

# The Hall of Science

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IN THESE WORDS the Sheffield disciples of Robert Owen aggressively rejected the spirit of 'patronising middle class philanthropy' which had hitherto permeated social enquiry and educational effort in their town. Unlike the Sheffield Mechanics' Library, opened in 1824, and the local Mechanics' Institute, established in 1833, their institution was 'under the patronage of no one'.

The Sheffield Hall of Science, opened by Robert Owen on March 17, 1839, ideally reflected the independent working-class spirit that was the essence of both Chartism and Owenism. It is significant that Isaac Ironside, its leading promoter, had worked in the heavy trade of stove-grate fitter before setting up in business as an estate agent. As a self-appointed champion of the 'suffering people', Ironside had for years been calling on the Sheffield artisans to 'think and act for themselves'. A supporter of the Chartists, Ironside was also a leading English Socialist. In 1843 he was to become a member of the Central Board of Owen's celebrated Queenwood experiment in agrarian co-operation.

The institution which Ironside dominated as 'the person more publicly connected with it than any other member was, of course, a consciously propa-

gandist establishment. The opening announcement in the Sheffield newspapers stated that the "new and handsome building' in Rockingham Street was to be used by the Socialists 'for the exposition of their views', and many of the early lectures were devoted to 'developing the principles on which to establish home colonies, which are the only remedies for the numerous evils that are now affecting all classes of the community'. ~ Yet it must be stressed that the marked propagandist nature of the Sheffield Hall of Science emphasised rather than detracted from its essentially educational character. The major problem of working-class regeneration, exerting a dominating influence on the thought of the period, bound politics, education and social reform together on the basis of one broad utilitarian principle. In particular, the vital connection between propaganda and education, a factor of great importance in the history of education at that particular period, was nowhere more dearly mirrored than in the activities of the Sheffield Hall of Science. By 1839 it had long been realised that neither political propaganda nor moral exhortation was likely to have more than an imperfect and temporary effect unless it was directed to minds which enjoyed a measure of cultivation, enlightenment and discipline. Propagandists and moralists - and the Sheffield Owenites were both - became educators in order to lay an essential foundation for their work, particularly in the minds of the young. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the Sheffield Hall of Science came to offer orthodox instruction. Weekly 'elementary instruction and mental improvement classes' were given, the terms being

ls. 6d. per quarter. A regular drawing class was also held. Moreover, in the Sheffield Iris of May 11, 1841, it was announced:

A Day School on the Pestalozzian System will commence at the Hall of Science of May 17th inst. conducted by Mr. G. J. Holyoake of Birmingham.

*Terms for children of both sexes*  
*From four to six years of age 4d. per week*  
" " *upwards 6d per ditto. 5*

Agreement to teach the classes of the Pestalozzian School was a condition of G. J. Holyoake's appointment as lecturer at the Sheffield Hall of Science by the Socialist Congress which met in Manchester in 1841, and that is indicated by the fact that he paid an assistant teacher, one Thomas Paterson, out of his own somewhat meagre remuneration. At the Seventh Annual Congress of the Universal Community of Rational Religionists, held at Queenwood in 1842, however, Ironside, as President of the Sheffield branch, criticised a system that divided a lecturer's duties between the teaching of children and the instruction of adults. At that period the school at Sheffield had been given to a private schoolmaster, a Mr. Lear of Cheltenham, and subsequently it was conducted by a Mr. Stanton of London.

In spite of all that has been said in the preceding paragraphs, however, it would be wrong to suggest that the educational work of the Sheffield Hall of

Science was a mere adjunct to a propaganda campaign. Like Benthamism and the ultra-Radicalism of Paine and Lovett - and both forces, through Ironside, were represented in the Sheffield Institution - Owenism made education a central and integral part of its system? The consciously fundamental nature of Owen's unqualified assertion that character and personality were determined by environmental influences meant that a completely new philosophy had to be worked out and broadcast by carefully organised intellectual activity which was to be free from the prejudices, restrictions and taboos of the past. Here, in fact, was the real basis of the Hall of Science idea: the attainment of social harmony and the moral and physical excellence of the people through the determination and propagation of universal truth. The Owenites really believed that their researches would ultimately give to social science the same power and precision that physical science had so strikingly achieved. They prided themselves on being practical, 'bread and cheese' reformers, for they not only considered that truth, in the final analysis, was self-identifying, but believed that to know truth inevitably led men to act rationally, morally and for the public good. Refusing to believe that society was inevitably 'a sort of legally arranged blunder', and fortified by the stimulating belief that ultimate reality and universal happiness were within their grasp, the Sheffield Socialists entered fearlessly into a wide field of intellectual enquiry. The urge to 'prove all things' led to such lectures and lecture courses as those given on 'Temperance', by John Finch; 'Phrenology', by Mrs. Emma Martin; 'Responsibility', by Lloyd Jones; '

The Morality of Christianity and the Morality of Infidelity', by Dr. Watts; 'Phreno-Magnetism', by Mr. Stocks; 'Pacifism', 'On the Existence and Personality of the Devil', by R. Buchanan; 'On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Trades Unions', by G. H. Holyoake; 'On the Effect of a Knowledge of the Social Principles', by Edward Walter; 'On the Origin of Disease and the Cause of Natural Death, with an examination of Mesmerism, Hydropathy, etc.', by Dr. S. Rowbotham; and 'Character, Not Opinion, the Test of Individual Worth and Dignity', by the Rev. W. Linwood of Mansfield.

A major aim of these lectures was to stimulate debate. Full, free and frank discussion were encouraged after each address. In this way the Socialists sought to maintain the interest of those students who had mastered the 'elements' and to convince the unconverted - for, like the Moral Force Chartists, the supporters of the Hall of Science sought to triumph by showing the superior reasonableness of the changes that they sought to bring about. The most important aim of these lectures and discussions was, however, enquiry into truth, the determination and elucidation of which was regarded as the real basis and infallible guarantee of social regeneration. The Sheffield Owenites, whose hymn urged them to 'Proclaim the truth divine', took this aspect of their work very seriously.

The spirit of fearless enquiry was thus deliberately cultivated in the Sheffield Hall of Science, and it is significant that its supporters constantly encouraged

individuals and organisations publicly to challenge Owenite principles. In March 1839, for instance, Lloyd Jones and W. Pallister of Leeds met to debate such significant questions as 'The Formation of Character', 'The Accountability of Man' and 'Is Socialism Calculated to Secure the Highest, Universal and Permanent Happiness of Man ? In 1840 a local clergyman, called R. S. Bayley, was induced to debate 'Marriage and Divorce' with a Socialist champion, called Mrs. Martin, and subsequently James Campbell clashed with Brindley, the most savage of the anti-Owenite crusaders. In 1842 the local Free Society was invited to send 'a champion or champions' to a Socialist function, and in 1843 Ironside publicly challenged the editor of the Sheffield Mercury to an open discussion.

Dedicated to the moral regeneration of the people, and based on a philosophy that equated both morality and happiness with knowledge, the Sheffield Hall of Science took on a peculiar religious character that must be represented as giving a special impetus to its educational work. In this respect it is interesting to note that the central body of Owenites, originally called 'The Association of All Classes of All Nations', soon became 'The Universal Community of Rational Religionists' and that G. J. Holyoake in 1841 was appointed 'social missionary' to Sheffield, the centre of a large 'diocese'. Hymns were sung at the functions of the Sheffield Hall of Science, and the institution, with rules certified by Tidd Pratt, was registered as a place of worship and licensed to solemnise

weddings. It was, in fact, on the grounds that the Hall of Science was a religious institution that Ironside refused to pay its apportioned share of the Poor Rate in 1840.

The legal case resulting from Ironside's action was heard in the local courts. The evidence, which the Sheffielder found 'anything but discreditable', throws a good deal of light on the aims and activities of his institution. For instance, the Overseers of the Poor of the Ecclesall Union proved that while little was said about God or the Bible in the institution, its premises were frequently used for lectures on general subjects and for dancing, glee singing and recitations. Slater, the Clerk to the Ecclesall Union, described how he had paid threepence to attend a dance at the Hall of Science and how he had seen Ironside, the Master of Ceremonies, keep order by means of a dog whistle. Another witness had attended a masquerade, having dressed up as Napoleon Bonaparte, and heard such songs as 'The Dancing Sweep' (sung by a real sweep I) and 'Give Me Back My Arab Steed'.

All this was, of course, strictly true. Yet Ironside could argue that the activities mentioned above in no way detracted from the essentially religious and educational character of the Sheffield Hall of Science. To the Owenites the social activities of their institution were no less 'holy' than the earnest discussions which were intended to lead to the salvation of society through the unfolding of the 'truth divine'. In bringing ordinary people together in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere to

enjoy harmless amusements, the Owenites, as 'socialists', considered themselves to be fulfilling a genuinely religious duty. In a town whose life was marred by 'bitterness, wrath and malice; envy, hatred and evil-speaking' the Socialists were seeking to induce people to 'break their bread together and eat it in singleness of heart'. They were also, by exerting a 'civilising and humanising' influence on the lower classes, dealing with the underlying social problem and gently attracting their supporters to activity of a more intellectual nature. As G. J. Holyoake later wrote:

Socialism was always social. Its worst enemies could not deny this, and it first set the example of teaching ordinary people to meet like ladies and gentlemen, on a pleasant equality, to abandon habits of isolation, suspicion conspiracy, and to chat and sing and dance and think their way to schemes of competence.

In addition to its festivals, bails, parties, soirées and masquerades, the Sheffield Hall of Science, which advertised itself as a 'delightful place of rational instruction and amusement' and boasted the services of 'the first quadrille band in Sheffield', held weekly dancing classes and offered free instruction in choral singing on the system of Mainzer 'who it appears is destined to effect a great musical revolution in this country'. The Hall of Science, said Ironside, was a second home to its members, who were 'never so happy as when there, being like so many affectionate brothers and sisters'



practising the religion of the New Moral World, which consisted in the increasing practice of promoting the happiness of every man, woman and child to the greatest extent in their power'.

The above activities, while illustrating the peculiar character of the Sheffield Hall of Science, also emphasised its significance as an interesting experiment in the field of educational motivation. Much of its importance as an institution does, in fact, stem from its anticipation of trends in the more orthodox field of educational effort in the Sheffield area.

By 1840 it had long been recognised that the Sheffield Mechanics' Institute of which Isaac Ironside was a founder-member had materially failed to attract the type of individual for whom it was specifically designed. Ironside had analysed the problem in the light of contemporary ultra Radical philosophies and had come to the conclusion that the conscious neutrality of the Mechanics' Institute on controversial issues (a neutrality which reflected the eagerness of its middle-class promoters to make the institution a stabilising factor in society), robbed the institution of an essential vitality and lost it the support of the mechanic who was eager to use his knowledge as a lever for securing the political emancipation and the social improvement of the mass of the people. In the Hall of Science, therefore, the Sheffield Owenite deliberately represented education as a direct and dynamic means through which the lower classes might collectively help

to solve' the bread and cheese question'. It was not until the early eighteen-fifties, however, that the Mechanics' Institute sought to excite and stimulate its potential supporters by organising lectures on controversial contemporary issues.

As an investigator into the problem of motivation in adult education, Ironside was among the first to realise that if ignorant and semi-ignorant adults were to be attracted to an educational institution, their gregarious instincts had to be appealed to. At the same time, reasoned Ironside, the hard and often humiliating pill of elementary instruction had to be sugared with a good deal of activity that was enjoyable and diverting. As Secretary to the Sheffield Mechanics' Library (in 1839 he was dismissed for placing a number of Socialist books on the shelves), Ironside had opened a coffee room on the premises, and for many years he fought an unrelenting battle to secure the introduction of plays and novels to the stock of the institution. ~a Victory did not come until 1859, when the rule excluding such works from the Library was rescinded, but it is significant that in the late eighteen-forties Ironside was to the forefront of a movement which resulted in the amalgamation of the Mechanics' Institute with the Athenaeum dedicated to social intercourse and polite recreation.

In yet another way the Sheffield Hall of Science anticipated important educational trends in the town. Like the founder of the People's College which opened in Sheffield in 1842 and inspired an important movement in adult education led by F. D.

Maurice, Ironside realised the need to build up a corporate spirit in an educational institution and to give its work a moral appeal. Like R. S. Bayley, too, though for different reasons, he considered that such institutions as the Sheffield Mechanics' Institute forfeited a good deal of working-class support, and lost an essential vitality, because they were associated with middle-class charity. Thus the educational institution that Ironside promoted was deliberately kept in the mainstream of that complex movement whereby the lower classes sought unaided to work out their own salvation. The Hall of Science was emphatically 'under the patronage of no one'.

In spite of an outburst of activity in the autumn of 1847, when a Workers' Educational Institute was established at the Hall of Science, the Sheffield institution declined rapidly after the collapse of the celebrated Queenwood experiment in practical agrarian socialism. Yet the significance of the Sheffield Hall of Science must not be underestimated. Few institutions more vividly illustrate the scope and power which Owen gave to the educational ideas of his disciples. By equating knowledge with reason, and reason with morality and happiness, Owen gave the stimulus of a practical goal to his adherents and infused their educational work with an intense, religious but far from sanctimonious spirit.

The Sheffield Hall of Science may have functioned effectively for a decade only, but educationally Owenism left a lasting legacy.

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