



SHEFFIELD AND SOCIALISM

EDWARD CARPENTER

BEING AN EXTRACT FROM MY DAYS AND DREAMS
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVID BLUNKETT

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by Edward Carpenter

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Sheffield and Socialism was first published in 1916 as part of Edward Carpenter's autobiography *My Days and Dreams*.

The cover photograph is of Edward Carpenter, at Millthorpe in 1905.



PREFACE

Sheffield and Socialism, the first pamphlet published by Principle 5, owes the debt of its creation principally to Mushroom Bookshop, an independent bookshop in Nottingham which ran from 1972 to 2000. It was Mushroom, who in 1993, published the extract from Edward Carpenter's *My Days and Dreams* which follows. They invited David Blunkett, the MP for Brightside and Hillsborough, to write the preface, which is still relevant today:

"In the year that Sheffield commemorates the centenary of its status as a City, it is fitting to reflect on the time which Edward Carpenter spent in Sheffield and the forgotten men and women who made such a mark on those times.

Together with William Morris and John Ruskin, Carpenter reflected an evangelism, regrettably lacking in late 20th century politics. The reverence for the dignity of labour and pride in skill and craftsmanship felt by Edward Carpenter, has been the essence of Sheffield politics for the last century. Rebuilding a commitment to the creative capacity of men and women is vital for a prosperous and rewarding future.

In establishing a local socialist society associated with the Socialist League, it is interesting to recall Edward Carpenter's concern that his friends and colleagues had not appreciated "the immense and growing power of money". In the world of the late 20th century, dominated by the power of international finance and the transnational nature of political power, we need today every ounce of conviction to carry us forward in the belief that democracy can triumph in the complexities of the modern world.

Yet in facing the realities of the world, Carpenter also notes the way in which ideas can permeate society even when it would seem that they are failing to gain a foothold through organised political groupings – something understood in the 20th century by Friedrich von Hayek and Margaret Thatcher. Carpenter had a dream and an ideal "of the common life conjoined to the free individuality". In essence, he recognised that our inter-dependence and the rights of the individual are not in conflict.

Remembering John Furniss or the Mrs. Ushers of this world – together with J.M. Brown's winning people over through kindness and persuasion – renews my faith that what they could do a hundred years ago, against all the odds, we can achieve today if we lift our own horizons."

David Blunkett
MP for Sheffield Brightside
October 1993

Where a spur of the moors runs forward into the great town,
And above the squalid bare steep streets, over a deserted quarry,
the naked rock lifts itself into the light,
There, lifted above the smoke, I stood,
And below lay Sheffield.

- Edward Carpenter, *Who Shall Command the Heart: Being Part IV
of Towards Democracy.*

Swan, Sonnerschen and Company, 1902

SHEFFIELD AND SOCIALISM

by Edward Carpenter

During my absence in the United States, my friend Harold Cox, who had just left Cambridge, came down to Millthorpe and spent a good part of the summer there – remaining a bit after my return home. He wanted to get manual and farm and garden experience, and that same autumn he plunged into farming – he took a farm at Tilford in Surrey and inducted a little colony into it. But the land was mere sand, and the experience of one winter and spring was enough! In less than a year he gave the place up and went out, by way of India, to the Anglo-Mohammedan College at Futtehgur.

While in India he went in 1885 or 1886 for a tour in Kashmir and from Kashmir he sent me a pair of Indian sandals. I had asked him, before he went out, to send some likely pattern of sandals, as I felt anxious to try some myself. I soon found the joy of wearing them. And after a little time, I set about making them. I got two or three lessons from W. Lill, a bootmaker friend in Sheffield, and soon succeeded in making a good many pairs for myself and various friends. Since then the trade has grown into quite a substantial one. G. Adams took it up at Millthorpe in 1889; making, I suppose, about a hundred or more pairs a year; and since his death it has been carried on at the Garden City, Letchworth.

In 1885 I published the second edition of *Towards Democracy* – still through John Heywood; and early in 1886 quite an important local event occurred in the establishment of our Sheffield Socialist Society. One or two of us beat around the town and got together a few Socialists and advanced Radicals; we persuaded William Morris to come down (early in March) – and the result of that was the formation of the Society. At that time, William Morris, having with a few others parted

from [Henry] Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation, had founded the Socialist League – branches of which were springing up merrily all over the country. And it was William Morris’s great hope, often expressed in the *Commonweal* and elsewhere, that these branches growing and spreading, would before long “reach hands” to each other and form a network over the land – would constitute in fact “the New Society” within the framework of the old, and destined ere long to replace the old.

No doubt the forces of reaction – the immense apathy of the masses, the immense resistance of the official and privileged classes, entrenched behind the Law and the State, and the immense and growing power of Money – were things not then fully realised and understood. There seemed a good hope for the realisation of Morris’s dream – and most of us shared in it. But History is a difficult horse to drive. In this matter of the Socialist movement, as in other matters, it has always been liable to take the most unexpected turns; and the little League societies, after flourishing gaily for a few years, suddenly began to wane and die out; I believe indeed that at this moment there is not one of them left. Morris saw with some sadness that his hope was not going to be fulfilled, and though I do not think that he altogether lost heart, he was fain in his last years to bury his disappointment in a return to his art work, and even to favour as a forlorn hope the Parliamentary side in revolutionary politics!

It is curious indeed in this matter to see how, of all the innumerable little societies – of the SDF, the League, the Fabians, the Christian Socialists, the Anarchists, the Freedom Groups, the Independent Labour Party, the Clarion societies, and local groups of various names – all supporting one side or another of the general Socialist movement – not one of them has grown to any great volume, or to commanding and permanent influence; and how yet, and at the same time, the general teaching and ideals of the movement have permeated society in the most remarkable way, and have deeply infected the views of all classes, as well as general literature and even municipal and imperial politics. Perhaps it is a matter for much congratulation that things have turned out so. If the movement had been pocketed by any one man or section, it would have been inevitably narrowed down. As it is, it has taken on something of an oceanic character; and if by its very lack of narrow-

ness, it has lost a little in immediate results, its ultimate success we may think is all the more assured.

The real value of the modern Socialist movement – it has always seemed to me – has not lain so much in its actual constructive programme as (1) in the fact that it has provided a text for a searching criticism of the old society and of the lives of the rich, and (2) the fact that it has enshrined a most glowing and vital enthusiasm towards the realisation of a new society. It is these two points which have always drawn and attached me to it. The constructive details of the future are things about which there may and indeed must be different opinions. The necessity of organisation in society, and of united action, the avoidance of officialism and bureaucracy, the handling of the land so as to afford the most general access to it, the barring of monopolies and of all industrial parasitism, the liberation of labour to dignity and self-reliance, the conduct of public ownership, the question of taxation, representation, education, etc. - these are all most complex affairs whose united and detailed solution can only proceed step by step, by slow trial and experience. We must expect mistakes and differences of opinion here.

Nevertheless, I think we may say that in the broad lines of its constructive policy Socialism has taken the right course and the one which time will justify. It has laid down in fact once for all the principles that parasitism and monopoly must cease, and it has set before itself the ideal of a society which while it accords to every individual as full scope as possible for the exercise of his faculties and enjoyment of the fruits of his own labour, will in return expect from the individual his hearty contribution to the general well-being, and at least to claim nothing for his own which (or the value of which) he has not by his own effort produced.

Towards the fulfilment of these aims Socialism has proposed a guardian public ownership of land and of some of the more important industries (guarded, that is, against the dangers of officialism), and it seems likely that this general programme is the one along which western society will work in the near future; that is, till such time as the State, qua State, and all efficient Government are superseded by the voluntary and instinctive consent and mutual helpfulness of the people – when of course the more especially Anarchist ideal would be realised. As I say,

while there is practically no dissent about the future form of society as one which shall embody to the fullest extent the two opposite poles of Communism and Individualism in one vital unity, there may and naturally must be differences on the question of the detailed working out of the problem, and indeed it may well be that the solution will take somewhat different forms in different places and among different peoples.

It has not been, I repeat, the belief in special constructive details as panaceas which has led me into the Socialist camp, so much as the fact that the movement has been a distinct challenge to the old order and a call to the rich and those in power to remodel society and their own lives; and that other fact that within the Socialist camp has burned that wonderful enthusiasm and belief in a new ideal of fraternity – which however crude and inexperienced it may at times appear, is surely destined to conquer and rule the world at last.

It is this latter side of the movement which by the outsider is so little known and understood. Those who stand outside a revolutionary agitation or who look down on it from above, necessarily only see the defiant subversive elements of it, they do not guess the glowing heart within. To me, passing from time to time from one stratum of life to quite another, it was a strange experience and not without its comic side, to see the wildly different features which one and the same movement wore to those within and those without; to hear Socialism spoken of from above, as nothing but an envious shriek and a threat, a gospel of bread and butter, a grab, a “divide up all around” - the work of unscrupulous demagogues and tinsel politicians.

Then the next moment to pass into the heart of the thing and to find oneself in an atmosphere of the most simple fraternity and idealism, where the coming of the kingdom of Heaven, a kingdom of social order and decency, was entertained with a childlike faith that might almost make one smile; where it seemed only necessary to go out into the streets and preach the better ideals for crowds to flock to the standard; and where, if a betterment of conditions was the main thing sought for, it was a betterment of social life and a satisfaction of the needs of the heart fully as much as an increased allowance of bread and butter. It was a strange experience to pass from cold to hot, and from hot to cold, as it were, and to realise how little those in the one current could

understand what was going on in the other.

Certainly, from what experience I have had of a movement at one time I thought very revolutionary, I am inclined to think that most revolutions must have been pretty well justified before they took place. One hears of dangerous mobs led by demagogues and fed on fancied wrongs; and of course there are such things in every movement as self-seeking blusterers, or misleaders; there is ignorance and non-reasoning exasperation; but my experience of the (British) masses is that instead of being too inflammable, they are surely only too slow to move, too slow to perceive the burdens which they bear, or to point out the cause of their own suffering; and – in the Socialist agitation – the number and influence of the blusterers and self-seekers compared with the genuine leaders has always been very small. No, revolutions do not take place without cause; and I doubt whether in any case the excesses accompanying a rising have exceeded the cruelties and injuries of the preceding tyranny.

There is such a heart of tenderness and patient common sense in the mass of the people – everywhere I believe – as to convince one that, notwithstanding the slanders that have been heaped upon by the arm-chair historian, they are really more inclined to endure than to accuse, more ready to forgive than retaliate. No – the general Socialist movement (including therein the Anarchist) has done and is still doing a great and necessary work – and I am proud to have belonged to it. It has defined a dream and an ideal, that of the common life conjoined to the free individuality, which somewhere and sometime must be realised because it springs from and is the expression of the very root-nature of Man. Our “Sheffield Socialists”, though common working men and women, understood well enough the broad outlines of this ideal. They hailed William Morris and his work with the most sincere appreciation. I found among them the most interesting personalities, saturated for the most part, as I have said, with the thought of fraternity and fellowship; and I made one or two lifelong friends. We organised lectures, addresses, pamphlets with a street-corner propaganda which soon brought us amusing and exciting incidents in the way of wrangles with the police and the town-crowds. At first an atmosphere of considerable suspicion rested upon the movement, and dynamite and daggers were assumed by outsiders to be indispensable parts of our equipment; but

as time went on, and after a few years, this died away – and where there had been only jeers or taunts at first, crowds came to listen with serious and sympathetic mien. A dozen or twenty at most formed the moving and active element of our society – though its membership may have been a hundred or more; and these disposed themselves to their various functions. Mrs. Usher, large-bosomed and large-hearted, would move on the outskirts of our open-air meetings, armed with a bundle of literature. She was an excellent saleswoman, and few could resist her hearty appeal “Buy this pamphlet, love, it will do you good!” Even in the streets or the tramcars the most solemn and substantial old gentlemen fell prey to her. Her brothers, the two Bingham, were among our speakers, and both of them pretty effective, the one in a logical, the other in a more oratorical way. They were provision merchants in the town; and their business suffered at first, but afterwards gained by the connection.

Then, there was Shortland, handsome, fiery and athletic, an engine fitter, always ready for a row and to act as “chucker out” if required. Or J. M. Brown, who took quite an opposite pat. He (tailor by trade) the very picture of kindness and broad good-nature would move among the crowd as if he hardly belonged to us, and engaging persuasively in conversation, first with one and then with another, would draw many a doubter into the fold; or George E. Hukin, with his Dutch-featured face and Dutch build – no speaker, nor prominent in public – but though young an excellent help at our committee meetings, where his shrewd strong brain and tactful nature gave his counsels much weight; and always from the beginning a special ally of mine; or George Adams, afterwards associated with me at Millthorpe, with his amusing quips and sallies, and plucky antagonisms, a good friend and a good hater, and always ready for an adventurous bout; or Raymond Unwin, who would come over from Chesterfield to help us, a young man of cultured antecedents, of first-rate ability and good sense, healthy, democratic, vegetarian, and now I need not say a well-known architect and promoter of Garden Cities.

Then at one time there was Fred Charles – who was afterwards accused of an anarchist plot and sentenced, most unfairly, to ten years’ hard labour. He was already leaning to the Anarchist side of the movement but was ready to work with us; and certainly, was one of the most devoted

of workers. No surrender or sacrifice for the 'cause' was too great for him; and as to his own earnings (as clerk) or possessions, he practically gave it all way to tramps or the unemployed.

The case was tried at Stafford in March 1892 by Justice Hawkins, and though the incriminating evidence was quite slender, yet there being a panic on at the time with regard to Anarchism, there was an obvious determination to convict. I appeared in the box to testify to Charles' excellent character and public spirit, but needless to say without success. Or there was Burton, engine-tender, rather a type of the stout, somewhat self-satisfied and ignorant street-speaker, who would get us into trouble shouting "The land for the people!" or other cant phrases of the period, with really no clear idea of what they meant, and would have to be rescued when attacked or challenged by some keener critic aiming the audience; or again, Jonathan Taylor, the very opposite in type to these, tall, lean, logical and conclusive to the last degree; who with a kind of homely unconquerable humour, compelled his hearers from finger to finger, and from point to point, of his argument, and somehow always succeeded in holding the most restive crowd, and for any period. He had been on the school-board at one time and was useful to us also by his knowledge of local and municipal expedencies. or again, John Furniss: he was a remarkable man, and perhaps the very first to preach the modern Socialism in the streets of Sheffield. A quarryman by trade, keen and wiry both in body and in mind, a thorough-going Christian Socialist, and originally I believe a bit of a local preacher; he had somehow at an early date got hold of the main ideas of the movement; and in the early 'eighties used to stride in – he and his companion George Pearson – five or six miles over the Moors, to Sheffield in order to speak at the Pump or the Monolith; and then stride out again in the middle of the night. This he kept up for years and years, and when later he migrated to another quarry about the same distance from Chesterfield did exactly the same thing there; for perhaps twenty years, with marvellous energy and perseverance he must have kept up this propaganda; and the amount of effective influence he must have exercised would be hard to reckon.

Such were some of the characters with whom I found myself associated, and for five or six years we carried on the Society with the utmost friendliness, accord and enthusiasm. It was a most interesting time. I

knew all those mentioned and many others, very intimately, was familiar in their houses, stayed with them, knew all of their goings-out, and comings-in, and something of the details of their various trades. In 1887 we took a large house and shop in Scotland Street, a poor district of the town; and opened a café, using the large room above for a meeting and lecture room, and the house for a joint residence for some of us who were more immediately concerned in carrying on the business.

We had all sorts of social gatherings, lectures, teas, entertainments in the Hall – the wives and sisters of the “comrades” helping, especially in the social work; we had Annie Besant, Charlotte Wilson, Kropotkin, Hyndman, and other notables down to speak for us; we gave teas to the slum-children who dwelt in the neighbouring crofts and alleys (but these had at first to be given up on account of the poor little things tearing themselves and each other to pieces, perfect mobs of them, in their frantic attempts to gain admittance – a difficulty which no arrangement of tickets or of personal supervision seemed to obviate); and we organised excursions into municipal politics; and country propaganda. This last was amusing as well as interesting.

While in the towns, as time went on, audiences grew in numbers and attentiveness, it remained very difficult to capture the country districts. The miners would really not be uninterested, but in their sullen combative way they would take care not to show it. Many a time we have gone down to some mining village and taken up our stand on some heap of slag or broken wall, and the miners would come around and stand about or sit down deliberately with their backs to the speaker, and spit, and converse, as if quite heedless of the oration going on. But after a time, and as speaker succeeded speaker, one by one they would turn around – their lower jaws dropping – fairly captivated by the argument. It was much the same with the country rustics – but as a rule less successful.

I remember on one occasion, seven or eight of us, armed with literature, going for a long country walk to Hathersage in the Derbyshire Dales. We had Tom Maguire with us, from Leeds, an excellent speaker, full of Irish wit and persuasiveness. We set him upon a stoneheap in the middle of the village and standing round him ourselves while he spoke, acted as decoy ducks. Curiosity came, in moderate numbers, but not

one of them would approach nearer than a distance of twenty to thirty yards – just far enough to make the speaker despair of really reaching them. In vain we separated and going around tried to coax them to come nearer. In vain, the speaker shouted himself hoarse and fired off his best jokes. Not a bit of it – they weren't going to be fooled by us! At last, red in the face and out of breath and with a string of curses, Tom descended from his cairn, and we all, shaking the dust of the village off our feet, departed!

I meanwhile and during these years, not only took part in our local work, but spoke and lectured in the Socialist connection all-round the country – at Bradford, Halifax, Leeds, Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh, Hull, Liverpool, Nottingham and other places – my subjects the failures of the present Commercial system, and the possible reorganisation of the future. As to the Café, we were only able to hold to it for a year. Though quite a success from the propagandist point of view, financially it was a failure. The refreshment department was not patronised nearly enough to make it pay. The neighbourhood was an exceedingly poor one. And so, we were obliged to surrender the place, and retire to smaller quarters.

During that year however, I lived most of the time at the Scotland Street place. I occupied a large attic at the top of the house, almost high enough to escape the smells of the street below but exposed to showers of black which fell from the innumerable chimneys around. In the early morning at 5am there was the strident sound of the 'hammers' and the clattering of innumerable clogs of men and girls going to their work, and on till late at night there were drunken cries and shouting. Far around stretched nothing but factory chimneys and foul courts inhabited by the wretched workers. It was, I must say, frightfully depressing; and all the more so because of tragic elements in my personal life at the time. Only the enthusiasm of our social worker, and the abiding thoughts which had inspired *Towards Democracy* kept me going. I spent my spare time during the year in arranging and editing the collection songs and music called *Chants of Labour* – a thing which might have been much better done by someone else, but I could find no one to do it. And it was a queer experience, collecting these songs of hope and enthusiasm, and composing such answering tunes and harmonies as I could in the midst of these gloomy and discordant conditions.

As I say, we only stayed a year there, and as far as my health was concerned, I don't think I could have endured it much longer. I realised the terrible drawback to health and vitality consequent on living in these slums of manufacturing towns, and the way these conditions are inevitably sapping the strength of our populations.

NOTES

The S.D.F was the Social Democratic Federation, a dogmatic Marxist group.

The I.L.P was the Independent Labour Party, a more libertarian grouping which still exists as Independent Labour Publications.

The Freedom Groups refer to the anarchist journal Freedom, published from 1886 to 2014. Freedom Bookshop and anarchist print house still operates, publishing occasional editions, books, news, and a digital archive of the paper.

The Clarion Societies organised leisure activities for socialists, such as cycling clubs and choirs.

The Fabian Society was and is a forum for left-wing intellectual debate.

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SHEFFIELD AND SOCIALISM

Principle 5 Pamphlet No: 1

Once one of Britain's best-known socialists, Edward Carpenter pre-figured many of today's concerns. He was a vegetarian, a supporter of women's rights and was one of the few people of his era to live in an openly homosexual relationship. Carpenter was a writer, an adult education lecturer, a market gardener and a composer of popular socialist anthems.

Carpenter was active within the Sheffield Socialist Society, a propagandist and campaigning group. In this memoir, he writes about the group's activities, such as opening a socialist cafe, and of the now forgotten individuals who tried to win people to socialism on the streets of Sheffield at the end of the 19th Century.

£2

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