

### **The free churches and the growth of trade unions in North-east England**

A number of people have made kind comments about my last article about the life and work of the great Presbyterian preacher James Murray. I thank them kindly for the support given and also by way of thanks, I thought many of you might be interested in learning about the importance of Methodism in the development of the trade unions in North-east England and the communities from which they sprang. The recently held Durham Miners Gala reminded me of another area where low church Christianity has helped ordinary working people in North-east England find their voices and work to improve their lives.

It has been noted that, “this view of equality is intrinsic to the Christian gospel as presented by the Methodists and was plainly an assumption made by the union leaders....however deferentially they may have behaved. The union leadership up until the early 1920’s consisted largely of ‘respectable’ Liberal Methodists who felt that they commanded the respect of the owners. The union leaders had an organismic view of society, they believed in reason and reconciliation as a means of settling disputes which were only caused, as they saw it, by temporary imbalances in the market, or misunderstanding.” The principle of equanimity, which has played such an important part in progressive movements around the world and which proclaims that all people are of importance played its part in North-east England. .

Not all trade unionist Methodists were so ‘respectable’. There were also pockets of radicalism within Methodism, but it can be argued that the real roots of this radicalism, lay with earlier 17<sup>th</sup> century Christian radicalism and other sources, rather than Methodism itself. This would tend to point to secular influences rather than Methodism being important in the growth of radical politics on the coalfield.

However, the fact remains that many of the radical voices heard on the coalfield during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were first heard within the sphere of Methodism. Although their language was political, it was, like the Rev Murray’s before them, also the language of the Bible. Methodism was therefore at a simple level, conducive to protest as it provided a form of language which could be used. It gave oratorical and organisational skills. The churches also provided a base for study, which in turn led to heightened consciousness. On an ideological level it has also been argued that Methodism encouraged the adoption of a particular type of ethical socialism, that of people like F.D. Maurice and Edward Carpenter and not so receptive to Marxism.

Robert Moore sums up the influence of Methodism by noting that the role of Methodism did help to spread radical ideas through the reading of the Bible, even if the mainstream of Methodism was moderate. At the same time it provided number of the Durham miners with the organisational skills to put some of those radical ideas to good effect, by supplying leadership to the miners. There is little doubt that the trade unions, which did so much to lead the struggle for human rights in the region, were heavily influenced in their organisation by the structures which came from the chapels. To this day, the National Union of Journalists in Newcastle, have a branch which is called a chapel.

There is a counter argument that Methodism set its face against radicalism and prevented revolution. However others have argued that the discipline and organisation of Methodism gave the working-class the experience needed for the formation of the trade union movement. Professor Hobsbawm has suggested that there was a complex relationship between religious revivalism and political radicalism. Perhaps the truth of the matter is really somewhere

between the two. Certainly Methodism was linked closely to the slow rise of trade unionism in the region and there were similarities in the organisation of both Methodist chapels and trade union branches..

It is also argued that religious revivalism fed upon political defeat, that it was seen as another avenue for those from the working-class who had seen their political aspirations stifled. There is also evidence that the Wesleyan priesthood sought confrontation, not accommodation with popular political radicalism. Stignant argues that religion was a bulwark of the state and an upholder of the status quo and therefore not well disposed towards radical political change. Among those in the Methodist ranks in the region were John Pawson and Thomas Carlill. It is reported that Pawson was supportive of much of what Thomas Paine had written in the *Rights of Man*, but still saw the state as sacrosanct and wanted to confront those who opposed it. Thomas Carlill noted with alarm that, “we have many king-haters” in Newcastle and it was these kinds of radicals who Pawson was also most against.

The Methodist support for the state, during a time when the ruling-classes were looking fearfully at what had happened across the Channel in France, was such that by 1810 rumours were rife that Wesleyan funds were being given to the government to buy cannons to use against working-class people. This did not sit easily however with many Methodists. Accordingly, many of them withdrew their financial support. In February 1819, Robert Pilter wrote that, “at Durham if report speaks true they have all become Luddites. You recollect the character of the Old General? Tis said they will give nothing towards the Conference...they will allow no collection to be made for Chapels. Nor send us any yearly collection.”

There was more. By now Methodists were becoming involved in radical politics in North-east England. It is reported that two Methodist preachers from North Shields attended a Radical Reform meeting in Newcastle on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1819, in the febrile atmosphere which came in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre. One of the Methodist preachers spoke in support of the ideas presented to the meeting. It is also true that many of the newly-formed Radical clubs adopted similar procedures to Methodist procedures, including the collection of subs and the introduction of District meetings.”

July 14<sup>th</sup> this year saw the 128<sup>th</sup> Durham Miners Gala, with an estimated 100 000 attending and speakers including Ed Miliband, the Leader of the Opposition. The first ‘Big Meeting’ in Durham took place in 1871 at Wharton Park, with around 5 000 attending to listen to speakers from Staffordshire, Scotland and South Yorkshire. The following year the Big Meeting or Gala moved to its present site on the Racecourse by the River Wear. Did the influence of low church Christianity pervade the Big Meeting or Gala?

The simple answer to that is yes. The 1870’s saw banners whose mottoes and quotations were concerned with the subject of the miners being given what was perceived to be a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. Many of the quotes were taken from the Bible and an often used quote was from Colossians 4:1: ‘Masters give unto your servants that which is just and right, knowing that ye also have a master in Heaven’. The banner from Castle Eden pit used lines from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah; ‘What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces and grind the faces of the poor’, while Hedley Hill and Rough Bill both featured lines from Psalm 41.1; ‘Blessed is the man that considereth the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble’.

The New Testament was used by a number of pits, particularly a line from Matthew, which was used by Hunwick, North Hetton and Sacriston mines which used the following line from Matthew 7:12; 'Whatsoever ye would that men do unto you, do ye also unto them'. Elemore pit took a line from 1 Thessalonians 5:12, which advised readers to, 'prove all things; hold fast which is good'. Many of those who marched behind these banners, would have been regular attenders of churches and chapels in County Durham and would have gained much of their radical spirit from those places of worship.

In 2010 I attended the service at Durham Cathedral which annually takes place as part of the Gala. The cathedral of course, has its own special memorial to all those who lost their lives in the mines of County Durham and the service was very impressive. A number of new banners were blessed and the cathedral was absolutely packed – standing room only at the back if I remember rightly. Last year I also looked closely at the banners on display at the modern Gala. It seemed that about one in three of the banners I saw had a Biblical theme in terms of quotations from the Bible and paintings representing Biblical scenes.

But then should this come as any great surprise? Churches and trade unions in the region have stood side by side in so many causes in recent years. From human rights in Burma, to supporting asylum seekers and refugees and the Make the Poverty History campaign, and in so many other instances, churches and trade unions in North-east England have found that they have shared values and can work together well.

The roots of trade unions in our region arguably lie far more in Methodism and Christianity in general than they ever do in Marxism. At a time when austerity measures are biting ever deeper, it is still trade unions and churches who together are playing a major role in keeping our communities together and putting basic Christian principles of caring for the 'other' and making a real difference into action.

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