

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

AN APPRECIATION

NOTES OF AN ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE
BRADLAUGH FELLOWSHIP BY THE

REV. STEWART D. HEADLAM

WARDEN OF THE GUILD OF ST. MATTHEW

With an Introduction

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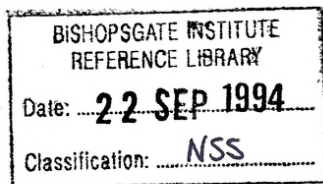
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BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS BY THE
REV. STEWART D. HEADLAM, B.A.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE pages that follow this prefatory note contain some of the most interesting and valuable parts of a lecture delivered to the Bradlaugh Fellowship by the Rev. STEWART D. HEADLAM on 24th May, 1905. The meeting took place in the hall of the Boro' of Shoreditch Liberal and Radical Club, New North Road—within a stone's throw of the 'mean street' in which Charles Bradlaugh was born, and of the Shoreditch Public Library, where a large marble bust of our lost leader occupies a prominent place. Mrs. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner presided at the lecture; and her son Charles listened with eager attention to Mr. Headlam's appreciation of his grandfather's life and work.

What is the Bradlaugh Fellowship? And how came it that a clergyman of the Church of England went as a friend and brother to address such a gathering?

Charles Bradlaugh died on 30th January, 1891; and already there are men, belonging to the class for which he lived and strove, who have never heard his name. This, perhaps, is not matter for wonder: it was said of old time, 'Quit the world and the world forgets you.' But there are some amongst us, men and women who worked with Charles Bradlaugh and knew the inestimable value of his life-service to humanity, who determined that so far as in us lay the memory of our great leader should not be suffered to pass away. The Bradlaugh Fellowship is but a small group of obscure people, whose object is to unite those who served under him, and to keep in public remembrance the work that he did.

This is the more necessary because, as Mr. Headlam truly says, his energy was mainly 'terrible, destructive, iconoclastic.' The man who, with toil and pain, clears the path and constructs the road, leaves no monument to call the easy-stepping wayfarer's attention to his work: the level safe road is there, but the very name of the maker is forgotten. The broken idol is thrown into the lumber-room; the children play with the fragments, heedless of the fact that their forefathers were persecuted even unto death if they refused to bow before the trumpery thing.

If Charles Bradlaugh had chosen the primrose path in life, if he had placed his eloquence, ability and overwhelming force of character at the service of smug conformity, then his reward would certainly have been rich and his place of the highest. But he was ever a man of the people, the champion of the lowly and oppressed; he lived and died poor, worn out in a ceaseless struggle for the advancement of the class to which he belonged.

Mr. Headlam's connection with the Secularist movement is a story that dates back to the early seventies. The letter to his intimate friend Sarson (page 8 *et seq.*) bears witness by its earnestness and occasional incoherence to the profound and abiding impression made by Bradlaugh's personality upon a young clergyman of open mind and catholic sympathies. Those who read that letter today may well find it impossible to realize the moral atmosphere of the time when it was written. It was the day of mean, pitiful persecution and narrowness, when no weapon of petty spite was too contemptible to be used against the atheist; when (to the present writer's knowledge) young men were turned from their homes by pious parents on account of their free-thinking views. 'Hatred, malice and all uncharitableness' wrought its ignoble work for the greater glory of God. Then and thenceforward 'Stewart Headlam' (as we were wont affectionately to style him) became our open and constant friend; while abating no jot of his Christian creed, he was always our helpful comrade.

The incident at which he hints on page 14 is a case in point. In 1879 two science classes (under the control of the Science and Art Department, South Kensington) were organized in connection with the Hall of Science. The director was the late Dr. E. B. Aveling; the National Secular Society (of which Mr. Bradlaugh was president) provided prizes for students who passed the class examinations; and the proportion of 'passes' was far above the average. At the outset a difficulty was experienced in complying with the Department's regulations. To obtain the Government grants it was essential that a Justice of the Peace or a clergyman should be on the committee. Now at that time no J. P. would look at us, even through a telescope; and it was not our way to seek favours from the clergy. In this perplexity the Rev. Stewart Headlam was our *deus ex machinâ*: he became chairman of the committee, and devoted much time and energy to the work. In 1883 there were eleven classes, 239 students receiving instruction, and 82 per cent. of these passed their examinations at South Kensington. In that year the Bishop of London, at the instigation of Lord Geo. Hamilton, put personal pressure upon Mr. Headlam to induce him to sever his connection with the classes. Mr. Headlam, however, was not amenable to episcopal coaxing or threats, and retained his position as chairman to the end.

This business of the science classes was but one of numberless instances of Mr. Headlam's kindness and helpfulness in days when odium and persecution were the Secularist's daily lot. Throughout the long and bitter struggle on the 'Oath Question' he stood up manfully for recognition of Charles Bradlaugh's rights as the elected of Northampton. Mr. Headlam was one of the vice-presidents of the League for the Defence of Constitutional Rights, and on many occasions publicly protested by voice and pen against the injustice with which Mr. Bradlaugh and his constituents were treated, in the name of religion, by a bigoted and reactionary majority in the House of Commons. Mr. Headlam was

also a member of the committee of the National Association for the Repeal of the Blasphemy Laws, a body formed to combat the persecuting spirit which revived certain evil old laws in the vain hope of suppressing a vivacious criticism of Christian doctrine. It was a noteworthy example of moral courage, twenty-five years ago, for a clergyman of the Church of England to identify himself with a public protest against the laws under which three men—Messrs. Foote, Ramsey and Kemp—were convicted and cruelly punished.

Little wonder, then, that we honoured and loved Stewart Headlam; and that when in 1905 he came to speak to us of Charles Bradlaugh, and later to preside at the annual dinner of our Fellowship, he was greeted by us all as a dear friend and comrade.

GEORGE STANDRING.

CHARLES BRADLAUGH.

I AM honoured by the request to say a few words in appreciation of Charles Bradlaugh; and I am glad to know that I speak in the presence of his daughter and grandson.

The impression which he has left upon me is of a man of tremendous strength—mainly destructive, terrible, iconoclastic. He is one of those men who

‘have towered in the van
Of all the congregated world to fan
And winnow from the coming step of time
All chaff of custom, wipe away all slime
Left by men slugs and human serpentry.’

Or, if you want words from the sacred Hebrew scriptures to describe him, we will say of him: ‘The idols shall he utterly abolish.’ He was one of those men who help us to understand a little the meaning of those words which were spoken of the typical representative man: ‘Whose fan is in his hand, and he shall thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner, and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’

And I make bold to say, without any fear of it now being considered a paradox, that

the Church, looking back, must acknowledge that it owes a deep debt of gratitude to Charles Bradlaugh for this destructive work of his.

My knowledge of him takes me back to the Christmas of 1873, when I went to Bethnal Green and so got into touch with many of Mr. Bradlaugh's followers, and looked forward each Thursday to the *National Reformer* as the expression of the most advanced Radicalism of the time.

It so happens that letters of mine which I used to write to my friend George Sarson have come back into my hands. I will read you one which I wrote on the Sunday night after hearing Mr. Bradlaugh at the Hall of Science in the evening. It was not my first visit to Old Street. I had been a few weeks before, and heard Mrs. Law denounce the smooth-faced priests who would put out the lamp of Reason. Here is the letter, given just as I dashed it off to an intimate friend:

Sunday night,
April 4, 1875.

My dear Sarson,

I have had another evening at the Hall of Science. Bradlaugh lectured on Slavery in America: which, with the exception of one bitter sentence against Christians, must have done all his hearers real good. However, all the great abolitionists whom he

spoke of were Christians: though undoubtedly they were opposed by the Christian Societies in America. After the lecture a member of the 'Bible Institute'—an old hand here—tried to prove that the law of Moses did not encourage slavery, and of course failed. Bradlaugh called him a liar, and I was rather in a funk when I called out 'Mr. Chairman' and went up to speak: there were calls of 'Name!', and though Bradlaugh said, quite courteously, 'Never mind the name,' I gave them my name and office, and fired away for my ten minutes: thanked him cordially for his grand speech: told them that the Bible religion which Bradlaugh had said favoured slavery might be made to favour anything: which brought much applause, which increased when I said that I did not believe in any infallible Book, but in Christ; then said the applause encouraged me to believe that true religion would live again, and that it encouraged me as much as the shout of 'Bogey!' at the Shoreditch Town Hall when a man spoke of a girl going to Hell for ever for going to a museum on Sunday. I ended by saying that in the *National Reformer*, which I often read (terrific excitement!), a Mr. Maccall had said that religion was a necessity for man, and that it was an awfully important thing that they all should support the best religion they could find, support the true

Christians against the false. Bradlaugh replied: thinking I was Hansard, and thanking me for all I had done for East London, wondered what the Bishop would say to me, and how he was to treat me while I belonged to a Church which published thousands of tracts teaching the infallibility of the Bible, and how he could find out what my Christianity was; if I did not believe in the Old Testament, which part of the New did I believe in; did I believe in faith or works (Paul, I suppose, or James). I replied that I was not Hansard, but was glad they recognised his work, and that now they knew there were at least two good Christians; that they might send what I said to the Bishop, and that I challenged them to do so, and was certain that, though he might not like it personally, he would not turn me out of my curacy, which, I said, he could do any day if he thought fit; I said that if I am left safe it will be a proof that my teaching, which you approve, is good Church teaching. I then said that as a Christian I did not believe in either Old Testament or New, but in Christ, of whom there was sufficient ordinary evidence that he lived and died a self-sacrificing deliverer; that I was a Christian because I obeyed Christ's spirit speaking into my heart, and that Mr. Bradlaugh was a Christian too. I then gave them very briefly the doctrine of

the Logos; and, seeing Colenso's book advertised in their hall, spoke of his real work as a Christian Bishop, and compared his work for Langalibale with the anti-slavery work; that they should judge of Christianity by its best men, not by frothy dissenting ministers, or Moody and Sankey (great applause), and that I could not be responsible for tracts put under people's doors.

Bradlaugh said that he did not know what to say; was very courteous; said I was very liberal, but if he were a barrister and the Bishop would give him a brief, he would convict me of heresy; hoped I would not spoil my splendid humanitarianism by joining it to a dead and rotting creed; knew that I was a good 'un by the ring of my voice (as far as I could make out); hoped I would get married (he may have meant the spiritual children); and asked me, if I liked, he would think none the worse if I didn't, as he didn't want to challenge me (as was his wont with others):—but if I liked to prove in the *National Reformer* that Christ was a deliverer and a self-sacrificing one—he believed there were no documents within 150 years of his reported death:—more praise—we shake hands and part.

Altogether a most exciting evening: at any rate the hall was full of people who now know that a parson does not worship the Bible, or believe that men will be kept

in punishment for ever, or objects to Museums being open on Sunday: this of itself must help to break down barriers or construct bridges 'pontifically.' (I also said that the Bible was probably the best book, but must be treated just like any other book. And he spoke strongly and feelingly of the treatment he had received from the parson here at St. Peter's (of the way he and others had been libelled, which is too true)—Packer by name—when he was a 'doubter.'

I want you to tell me what you think about my writing to the *Reformer*: and whether it would be well to write to the Bishop and say that a lot of men in his diocese accused him of believing in the infallibility of the Bible, and therefore supporting slavery, and asking leave to publish his answer in the *Reformer*.

Next Sunday Bradlaugh lectures on Christian Culture and is sure to say some nasty things about Christians, and we deserve it; how much nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven are these men in the Hall of Science than the followers of Moody and Sankey!

Ever yours,

STEWART D. HEADLAM.

This letter may perhaps serve as an interesting note of the kind of work done at the Hall of Science. 'Is the Bible True?'

'The New Life of Abraham,' and all the rest of that part of Mr. Bradlaugh's work was necessary in view of the crude Bible-worship which was prevalent. Now of course we recognise that to ask 'Is the Bible true?' would be as absurd as to ask 'Is English Literature true?'

But though mainly a destroyer, Mr. Bradlaugh was not only destructive. The formula of the National Secular Society, that this world demands, and will repay, our utmost care and attention, suggested construction on what always seemed to me to be the distinctly Christian lines of the Secular work of Christ, involving a salutary attack upon the otherworldliness of pietism. It was this which inspired all the political work—the unbending Radicalism—of Mr. Bradlaugh; and which led, at a time when many of the best men were hemmed in by the Malthusian dilemma, to the Malthusian League, to the Knowlton pamphlet, and to prosecutions for teaching which was the natural outcome of the current philosophy of the time. We have now learned differently; but we must remember that it was Bradlaugh's zealous fight against poverty which led him into those regions: he, too, burned with indignation when he saw that the people were not properly fed, clothed and housed; and set about, to the best of his power, regardless of hatred and insult, to find a remedy.

But so bitter was the feeling against him that the simple fact of my consenting to be president of the science classes held at the Hall of Science was made a matter of a question in Parliament, and was one of the many causes of the Bishop of London's attacks upon me; but I was glad to find out, only the other day, that it led to the young men who attended those classes nicknaming the Guild of St. Matthew as the 'Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Atheists.'

On July 24th, 1880, I sent the following telegram to Mr. Bradlaugh, addressed to 'The Prison: The House of Commons':— 'Accept my warmest sympathy. I wish you good luck in the name of Jesus Christ the Emancipator, whom so many of your opponents blaspheme.' This sums up a lecture on 'A Christian's View of the Bradlaugh Case,' which I gave throughout the country, and which ended with the words that, according to Christ's teaching, however much Mr. Bradlaugh might say that he did not know God, as he had taken infinite pains to bring about the time when the people of England should be properly clothed, fed and housed, God knew him and claimed him as His.

Those of us who are Socialists, especially those of us who have learnt from Henry George, believe that there are other means rather than those advocated by Mr. Bradlaugh, which will bring about the results he

desired; but none of us, especially those of us who are Socialists, can afford to ignore, still less to detract from, his overmastering personality. To listen to him, to be in his presence, was a moral tonic. William Rogers ('hang theology, damn science, let's begin!' Rogers) said to me once, after some reception: 'I found your friend Bradlaugh deadly dull!' Doubtless he was self-centred, and doubtless he was a 'terrible man'; but what a fight he fought, and what an example he has left us!

If, as most of us believe, we know better now how to tackle the evils against which he fought; if, as some of us believe, there is a divine inspiration urging us to the battle, let us at any rate see that we are as strenuous and as devoted as an 'individualistic atheist.'

We have much to be grateful to Charles Bradlaugh for on account of his destructive work; but it is his towering personality that we chiefly honour.

STEWART D. HEADLAM.

