

# Notable NSS Presidents since Chapman Cohen

## **F.A. Ridley (22 February 1897 – 27 March 1994)**

R.H. Rosetti took over the NSS presidency when Chapman Cohen retired. But his health rapidly deteriorated and he died two years later. F.A.Ridley, who succeeded him in 1951, served until 1963.

Frank Ridley was born into a comfortable middle class family; educated at the famous public school Sedburgh; and obtained a licentiate from Durham University. He then broke with Christianity and moved to London.

He differed from his predecessors – he was a revolutionary socialist with links to many left-wing movements, particularly the Independent Labour Party.

His greatest contribution to secularism lay in his writings, including *The Papacy and Fascism*, 1937 (one of the first pieces of work to link the two); *The Jesuits* (1932) and *The Evolution and the Papacy* (1949). A theme running through all these works was the relationship between politics and religion.

Ridley also edited *The Freethinker* from 1951 to 1954. He frequently wrote on a range of subjects, but he was a particularly well-informed and cogent critic of the Roman Catholic Church.

## **David Tribe (1931 - 2017)**

Tribe was born in Sydney, Australia and brought up in Brisbane. He studied medicine at the University of Queensland but did not enjoy hospital work. He travelled to the UK soon after leaving university, working principally as a lecturer.

Tribe was President of the NSS from 1963 to 1971 and edited *The Freethinker* for a brief period in 1966.

His presidency coincided with a period of vigorous campaigning on the society's behalf. The 1960s saw progress on a number of fronts including gay rights, women's rights, abortion, contraception and divorce law reform. Tribe, in particular, wrote and campaigned on the subjects of religion and schools.

He wrote two major pieces of scholarship of great significance to the NSS. In 1967, shortly after the society's centenary, he published *100 Years of Freethought*. Four years later he wrote *President Charles Bradlaugh MP*, a work of outstanding scholarship which helped rekindle interest in the society's founder.

David Tribe died in Australia in 2017, at the age of 86.

## **Barbara Smoker (2 June 1923 - 7 April 2020)**

Smoker was born in London into a Roman Catholic family. In her 20s she became an atheist.

She first became involved in the secular movement when she joined the South Place Ethical Society. She was elected President of the NSS in 1972, continuing in that role until 1996. As such the length of her term of office rivalled that of G.W. Foote and Charles Bradlaugh.

As President she represented the Society in print, on lecture platforms, speaking tours and on radio and television. She was also in demand as a celebrant at funerals, weddings, gay commitments and naming ceremonies.

She supported campaigns for causes such as the abolition of the death penalty, nuclear disarmament, legalisation of abortion and voluntary euthanasia.

Among the other offices she has held is as a former Chair of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (now Dignity in Dying).

In 2005 Smoker received the Distinguished Humanist Service Award from the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#).

Barbara Smoker's autobiography ([My Godforsaken Life: Memoir of a Maverick](#)) was published in December 2018 and reviewed by the NSS.

## **Denis Cobell (1938 - )**

Denis Cobell was born in Hove, East Sussex. His parents were strict evangelical Christians and his father was a lay preacher.

Cobell's secularism was triggered by the books he read in Hove Public Library, including those of Bertrand Russell.

He worked as an NHS nurse for 48 years. In 1960 he moved to London and took up a position at Guy's Hospital, where he remained until he retired.

He joined the Council of the NSS in 1976 and became President in 1997. He held the post until 2006. During his presidency he forged a close working relationship with Keith Porteous Wood (Executive Director).

The NSS was brought into the digital age. As a result parliamentary lobbying and effective campaigning have become hallmarks of the society. And its theatre of operations has been extended to include the European Union, the Council of Europe and United Nations.