

1. Introduction: The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hywRVpB1k1w&feature=youtu.be>

0:00:12.259,0:00:20.779

Hello. My name's Bob Forder.

I'd like to begin by explaining who I am, what I plan

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to do over a series of video clips relevant to the history and traditions

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of the National Secular Society, or NSS, one of the oldest, if not the oldest,

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radical campaigning organizations in the UK.

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I have been a member of the NSS for very many years, more recently have joined

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their Council, and I am generally referred to as the NSS historian. I hope it won't sound too

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self-indulgent if I endeavour to explain my own interest and passion, but what may

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seem an odd and esoteric historical byway.

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My great-grandfather, also Robert Forder, was a poor man from Norfolk who joined the

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great exodus from rural England to the rapidly growing cities of

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the UK, like London, where he settled. He became involved in the various radical

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campaigns of the third quarter of the 19th century and, like many others, he

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fell under the spell of the great Charles Bradlaugh.

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Bradlaugh founded the National Secular Society in 1866 and became its first president.

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After what might be described as a faltering start,

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by 1877 the Society had grown sufficiently to employ a paid secretary.

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That secretary was to be my ancestor,

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whose administrative skills and loyalty for Bradlaugh, had earned him the

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president's trust. Robert remained secretary until 1891 and

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was therefore associated with all Bradlaugh's struggles, which I shall endeavour

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to explore in subsequent talks. He also became a publisher in his own right,

0:02:32.840,0:02:37.500

and it was that that drew my attention to him as a young man along

0:02:37.510,0:02:44.920

with the odd family story.

Over the years I've collected a large

0:02:44.920,0:02:50.920

collection of secularist publications,
many directly relevant the career of

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Charles Bradlaugh and the NSS.
It's been a jolly good area for collecting.

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The books are scarce,
but often remarkably cheap because most

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people simply don't understand what they
are and what they represent.

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To be honest, at first I didn't always
understand their significance or

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importance in the eyes of the radicals
of the period.

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But as time has gone on, and I've read
more widely, I think I've come to

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understand a little more.
I want to say something else too.

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Having spent a career teaching humanities
subjects, and particularly history, I've

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also come to understand that history
means different things to different people.

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And it's teaching serves different purposes
according to who you speak to.

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On the one hand there is the history of

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what you might loosely term conservative
traditionalists, even nationalists.

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Their history dwells on topics such as
1066, the fleet that beat the Spanish Armada,

0:04:09.420,0:04:14.360

Gloria Victoria Britain,
the wonders of the Empire,

0:04:14.360,0:04:21.200

Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain.
All these important topics appear on the

0:04:21.200,0:04:27.660

curriculum of British schools.
Now I know schools sometimes nod in

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the direction of the trade union movement
and Peterloo, for example, but I

0:04:33.660,0:04:42.300

ask you: What is the overall message of
school history for the student?

0:04:42.460,0:04:48.200

There is another history.
It's often drier, more academic and

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contained within books and journals with
generally short print runs.

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But within this you'll find the history of
ordinary
people, revolt, rebellion, protest and

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agitation for change.
Perhaps the most obscure history of all

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is the story of those who regarded
religion as a conservative force,

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a bastion of privilege and an obstacle to
human progress.

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The NSS and its history is a small part
of this alternative history, but it is

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important, and the
traditions it encompasses and contributes

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to our not only alive today, but, I would
suggest, are increasingly significant in

0:05:43.279,0:05:50.740
these populist and
potentially illiberal times.

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Thank you for watching, and I hope of
whetted your appetites and that you will

0:05:57.379,0:06:01.940
watch further short videos in this
series, where I endeavour to give a

0:06:01.940,0:06:08.200
personal view as to the significance of
particular individuals and events.

0:06:08.280,0:06:19.840
If you want to contact me my email address is
r.w.forder@btinternet.com