

# 10. Chapman Cohen (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

Video available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8H4nU5dg\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8H4nU5dg_k)

0:00:12.020,0:00:31.140

Hi. Bob Forder again.

Chapman Cohen

1st September 1868 - 4th February 1954

0:00:31.780,0:00:39.110

Chapman Cohen was born in Leicester, the son of Deborah and Henry, and the second

0:00:39.110,0:00:47.880

of six children. His parents were of Orthodox Jewish background and of modest means.

0:00:47.880,0:00:52.460

His father was a confectioner.

0:00:52.469,0:00:59.269

Chapman was generally known as CC.

0:00:59.929,0:01:07.430

The Cohen's moved to London in 1889, we don't really know why.

0:01:07.430,0:01:15.180

Cohen wrote that he had "little religion at home and none at school."

0:01:15.180,0:01:22.960

But that's not to say that he considered his Jewish background irrelevant to his views.

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In his book, published in 1940, "Almost an Autobiography", he explains that

0:01:31.720,0:01:39.740

Christian persecution encouraged his own

critical analysis of religion.

0:01:40.140,0:01:53.590

CC's formal elementary education was slight, a factor he considered to his advantage:

0:01:53.590,0:02:01.920

"The mental soil was healthy, with no weeds that might choke the better growth."

0:02:02.150,0:02:09.450

He was, however, a prodigious reader. As a youngster he moved from boys'

0:02:09.450,0:02:15.959

tales to standard novels and then history. science and philosophy.

0:02:15.959,0:02:20.420

"I can definitely date the fact that

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before I was 18 I was familiar with Spinoza, Locke, Hume and Berkeley,

0:02:27.360,0:02:36.840

besides having revelled in the Platonic dialogues, a love for which I have never outgrown."

0:02:37.270,0:02:42.840

He remained an avid collector of books all his life.

0:02:44.160,0:02:49.680

When first in London CC was apprenticed to a cigar maker and it

0:02:49.680,0:02:56.100

seems that his association with the National Secular Society began quite by chance.

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In 1889 he was in London and stopped to listen to a Christian

0:03:01.500,0:03:09.740

Evidence speaker in Victoria Park, who was debating with an elderly man with a speech impediment.

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The Christian speaker began to ridicule the older man.

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Cohen intervened and was soon being invited

0:03:18.050,0:03:24.430

by the local NSS branch to speak on the Society's platforms.

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Cohen came to writing after speaking and debating and, it seems, rather reluctantly.

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He had been courted for several years by George William Foote, then President of

0:03:38.330,0:03:45.860

the NSS and editor of the Freethinker, and in 1897 he started

0:03:45.860,0:03:54.050

writing articles for that journal.

He was Foote's protégé. During this period he

0:03:54.050,0:04:01.640

also briefly edited the Bradford Truthseeker when its editor, John Grange, was ill.

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In 1898 he became sub-editor of the

0:04:05.820,0:04:12.570

Freethinker, following JM Wheeler's death, gradually taking on an increasingly

0:04:12.570,0:04:18.320

prominent role as Foote's health declined.

0:04:18.440,0:04:23.130

Apart from Freethinker articles, his first publication was a pamphlet

0:04:23.130,0:04:28.340

entitled "An Outline of Evolutionary Ethics".

0:04:28.730,0:04:36.010

In 1915 Cohen became NSS President and Freethinker editor when Foote died.

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He was already 47 and it been married, since the age of 24, to Celia.

0:04:44.080,0:04:53.420

In 1900 Celia had given birth to a daughter, Daisy, and in 1908 she was joined by Raymond.

0:04:53.420,0:04:59.520

They lived in Leytonstone in comfortable house.

0:04:59.520,0:05:05.100

They owned a Bullnose Morris, a dog,

0:05:05.100,0:05:13.280

and according to his son, Raymond, who I once met, took occasional foreign holidays.

0:05:13.280,0:05:17.560

They liked Westcliff-on-Sea.

0:05:17.560,0:05:26.150

Celia never took paid employment.

Domestic life was spoiled only by the early

0:05:26.150,0:05:34.050

and tragic death of CC's daughter, Daisy, as a young woman.

0:05:34.050,0:05:41.000

Raymond became a very successful doctor who researched into TB, the disease

0:05:41.000,0:05:46.669

that had killed Daisy.

0:05:47.700,0:05:55.540

The Freethinker markedly changed its tone when the editorship passed from Foote to Cohen.

0:05:55.540,0:06:02.660

The bible-bashing, biting satire that had characterized Foote's editorship

0:06:02.660,0:06:09.920

disappeared, and was replaced by a more sober critique of the illogicality and

0:06:09.920,0:06:18.960

contradictions of Christianity. Interestingly, Cohen in "Almost an Autobiography"

0:06:18.960,0:06:23.970

describes a conversation he once had with Foote, in which he told

0:06:23.970,0:06:31.220

Foote that he paid too high a tribute to Christianity with his hatred, and

0:06:31.220,0:06:39.530

argued that you only hate that for which you maintain an element of respect.

0:06:40.050,0:06:47.199

Cohen's default tone, on the other hand, was one of scholarly contempt, based in

0:06:47.199,0:06:55.570

philosophy and science, particularly evolutionary theory. What he was so good

0:06:55.570,0:07:06.620

at was explaining things in plain simple English, even quite complicated ideas.

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Cohen always wrote the lead article for the Freethinker, and topics included

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criticism of Christianity and the religious and their illogicality,

0:07:17.740,0:07:23.420

the irrationalism and undesirable social and political effects of religion;

0:07:23.430,0:07:29.830

criticisms of the Church of England and its clergy; and the commentary on social and

0:07:29.830,0:07:36.169

political policies, for example, blasphemy, education and birth control.

0:07:36.169,0:07:42.460

CC was at the helm of the Freethinker and NSS through most of two world wars,

0:07:42.460,0:07:49.699

but his attitude to each was very different. He deplored the jingoism and

0:07:49.700,0:07:55.920

nationalism of the first war, but regarded the second as a necessary evil.

0:07:56.000,0:08:04.279

At the end of 1914 Cohen wrote in the Freethinker:

"The beating of Germany

0:08:04.279,0:08:08.870

in the field will not secure peace, but the getting of different ideas into

0:08:08.870,0:08:16.849

German heads and into the heads of other people will. Guns may kill men, but they

0:08:16.849,0:08:27.750

are powerless against ideas."

In 1935 he wrote "The Freethinker is one

0:08:27.750,0:08:31.500

of the few papers in this country that can look back on its wartime records

0:08:31.500,0:08:35.750

without regret and without shame."

0:08:36.680,0:08:42.229

The two world wars, with their associated paper shortages, put great pressure on

0:08:42.229,0:08:46.519

the Freethinker, but it never missed an issue despite the offices being

0:08:46.519,0:08:50.570

destroyed during a raid in the Second World War.

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During the 1920s and 1930s the NSS and Freethinker offices, and the

0:08:55.650,0:09:02.220

headquarters of the Pioneer Press were at 61 Farringdon Street.

0:09:02.220,0:09:08.220

Cohen generally did most of his work at home, visiting the offices

0:09:08.220,0:09:14.580

perhaps twice a week.

There was a full-time secretary.

0:09:14.580,0:09:21.029

The Freethinker was a weekly national publication, which consisted comprised 16

0:09:21.029,0:09:25.860

pages for most of the interwar years.

0:09:26.220,0:09:33.180

Cohen also authored around 25 hardbound books and numerous

0:09:33.180,0:09:39.370

pamphlets and leaflets.

CC was enthusiastic about the

0:09:39.370,0:09:44.230

establishment of the League of Nations in 1919, although he would have preferred

0:09:44.230,0:09:50.500

the title the League of People. He gave support to the reform acts which

0:09:50.500,0:09:54.730

extended the vote to women. He argued in favor of women being given the ability

0:09:54.730,0:09:59.410

to control their fertility, he was an opponent of the blasphemy laws and a

0:09:59.410,0:10:06.370

staunch defender of free speech. He also deplored the privileged access of the

0:10:06.370,0:10:12.390

religious to the BBC, favored a liberalisation of the divorce laws,

0:10:12.390,0:10:19.240

advocated sex education, and favoured a freer and more scientific attitude to

0:10:19.240,0:10:26.080

sexuality, the repression of which he explored in detail in his book

0:10:26.080,0:10:34.030

"Religion and Sex". Religion in schools was a constant preoccupation, in that

0:10:34.030,0:10:39.040

sense, some things never change.

0:10:39.460,0:10:45.819

Cohen travelled the country giving lectures. During the 1919 indoor

0:10:45.820,0:10:54.840

lecturing season, for example, (that means from autumn all the way through to spring),

0:10:54.840,0:11:04.520

he spoke at no less than 34 venues on more than 50 occasions.

0:11:04.520,0:11:12.480

The venues included Manchester and Leicester (often), Abertillery, South Shields,

0:11:12.480,0:11:20.160

Swansea, Glasgow, Paisley, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Belfast, Leeds etc etc.

0:11:20.160,0:11:26.400

Subjects included a range such as "Christianity, the Army and the Nation",

0:11:26.410,0:11:32.120

"Freethought, Religion and Death", "God and Evolution".

0:11:32.120,0:11:38.610

In 1919 he also debated with the Glasgow spiritualists.

0:11:38.610,0:11:47.390

There are many stories about Cohen's ability as a speaker and his sharp wit and humor.

0:11:47.680,0:11:56.660

Raymond told me of one: at one meeting the issue of deathbed recantations came up.

0:11:56.660,0:12:00.220

At the time it was believed that Napoleon been a heretic

0:12:00.220,0:12:06.910

who recounted on his deathbed and begged for God's mercy.

0:12:06.910,0:12:17.400

During the meeting a Christian heckler shouted out

"What did Napoleon say on his deathbed?"

0:12:17.400,0:12:23.040

Cohen looked puzzled, scratched his head

0:12:23.240,0:12:29.780

and replied "Not tonight Josephine?"

0:12:30.400,0:12:35.570

Everything Cohen wrote and said was rooted in his freethought, atheism and

0:12:35.570,0:12:39.960

trenchant criticism of religion.

0:12:40.000,0:12:45.440

However, by the end of the Second World War, Cohen was an old man. His writings had

0:12:45.440,0:12:49.400

become repetitive, he was forgetting things and becoming confused.

0:12:49.400,0:12:57.620

At both the 1947 and 48 National Secular Society

annual conferences there was resistance

0:12:57.630,0:13:04.080

to his re-election. The minutes of the 1947 conference have Colin McCall

0:13:04.080,0:13:10.920

saying that Cohen was no longer able to carry out his duties. He said the NSS was

0:13:10.920,0:13:17.580

living in "Victorian times" and that Cohen should follow Bradlaugh's example and resign

0:13:17.580,0:13:22.980

when he was no longer able to carry on an active role.

0:13:22.980,0:13:29.020

Shortly before the '49 conference, Cohen made it clear that he would not seek re-election

0:13:29.020,0:13:37.140  
following a particularly disastrous meeting.  
He was succeeded by RH Rosetti.

0:13:37.140,0:13:40.440  
For a while Cohen carried on  
with the Freethinker,

0:13:41.520,0:13:46.900  
although he became increasingly dependent  
on others, particularly Herbert Cutner.

0:13:46.900,0:13:52.060  
On May 27th 1951 he resigned the editorship.

0:13:52.060,0:13:58.480  
He died from pneumonia less  
than three years later.

0:13:58.540,0:14:08.360  
Remarkably CC's voice has not entirely  
disappeared, because in 1932 Edison Bell

0:14:08.360,0:14:13.120  
made a recording:  
"The Meaning and Value of Freethought".

0:14:13.120,0:14:21.720  
So we can hear from the man himself  
by searching for his name on YouTube.

0:14:21.900,0:14:27.860  
So, what were his achievements?  
Well, first and foremost there was

0:14:27.860,0:14:33.320  
the brilliance of his writings.  
Nobody has ever written so clearly and

0:14:33.320,0:14:40.880  
coherently when making the case for unbelief.  
In my opinion his "Pamphlets for the People"

0:14:40.880,0:14:48.800  
make out the positive case for  
non belief better than anybody else ever has.

0:14:48.800,0:14:52.060

Second, as a speaker he had few peers.

0:14:52.079,0:14:57.759  
Though he lacked the physical presence  
of a Bradlaugh, his logic, calm and quick

0:14:57.759,0:15:05.490  
wits disarmed and shamed hecklers,  
who were frequent in those days.

0:15:05.490,0:15:12.129  
Sidney Gimson wrote of Cohen:  
"He has a wonderful power of clear thinking

0:15:12.129,0:15:19.420  
with the gift of putting his arguments in  
simple and convincing language"

0:15:19.420,0:15:24.579  
So formidable was Cohen as an advocate,  
that he generated a loyal following that

0:15:24.579,0:15:29.930  
held him in awe.  
Very recently, the former NSS President,

0:15:29.930,0:15:36.610  
Barbara Smoker (sadly now deceased) told  
me that when she became President of the

0:15:36.610,0:15:44.470  
Society in 1972, Cohen's  
memory was still revered.

0:15:45.560,0:15:50.760  
When Cohen took over from Foote, he also  
brought stability and calm to the NSS.

0:15:50.760,0:15:58.600  
This had not always been the case before.  
Agonized public appeals and cries for help  
ended.

0:15:58.600,0:16:03.240  
Cohen was greatly helped in this respect  
by a court judgment known as the Bowman

0:16:03.240,0:16:09.330

judgment, which reached the House of Lords on appeal in 1917. Prior to this

0:16:09.330,0:16:15.060

the legality of bequests could and were successfully challenged.

0:16:15.060,0:16:20.400

Much of this was Foote's work, but Cohen had assisted him and it was the Freethinker

0:16:20.400,0:16:24.620

under Cohen that was the main beneficiary.

0:16:24.620,0:16:31.190

Finally, I am influenced by one of Sydney Gimson's comments when he wrote of some

0:16:31.190,0:16:37.100

of the other speakers that appeared at the Leicester Secular Hall:

0:16:37.100,0:16:42.560

"They adopt the conventional religious attitude and do not recognize how loose thinking

0:16:42.560,0:16:48.520

reacts on their judgment on social problems".

0:16:48.860,0:16:55.800

Nobody could accuse Cohen of "loose thinking".

0:16:56.220,0:17:01.290

Well, there were some downsides: Firstly, Cohen was autocratic in his conduct

0:17:01.290,0:17:08.910

of the Council and Conference of the NSS. He so dominated the NSS and the Freethinker,

0:17:08.910,0:17:14.709

that to a large extent they were him. That brings great dangers particularly

0:17:14.709,0:17:23.500

when the time for succession arrives.

Secondly, in his book 'Almost an Autobiography'

0:17:23.500,0:17:27.920

Cohen commented that he'd spent a lifetime doing what interested him.

0:17:27.920,0:17:31.820

As such his interests were those of the NSS, and the NSS became

0:17:31.830,0:17:38.820

divorced from political campaigns. Cohen held politicians in low regard,

0:17:38.820,0:17:44.820

did not generally associate with them, and thought ideas far more important

0:17:44.820,0:17:50.970

than the grubby game of politics. As Cohen himself wrote:

0:17:50.970,0:17:56.000

"Those who lack the good sense and intentions to enter worthwhile

0:17:56.000,0:18:03.000

occupations often turn to politics."

0:18:03.200,0:18:07.960

The trouble was, the NSS became inward-looking.

0:18:07.960,0:18:14.300

Cohen wrote and spoke to his admirers, his admirers applauded, but the Society

0:18:14.300,0:18:18.400

had little influence outside its own ranks.

0:18:18.400,0:18:27.340

Finally, Cohen simply stayed too long. After the Second World War his powers were

0:18:27.340,0:18:33.600

in decline, but he was a stubborn old man who refused to go. Unfortunately by then

0:18:33.600,0:18:39.440  
the NSS was suffering a decline in  
membership,  
and many individuals of talent had gone.

0:18:39.440,0:18:44.430  
It never really recovered until  
1963 with the election of David Tribe

0:18:44.430,0:18:50.980  
as President, when the NSS once again  
become an outward-looking organization,

0:18:50.980,0:18:56.960  
which campaigned for the  
many liberal reforms of the Wilson

0:18:56.960,0:19:03.020  
government's Roy Jenkins, Home  
Secretaryship.

0:19:03.420,0:19:10.640  
CC was cremated at Golders Green  
Crematorium.

0:19:11.580,0:19:18.800  
There are no memorials to Chapman Cohen  
and there's no biography, although Jim  
Herrick

0:19:18.800,0:19:22.769  
gives an interesting account of  
his Freethinker days and some additional

0:19:22.769,0:19:26.460  
biographical information.

0:19:27.300,0:19:32.100  
Thank you for listening.  
If you want to contact me about this or

0:19:32.100,0:19:44.800  
any other aspect of secularist and NSS history,  
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