

## 4. G.J. Holyoake (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeOZBTCcpEw>

0:00:14.740,0:00:24.810

George Jacob Holyoake 1817 to 1906

0:00:25.250,0:00:30.160

Hi. It's Bob Forder again

0:00:30.980,0:00:39.500

George Jacob Holyoake was born in Birmingham, the second of 13 children. His

0:00:39.500,0:00:44.670

father was a whitesmith, which means that he worked tin,

0:00:44.670,0:00:52.469

and his mother a horn button maker. Like Paine and Carlile his background was

0:00:52.469,0:00:57.400

that of an artisan.

George Jacob received a basic

0:00:57.400,0:01:03.109

education to the age of eight before joining his father's trade.

0:01:03.109,0:01:08.780

At the age of 19 he began attending evening classes at the Birmingham Mechanics

0:01:08.780,0:01:14.479

Institute and became acquainted with the pioneering socialist ideas of Robert

0:01:14.479,0:01:20.380

Owen and, of course, he also read Thomas Paine

0:01:20.380,0:01:28.560

in 1837 he joined Owen's "Association of All Classes of all Nations".

0:01:28.700,0:01:37.759

Two years later, in 1839, he married Eleanor Williams. They soon had two daughters and

0:01:37.759,0:01:43.980

three sons were to follow. He decided to become a teacher, but it

0:01:43.980,0:01:51.180

seems his promotion was blocked due to his unorthodox ideas. Well, that was his story

0:01:51.180,0:01:58.170

anyway. He therefore successfully applied to become an Owenite Social Missionary

0:01:58.170,0:02:03.210

working first in Worcester and then Sheffield where he established a school

0:02:03.210,0:02:06.740

for the City's children.

0:02:07.759,0:02:13.310

Holyoake promoted and was influenced by Owen's experiments at his new Lanark

0:02:13.310,0:02:20.030

textile factory, limiting working hours, introducing education for children and

0:02:20.030,0:02:25.980

ensuring that his workers lived in good quality housing and were able to purchase

0:02:25.980,0:02:32.050

wholesome food and supplies at fair prices.

0:02:32.050,0:02:39.950

This association with Owenism had a influence on Holyoake in that he always

0:02:39.950,0:02:47.239

followed the Owenite idea that people are modelled by their environment. And if

0:02:47.239,0:02:53.239

people live in better circumstances,  
they'll eventually become better

0:02:53.239,0:02:55.599  
citizens.

0:02:56.239,0:03:03.360  
In 1841 Holyoake was contributing  
articles to the "Oracle of Reason" an

0:03:03.360,0:03:10.510  
atheist journal.  
In 1842 Charles Southwell,

0:03:10.510,0:03:20.890  
the journal's editor, was arrested,  
convicted of blasphemy, and sent to prison.

0:03:20.890,0:03:25.280  
Holyoake took over the editorship  
becoming increasingly critical of

0:03:25.280,0:03:31.160  
Owenism which he considered far too  
accommodating of Christianity. It was

0:03:31.160,0:03:36.319  
also critical of Owen's community  
building ventures. For example the one at

0:03:36.319,0:03:42.440  
Queenswood in Hampshire, arguing that  
such separateness was a diversion from

0:03:42.440,0:03:48.550  
the need to radically restructure  
society.

0:03:48.599,0:03:58.240  
Like Southwell, Holyoake was soon to  
find himself in trouble with the law.

0:03:58.240,0:04:04.730  
Southwell had been imprisoned in Bristol  
and Holyoake was traveling on foot to

0:04:04.730,0:04:09.650  
visit him when he stopped off in  
Cheltenham to give a lecture on the 24th

0:04:09.650,0:04:17.930

of May 1842. At the end of the lecture  
a clergyman questioner suggested that

0:04:17.930,0:04:22.010  
although Holyoake had told his audience  
of their duty to mankind

0:04:22.010,0:04:26.740  
he had said nothing of their duties of God.

0:04:27.070,0:04:36.130  
Holyoake replied, "If poor men cost the  
state as much as the churches, they be

0:04:36.130,0:04:44.889  
put on half-pay. I think it would be wise  
to do the same thing with the Deity.

0:04:44.889,0:04:57.419  
For myself, I flee the Bible as a viper  
and revolt at the touch of a Christian".

0:05:00.009,0:05:06.729  
Holyoake continued to Bristol but learned  
that news of his comments had spread and

0:05:06.729,0:05:12.760  
that the Cheltenham magistrates thought  
there was a case of blasphemy to answer.

0:05:12.760,0:05:20.640  
Holyoake returned to Cheltenham, addressed  
a meeting, and was promptly arrested.

0:05:20.640,0:05:27.670  
Holyoake defended himself at his trial  
was found guilty and sentenced to six

0:05:27.670,0:05:31.960  
months. A number of attempts were made by  
the

0:05:31.960,0:05:37.630  
prison chaplain to convert him during  
drink during his imprisonment all were

0:05:37.630,0:05:44.000  
unsuccessful  
but some of which was recorded by Holyoake.

0:05:44.169,0:05:53.710

Chaplin: "You deny there is a God?"  
Holyoake: "Oh no no I deny there is sufficient

0:05:53.710,0:05:56.978  
reason to believe that there is one."

0:05:56.978,0:05:59.900  
Chaplain: "I am very glad to find that you have  
not the temerity to say there is no God."

0:05:59.900,0:06:01.570  
Holyoake: "And I am very sorry to find that you  
have the temerity to say there is one."

0:06:01.570,0:06:06.569

0:06:06.569,0:06:12.839  
If it be absurd for me to deny what I cannot  
demonstrate, is it not improper for you to  
assert so dogmatically what you cannot  
prove?"

0:06:12.839,0:06:18.509

0:06:18.509,0:06:25.159

0:06:26.510,0:06:31.180  
While in prison Holyoake was visited by  
Richard Carlile.

0:06:31.180,0:06:37.560  
This came as a surprise as he'd been  
told Carlisle was dead.

0:06:38.379,0:06:48.129  
Holyoake emerged from jail a celebrity  
martyr. He had never been so popular.

0:06:49.160,0:06:53.280  
After his release Holyoake started a  
journal called

0:06:53.280,0:06:57.930  
"The Reasoner" which survived for some 15  
years and became one of the most

0:06:57.930,0:07:03.660  
important working-class journals of the

19th century. It also provides us with a

0:07:03.660,0:07:10.880  
record of many of the reformist  
activities of that period.

0:07:12.169,0:07:16.879  
Holyoake also became a member of the  
Birmingham Chartists eventually becoming

0:07:16.879,0:07:22.320  
a member of the Chartist Executive  
but Charterism and went into decline

0:07:22.320,0:07:27.710  
after 1848 and eventually collapsed.

0:07:28.150,0:07:34.660  
After 1848 Holyoake therefore helped  
found and became one of the

0:07:34.660,0:07:38.290  
leaders of the National Reform League  
which endeavored to carry on the

0:07:38.290,0:07:43.410  
campaign for political and  
constitutional reform.

0:07:44.039,0:07:51.009  
Holyoake also campaigned against the taxes  
on  
knowledge as they were known. These were

0:07:51.009,0:07:56.770  
were intended to make it more difficult for  
subversive, seditious, blasphemous and

0:07:56.770,0:08:02.409  
revolutionary ideas to spread.  
They became particularly significant

0:08:02.409,0:08:08.289  
after 1815 and then again after Peterloo  
when the taxes on newspapers were

0:08:08.289,0:08:14.879  
extended in order to put them beyond the  
reach of working people.

0:08:16.110,0:08:19.610

Apart from Carlile and Holyoake two other individuals were of particular

0:08:19.610,0:08:25.680

importance: Henry Hetherington and James Watson, although there were very many

0:08:25.680,0:08:28.760

others too.

0:08:29.160,0:08:35.530

In 1851 Holyoake joined with Watson and Hetherington to form the Association for

0:08:35.530,0:08:41.260

the repeal of the taxes on knowledge. In 1855 newspapers stamp duties were

0:08:41.260,0:08:49.740

finally abolished, but only after Holyoake himself had been fined many times.

0:08:50.890,0:09:00.020

By 1853 Holyoake's "The Reasoner" was selling around 5,000 copies a week, although its

0:09:00.020,0:09:05.450

reach was probably much wider than that as copies were handed on, and there were

0:09:05.450,0:09:14.180

readings sometimes of particular issues. In it, Holyoake criticised Christianity

0:09:14.180,0:09:19.600

and suggested that it should be replaced by a belief system based on reason and

0:09:19.600,0:09:25.120

science.

Holyoake coined the term "secularism" as a

0:09:25.120,0:09:33.809

name for this theory. And he describes what he meant in the following way:

0:09:35.850,0:09:41.560

"Secularism is that which seeks the development of the physical,

0:09:41.560,0:09:47.500

moral and intellectual nature of man to the highest possible point, as the

0:09:47.500,0:09:55.450

immediate duty of life - which inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural

0:09:55.450,0:10:02.760

unmapped morality,

apart from Atheism, Theism or the Bible -

0:10:02.760,0:10:09.460

which selects as its methods and proposes these positive agreements as

0:10:09.460,0:10:17.350

the common bond of union, to all who had regulate life by reason and ennoble it

0:10:17.350,0:10:21.360

by service.

0:10:21.889,0:10:27.689

One of the reasons Holyoake generated his new term was that he considered atheism

0:10:27.689,0:10:33.449

far too negative. For

Holyoake a key principle was freedom of

0:10:33.449,0:10:38.329

thought and expression without interference from State or Church,

0:10:38.329,0:10:44.490

although from Holyoake's own definition it could be seen that his view of

0:10:44.490,0:10:49.379

secularism was broad in the way in

which the term is often used today and

0:10:49.379,0:10:56.629

perhaps has much in common with the term "humanism".

0:10:58.570,0:11:04.850

Some thought this position a betrayal as it diverted away from attacks on

0:11:04.850,0:11:08.720  
religion at a time when the established  
Anglican Church was widely viewed as

0:11:08.720,0:11:16.460  
repressive and as a kind of  
establishment thought police. In their

0:11:16.460,0:11:22.210  
minds secularism and atheism were  
virtually synonymous

0:11:22.810,0:11:28.360  
These divisions were very evident in the  
secularist or freethought movement and

0:11:28.360,0:11:34.390  
were one, among others, of the factors that  
led to Holyoake losing the leadership of

0:11:34.390,0:11:41.890  
secularism to the more militant  
outspoken Charles Bradlaugh, of whom I

0:11:41.890,0:11:47.460  
will have much more to say in the future.

0:11:48.660,0:11:54.430  
As mentioned earlier Holyoake was  
deeply influenced by the ideas of Robert

0:11:54.430,0:12:02.649  
Owen including Owen's pioneering work on  
co-operation. Holyoake campaigned forom the

0:12:02.649,0:12:08.560  
movement in "The Reasoner" and wrote  
"Self-help by the People", a book about the

0:12:08.560,0:12:14.279  
Rochdale pioneers. He had actually been  
present at the opening of the first

0:12:14.279,0:12:23.769  
co-operative store at Toad Lane, Rochdale.  
He also wrote "The History of Co-operation

0:12:23.769,0:12:32.490  
in England" thereby became effectively  
the co-operative movement's historian.

0:12:32.540,0:12:37.940  
Holyoake's contribution to cooperation was  
recognized by the naming of the

0:12:37.940,0:12:45.950  
co-operative Union headquarters in  
Manchester Holyoake House. Two other

0:12:45.950,0:12:52.690  
memorials to Holyoake are plaques on his  
residences at 36 Camelford Street, Brighton

0:12:52.690,0:12:59.300  
where he lived from 1881 to his death in  
1906, and at 4 Woburn Walk,

0:12:59.300,0:13:05.800  
just south of Euuston station where he  
lived from 1850 to 1861.

0:13:05.800,0:13:10.829  
This plaque was only recently unveiled.

0:13:13.829,0:13:19.589  
Holyoake was one of the founding fathers  
in the Rationalist Press Association and

0:13:19.589,0:13:27.200  
was its first Chairman. The RPA  
was highly influential in the

0:13:27.200,0:13:32.210  
first half of the 20th century  
popularising rationalist, secularist and

0:13:32.210,0:13:39.260  
free thinking ideas. Ventures like the  
Thinker's Library were, in my estimation,

0:13:39.260,0:13:43.880  
just as important in making good  
quality literature available to the

0:13:43.880,0:13:49.090  
masses as were Penguin and the Left Book  
Club.

0:13:50.010,0:13:58.860  
So what were Holyoake's achievements? What  
was his legacy?

0:13:58.860,0:14:04.740

Well most obviously there was that word "secularism"

0:14:04.970,0:14:11.180

but there are other points too. First, one reason he is important is simply that he

0:14:11.180,0:14:16.700

lived a very long time and his long life covered an important period in

0:14:16.700,0:14:21.430

English radical history.

0:14:21.990,0:14:28.649

Second, his interests encompass most radical campaigns and issues - Charterism

0:14:28.649,0:14:36.240

and political reform, the War of the Unstamped, secularism and co-operation. In

0:14:36.240,0:14:41.630

some senses he was the fulcrum around which many of these campaigns revolved.

0:14:41.630,0:14:49.740

To an extent his autobiography "Sixty years of an Agitator's Life" is a history of

0:14:49.740,0:14:59.450

19th century radicalism.

On that theme, George Jacob also tried to

0:14:59.450,0:15:05.860

fuse together reformist ideas and he tried to build bridges between

0:15:05.860,0:15:12.730

secularism, co-operation, socialism and political reform.

0:15:15.370,0:15:21.910

Third I think his main importance was that of a journalist spreading,

0:15:21.910,0:15:29.770

articulating and developing the radical and reformist message.

0:15:29.770,0:15:37.500

As well as his journals he wrote over a 160 books and pamphlets.

0:15:41.480,0:15:45.189

But there were some negatives too.

0:15:46.010,0:15:53.210

He was a poor public speaker with a thin reedy voice in the days when the public

0:15:53.210,0:15:58.840

meeting was one of the most important ways in which ideas were communicated.

0:15:58.840,0:16:02.760

He wasn't a good organiser either.

0:16:04.550,0:16:14.710

As time went on he became distrusted by many of his more militant followers

0:16:14.710,0:16:19.450

He certainly spent a lot of time cultivating his relationship with the

0:16:19.450,0:16:27.059

powerful and the respectable - the pious William Gladstone was a

0:16:27.059,0:16:30.410

particular target.

0:16:32.700,0:16:38.670

His rivalry with Charles Bradlaugh who effectively replaced him as a leader of

0:16:38.670,0:16:43.939

British secularism damaged radical cause.

0:16:43.939,0:16:49.039

A particular issue was Holyoake's failure to support Bradlaugh and Annie Besant

0:16:49.039,0:16:56.559

over the publication of a birth control pamphlet entitled "Fruits of Philosophy".

0:16:56.559,0:17:02.099

Much more about this later and its

significance.

0:17:05.459,0:17:12.270

So where can we find out more about Holyoake?

0:17:12.270,0:17:19.470

Well there's his autobiography and stuff already mentioned, and there is Lee

0:17:19.470,0:17:26.460

Grugel's "George Jacob Holyoake" which is fairly recent.

0:17:26.460,0:17:32.910

Probably the best book though is Edward Royle's "Victorian Infidels" which is not a

0:17:32.910,0:17:38.430

biography as such but deals with the events which dominated Holyoake's life

0:17:38.430,0:17:49.570

and recognises his central contribution. Interestingly a Canadian, Ray Argyle,

0:17:49.570,0:17:55.020

is currently writing a biography of Holyoake due to be published early in

0:17:55.020,0:17:59.450

2021.

I've been privileged enough to see some

0:17:59.450,0:18:06.230

extracts from this and it promises to be an excellent read.

0:18:06.230,0:18:10.770

Thank you for listening

You can contact me through my email

0:18:10.770,0:18:20.240

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