

# 5. The Early Career of Charles Bradlaugh (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

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

0:00:14.140,0:00:24.859

Hi. Bob Forder.

The Early Career of Charles Bradlaugh,

0:00:24.859,0:00:34.940

26 September 1833 - 30 January 1891

0:00:35.480,0:00:42.329

Charles Bradlaugh was the eldest of six children born to Charles Bradlaugh,

0:00:42.329,0:00:49.789

a solicitor's clerk, and his wife, Elizabeth, a former nursemaid.

0:00:49.789,0:00:56.500

He was born in Hoxton, East London and was educated at her local elementary day school.

0:00:56.500,0:01:01.640

At the age of 12 he became an office boy in the company where his father worked.

0:01:01.640,0:01:09.240

At this time the family lived in Bethnal Green. The young Charles occasionally heard

0:01:09.240,0:01:17.160

local radical/free-thinking speakers in Victoria Park, which was nearby.

0:01:17.160,0:01:22.020

He also attended the local Anglican Sunday School

0:01:22.020,0:01:28.420

at St Peter's Church, where the Reverend John Packer was the incumbent.

0:01:28.439,0:01:33.420

The Reverend Packer had identified

Charles

0:01:33.420,0:01:41.060

as one of his brightest youngsters, and had appointed him a Sunday school teacher.

0:01:41.200,0:01:46.170

Thus encouraged, the young Charles began an earnest study of the

0:01:46.170,0:01:52.790

four Gospels, but was disquieted by inconsistencies between them.

0:01:52.790,0:02:01.880

If these writings were guided by God shouldn't God be consistent?

0:02:01.920,0:02:06.870

He innocently asked for clarification from Packer, and was amazed to receive a

0:02:06.870,0:02:10.830

hostile response and a three-month suspension from his role as a Sunday

0:02:10.830,0:02:19.110

school teacher. Then it got worse. Charles sent Packer a copy of Robert Taylor's

0:02:19.110,0:02:27.390

"The Diegesis" for comment and at the same time announced himself a teetotaler

0:02:27.390,0:02:33.220

- a free-thinking characteristic in those days -

0:02:33.400,0:02:41.640

Robert Taylor not only styled himself "The Devil's Chaplain", his Diegesis was an

0:02:41.650,0:02:47.080  
extraordinary work of scholarship which  
mercilessly explored Christian origins

0:02:47.080,0:02:52.920  
and claimed it to be rooted in myth.

0:02:53.020,0:02:58.800  
Packer visited Charles senior.  
He gave his son three days to change his

0:02:58.819,0:03:03.970  
mind or leave his job and his home.

0:03:04.620,0:03:09.540  
The young Bradlaugh was never one for  
compromise, he left home and was offered

0:03:09.540,0:03:20.200  
shelter by Eliza Sharples, Richard Carlile's  
former partner, and her three children.

0:03:20.440,0:03:24.880  
Bradlaugh spent his time at the  
Carlile's in fruitful study,

0:03:24.880,0:03:30.120  
teaching himself French, Hebrew, Greek and  
Latin.

0:03:30.580,0:03:36.840  
At the age of 17 he made the  
acquaintance of Austin Holyoake ,

0:03:36.840,0:03:43.240  
G.J Holyoaks brother.  
It was he who arranged for George Jacob

0:03:43.250,0:03:48.319  
to take the chair of the meeting  
where Bradlaugh spoke on the

0:03:48.319,0:03:55.640  
"Past, Present and Future of Theology"  
on 16th October 1850.

0:03:55.640,0:03:59.870  
Bradlaugh had just given his  
first infidel lecture.

0:03:59.870,0:04:08.660

Shortly afterwards wrote his first pamphlet  
"A Few Words on the Christian's Creed".

0:04:08.820,0:04:13.330  
Despite these youthful achievements,  
Bradlaugh was broke having failed to

0:04:13.330,0:04:18.790  
make a living as an independent coal  
merchant.  
Consequently, in December 1850

0:04:18.790,0:04:24.460  
he took the "Queen's shilling", enlisted in  
the 7th Dragoon Guards, and was

0:04:24.460,0:04:31.440  
posted to Ireland, where the misery he  
witnessed made a profound impact on him.

0:04:31.440,0:04:39.620  
He didn't enjoy army life, and when an aunt  
agreed to buy him out, he was delighted.

0:04:39.620,0:04:45.950  
On his return he took a job as a  
solicitor's clerk, and was married

0:04:45.950,0:04:57.480  
to Susannah in June 1855. Three children  
followed - Alice, Hypatia and another Charles.

0:04:57.480,0:05:01.010  
During his period he was learning  
much about law and was

0:05:01.010,0:05:05.900  
lecturing increasingly frequently on  
freethought subjects.

0:05:05.900,0:05:12.480  
At first marriage and family life went well,  
but he was to be overcome by tragedy.

0:05:12.480,0:05:20.580  
Susannah drank heavily.  
She died in 1877, aged just 45.

0:05:20.580,0:05:29.680  
His son Charles had already died aged 10,  
and Alice died in 1888 aged 32.

0:05:29.680,0:05:38.960

Only Hypatia was to outlive her father,  
dying in 1935 aged 77.

0:05:39.340,0:05:45.360

In 1858 Bradlaugh was invited  
to take on the editorship of the

0:05:45.370,0:05:51.550

"Investigator", a militant radical paper.  
That closed, but he was then invited to

0:05:51.550,0:05:59.180

take on the editorship of the  
"National Reformer", alongside Joseph Barker.

0:05:59.180,0:06:08.540

He was to remain editor, apart from a  
break from 1863 to 1866, until his death.

0:06:08.860,0:06:14.860

At this time Bradlaugh was also establishing  
himself as a platform speaker.

0:06:14.860,0:06:18.720

Harry Snell, who was to become a Labour MP,

0:06:18.720,0:06:26.180

and later, as Lord Snell, led the  
Labour Party in the Lord's said this:

0:06:26.190,0:06:30.300

"Bradlaugh was already speaking when I  
arrived, and I remember as clearly as

0:06:30.300,0:06:36.240

though it were only yesterday, the  
immediate and compelling impression made

0:06:36.240,0:06:43.430

upon me by that extraordinary man.  
"I have never been so influenced by a human

0:06:43.430,0:06:47.529

personality as I was by  
Charles Bradlaugh.

0:06:47.529,0:06:54.260

"The commanding strength, the massive head,

the imposing stature, and the ringing  
eloquence

0:06:54.260,0:07:03.340

of the man fascinated me ... and I became one  
of  
his humblest but most devoted of his  
followers".

0:07:03.340,0:07:09.940

Tom Mann was a young trade unionist when  
he first heard Bradlaugh speak.

0:07:09.940,0:07:15.140

This is what he said:  
"Charles Bradlaugh was at this period,

0:07:15.140,0:07:20.660

and I think for fully fifteen years,  
the foremost platform man in Britain.

0:07:20.660,0:07:26.760

"When championing an unpopular cause,  
it is of advantage to have a powerful physique.

0:07:26.760,0:07:33.640

Bradlaugh had this; he also had  
the courage equal to any requirement,

0:07:33.640,0:07:41.040

a command of language and power of  
denunciation  
superior to any other man of his time...

0:07:41.040,0:07:45.500

"He was a thorough-going republican.

0:07:45.500,0:07:56.500

"Of course, in theological affairs,  
he was the iconoclast, the breaker of images."

0:07:56.500,0:08:03.200

So, what did Bradlaugh stand for?

0:08:03.380,0:08:10.060

First and foremost he was an  
atheistic free thinker.

0:08:10.060,0:08:16.120

ie it was his belief that Christianity  
was used by the established church to

0:08:16.120,0:08:22.270

repress working-class people and keep them in their place. He thought that the

0:08:22.270,0:08:28.129

surest route to improving the lot of the working class was to make them free.

0:08:28.129,0:08:34.280

There were many obstacles to that freedom, but religion was at the heart of many of them.

0:08:34.280,0:08:42.860

Related to this, he was a fervent advocate of a free press.

0:08:43.100,0:08:49.760

Bradlaugh was also a Republican, who believed that religion underpinned

0:08:49.760,0:08:54.700

monarchy and the aristocratic structure of society.

0:08:54.860,0:08:59.340

It's perhaps worth adding that when Victorians talked about republicanism

0:08:59.340,0:09:03.660

they were talking about more than just the abolition of monarchy.

0:09:03.660,0:09:08.810

They were talking about the aristocracy too.

0:09:08.810,0:09:16.460

Let me quote some of the final words from "The Impeachment of the House of Brunswick":

0:09:16.460,0:09:21.040

(which was Britain, remember)

0:09:21.040,0:09:26.460

"I loathe these small German breast-bestarred wanderers, whose only merit is

0:09:26.460,0:09:34.660

their loving hatred of one another.

"In their own land they vegetate and wither unnoticed.

0:09:34.660,0:09:41.200

"Here we pay them highly to marry and perpetuate a pauper prince-race.

0:09:41.200,0:09:48.060

"If they do nothing they are 'good'. If they do ill, loyalty gilds the vice

0:09:48.060,0:09:53.940

until it looks like virtue."

0:09:54.180,0:10:00.540

Third: Bradlaugh was a Democrat who campaigned for an extension of the vote to

0:10:00.540,0:10:08.640

include all males. He often referred to the household vote.

0:10:08.640,0:10:14.780

As such he didn't believe that the 1867 Reform Act went far enough,

0:10:14.780,0:10:22.580

as it only enfranchised males who were householders or paying a minimum amount in rent.

0:10:22.780,0:10:28.720

Fourth: Perhaps most surprisingly, he was a constitutionalist, who believed the British

0:10:28.720,0:10:40.580

Parliamentary system capable of reform. He was an opponent of violent revolution.

0:10:40.700,0:10:51.520

Fifth: Lastly, Bradlaugh was a neo-malthusian or to use more modern terminology.

0:10:51.520,0:10:55.160

a birth controller or family planner.

0:10:55.180,0:11:00.080

Like Carlile, he believed one of the principle causes of poverty was large families,

0:11:00.080,0:11:04.920

and he was horrified by the frequency of abortion and infanticide in

0:11:04.920,0:11:10.379

Britain's towns and cities.

For Bradlaugh it was partly a matter of social and

0:11:10.379,0:11:16.280

economic improvement, partly a moral crusade.

0:11:16.280,0:11:22.550

The story of his and Besant's republication of the birth control tract,

0:11:22.550,0:11:28.560

"Fruits of Philosophy" is the subject of another episode.

0:11:28.760,0:11:35.200

In a previous episode I mentioned how prolific Annie Besant was.

0:11:35.200,0:11:39.820

However, not even she could rival Bradlaugh.

0:11:39.820,0:11:45.280

The Freethought Publishing Company's catalogue for November 1878 lists

0:11:45.280,0:11:49.600

10 full length books, 32 pamphlets and 5 records of

0:11:49.600,0:11:56.350

debates in which Bradlaugh participated. You could also purchase framed

0:11:56.350,0:12:03.020

photographs of the great man.

Of course, he was also writing regularly for

0:12:03.020,0:12:08.849

his National Reformer.

Now, I think it's also worth adding there

0:12:08.849,0:12:15.709

is one thing Bradlaugh was not, that was: he was not a socialist.

0:12:15.709,0:12:22.819

In 1884 he debated the question

"Will Socialism Benefit the English People?"

0:12:22.820,0:12:31.540

with Henry Hyndman of the Democratic Federation, which was a socialist organisation.

0:12:31.540,0:12:36.020

Bradlaugh began with these words:

0:12:36.020,0:12:42.529

"We both recognise....many evils.

He wants the State to remedy them.

0:12:42.529,0:12:50.960

"I want the individual the remedy them".

And then he added:

0:12:50.960,0:12:59.100

"Revolution, as he (Hyndman) says, is to be effected by argument if possible.

0:12:59.100,0:13:05.880

Aye, but what if argument is not possible?

0:13:05.880,0:13:16.920

Force? Yes, that is the term.

Force? Yes, that is the curse..."

0:13:16.980,0:13:21.420

He then went on to list a number of other objections, including growth in the

0:13:21.420,0:13:25.650

power and authority of the state that would be necessary to implement

0:13:25.650,0:13:33.230

socialist measures, and the dangers of authoritarianism that would arise.

0:13:33.580,0:13:41.720

On occasions his writings seem to anticipate Stalin.

0:13:41.720,0:13:46.340

Bradlaugh also noted that throughout the 19th century there had been experiments

0:13:46.340,0:13:54.860

with socialist projects, and all of them failed.

0:13:54.880,0:14:05.080

At heart, Bradlaugh was a politician who knew he needed a base from which to work.

0:14:05.280,0:14:13.020

By the early 1860s he was widely regarded as London's leading radical and secularist.

0:14:13.020,0:14:20.040

In 1866 he founded the National Secular Society in the midst of

0:14:20.040,0:14:27.180

increasing agitation for reform.

Its principles included, and I quote:

0:14:27.180,0:14:32.220

"That human improvement and happiness cannot be effectually promoted

0:14:32.220,0:14:38.880

without civil and religious liberty, and that, therefore, it is the duty of every individual...

0:14:38.880,0:14:45.200

to actively attack all barriers to equal freedom of thought and utterance..."

0:14:45.330,0:14:50.170

Bradlaugh proclaimed himself Acting President and was duly confirmed in the

0:14:50.170,0:14:57.260

role at a National Conference.

Soon the NSS was spawning local branches.

0:14:57.260,0:15:04.350

Of course, the whole project was made feasible by the establishment of a

0:15:04.350,0:15:10.260

national railway network from about 1850, which went meant that leading figures in

0:15:10.260,0:15:15.580

the movement could travel the country.

0:15:15.720,0:15:22.720

Bradlaugh also needed a headquarters.

In 1868 the NSS took out a lease on a

0:15:22.720,0:15:29.740

property at 142 Old Street, and named it the Hall of Science.

0:15:29.740,0:15:34.630

At first it had a capacity of 700, but this was soon more than doubled with

0:15:34.630,0:15:40.130

extensions and a gallery, whereby it could hold 1600.

0:15:40.130,0:15:45.970

Bradlaugh had no trouble filling it.

0:15:46.300,0:15:56.500

By 1870 there was a large lecture hall built to hold 1200, a small hall for 220,

0:15:56.500,0:16:03.860

dressing rooms, school and classrooms, and a coffee and restaurant room.

0:16:03.860,0:16:14.360

Bradlaugh now had his newspaper, national headquarters, and a national organization.

0:16:14.360,0:16:19.560

Now he turned his attention to Parliament,

0:16:19.560,0:16:29.420

a story to be related in another episode.

0:16:29.540,0:16:37.120

Further readings: Well, there are three excellent biographies of Bradlaugh, that

0:16:37.130,0:16:43.340

are reasonably available.

The first and oldest is by his daughter,

0:16:43.340,0:16:51.970

Hypatia, and J.M. Robertson, and was published and very soon after his death.

0:16:52.420,0:16:59.649

The second was written many years later in the 1960s by David Tribe, himself a

0:16:59.649,0:17:06.820

former NSS president, and it's entitled  
President Charles Bradlaugh.

0:17:06.980,0:17:15.140

And the third and most recent is a very  
lively volume written by Brian Niblett,

0:17:15.150,0:17:21.840

under the excellent title "Dare to Stand  
Alone".

0:17:22.040,0:17:24.740

Thank you so much for listening.

0:17:24.740,0:17:31.200

If you want to contact me about this,  
or any other aspect of secularist and NSS  
history

0:17:31.200,0:17:40.780

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