

6. Annie Besant (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPcYdKkfJ8c&feature=youtu.be>

0:00:10.889,0:00:28.270

Hi, Bob Forder.

Annie Besant: 1st October 1847 - 20th September 1933

0:01:36.340,0:01:42.180

devoting herself to training us in the soundest most thorough fashion.

0:00:28.280,0:00:35.170

Annie was the daughter of Emily and William Wood, a lower middle class couple.

0:01:42.380,0:01:48.280

"No words of mine can tell you how much I owe her, not only of knowledge, but of

0:00:35.170,0:00:41.240

Her father died when she was only five, leaving Annie's mother, Emily, in

0:01:48.280,0:01:53.280

that love of knowledge, which has remained with me ever since as a

0:00:41.240,0:00:49.570

difficult circumstances. She found work looking after boarders at Harrow school.

0:01:53.280,0:01:58.120

constant spur to study."

0:00:49.570,0:00:58.560

Here is Annie with her mother.

Annie went to live with Ellen Marryat ,

0:01:58.220,0:02:05.980

Marryat was also an evangelical.

Annie also wrote:

0:00:58.560,0:01:06.040

sister of the famous naval novelist, Captain Frederick Marriott.

0:02:05.980,0:02:17.040

"...sin, damnation, conversion, and permanent recourse to the Scriptures formed the regime."

0:01:06.040,0:01:13.260

Ellen provided Annie with a good liberal education.

0:02:17.040,0:02:20.810

Annie left Miss Marryat's care as an

0:01:13.340,0:01:18.560

According to Annie's autobiography, and I quote:

0:02:20.810,0:02:26.810

attractive petite figure with dark hair.

She was a highly articulate,

0:01:18.560,0:01:26.700

"Miss Marryat had a perfect genius for teaching...

She taught us everything herself except music,

0:02:26.810,0:02:35.329

strong-willed firebrand, but at this time extremely devout.

0:01:26.700,0:01:32.280

and for this she had a master, practicing us in composition, in recitation,

0:02:35.400,0:02:45.760

In April 1866 she met the Reverend Frank Besant, brother of Sir Walter Besant, historian and novelist.

0:01:32.280,0:01:36.340

in reading aloud English and French, and later, German,

0:02:45.760,0:02:51.180

Frank had also been educated at Cambridge and was now a deacon in Clapham.

0:02:51.180,0:02:59.180
According to Anne Taylor,
one of Annie's biographers, he was

0:02:59.180,0:03:13.700
"...an impecunious, parsimonious, stiff-necked
young man from Portsea, whose
evangelicalism was serious".

0:03:13.920,0:03:21.760
Here we have Frank in middle age.
Frank proposed marriage to Annie,

0:03:21.760,0:03:27.420
which she accepted, but later
bitterly regretted.

0:03:27.420,0:03:35.180
I quote: "In truth, I ought never to have
married,
for under the soft, loving, pliable girl

0:03:35.180,0:03:39.740
there lay hidden, as much unknown to herself
as to her surroundings,

0:03:39.740,0:03:46.160
a woman of strong dominant will,
strength that panted for expression and

0:03:46.160,0:03:54.540
rebelled against restraint, fiery and passionate
emotions that were seething under
compression

0:03:54.540,0:03:59.780
- a most undesirable partner
to sit in the ladies armchair

0:03:59.780,0:04:04.920
on the domestic rug before the fire."

0:04:05.020,0:04:15.060
By the time she was 23 she had two
children, Digby and Mabel.

0:04:15.400,0:04:20.480
Both had been difficult births, but when
Annie suggested to Frank that they

0:04:20.480,0:04:27.480

should limit their family,
he gave her a beating.

0:04:27.640,0:04:32.080
Unsurprisingly she came to question
their marriage and her husband's views.

0:04:32.080,0:04:37.720
First she was influenced by the sermons
of Charles Voysey, a dissenting minister,

0:04:37.720,0:04:43.520
who questioned the authority of the Bible.
Then she came under Thomas Scott's
influence,

0:04:43.520,0:04:48.600
an elderly free thinker and Ramsgate
publisher.

0:04:50.120,0:04:56.980
Annie began to write for Scott.
Frank became aware and issued an ultimatum:

0:04:56.980,0:05:03.460
Either stop writing and attend Church
and take Holy Communion or leave.

0:05:05.740,0:05:13.780
She chose the latter, despite having to leave
Digby in the care of his father.

0:05:14.100,0:05:22.720
In July 1874 Annie purchased a copy of
the National Reformer, edited by the

0:05:22.720,0:05:30.780
notorious infidel Charles Bradlaugh.
The National Reformer advocated

0:05:30.780,0:05:37.009
atheistic secularism, universal suffrage
and republicanism,

0:05:37.009,0:05:41.020
and reported the activities of the
National Secular Society,

0:05:41.020,0:05:48.960
which Bradlaugh founded in 1866,
and to which he had been elected president.

0:05:49.400,0:05:59.200

Here we have an image of Charles Bradlaugh.
Annie attended her first NSS meeting on 2
August 1874.

0:05:59.200,0:06:05.880

This is how she described the scene:
"The Hall was crowded to suffocation,

0:06:05.880,0:06:11.620

and at the very moment announced for the
lecture,
a roar of cheering burst forth,

0:06:11.620,0:06:16.700

a tall figure passed swiftly
up the Hall to the platform and,

0:06:16.700,0:06:25.420

with a slight bow in answer to the voluminous
greeting,
Charles Bradlaugh took his seat.

0:06:25.420,0:06:30.960

I looked at him with interest,
impressed and surprised.

0:06:30.960,0:06:36.480

The grave, quiet, stern, strong face,
the massive head, the keen eyes,

0:06:36.480,0:06:41.780

the magnificent breadth and height of
forehead
- was this the man I had heard

0:06:41.780,0:06:47.280

described as a blatant agitator,
an ignorant demagogue?

0:06:47.280,0:06:52.560

"He began quietly and simply, tracing out
the resemblances between the Krishna

0:06:52.560,0:06:59.760

and the Christ myths, and as he went
from point to point, his voice grew in force

0:06:59.760,0:07:04.920

and resonance, till it rang

round the hall like a trumpet.

0:07:04.930,0:07:10.210

Familiar with the subject, I could test
the value of his treatment of it, and saw

0:07:10.210,0:07:14.060

that his knowledge was as sound
as his language was splendid.

0:07:14.060,0:07:21.900

Eloquence, fire, sarcasm, pathos, passion,
all in turn were bent against Christian
superstition

0:07:21.900,0:07:28.460

till the great audience, carried away by
the torrent of the orator's force,

0:07:28.460,0:07:37.200

hung silent, breathing soft, as he went on,
till the silence that followed a magnificent

0:07:37.200,0:07:46.280

peroration broke the spell and
a hurricane of cheers relieved the tension."

0:07:46.460,0:07:52.960

Annie soon became friends with Bradlaugh,
and she was offered job on the National
Reformer.

0:07:52.960,0:07:59.620

She also accepted Bradlaugh's invitation to
give
lectures on subjects she felt strongly about.

0:07:59.620,0:08:05.740

Her first was on
"The Political Status of Women".

0:08:05.960,0:08:16.260

Hypatia, Bradlaugh's daughter, wrote of Annie:
"She was very fluent, with a great

0:08:16.260,0:08:20.480

command of language, and her voice
carried well; her throat, weak at first,

0:08:20.480,0:08:26.480

rapidly gained in strength, until she

became a most forcible speaker.

0:08:27.630,0:08:32.080

Tireless as a worker, she could both write and study longer without rest and respite

0:08:32.099,0:08:37.289

than any other person I have known, and such was a power of concentration, that

0:08:37.289,0:08:44.320

she could work under circumstances which would have confounded almost every other person.

0:08:44.320,0:08:48.780

Though not an original thinker, she had a really wonderful power

0:08:48.780,0:08:54.210

of absorbing the thoughts of others, of blending them, and of transmuting them

0:08:54.210,0:09:03.090

into glowing language. Her industry, her enthusiasm, and her eloquence made of her

0:09:03.090,0:09:12.120

a very powerful ally to whatever cause she espoused."

0:09:12.340,0:09:23.040

Here we have some of Annie's early publications.

From this date on, and well into the 1880s

0:09:23.040,0:09:28.160

Annie became prolific, writing on freethought and theological subjects

0:09:28.160,0:09:34.819

and on social and political reform often with a feminist slant.

0:09:34.820,0:09:41.640

A Freethought Publishing Company catalogue of 1883 lists 43 Besant pamphlets

0:09:41.640,0:09:48.480

and 7 full-length books. Add to that numerous contributions to the National Reformer

0:09:48.480,0:09:55.850

and her own journal "Our Corner" plus talks and debates all over the country.

0:09:55.850,0:10:01.129

There was much discussion of the bond between Bradlaugh and Besant.

0:10:01.129,0:10:08.870

However, there is no evidence that there was a sexual relationship between them.

0:10:08.870,0:10:17.300

In 1877 Bradlaugh and Besant republished a birth control tract entitled "Fruits of Philosophy".

0:10:17.300,0:10:26.340

I shall relate that story as a separate episode, as I will Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament.

0:10:26.340,0:10:34.260

From about 1800 Annie was moving towards socialism and away from individualistic radicalism

0:10:34.260,0:10:41.380

of the type advocated by Bradlaugh and many NSS members.

0:10:41.440,0:10:49.980

The differences between Bradlaugh and Besant are best illustrated perhaps by two quotations.

0:10:49.980,0:10:57.740

First, Bradlaugh in a speech at St James' Hall on 17th April 1884.

0:10:57.920,0:11:04.560

"We recognise the most serious evils, and especially in large centres of population;

0:11:04.560,0:11:10.360

arising out of the poverty already existing, aggravating and intensifying the crime,

0:11:10.360,0:11:13.980
disease, and misery developed from it...

0:11:13.980,0:11:21.480
I want to remedy the evil, attacking it in detail
by the action of the individuals most affected
by it...

0:11:21.480,0:11:32.340
Social reform is one thing because it is reform;
Socialism is the opposite because it is
revolution...

0:11:32.340,0:11:37.700
Now, I have said that in order to effect
Socialism in this country

0:11:37.700,0:11:40.740
- and I am only dealing with this country -

0:11:40.740,0:11:48.160
it would require a physical-force revolution,
because you would want that physical force

0:11:48.160,0:11:52.820
to make all the present property-owners
who are unwilling, to surrender

0:11:52.820,0:12:04.500
their private property to the common fund -
you would
want that physical force to dispossess them."

0:12:04.500,0:12:10.540
Then, Besant writing in the National Reformer
in October 1887

0:12:10.540,0:12:18.440
announced a conversion to socialism
and resignation as co-editor of the newspaper.

0:12:18.440,0:12:23.360
"When I became co-editor of this paper I
was not a Socialist; and, although I

0:12:23.370,0:12:28.260
regard Socialism as the necessary and
logical outcome of the Radicalism which

0:12:28.260,0:12:34.560
for so many years the National Reformer

has taught, still, as in avowing myself a

0:12:34.560,0:12:41.250
Socialist I have taken a distinct step,
the partial separation of my policy in

0:12:41.250,0:12:45.770
labour questions from that of my
colleague has been of my own making,

0:12:45.770,0:12:53.850
and not of his, and it is, therefore, for me to
go away. Over by far the greater part of

0:12:53.850,0:12:59.460
our sphere of action we are still substantially
agreed,
and are likely to remain so.

0:12:59.460,0:13:04.920
But since, as Socialism becomes more and
more a question of practical politics,

0:13:04.920,0:13:09.920
differences of theory tend to produce
differences in conduct;

0:13:09.920,0:13:16.140
and since a political paper must have
a single editorial program in practical politics,

0:13:16.140,0:13:23.400
it would obviously be most inconvenient
for me to retain my position as a co-editor.

0:13:23.400,0:13:28.200
I therefore resume my former position as
contributor only, thus clearing the

0:13:28.200,0:13:34.840
National Reformer of all
responsibilities to the views I hold."

0:13:35.320,0:13:43.380
Annie joined the Social Democratic Federation
and the Fabian Society and associated herself
with

0:13:43.380,0:13:51.940
Walter Crane, Edward Aveling, H.M. Hyndman
and particularly George Bernard Shaw.

0:13:52.100,0:14:01.420

Shaw and Besant developed a relationship.
Shaw invited her to co-habit

0:14:01.420,0:14:06.220

to which Annie responded with a list of
her terms.

0:14:06.320,0:14:13.860

Shaw responded "Good God! This is worse
than all the vows of all the churches on earth.

0:14:13.860,0:14:18.940

I had rather be legally married...."

0:14:18.940,0:14:25.110

In June 1888 Besant learned of the
plight of the young women who worked at

0:14:25.110,0:14:30.200

Bryant and May's factory in East London.
Here the young women earned less than

0:14:30.200,0:14:36.000

five shillings a week and offer had their wages
reduced by an elaborate system of fines.

0:14:36.000,0:14:42.620

Even worse, their health was seriously affected
due to the use of white phosphorus,

0:14:42.620,0:14:49.640

which not only caused the yellowing of the
skin,
but an illness commonly known as phossy jaw,

0:14:49.640,0:14:56.660

whereby a side of the face turned green, then
black with foul-smelling puss,

0:14:56.660,0:15:00.020

before death ensued.

0:15:00.020,0:15:07.080

Bryant and May's response to any young
woman
showing symptoms was to dismiss them.

0:15:07.080,0:15:15.180

On 22nd June 1888 Besant wrote an article

in another of her newspapers, "The Link",

0:15:15.180,0:15:19.960

entitled "White Slavery".

0:15:19.960,0:15:22.960

The company responded by
demanding that each member of their

0:15:22.960,0:15:27.120

workforce sign a statement saying they
were happy with their working conditions.

0:15:27.120,0:15:36.840

Some refused - they were dismissed.
1,400 women responded by coming out on
strike

0:15:36.840,0:15:40.670

and they won their dispute.

0:15:40.670,0:15:46.160

This was hugely significant in that not
only had young women taken on the might

0:15:46.160,0:15:52.670

of Bryant and May, but this was an
important step in the formation of trade

0:15:53.400,0:16:01.820

unions for the unskilled, which was
followed up by the Dockers' Strike of 1890.

0:16:01.820,0:16:07.679

Annie's exact contribution is a matter
of some dispute, but she undoubtedly

0:16:07.679,0:16:14.069

provided the women with
publicity and guidance.

0:16:16.610,0:16:22.730

By the late 1880s Annie's opinions
were changing again,

0:16:22.730,0:16:28.790

and it seems that her conversion to
Theosophy dated from June 1899 when she

0:16:28.790,0:16:35.360

reviewed Madame Blavatsky's

“The Secret Doctrine”.

0:16:35.360,0:16:42.480

In the baldest terms, theosophy was based on Hindu ideas karma and reincarnation,

0:16:42.540,0:16:47.160

with Nirvana as the eventual aim.

0:16:47.160,0:16:54.740

While socialism might have been a stretch for some of her former freethinking, radical colleagues,

0:16:54.740,0:17:00.800

this was simply a step too far.

0:17:01.040,0:17:06.700

In 1891 she resigned from the National Secular Society taking the copyright of

0:17:06.700,0:17:11.080

her various publications with her.

0:17:11.160,0:17:23.500

It was a bitter bitter blow, and most NSS members knew their loss was a heavy one.

0:17:23.580,0:17:32.920

In 1893 she left for India, where she devoted herself to her new religion

0:17:32.920,0:17:41.080

and the cause of Indian nationalism until her death in 1933,

0:17:41.080,0:17:46.900

Here she is pictured with Gandhi.

0:17:46.900,0:17:56.540

There are several biographies of Annie Besant. The best, to my mind, by far is Arthur Nethercott's

0:17:56.540,0:18:06.520

“The First Five Lives of Annie Besant”.

Also, although it is in no way a biography,

0:18:06.520,0:18:14.600

Louise Raw's “Striking a Light” is a fascinating

account of the Match Women's dispute,

0:18:14.600,0:18:23.460

and includes an interesting reassessment of Annie's role.

0:18:23.720,0:18:29.000

Thanks for listening.

If you want to contact me about this,

0:18:29.000,0:18:32.300

or any other aspect of secularism and NSS history

0:18:32.300,0:18:41.780

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