

9. George William Foote (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCVPfHz5Qgc>

0:00:15.460,0:00:25.840

Hi. Bob Forder again.
George William Foote

0:01:27.579,0:01:35.520

no one of whom I could inquire.
Secularism and Atheism I had never heard

0:00:26.240,0:00:38.740

11 January 1850 - 17 October 1915,
and his journal The Freethinker.

0:01:35.520,0:01:42.390

of in any definite way, although I
remember, when a little boy, having an

0:00:38.740,0:00:47.220

George William Foote was born in Plymouth,
the son
of a customs officer who died when he was
four.

0:01:42.390,0:01:53.920

Atheist pointed out to me in the street.
Naturally I regarded him as a terrible
monster."

0:00:47.220,0:00:52.500

As a youngster he had an Anglican upbringing.

0:01:53.920,0:01:58.770

In 1876 Foote moved to London and worked

0:00:52.500,0:01:00.380

In 1891, in The Freethinker, he provided a
little

0:01:58.770,0:02:05.210

in a West End library.
Poetry was a great love - he admired

0:01:00.380,0:01:04.080

information about his early life
when he wrote this:

0:02:05.210,0:02:13.260

Shakespeare, Byron, Browning and Shelley
He thought highly of George Meredith, who
he knew.

0:01:04.089,0:01:10.570

"While in my native town of Plymouth I
had read and thought for myself, and had

0:02:13.260,0:02:16.300

His interest in the arts was wide,

0:01:10.570,0:01:16.420

gradually passed through the various
stages of scepticism, until I was

0:02:16.300,0:02:24.740

including Titian and Turner, Beethoven
and Wagner. In short, Foote was a highly

0:01:16.420,0:01:22.090

dissatisfied even with advanced Unitarianism.

0:02:24.740,0:02:33.080

cultured man, although, ironically,
he is best remembered, if remembered at all,

0:01:22.090,0:01:27.579

But I could not find any literature in
advance of this position, and there was

0:02:33.080,0:02:43.120

for his scurrilous, satirical, and, in some

people's opinion, vulgar Freethinker.

0:02:43.560,0:02:51.810

Foote married twice. His first wife, Henriette Mariane Heiman, was a gifted

0:02:51.810,0:02:59.280

musician and linguist, but died a few months after their marriage in 1877.

0:02:59.280,0:03:05.840

We know little of his second wife, not even her name. There were no children.

0:03:05.840,0:03:10.680

As soon as he arrived in London, he began attending freethought meetings and

0:03:10.680,0:03:17.580

lectures and met Charles Bradlaugh. He started a secular Sunday school at the

0:03:17.580,0:03:25.230

Hall of Science, and formed the Young Men's Secular Association. In 1870 he began

0:03:25.230,0:03:31.770

contributing to the National Reformer, and in 1873 was Secretary of the London

0:03:31.770,0:03:39.450

Republican Club and National Republican League. At first, Foote seemed to be

0:03:39.450,0:03:45.329

following in Bradlaugh's footsteps, like Bradlaugh, he was an impressive

0:03:45.329,0:03:51.700

platform orator. However, soon a rivalry between them

0:03:51.700,0:03:59.290

began to develop. Foote objected to what he regarded as Bradlaugh's autocratic

0:03:59.290,0:04:08.410

behavior within the NSS.

In 1876 he approached GJ Holyoake and

0:04:08.410,0:04:15.400

together they founded the Secularist, which, in direct opposition to Bradlaugh's

0:04:15.400,0:04:20.940

position, eschewed theological attacks.

0:04:20.940,0:04:29.580

At the NSS conference that year, Foote was nominated

for a Vice-Presidency, but was defeated

0:04:29.580,0:04:36.360

when Bradlaugh and Besant threatened to resign if he was elected.

0:04:36.370,0:04:42.910

This may well have focused Foote's thoughts, because Holyoake and Foote then

0:04:42.910,0:04:46.540

dissolved their partnership.

0:04:48.220,0:04:52.000

The Knowlton pamphlet case caused a further major rupture between

0:04:52.000,0:04:57.580

Besant and Bradlaugh on one hand, and Foote on the other.

0:04:57.580,0:05:04.180

Foote saw no necessary connection between birth control and secularism.

0:05:04.180,0:05:10.540

He was expelled from the NSS for his criticism of the Society's policies and

0:05:10.540,0:05:19.440

attacks on Bradlaugh's "imperiousness".

He then joined with Charles Watts in the

0:05:19.440,0:05:28.180

British Secular Union, a rival and alternative to the NSS.

0:05:29.040,0:05:36.400
However, despite this past history,
Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament

0:05:36.419,0:05:43.140
resolved all differences.
Foote was appalled by the treatment

0:05:43.140,0:05:49.220
Bradlaugh received.
This led to a fundamental change in the

0:05:49.220,0:05:58.140
tone and style of his writing.
In May 1881 the first issue Foote's Freethinker

0:05:58.140,0:06:06.640
appeared with Bradlaugh's support.
Foote had become a militant.

0:06:06.640,0:06:16.020
Freethinker trumpeted Foote's militant
intention
in the first paragraph of the first number:

0:06:16.220,0:06:25.840
“...The ‘Freethinker’ is an anti-Christian
organ,
and must therefore be chiefly aggressive.

0:06:25.840,0:06:30.820
It will wage relentless war
against Superstition in general, and

0:06:30.820,0:06:35.680
against Christian Superstition in particular.

0:06:35.680,0:06:41.100
It will do its best to employ the
resources of Science, Scholarship,

0:06:41.100,0:06:47.919
Philosophy and Ethics against the Bible
as Divine Revelation; and it will not

0:06:47.919,0:06:54.070
scruple to employ for the same purpose

any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that

0:06:54.070,0:07:00.620
may be borrowed from the armoury of
common sense.”

0:07:00.880,0:07:06.240
That is precisely what he did

0:07:06.280,0:07:13.149
Foote always wrote the Freethinker's
leading article, though his assistant,

0:07:13.149,0:07:20.200
Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, contributed
much content too.

0:07:20.280,0:07:27.820
The paper was an instant success, and by the
5th issue had become weekly rather than
monthly.

0:07:27.820,0:07:36.920
From the 3rd issue in July 1881
cartoons began to appear.

0:07:37.320,0:07:44.790
By criticizing religion with ridicule and
sarcasm, Foote was defying the taboo that

0:07:44.790,0:07:52.470
religious views should be treated with
respect and reverence. He was seeking to

0:07:52.470,0:07:57.690
establish that religion is a social
phenomenon, open to the same range of

0:07:57.690,0:08:04.840
comment as all other aspects
of human behavior.

0:08:04.840,0:08:14.340
He knew he was inviting prosecution
and in March 1882 he wrote:

0:08:14.340,0:08:21.360
“No prosecution yet!

The 'Freethinker' still goes on 'blaspheming' ...

0:08:21.360,0:08:28.860

Our souls are in arms and ready for the fray,
but the enemy won't come on".

0:08:29.080,0:08:36.320

Well, that changed in May with prosecutions
against Foote as editor, WJ Ramsey as
manager,

0:08:36.320,0:08:44.060

and William Kemp as printer.
The main mover was Sir Henry Tyler MP.

0:08:44.060,0:08:54.420

A primary motive was to get Bradlaugh.
As the law stood, anybody convicted of
blasphemy was

0:08:54.420,0:09:00.100

barred from the House of Commons.
However, Bradlaugh managed to escape the
net

0:09:00.100,0:09:03.630

by proving that he was not the
proprietor of the newspaper,

0:09:03.630,0:09:10.060

despite the first few issues having been
published from 28 Stonecutter Street.

0:09:10.100,0:09:14.060

Foote welcomed the fight.

0:09:14.420,0:09:21.500

"Let them do their worst; they will not
break our spirit nor extinguish our case.

0:09:21.500,0:09:28.960

Let the Christian mob clamour as loudly as
they can.

Crucify him! Crucify him!

0:09:28.960,0:09:33.380

They will not daunt us."

0:09:33.540,0:09:39.100

The first trial was conducted
before Lord Justice North

0:09:39.100,0:09:45.900

- a Catholic widely regarded by freethinkers as
a bigot.

The prosecution was

0:09:45.910,0:09:52.680

brought against the Christmas Number of
1882, whose cartoons had caused outrage

0:09:52.680,0:09:56.420

amongst the pious.

0:09:56.720,0:10:05.380

One of the main tactics was to lampoon Bible
statements by presenting them in pictorial
form.

0:10:05.440,0:10:10.630

Foote conducted his own defence, which
concluded with a three-hour address

0:10:10.630,0:10:15.640

interrupted by waves of applause
from supporters.

0:10:15.640,0:10:23.680

The jury failed to agree, a retrial was ordered,
and in the meantime Foote and his

0:10:23.680,0:10:27.750

colleagues were refused bail.

0:10:28.130,0:10:37.600

The second trial also took place before
North, and he remained hostile.

0:10:37.600,0:10:44.850

In his final statement to the jury, Foote asked:

0:10:45.120,0:10:52.440

"...to allow us to go away from here free
men,
and so make it impossible that

0:10:52.440,0:11:01.020

there ever again should be a prosecution for blasphemy; and have your names inscribed in history

0:11:01.020,0:11:04.780

as the last jury that decided forever that great and

0:11:04.840,0:11:10.280

grand principle of Liberty, which is broader than all the skies..

0:11:10.280,0:11:19.700

the principle of the equal right and Liberty of every man."

0:11:19.720,0:11:24.880

All to no avail, the 3 defendants were convicted.

0:11:24.959,0:11:32.900

Following a hostile summing up, North sentenced Foote to 12 months,

0:11:32.900,0:11:42.580

Ramsey 9, and Kemp three months.

0:11:43.000,0:11:52.520

Foote responded by turning to the judge and congratulating him:

0:11:53.320,0:12:01.480

"I thank you, the sentence is worthy of your creed."

0:12:01.840,0:12:06.800

There was widespread shock at the sentences, with appeals and petitions

0:12:06.800,0:12:11.950

being sent to the Home Secretary, but to no avail.

0:12:14.040,0:12:21.420

Meanwhile, the Freethinker editorship was taken over by Edward Aveling on a temporary basis.

0:12:21.420,0:12:29.200

Wheeler, Foote's most obvious deputy, was prone to nervous breakdowns.

0:12:29.500,0:12:35.980

On 24th and 25th of April, Foote and Ramsey were tried again, this time before

0:12:35.980,0:12:44.140

Lord Justice Coleridge, on charges relating to the Freethinker of 28th May 1882.

0:12:44.140,0:12:49.130

In particular there was an article "What shall I do to the damned"

0:12:49.130,0:12:59.160

and a cartoon showing an old gentleman in the gloom, holding a match to light his pipe

0:12:59.160,0:13:04.200

with the title "Divine Illumination".

0:13:04.420,0:13:11.080

Coleridge treated the defendants with consideration and courtesy.

0:13:11.080,0:13:20.100

In contrast to North, he allowed Foote to quote from respectable agnostics, such as Thomas Henry Huxley,

0:13:20.100,0:13:26.060

as he pleaded that there was "injustice in the writer of the penny papers

0:13:26.060,0:13:32.220

carrying off as a scapegoat into the wilderness of Holloway Gaol

0:13:32.220,0:13:38.940

the sins of all cultured agnostics of the day".

0:13:39.000,0:13:50.380

Again, the jury failed to reach a verdict.

Although a retrial was expected, it never occurred

0:13:50.600,0:13:57.700
Conditions in Holloway were dire, far worse than anything suffered by Carlile.

0:13:57.700,0:14:03.820
At first Foote was held in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day and

0:14:03.820,0:14:13.020
allowed only the Bible as reading matter. He had to sleep on a plank bed.

0:14:13.280,0:14:19.220
WJ Ramsey produced a pamphlet describing conditions which included

0:14:19.230,0:14:23.870
this illustration on the front cover.

0:14:36.290,0:14:42.670
Foote was released from Holloway on 25th February 1884.

0:14:42.670,0:14:52.560
Outside a large crowd assembled. Foote was taken to the Old Street Hall of Science,

0:14:52.560,0:14:59.820
where a special celebration breakfast took place.

0:15:00.620,0:15:06.620
He immediately resumed editorship of The Freethinker, and the cartoons,

0:15:06.620,0:15:13.280
suspended during his imprisonment, returned. He was in great demand as the lecturer

0:15:13.280,0:15:23.120
throughout the country, and generally spoke under the title "How I fell among thieves".

0:15:23.420,0:15:30.280
Foote had achieved martyrdom.

0:15:31.680,0:15:40.040
On 16th February 1889 a special NSS conference was called.

0:15:40.040,0:15:47.510
An ailing Charles Bradlaugh had decided to resign as President

0:15:47.510,0:15:52.510
and proposed Foote as his successor.

0:15:53.060,0:16:02.360
When the moment came, he presented a small hammer or gavel to Foote and said:

0:16:03.100,0:16:08.320
"I tender the only emblem of office we have.

0:16:08.400,0:16:15.449
This hammer, presented to us by the widow of James Watson, was used in the old Rotunda,

0:16:15.449,0:16:21.500
in days when such freedom as we now enjoy was impossible.

0:16:21.500,0:16:27.600
Carlile often used it. I give it to you joyfully, Foote,

0:16:27.600,0:16:33.560
and trust you will hand it to your successor."

0:16:34.040,0:16:42.610
I'm delighted to say this gavel is still in the possession of the National Secular Society.

0:16:44.060,0:16:48.380
The National Reformer did not survive long after Bradlaugh's death,

0:16:48.380,0:16:53.260
and with this, the Freethinker became the voice of the NSS.

0:16:53.269,0:16:57.550

It continued in that capacity for over a century,

0:16:57.550,0:17:03.540

although it no longer fulfill that role because, while the journal is a avowedly atheist,

0:17:03.540,0:17:11.600

the NSS no longer regards the terms atheism and secularism as synonymous.

0:17:11.720,0:17:20.520

The NSS itself changed under Foote, and became almost exclusively an atheist organization

0:17:20.520,0:17:24.700

- satire and biblical criticism were the order of the day,

0:17:24.700,0:17:33.520

coupled with Foote's biting exposure of the absurdities of religion and the religious.

0:17:33.860,0:17:39.020

From now on, it was less concerned with campaigns for political, social and

0:17:39.020,0:17:45.470

economic reform, although Foote himself remained an ardent Republican and, despite

0:17:45.470,0:17:51.300

his earlier stance, an advocate of birth control.

0:17:51.480,0:17:59.140

In his last years, Foote wrote despairingly of the approach of war

0:17:59.159,0:18:07.080

focused what he saw as the culpability of the religious.

0:18:09.170,0:18:18.240

Foote died on 17th October 1915,

and the Presidency of the NSS and

0:18:18.240,0:18:26.670

editorship of the Freethinker passed to Chapman Cohen, who was to become the NSS's

0:18:26.670,0:18:34.370

longest-serving President, holding the office for 34 years.

0:18:36.410,0:18:40.610

Some concluding comments:

0:18:42.240,0:18:48.480

Under Foote the NSS evolved from being a quite broadly based political

0:18:48.480,0:18:58.700

campaigning organization, into a much narrower freethinking, atheist pressure group.

0:18:58.960,0:19:06.310

This may well have been inevitable, but the NSS became divorced from wider

0:19:06.310,0:19:15.480

radical campaigns, and in doing so, lost followers.

0:19:16.340,0:19:26.630

Also Foote's our own approach to secularism revolved around his flair for biting satire.

0:19:26.640,0:19:34.980

As such he was applauded by some but alienated others.

0:19:35.680,0:19:43.940

The religious, meanwhile, learned a highly effective response:

0:19:44.040,0:19:48.300

they simply ignored him.

0:19:48.320,0:19:56.300

Nevertheless, he retained a loyal base in

the NSS, and a loyal Freethinker readership,

0:19:56.300,0:20:01.380

which meant the organization survived
what could have been mortal blows

0:20:01.380,0:20:08.900

with the death of Bradlaugh
and the defection of Annie Besant.

0:20:10.080,0:20:19.180

Further reading: Just one suggestion
because there are no biographies of Foote,

0:20:19.190,0:20:23.810

although Jim Herrick wrote an excellent
short history of the Freethinker, which

0:20:23.810,0:20:29.560

includes substantial biographical details.

0:20:30.480,0:20:35.760

Thank you for listening.
If you want to contact me about this, or any
other

0:20:35.760,0:20:48.420

aspect of secularist and NSS history, my
email address is r.w.forder@btinternet.com