

7. Bradlaugh, Besant & “Fruits of Philosophy” (Origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

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

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Hi, Bob Forder here.

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Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant and Charles Knowlton's "Fruits of Philosophy"

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When outlining Charles Bradlaugh's early career, I made the point that to Bradlaugh

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and many free-thinking NSS members what we would call birth control

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or family planning, and they would call Malthusianism or Neo -Malthusianism,

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were core seminal issues. The term Malthusianism derived from the

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work of the Rev, Thomas Malthus, who in 1798 had published his "Essay on the Principle of Population".

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His core argument was that the rate of population growth was far faster

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than the increase in food production , and that if this was left unchecked

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would only resolve matters through hunger, pestilence, starvation and general misery.

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He did argue that it could possibly be staved off by late marriage, but explicitly ruled out

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the adoption of contraceptive techniques, or checks, which he regarded as immoral.

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Freethinkers, like Bradlaugh and Besant, were convinced by Malthus's analysis,

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but not by his suggested cure,

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hence their adoption of the term, in some cases, of Neo -Malthusianism.

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In 1832, Charles Knowlton, an American doctor, published a small pamphlet under the less than

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revealing title "The Fruits of Philosophy". It contained a summary of what was then known

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about conception and recommended preventative techniques.

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He most strongly recommended douching,
using a syringe to wash out the vagina after

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intercourse with a chemical solution,
He also mentioned withdrawal, the sponge,

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and the baudruche, or condom, which, in
his day, was made of fine animal gut.

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Rubber had yet to be vulcanized.
The pamphlets was also published in Britain

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and sold steadily but in small numbers.
In 1876 a new edition was published and

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sold in Bristol by one Henry Cook.
The pamphlet was published by Charles
Watts,

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one of Bradlaugh's closest allies, and the
Secretary of the NSS.

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Cook was arrested and charged with
publishing pornography.

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The charge seems to extend in part
from some additional illustrations

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Cook had inserted.
Unfortunately we have no record of these,

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but they may just have been
anatomical drawings, enhancing

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and explaining the text.
This was all bad enough, but then Charles

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Watts decided to stop publication to
save himself from likely imprisonment.

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Bradlaugh and Besant were appalled by
what they regarded as a gross betrayal,

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and there was a vicious falling out
between themselves and their former ally,

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with Watts resigning as NSS Secretary.

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For Bradlaugh and Besant, this was not
only a Malthusian issue, it was also

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about press freedom. Consequently, they
formed the partnership, founded the

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Freethought Publishing Company, and took
out a lease on a shop at 28 Stonecutter St,

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which is just around the corner
from Fleet Street. Here they republished

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the Knowlton pamphlet with a new
introduction.

I quote:

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"We think it more moral to prevent the
conception of children than, after they are
born,

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to murder them by want of food, air, and
clothing.

We advocate scientific checks to population,

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because, so long as poor men have large families, pauperism is a necessity,

0:05:40.740,0:05:47.420
and from pauperism
grow crime and disease.

0:05:47.420,0:05:53.640
"The wage which would support the parents
and two or three children in comfort and
decency,

0:05:53.640,0:05:58.760
is utterly insufficient to maintain
a family of twelve or fourteen,

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and we consider it a crime to bring into
the world human beings doomed to

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misery or to premature death."

0:06:10.200,0:06:17.880
Well, Bradlaugh and Besant made no
secret of their work. The pamphlet sold

0:06:17.880,0:06:26.600
500 copies on the first day, and copies
were delivered to the local police station.

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They were arrested and they appeared in
court on 18th June 1877.

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They were being prosecuted for publishing,
quote,
"a certain indecent, lewd, filthy, bawdy, and

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obscene book" by the Solicitor-General,
no less, Harding Giffard.

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Bradlaugh and Besant both defended
themselves.
In Besant's case it was almost unheard of

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for a woman to do so.

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As she pointed out in 1876 only 700
copies of "The Fruits..." had been sold,

0:07:15.440,0:07:22.460
however the Freethought Publishing
Company had sold 125,000

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in the three months before the trial.
She provided data on

0:07:26.940,0:07:31.410
the problem of large families among the
poor, arguing the child mortality rates

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in large families were double that of
smaller families.

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She also claimed that Neo-Malthusian
methods would allow couples to marry

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earlier, reducing prostitution.
Further,

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all the information "Fruits..." provided
could be found in other publications -

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the difference was that the other
publications were more expensive

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and therefore unavailable to working people.

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Note the irony.

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Bradlaugh and Besant were

being accused of immorality.

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But what they regard it as their cause,
was a deep moral cause, or even a crusade.

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Bradlaugh added some further points -
in particularly drew attention to the high

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rates of infanticide among urban poor,
claiming that in 1868 in London no less

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than 16,000 child deaths were the result
of mothers murdering their children.

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In his final statement to the court
Hardinge Giffard had this to say:

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"I say that this is a dirty, filthy book,
and the test of it is that no human

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being would allow that book to lie on his
table;

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no decently educated English husband
would allow even his wife to have it,

0:09:29.930,0:09:36.199

and yet it is to be told to me, forsooth, that
anybody
may have this book in the City of London,

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or elsewhere, who can pay sixpence for it!

0:09:43.010,0:09:51.200

The object of it is to enable persons to
have sexual intercourse, and not to have

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that which in the order of Providence is

a natural result of that sexual intercourse."

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Besant and Bradlaugh were found guilty,
but won their case on appeal.

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However, for Besant there was a grievous
cost.

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Her estranged husband, the Reverend Frank,
persuaded the courts that

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he should have custody of their daughter,
Mabel.

He already had custody of their son Digby.

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Despite their victory, the fact was that
"Fruits of Philosophy" was out of date.

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Besant and Bradlaugh attempted to address
this through footnotes, but, following the
trial,

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Besant set about writing her own pamphlet
entitled "The Law of Population".

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This sold an estimated 175,000 copies

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by the time it was withdrawn in 1891,
when she joined the Theosophists.

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At this point, it in turn, was replaced by
Dr. Henry Arthru Allbutt's "The Wife's
Handbook",

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which was still being sold into the 1920s, and
eventually sales certainly topped half a
million.

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One particular feature of both Besant's and Allbutt's pamphlets was the

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incorporation of illustrative advertisements, which may well have

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proved as instructive as a text itself.

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What points can we make in conclusion? Well firstly

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I would suggest that 1877 was a key moment in the struggle for a free press.

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Second. Mistakenly, I think, some have argued that the Fruits of Philosophy case

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cleared the way for the publication of other birth control tracts.

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This is untrue. In the 1880s and 90's there are a number of other prosecutions with those

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convicted serving prison terms, some with hard labour.

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They included publishers like the elderly Edward Truelove and various booksellers.

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Dr Allbutt himself had his registration removed by the General Medical Council.

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Third. All the 19th century pioneers of birth control advice were

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secularists, freethinkers and atheists. Later Marie Stopes endeavoured to

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reinterpret or even rewrite history by suggesting that the birth control

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movement was disadvantaged by its association with secularism.

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This is a strange piece of overly creative thinking, since no Christians actually tried to act as pioneers.

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Fourth. With the noble exception of Henry Allbutt, the medical profession was

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as one in its hostility to the advocacy of contraceptive techniques,

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so keen was it to preserve its image of respectability.

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Fifth. In the wake of the Fruits of Philosophy trial, Bradlaugh and Besant helped form

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the Malthusian League, which carried on the campaign for very many years.

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It, the Malthusian League, can be seen

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as a forerunner of the Family Planning Association.

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Finally, I would suggest that this particular story spells out in the

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highest relief, how the contribution of secularists and freethinkers to the

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improvement of social conditions is so often overlooked and misrepresented.

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If you want to read more about this, an easily obtained book is Roger Manvell's

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"The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh".

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Thank you for listening.

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

0:15:30.520,0:15:41.240

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