

Ep 43: Charles Bradlaugh – Atheist and Republican

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"You have people writing memoirs of that particular period. You say:

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'If you were a thinking working man your only choice was Bradlaugh or the bottle'.

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"Now one of the attractive things about Bradlaugh is his optimism because he really thought that if

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you could make ordinary people free, free from the constraints of religion, they would make good."

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Emma Park (EP):

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You're listening to Episode 43 of the National Secular Society podcast presented by Emma Park. On

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the 30th of January 1891, after years of overwork and illness, Charles Bradlaugh died in his home

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on Circus Road in St. Johns Wood, London. This episode on the 130th anniversary of Bradlaugh's

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death will celebrate his life and work. We'd

like to persuade you that his contributions to

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British parliamentary democracy and to civil liberties deserve to be better remembered.

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From an early age, Bradlaugh was a strong individualist who was not afraid to speak

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his mind. In 1866 at the age of 33 he became the first President of the National Secular Society

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which was to become a leading focus of working-class radicalism. In 1872 he

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published a scathing indictment of the British monarchy entitled "The impeachment of the House

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of Brunswick" in which he lambasted the previous monarchs for their ineptitude and extravagance.

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In 1876 he nearly got imprisoned after he and his fellow secularist, Annie Besant,

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published a birth control pamphlet and were prosecuted for obscenity.

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Bradlaugh first tried to enter Parliament in 1868 as a Liberal candidate for Northampton.

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After two failures he succeeded in being elected in 1880. However, when he got to Parliament the

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House of Commons would not allow him to take his seat because, as an atheist and republican,

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they did not believe that he would be bound by the oath of allegiance to the Crown, which most

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MPs were required to swear on the Bible. He was returned three more times and each time he was

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still forbidden to take his seat, before he was finally allowed to do so in January 1886

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after winning the election for a fifth time. Meanwhile he had been prosecuted,

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imprisoned in the clock tower under Big Ben and forcibly ejected from the House.

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Bradlaugh had only five years as a sitting MP before he died at the premature age of 57. In that

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time among other things he introduced a private members bill which became the Oaths Act 1888.

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This allowed non-believers to affirm instead of taking an oath, both in Parliament and in

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other official and legal settings. Bradlaugh had become the embodiment of secularism and

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progressive constitutional reform in Parliament.

Joining me now is David Nash (DN) who is Professor

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in History at Oxford Brookes University. David's research interests include blasphemy

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and radicalism in Britain, the history of religion and the history of law and crime.

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He's the author of numerous books and articles and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

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David first of all how did you come to be interested in Charles Bradlaugh? (DN): Well,

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I think it comes from very much the sort of period and institution I went to as an

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undergraduate and then a postgraduate. I grew up very much with wanting to pursue social history

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and the sort of mission of historians like Edward, EP Thompson, to sort of find people

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who had been hidden from history and I also had a deep interest in the politics of radicalism.

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So when I went to my first university, which was the University of East Anglia in Norwich,

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I was lucky enough to be taught by Patricia Hollis, who was one of the great historians

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of "The Unstamped Press" of the 1820s. And from there I went on to do post-graduate study

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at the University of York and with my supervisor there, Edward Royal, who had really pioneered work

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trying to look at the secular movement in England, one discovered that there was so little properly

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researched about this whole area. So I basically plunged into the study of the secular movement

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in Britain in the second half of the 19th century. And sort of almost from there I've

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never looked back. Because I've then gone on to do more work in this area into the 20th century.

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But also to look at things like the history of blasphemy. So it's really been a sort of

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desire to uncover areas that haven't been properly historically investigated, and to show up their

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importance I think. (EP): Edward Royal himself wrote several books I think about the secularist

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movement in the 19th century and then the study of infidels like Bradlaugh. (DN): Yes I mean his

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two books - he did one on the earlier part of the Victorian period and then the later part. They are

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still the starting point for anyone who wants to investigate this area and there's still much to

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be uncovered and properly analysed. (EP): Let's go back to Charles Bradlaugh himself. Now, he founded

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the National Secular Society in 1866 but who was he and how did he come to found the NSS? (DN):

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Well, Bradlaugh was born in 1833 which is a sort of a birth date that places him after the sort

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of radical fallout from the French Revolution and important free thinkers and infidels like

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Richard Carlile and Susanna Wright. So he's born after that, but he does get a foothold in that

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particular zeitgeist because he loses his religion in adolescence and is forced to leave his own

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family home. And the first person who takes him in is Eliza Sharples who is a woman who had been

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the common-law wife of Richard Carlile. So immediately he's got that sort of connection

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with old infidelity. And sort of from this he was able almost to cut loose in London and he had an

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absolutely meteoric rise in metropolitan lecturing circles. And on the back of this he was invited to

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become an editor of the newly launched radical and secular periodical 'The National Reformer'. And

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into the 1860s he became as you noted the first President of the National Secular Society from its

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foundation until he finally relinquished this in 1890. Throughout this time since his adolescence

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he was a very staunch atheist and campaigner with a sort of attitude that was very much

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about smashing and destroying religion and indeed he gave himself the nom de plume of "Iconoclast"

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which is what many friends and opponents knew him as. And that title very much says it all about his

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approach to what he wanted to happen to religion. In terms of what he did with the National Secular

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Society, he was quite often an advocate of the sort of set piece publicity-seeking demonstration

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of sort of power or challenge. And he frequently put this into practice. He worked tirelessly on

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set piece lectures, biblical disputes with members of the Christian fraternity during his period,

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he wrote a voluminous amount of journalism but also involved himself in a host of adjacent

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radical causes like universal suffrage. He advocated universal suffrage, Irish home rule,

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the radicalism that became socialism. He actually attended The First International but very quickly

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withdrew from it. And it became quite notable after this for being an anti-socialist. He

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was also a Republican who wrote some hard-hitting pamphlets against the monarchy and its behaviour.

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But also other sort of set-piece agitations such as the Knowlton pamphlet trial of 1877 when he

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stood in the dock alongside Annie Besant accused of having published an obscene work. But I suppose

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his crowning glory is that he becomes a Member of Parliament after three attempts when he's blocked

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from entering Parliament because he cannot swear a religious oath. But he finally gets his way in

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1886. But if we think of a life lived at sort of

double speed all this is really too much for a man

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who for a lot of his life had considerably poor health and he died perhaps in the end prematurely

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in January 1891, but equally you could say he probably packed into his life more than people

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who lived twice dare we say it three times as long. (EP): Because he was an incredibly hard

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worker wasn't he? (DN): Absolutely and there was constant lecturing, constant writing, constant

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work with the law to defend himself from people who would bring multiple lawsuits against him.

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This happened particularly during his attempts to enter Parliament. He also had a newspaper to run,

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and he also had unfortunately a quite ill wife to look after, alongside his own quite fragile

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health. (EP): Because she, Susannah ended up being an alcoholic didn't she? (DN): Yes right,

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yes a very sad story. (EP): So just, you talked about his meteoric rise. What was it about

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his personality which enabled him to rise in this way? (DN): Well I think he was very

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physically imposing. He was sort of six foot tall and he was a particularly forthright and

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blunt speaker. And you know if you were standing or sitting on a platform alongside

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him what you would have noticed looking out into the crowd is how he very much had a common touch

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and became really a sort of cult hero for the rank and file of radicalism during this period.

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And you know being involved in that range of causes meant he was capable of attracting you

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for one or two of those causes but not necessarily for all of them. But in many ways that was enough

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to give him this sort of charisma and power. (EP): He, you said he was a figure for the working

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classes. I mean his background - he was very much from a working-class background wasn't he?

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He didn't have any money of his own. (DN): Yes indeed. This is very important. He was, as many of

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the people in the secular movement of that period. He was largely self-taught. He'd been the son of a

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solicitor's clerk and his father spent a great deal of time barely trying to keep the family

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together financially. (EP): Where would that have put him on the social scale as the son of a

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solicitor's clerk in that era? (DN): He might have been the very bottom rung of the middle classes

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but you know in many respects some of this is about wealth as much as position and if you had a

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sense that your family had never had enough money then during that period there were many stories

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of people's pushing to make better of themselves and to reach some degree of economic prosperity.

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Which indeed Bradlaugh did for some time in his life. (EP): How did the National Secular

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Society evolve under Bradlaugh's leadership? (DN): Well in a sense it's sort of slightly two edged.

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The National Secular Society during this period was really very much his movement. And you know

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he had people working with him but they always got the sense that they were working FOR him

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rather than WITH him and it's a frequent complaint you get from people that the National Secular

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Society was far too focused upon him. So you know there are many things that Bradlaugh defines about

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the National Secular Society that make it one thing - that's good for the people who like that,

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i.e. metropolitans, atheists - but also his strident personal style meant that he had

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clashes with other members of the NSS and other leaders. But also being atheist meant that people

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who had slightly different beliefs, say people who were positivists like Frederick James Gould

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or ethicists like Stanton Coit and his lifelong sparring partner was George Jacob Holyoake. All

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these people had slightly softer relations with Christianity than Bradlaugh was prepared to have.

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Which in the end meant that the NSS seemed to get shaped as a campaigning organisation

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and other groups like ethicists, positivists and humanists tended to concentrate much more on,

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if you like, the movement culture of providing things for their members.

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So you know Bradlaugh perhaps turning up a South Place Ethical Society to see the Ethical Church

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in action would have thought to himself: "What's the point of this, I don't see the value of this

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at all". (EP): So would you say Bradlaugh was more, more militant and more destructive in his

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campaigns? (DN): Indeed, much, much more. (EP): What did secularism mean to Bradlaugh? I mean,

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did his idea of secularism mean that the National Secular Society approached

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secularism in a different way from other people who called themselves secularists,

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like Holyoake or Foot? (DN): Yes, I mean in some respects this is a different interlude in

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the things that secularism thought in the 19th century because Bradlaugh's predecessor,

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George Jacob Holyoake, had very much come out of the socialism of Robert Owen. Which interestingly

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talked about the problems of society being not over-production but under-consumption. That sort

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of socialist approach is about communitarianism and about creating some sort of form of perfection

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on earth. But Bradlaugh was very different. Bradlaugh was from this different generation

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born in 1833. And it's no coincidence as a result of this he became anti-socialist and

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individualist. (EP): Why is Bradlaugh so opposed to socialism? (DN): I think many reasons because

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there were many liberals during that particular time who saw socialism as dangerous, saw socialism

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as too infected with forms of Christianity. And Bradlaugh, being an individualist, and

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having worked his own way up, would have said that it was very much down to individuals to

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engage in that form of struggle, rather than throw your lot in with forms of

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dangerous quasi-religious belief. I think also one of the things that he distrusted about socialism

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was that it wasn't entirely English. He had a great reverence for English institutions which

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is one of the unknown reasons for why he wanted to enter Parliament. (EP): He was very

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much a constitutionalist wasn't he? Unlike the socialists, he was never in favour of violence

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and political violence. (DN): Except occasionally at his own meetings when he had to deal

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with people who'd come to break them up. His anti-socialism, he also saw socialism

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as dangerously Germanic I think. And as you say this constitutional reverence for the law and for

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offices, if not the people who always held them, was something that drove him

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and also bear in mind that his constituency was of the lower middle class and the skilled

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working class. (EP): In Northampton? (DN): Well in Northampton and generally of people who might have

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felt that they had more to lose from socialism and bearing in mind socialism only properly convinces

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the working classes that it speaks for them in the 1880s and beyond. (EP): And it's at that

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point that secularism as a national movement wanes in influence; is that right? (DN): Well

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I think possibly it wanes in influence... it's often said it wanes in influence actually with

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the death of Bradlaugh. That the people who come after Bradlaugh don't have anything like

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the charisma or drive that he actually had. I suppose there's an extent to which socialism's

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eclipse of liberalism is also in its way an eclipse of secularism's attachment to

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the liberalism of the last decades of the 19th

century, which itself does undergo something of

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a decline. (EP): Are secularism and liberalism so closely attached partly because they were

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sort of united in the person of Bradlaugh? (DN): I think that's true but there's also

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a secularist attachment to individualism as an idea. So they're very interested in the Herbert

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Spencer. They're very interested in this idea of you reach forward for the truth under your own

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steam which is something that had driven all the people who are in the movement from the 1850s up

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until the 1890s. They're people who had got to secularism through their thinking and reading.

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They to this day distrusted sort of shop-bought off the peg solutions. (EP): How did Bradlaugh's

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idea of secularism and the ideas of secularism in the NSS in the 19th century relate

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to what secularism is today? (DN): Well I think he wanted to make all things secular

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but also within that to make all areas of life not in any way beholden to religion. So you know

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I think if he were alive today he'd be quite surprised at the sheer persistence of religion.

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You know, how religion still particularly in the form, in the face of the Church of England,

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how religion still tries to speak to the Nation, tries to speak to people's morality.

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I think he'd be very surprised at the existence of faith schools, particularly with the work done to

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try and undermine this in school boards and the 1870 Education Act. Bradlaugh would have hoped

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that that had gone forward to be fully secular by now. (EP): And of course Britain still is

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not a secular country. We don't have a secular constitution. We still have Bishops in the House

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of Lords. (DN): Exactly. He'd be very appalled to see the Lords spiritually in the House of Lords

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but pleased, he'd be very pleased that poverty has been tackled through access to information to

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control people's fertility. So he'd be very pleased with developments like the NHS in terms

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of controlling people's fertility. But things like NHS might be slightly double-edged for him because

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remember his individualism would potentially have distrusted the control of people or potential

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control of people from cradle to grave. (EP): Now David you've written an article about the numerous

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biographies that were published about Bradlaugh both during his life and after his death. And

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you've even described the story of his life as endlessly recreated. Who was involved in writing

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these biographies of Bradlaugh and what were their aims? (DN): There are various biographies of him,

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with some of them with different aims. What happens is some other secularists seek to tell

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the story from their point of view. And

occasionally particular episodes had individuals

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squabbling over them. But more important than that, is the raft of sort of phony bogus invented

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biographies of Bradlaugh written anonymously which had several purposes. They had sort of salacious

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copy about things that he had allegedly done -
so you know they were pieces of cheap journalism

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to earn some money but they were also aimed at undermining his reputation. So you know just

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to give some examples from his lifetime, there was an accusation that he had indulged in spiritualism

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which Bradlaugh refuted. He did admit to the fact that he had been interested in mesmerism,

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you know, hypnotism. Basically, he claims this was to help him control pain in his illness because

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he suffered for a very long time with hereditary Bright's disease, so he used mesmerism to control

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pain but not spiritualism. Another biography talked about how in 1866 and 67 he'd been

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involved in the Reform League that was pushing for what eventually becomes the Second Reform Act.

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And there was a story put about that he had concocted a plan to burn down London during

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that particular agitation for the Reform Bill but had ultimately chickened out of doing this.

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So, you know that's a double story that calls him both a traitor and a coward. (EP) Why is it that

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Bradlaugh attracted these slanderous biographies?
Why did he attract so much controversy? (DN):

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Well because he's the go-to name for secularism during this period. You know he made himself

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de facto invisible leader of this movement so he actually becomes this particular target. You

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know both for political accusations but also one

other famous one was the so-called watch story,

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which was put about that him or other secularists would regularly stand on lecture platforms and say

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"I'm going to look at my pocket watch for one minute and I defy the almighty to strike me dead".

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And sort of the idea being that these were sort of circus music hall provocative acts, which prove

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nothing one way or the other and it also meant for people writing these up that if Bradlaugh had said

0:22:59.520,0:23:06.160

this, all that displayed was the potential mercy of the Almighty who hadn't actually struck him

0:23:06.160,0:23:13.520

down. But the really dangerous stuff comes from his deathbed and indeed the 19th century is full

0:23:14.080,0:23:20.560

of attempts to make secularists recant their secularism and atheism on their deathbed.

0:23:20.560,0:23:27.600

And attempts were made to do this most interestingly by Charles Bradlaugh's own

0:23:27.600,0:23:33.360

brother, William, who was in many ways a

mirror image of him. He tried to create a

0:23:33.360,0:23:39.440

Christian evangelical movement to try and sort of overwrite everything Charles Bradlaugh had done.

0:23:40.240,0:23:47.040

And he put about stories after Bradlaugh had died that Bradlaugh had recanted on his deathbed. (EP):

0:23:47.040,0:23:53.360

Do you think that the proliferation of these biographies contributed to the fact that Bradlaugh

0:23:53.360,0:23:59.600

is perhaps less well known today than he ought to be? Do think he ought to be better known, and his

0:23:59.600,0:24:04.960

place in 19th century British history to be better acknowledged? (DN): Yes, I don't, I wouldn't

0:24:04.960,0:24:09.760

necessarily say it's those biographies that have caused it. I think there are other things

0:24:10.320,0:24:16.560

that has meant he hasn't really had the place due to him in 19th century history. Because a

0:24:16.560,0:24:22.720

lot of radical historians would sort of think of Thomas Paine and then the Chartist movement as the

0:24:22.720,0:24:26.960

radicalism of the early part of the 19th century and then the later part

0:24:26.960,0:24:32.320

is seen as the rise of socialism. So this radicalism in between was something

0:24:32.320,0:24:37.520

undiscovered and not talked about it, and in fairness it's one of the things that attracted

0:24:37.520,0:24:43.280

me to the period - that it was seen as this sort of big gap between Chartism and the rise of

0:24:43.280,0:24:50.560

socialism. And what Bradlaugh does for radicalism is effectively fill that gap. If you put him,

0:24:50.560,0:24:57.280

if you're prepared to put him in there. He's very much the first person also to breach barriers and

0:24:57.280,0:25:02.640

this breaching of barriers is something that other radicals learnt and followed. (EP): What

0:25:02.640,0:25:09.600

barriers in particular? (DN): Barriers of being able to speak directly to the working classes,

0:25:10.720,0:25:15.600

being able to get into Parliament which he still really manages to do before

0:25:15.600,0:25:21.760

later radical movements, of challenging a whole host of vested interests in all sorts of areas.

0:25:22.400,0:25:27.280

And he's also got influence upon radicals at the top and bottom of society

0:25:27.280,0:25:35.120

for what's really 30 crucial years, from you know

sort of the 1860s up until the start of the 1890s.

0:25:35.920,0:25:42.880

And this is important because you had people writing memoirs of that particular period who say,

0:25:42.880,0:25:48.400

you know, "if you were a thinking working man your only choice was Bradlaugh or the bottle".

0:25:49.040,0:25:54.480

I was also very surprised when I was doing work on this that a lot of the accounts of Bradlaugh end

0:25:54.480,0:26:02.080

with the day he gets into Parliament but he had a considerable life in Parliament where he worked

0:26:02.080,0:26:12.240

tirelessly for small producers and people who fell foul of vested interests and he became known also

0:26:12.240,0:26:20.400

as the member for India because he attacked the attitudes of the British aristocracy in India. He

0:26:20.400,0:26:29.600

spoke out for Indian rights. And what this meant is that when he ended up going to India in 1889,

0:26:30.240,0:26:35.120

basically to recover from a health that was collapsing, when he gets to India he's

0:26:35.120,0:26:42.000
actually feted as a national hero by the Indian independence movements of the period. Who had

0:26:42.000,0:26:49.200
learned what they were trying to campaign for by looking at this liberal line of John Stuart Mill

0:26:49.200,0:26:56.160
and Charles Bradlaugh. And indeed Mahatma Gandhi actually comes to Bradlaugh's funeral in 1891.

0:26:56.960,0:27:02.240
And he's (Bradlaugh) feted in India because the things he's saying, says in Britain, that he

0:27:03.360,0:27:11.920
wanted an atheist republic means that he is not always taken seriously in England, but

0:27:11.920,0:27:18.480
his message of an atheist republic is music to the ears of Indian nationalists who want to smooth out

0:27:18.480,0:27:26.080
the differences in Indian religions by having a secular state. But equally they don't want to go

0:27:26.080,0:27:34.480
back to being ruled by Indian kings and nabobs in an India where the British have left. They wanted

0:27:34.480,0:27:41.280
a secular republic. (EP): Now of course Bradlaugh finally took his seat as the first openly atheist

0:27:41.280,0:27:49.280

MP in early 1886 and then he died in January 1891 so he didn't have many years in Parliament. Do

0:27:49.280,0:27:54.240
you think if he had survived longer and he'd had say another five years in parliament the history

0:27:54.240,0:27:59.280
of secularism in Britain in the 19th century would be more important today, would have a

0:27:59.840,0:28:04.480
better acknowledged place than it does? (DN): I think that's possible. You know quite whether

0:28:04.480,0:28:11.600
he would have got as far as Cabinet status is difficult to determine. But what's interesting is

0:28:12.320,0:28:20.320
a generation and a bit on from him, one of the leading secularists of the day John Mckinnon

0:28:20.320,0:28:26.080
Robertson does indeed get Cabinet office in a Liberal government. It's possible that some other

0:28:26.080,0:28:33.440
reforms might have happened more quickly because it's only in 1917 that it becomes legal to leave

0:28:34.640,0:28:43.200
bequests to be used for secularist and atheist purposes, as a result of the Bowman case of 1917.

0:28:43.200,0:28:48.080

It might be if Bradlaugh had been in Parliament he would have done more to do that. He did ensure

0:28:48.080,0:28:52.480

that atheists were allowed to enter Parliament with an act forced through not long after he

0:28:52.480,0:28:59.600

took his seat in Parliament, so I think it would have accelerated things very much in terms of

0:28:59.600,0:29:06.480

recognising the secular contribution to society. But equally what would his relationships have been

0:29:07.120,0:29:13.680

with the growing independent Labour party and the socialist movement of the 1890s?

0:29:14.480,0:29:21.040

That's a very interesting historical "What if?". (EP): Let's talk about finally about Bradlaugh's

0:29:21.040,0:29:27.280

legacy today. Now one of the things he failed to achieve in his lifetime was the abolition of the

0:29:27.280,0:29:32.960

offence of blasphemy. And in the end that was blasphemy was not actually abolished in England

0:29:32.960,0:29:41.360

and Wales until the first decade of the 2000s, I think it was 2008, 2009. What do you think

0:29:41.360,0:29:46.160

Bradlaugh, if he had been alive today, what would he have seen as the biggest threats to

0:29:46.160,0:29:52.160

freedom of expression and freedom of conscience

in modern Britain? (DN): Well I think it's quite

0:29:52.160,0:29:58.800

possible that he would still see religion as having a role to play in free speech and you

0:29:58.800,0:30:05.840

know we have to look around and see that there are still pronouncements from the European Union in

0:30:05.840,0:30:12.800

the shape of things like the Venice Commission who have spoken about how blasphemy laws are something

0:30:12.800,0:30:19.040

that have a deeply chilling effect on free speech. And you know Bradlaugh would have been appalled

0:30:19.040,0:30:25.840

by that. But I think looking around society more generally, I think there are other things that he

0:30:25.840,0:30:33.200

would want to think and say. You know his life was really a demonstration of the virtues of reading,

0:30:33.200,0:30:39.920

thinking and studying and I think he might be appalled by the way in which some aspects

0:30:39.920,0:30:45.520
of the internet and social media have taken over from reading, studying and thinking. He'd perhaps

0:30:45.520,0:30:52.720
look at this and see that far too many opinions that people have are filtered for them by reading

0:30:53.440,0:31:00.880
short expositions of ideas, summarised bits. And he would have been concerned that sort of

0:31:00.880,0:31:07.120
not reading deeply, thinking and studying deeply would be a threat to free speech. And are also the

0:31:07.120,0:31:14.720
sort of things that are responsible for the rise of populist politicians like Trump and Johnson.

0:31:15.360,0:31:20.800
You know he would be saying "Don't accept what you're told especially when it seeks to defend

0:31:20.800,0:31:26.240
vested interests". He would look around modern Britain and see vested interests everywhere I

0:31:26.240,0:31:32.560
think. You know he'd be telling people to research your counter arguments effectively and never tire

0:31:32.560,0:31:38.560
of offering them. (EP): So a really inspiring

example? (DN): Yes and I think one that should

0:31:38.560,0:31:45.840
be studied even more deeply. (EP): Professor David Nash, thank you very much. (DN): Thank you.

0:31:48.680,0:31:52.720
(EP): To reflect on my interview with professor David Nash I'm joined

0:31:52.720,0:31:58.320
now by Bob Forder (BF), NSS historian and long-standing member. Bob's great grandfather,

0:31:58.320,0:32:03.440
also called Robert Forder, was the first paid secretary of the NSS in the late 19th century.

0:32:04.000,0:32:06.880
Bob will be giving me his own perspective on Charles Bradlaugh.

0:32:08.080,0:32:13.840
Bob hello. (BF): Good evening. (EP): Professor Nash talked briefly about Bradlaugh's character.

0:32:15.280,0:32:20.320
My impression from reading about him is that Bradlaugh was indeed incredibly charismatic

0:32:20.320,0:32:27.920
and his charisma and his personal qualities were a really large factor in his success. What's your

0:32:27.920,0:32:37.280
view about this? (BF): Well first of all he was a big man, he had a very large head and he had a

0:32:37.280,0:32:46.320
very strong voice. I've got a couple of quotations

here Emma which might be useful. The first is from

0:32:46.880,0:32:55.840

Harry Snell who in later life became a Labour MP and eventually he was the Leader of Labour Party

0:32:56.400,0:33:07.120

in the House of Lords and this is what he wrote about Bradlaugh in something published in 1933.

0:33:08.880,0:33:14.080

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

0:33:14.080,0:33:22.560

it was only yesterday the immediate and compelling impression made upon me by that extraordinary man.

0:33:23.760,0:33:29.040

I've never been so influenced by a human personality as I was by Charles Bradlaugh:

0:33:29.760,0:33:36.880

the commanding strength, the massive head, the imposing stature and the ringing eloquence of

0:33:36.880,0:33:47.120

the man fascinated me and I became one of his humblest and most devoted followers". (EP): And

0:33:47.120,0:33:53.280

that's from a later Labour MP? (BF): Yes and there's Annie Besant, as well of course who

0:33:53.840,0:34:02.720

became perhaps his closest ally over the

re-publication of "Fruits of Philosophy" and for

0:34:02.720,0:34:09.520

a number of years afterwards. And she described in her autobiography the first occasion she saw him:

0:34:11.040,0:34:20.640

"Eloquence, fire, sarcasm, pathos, passion. All in turn were bent against Christian superstition till

0:34:20.640,0:34:30.000

the great audience, carried away by the torrent of the orator's voiced force hung silent, breathing

0:34:30.000,0:34:37.440

soft as he went on, till the silence that followed a magnificent peroration broke the spell and a

0:34:37.440,0:34:42.800

hurricane of cheers relieves the attention". (EP):

Oh that's a wonderful description Bob and I also

0:34:42.800,0:34:48.800

remember actually I think Gladstone was meant to have written to Queen Victoria that Bradlaugh

0:34:48.800,0:34:54.800

was a consummate speaker so even Gladstone himself, who was not always on Bradlaugh's side,

0:34:54.800,0:35:00.080

was aware of and was prepared to acknowledge

Bradlaugh's eloquence. (BF): Yes and
0:35:01.520,0:35:05.200
you have to remember that these
were the days without microphones,
0:35:05.200,0:35:13.440
without any of that sort of electronic
assistance.
And Bradlaugh was often addressing huge
crowds
0:35:14.240,0:35:22.640
in the open air and yet he could hold that
crowd
due to the sort of power of his personality,
0:35:22.640,0:35:29.840
the power of his speech. I would add one
other thing, which I think Professor Nash
0:35:30.720,0:35:38.560
mentioned as well, and that is that: you know
Bradlaugh wasn't a great person for
colleagues.
0:35:38.560,0:35:45.760
He preferred followers. (EP): Yes, and he was
perhaps disliked by some of the other leaders
of
0:35:45.760,0:35:52.160
the secularist movement for that reason
wasn't
he? (BF): Yes he was and in particular there's
0:35:52.160,0:36:02.960
the case of George Jacob Holyoake who he
really
displaced as leader of secularism. And
although
0:36:02.960,0:36:08.960
he tried, they tried hard the two of them to
find
grounds on which to cooperate from time to
time,

0:36:09.840,0:36:16.800
there was always this personality problem
between them and the fact that the younger
man
0:36:17.600,0:36:24.520
had displaced Holyoake from what he no
doubt regarded as his true position. (EP):
0:36:25.200,0:36:30.480
Yes, so it was that slight paradox in that he
was
in favour of getting rid of privileges but he
was,
0:36:31.040,0:36:37.720
he didn't really want to have any rivals
within the NSS. (BF): Certainly not. (EP):
0:36:38.480,0:36:43.360
Professor Nash also spoke about Bradlaugh's
desire to abolish religion and also pointed
0:36:43.360,0:36:48.560
out that some secularists were not wholly
against
all types of religion. Let's look at Bradlaugh's
0:36:48.560,0:36:55.440
view a bit more. Why was it do you think that
Bradlaugh had such an antipathy to religion?
(BF):
0:36:55.440,0:37:00.480
Well you know in a funny sort of way I don't I
don't think, if we want to understand
Bradlaugh,
0:37:01.040,0:37:08.560
I don't think we should start with his
atheism. I think we should start with his
0:37:08.560,0:37:18.160
radicalism and his desire to improve the lot of
ordinary working people. That's where he
started.
0:37:19.040,0:37:26.480

Now he looked around him and he thought that the problem that ordinary people confronted were

0:37:26.480,0:37:35.440
born out of primarily the aristocratic nature of society. And the aristocratic nature of politics

0:37:35.440,0:37:46.400
as well. And he wanted to change that. He thought that the whole thing was underpinned by religion

0:37:46.400,0:37:52.640
and particularly the Church of England because generally when Bradlaugh talks about Christianity

0:37:52.640,0:37:58.560
or religion he's talking about the Church of England and he regarded as the Church of England

0:37:59.360,0:38:09.840
as a sort of glue or even thought police that was designed to first justify the privileges of the

0:38:09.840,0:38:18.560
aristocracy, and particularly the monarchy, and to justify it and to act you know in the old Marxist

0:38:18.560,0:38:25.280
phrase as "an opium of the people". I mean he had very fundamental disagreements with socialism,

0:38:25.280,0:38:30.840
Marxism but he would have agreed I think on that idea in particular. (EP):

0:38:31.360,0:38:37.760
The idea that religion was there to just control people? (BF): Absolutely absolutely. He thought

0:38:38.400,0:38:45.840
smash religion or smash the Church of England perhaps and he'd free people who would make good.

0:38:46.400,0:38:52.720
Now one of the attractive things about Bradlaugh is his optimism because he really thought

0:38:53.280,0:39:01.200
that if you could make ordinary people free, free from the constraints of religion, they would make

0:39:01.200,0:39:08.400
good. They would improve their lot. (EP): Which brings us nicely on to socialism and Karl Marx

0:39:08.400,0:39:13.920
himself of course was responsible for communism which might have freed people from religion but

0:39:13.920,0:39:18.960
didn't make them free in other respects. Now Bradlaugh himself seems to have had a personal

0:39:18.960,0:39:23.440
antipathy to Karl Marx. Could you tell us a bit more about that? (BF): Well they just

0:39:23.440,0:39:29.440
had a different view of looking at the world didn't they? Marx had some pretty scathing

0:39:29.440,0:39:38.400

things to say about Bradlaugh actually which I suppose in modern terms we'd say that Marx thought

0:39:39.440,0:39:48.880

Bradlaugh's ego was far too large. I'm sure that Bradlaugh had a similar opinion of Marx

0:39:49.680,0:39:57.680

and didn't like what he had to say very much either. (EP): Now Bradlaugh's objections to

0:39:57.680,0:40:02.240

socialism were brought out in a number of debates

he had with them. In particular with Henry

0:40:02.240,0:40:10.880

Hyndman, a debate in 1884. So what was, what were

Bradlaugh's main points in that debate? (BF): Well

0:40:10.880,0:40:17.440

I've got three quotations here Emma which I think

say it all. Bradlaugh wrote an awful lot about

0:40:18.400,0:40:27.680

socialism but three quotations can really focus

I think, focus us on the main arguments he had.

0:40:29.120,0:40:40.080

He was speaking at this debate with

Hyndman

in 1884 about social evil and he said this

0:40:41.200,0:40:45.920

he said this: "He (meaning Hyndman)

wants the state to remedy them.

0:40:46.880,0:40:55.200

I want individuals to remedy them." So first of all Bradlaugh's an individualist. Second,

0:40:55.920,0:41:03.920

he comes onto the subject of how that change that the socialists are looking for can be achieved.

0:41:03.920,0:41:12.960

And he said this: "Revolution as he (Hyndman)

says

is to be affected by argument if possible.

Aye,

0:41:13.760,0:41:24.080

but what if argument is not possible? Force?

Yes

that's the term. Force, yes that's the curse."

0:41:25.120,0:41:30.960

So he feared violence. (EP): And Bradlaugh

was a constitutionalist all his life

0:41:30.960,0:41:40.480

wasn't he? (BF): Absolutely absolutely. And

he

thought Parliament could be used as the

vehicle

0:41:42.080,0:41:48.480

through which the sort of changes he was

seeking

could be achieved. (EP): And again that

reflects

0:41:48.480,0:41:57.840

his optimism I think. (BF): Yes and here's

another

aspect to his optimism as well is his

liberalism

0:41:58.560,0:42:05.600

and he said this to Hyndman: "In this

collective the state would direct everything

0:42:06.880,0:42:14.480

and there would be no freedom at all".

How's that for somebody speaking in 1884

0:42:15.120,0:42:21.920

looking ahead to the 20th century

and what happened in Russia

0:42:21.920,0:42:29.840
for example. (EP): China? (BF): Or China today?
Absolutely. (EP): Bob Forder, thank you very much.

0:42:34.200,0:42:35.200
(EP):

0:42:35.200,0:42:38.320
I hope you enjoyed my conversations with David Nash and Bob Forder.

0:42:38.960,0:42:43.360
Charles Bradlaugh was a controversial figure in his lifetime and afterwards. There's no doubt

0:42:43.360,0:42:48.560
that he alienated some of his fellow secularists with his domineering style of leadership. However,

0:42:48.560,0:42:53.520
for a man who is in every sense self-made, it's hard not to admire the reforms he did achieve

0:42:53.520,0:42:58.640
in the treatment of non-believers in the law and Parliament and in the freedom of publication. He

0:42:58.640,0:43:04.800
was also a strong advocate for Indian self-rule at a time when this was unpopular. Bradlaugh did

0:43:04.800,0:43:10.480
not succeed in abolishing blasphemy or in removing Bishops from the House of Lords or in establishing

0:43:10.480,0:43:17.200

a republic of Great Britain or of India but he sowed a seed. Not to mention his individualism and

0:43:17.200,0:43:22.480
sheer bloody mindedness in the face of relentless opposition from the establishment. Fundamentally

0:43:22.480,0:43:27.280
for me Charles Bradlaugh was a champion of the ancient British tradition of liberty that is under

0:43:27.280,0:43:32.800
such grave threat on all sides today. For this reason if for no other he should be remembered

0:43:37.840,0:43:42.320
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0:43:46.880,0:43:51.440
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