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Iconoclast.

Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh Centenary Volume.
(C.A. Watts & Co., and the Pioneer Press: 2s. 6d. net.)

No one who is attracted towards the life-history of one of the noblest pioneers and greatest men that ever lived can neglect this book.

It is a work boiled down—on the whole with skill and success—from a couple of hundred books and pamphlets. To the student of its times it is quite indispensable. In these pages there is presented a panorama of the life and times of Charles Bradlaugh, probably the most outstanding—certainly the boldest—figure in the stormy social and political life of England during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Born of humble parentage in Hackney, in 1833, Bradlaugh, by sheer force of personality, won to a dominant place in the sociological, theological, and political life of his country.

He was sixteen when his first pamphlet was issued, and he had started his career as an orator—in the open-air—even before that; at the age of fifty-seven he died in the service of his country; worn out and slain by his struggles with authority; dead but unvanquished. Bradlaugh's motto was "Thorough," and in his whole life he never falsified the word or its implications.

This book is an admirable account, by half a dozen authorities, of the many-faceted activities of this heroic and honest man; execrated by the bigoted, the brutalized, the pious, the ignorant, there was always a minority ready and eager to honour, to serve, to applaud him in his hours of private sorrow, of temporary public defeat and humiliation. This minority always saw him arise victorious in the end; this was at once their justification and their reward; and it was all that they asked.

Happy is the pioneer with such a following. In this respect, at least, was Charles Bradlaugh fortunate. Fortunate, too, is the worker who is happy in his friends; and the subject of this memoir was assuredly not herein lacking. Annie Besant, the

greatest woman-propagandist of his century, was his intimate colleague; a great poet, James Thomson (B.V.), was with him on his paper; on his staff, as occasional contributors, were scores of writers who were, in their degrees, experts in the various branches of reform whereof they wrote. This catalogue of names is far too long to be given here; even in part. But it is noteworthy that the *National Reformer* "raised" more than one writer who was afterwards himself—in some cases, herself—to play a conspicuous editorial part. Such were G.H. Reddalls, Harriet Law, Annie Besant, G.W. Foote, W. Stewart Ross ("Saladin"), John M. Robertson, Charles Watts, and—if I may include a celebrated and too-little-remembered sub-editor—Joseph Mazzini Wheeler.

With certain of these there were to occur dissensions later-on; but this is not the place to write on that theme.

This book proves conclusively, and in an exceedingly interesting way, how forceful was Bradlaugh as an orator. The most varying-minded auditors were impressed by his power of public utterance, the pungency of his eloquence; such varying critics were George Meredith, G.B. Shaw, G.W. Foote, T.P. O'Connor, Professor John Stuart Blackie, John M. Robertson. As a debater his skill and prowess were unquestioned. In these matters, as may be gathered from this absorbing book, all the testimony goes one way.

Bradlaugh was the most catholic—using that word, of course, with a small *c*—of all the reform-leaders of his time. He was an Atheist, a Republican, a Radical, a Land-Reformer, a Divorce-Reformer, a Malthusian; always on the side of the working-classes, the more intelligent of whom adored him, he was the great advocate of self-reliance, as against any form of Socialism, which, rightly or wrongly, he rigorously opposed. This is neither the time nor the place to direct Bradlaugh's political views; but no serious critic has dared to question either his sincerity or his determination in putting his case. He was utterly and unswervingly honest; and, so rare a virtue is honesty in politicians, that this book is almost unique in presenting a portrait of a man who, entering parliament, remained entirely uncorrupted. I can imagine no higher praise to accord to any public man than that. It is, as I have already said, almost—though not quite—an unique record.

Like all reformers who devote their lives, gifts and services to the poor and the dispossessed, Bradlaugh was among the best-hated men of his time. The rich and powerful, almost without exception, from the throne downwards, united in exe-

crating, vilifying, slandering and decrying the man whose crime was that he insisted upon his right to alleviate the suffering of the poor and ignorant by enlightening the darkness wherein the "upper classes" wished them to remain for the sake of maintaining the supremacy of their alleged aristocracy.

All this is told fully both by pen and cartoon in this work; especially telling is a sympathetic little tail-piece from *Punch*, by Harry Furniss. It is called "Exit!" and it gives perfectly a back-view of the tired hero, prematurely aged and broken past mending by his gargantuan efforts for human freedom.

That "iconoclast," to use his early nom-de-guerre, gained the friendship of such contemporaries as T.P. O'Connor, Henry Labouchere, Moncure D. Conway and Thomas Burt, amongst innumerable others, is a completely efficient reply to his detractors. In this book will be found his contemporaries' judgments upon him. Collectively they form an exhaustive and final vindication of his life-works. These criticisms are essential not merely to an understanding of Bradlaugh himself, but to a collective grasp of the political and social trends-and-touches of the nineteenth century.

As a Malthusian, Bradlaugh, and with him Annie Besant in her heroic period, only escaped prison because of a legal flaw in the indictment. That he actually courted confinement in an English prison, with all the physical discomforts and moral obloquies entailed by it, on behalf of the poor, to whom he insisted that it was only right to impart certain sex-knowledge, is an unanswerable reply to those of his critics and calumniators who charge him with self-seeking and fame-hunting. The full tale of epic heroism is given in this book, with an account of the colossal legal struggles wherein he was engaged; wherefrom he emerged victoriously; and so broken that his victories cost him his life.

In addition to his immense editorial labours, Bradlaugh ran his own publishing house; he and Annie Besant were proprietors of The Freethought Publishing Company, in its day the most important enterprise of its kind. The number of his own pamphlets is about one hundred; there are ten or a dozen books to his account; and there must be at least forty printed debates, many of them issued in pamphlet-form. There is a good, though not exhaustive, bibliography at the end of this history. This needs revision.

Bradlaugh was unquestionably the greatest lay-lawyer of his time; and throughout his life he gave free legal advice to the poor and the worried.

There are one or two errors in this book that might well be corrected in a future edition. Bradlaugh's first pamphlet is dated 1849; and not 1850, as is wrongly stated. His first book began to appear, in penny numbers, in 1857. This I have proved conclusively in the *Freethinker* for July 21, 1929. The editor of *Champion of Liberty* gives the date wrongly as 1858. Bradlaugh's editorship of the *Investigator* began in November, not March, 1858.

The part played by Bradlaugh in public life can best be estimated by the number of references, caricatures and cartoons referring to him. I myself counted sixty or so in a single year's issues—in the 'eighties—of the conservative and scurrilous "comic" paper, *Moonshine*. Press-references ran into tens of thousands; it is by these cuttings that a public man's hold of the popular imagination may be gauged. By this gauge Bradlaugh shares with Gladstone the doubtful honour of being the most lampooned public man of his time.

One omission that I find in this book is to me a regrettable one. The most intimate and psychologically-accurate picture that I have seen, was that issued by G.W. Foote in 1891, just after Bradlaugh's death. This pamphlet, revised from *Freethinker* articles, was called "Reminiscences of Charles Bradlaugh." There is, of course, as there had to be, a quotation from Foote; but this particular pamphlet has been ignored.

Bradlaugh's work for the liberation of India, and for the secularization of Sunday, were among his contributions to that human welfare whereto his whole "thorough" life was dedicated. He was tremendous physically, mentally and morally. Foote, always a fine phrase-maker, calls him "a Colossus of Man hood." The description could not be bettered. It is entirely true; and, in an impression, no, more is demanded.

The sectional writers of *Champion of Liberty* are Mr. Chapman Cohen, Dr. C.V. Drysdale, Mr. W. Ivor Jennings, and Sir John Hammerton; Mrs. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner has compiled the bibliography; Mr. Charles Bradlaugh Bonner, Bradlaugh's grandson, has given valuable aid; and the whole volume has been edited by Mr. J.P. Gilmour.

The book contains fourteen text pictures, mainly cartoons; thirteen plates, whereof eight are portraits; and an exquisite and unforgettable photogravure frontispiece-portrait by Walter Sickert. Including the introductory-leaves the book holds three hundred and sixty large pages; and the price is half-a-crown for a well-clad, cloth-bound production.

As prices go, in these days, the book would be "reasonable" at twelve-and-sixpence. For a fifth of that sum the fortunate reader may acquire an adequate and well-penned account of the greatest hero, humanist and reformer of the latter half of the Nineteenth Century.

Victor B. Neuburg.