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CHANGING IMAGES OF AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY AND THE SCOTTISH
LABOUR MOVEMENT

Mid-Victorian Scotland was a remarkably homogeneous society, and the milieu, in which the labour movement developed, had very long traditions of social repression and economic backwardness.¹ A system of democracy inherited from the Calvinist revolution of 1559, social mobility and the comparatively superior educational opportunities of working class children were, in the considered opinion of a large number of journalists, clergymen and members of Parliament, the dominant characteristics of Scottish democracy.² In practice, the educational opportunities and social mobility open to the working classes were severely circumscribed by the conditions industrial capitalism had engendered; and in the mid-1860s the labour movement, though influenced by the traditions – and the mythology – of Scottish democracy, looked to America for their model of a democratic society.

Moreover, in the late 1860s and 1870s the impact of American ideas on the Scottish labour movement reinforced the Lib-Lab alliance,³ and thereby strengthened the stability of Scottish society. The labour movement's latent revolt from Liberalism was, in fact, inhibited by adherence to self-help and involvement in agitations for land reform on the basis of *laissez-faire* economic principles. By the 1880s American ideas and agitators were making a major contribution to the growth of socialist consciousness in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, the Shetlands, the Highlands and, above all, in the Scottish coalfields.

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London, 1968), pp. 257-265.

² For a perceptive critique of orthodox accounts of Scottish democracy in the nineteenth century, see the essay by Father Anthony Ross entitled "Resurrection", in *Whither Scotland*, ed. by Duncan Glen (London, 1971).

³ Professor Harrison has convincingly argued that "the Lib-Lab era in working-class politics" began in 1868. Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists* (London, 1965), p. 209.

I

In 1866 the labouring poor were socially, culturally and politically fragmented, and the Scottish working class had “many subdivisions and gradations including occupations as various as those of the dexterous artisan and the rude miner, the intelligent factory hand and the casual dock labourer”.¹ The artisans possessed the characteristics of “industry, skill, independence and self-respect”,² and labourers were labourers because they were “lazy and profligate”.³ Such characteristics as industry, skill, independence and self-respect were allegedly restricted to the artisans and skilled workers, and a Scottish educationist argued that: “There are in every school boys who are fit only to be hewers of wood and drawers of water”.⁴

The superior education and the “democratic instincts” of indigenous working people occupy a major niche in the mythology of Scottish history,⁵ and “the popularity of the democratic [Presbyterian] church with the middle and lower classes”⁶ was proverbial among journalists, clergymen and members of Parliament. The reality was somewhat different, and Presbyterian clergymen, educationalists and middle-class Liberals recognised and encouraged class differences, status differentiation and social stratification.⁷ In social, economic and political life there were, as the *Edinburgh Review* put it, “orders and degrees” which did not “jar with liberty”.⁸

The social misery, gloom, brutality and insensitivity of Scottish society were reflected in the socially stratified and authoritarian educational system. Moreover, the poverty and brutality of social life were manifested in the statistics of drunkenness, overcrowding and illegitimacy; and the possessing classes had little sympathy for the

¹ *Edinburgh Review*, CXXVIII, No 262 (1868), p. 489.

² *Ibid.*, p. 490.

³ *Reformer*, 25 March 1871.

⁴ Report on Scottish Education for 1871 [Parliamentary Papers, 1872], p. 93. I owe this reference to Mrs Madeleine Monies, of the University of Edinburgh.

⁵ “Scottish democracy was the ideological basis of the Liberal Party in Scotland, but it could not apply to the Irish. Roman Catholic, uneducated, and not too concerned with the dignities of man in the face of a struggle for survival, the Irish working class (and there were not many in any other class) seemed a threat to the Scottish way of life.” James Kellas, *The Development of the Liberal Party in Scotland, 1868-1895*, Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1966, p. 26.

⁶ “Secondary Education in Scotland”, in: *North British Daily Mail*, 18 March 1868.

⁷ S. Mechie, *The Church and Scottish Social Development, 1780-1870* (London, 1960), p. 60.

⁸ *Edinburgh Review*, CXXVII, No 258 (1867), p. 452.

plight of the labouring poor. Besides, every town and city contained a “floating mass of shivering, shirtless and shoeless humanity”,¹ and in towns and cities such as Falkirk, Dunfermline, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee, a large, shiftless population was commonplace. As boom and slump alternated during the second half of the nineteenth century mass unemployment was often widespread, and in 1867 the *North British Daily Mail* estimated that, in Glasgow, thirty thousand working men had been unemployed for almost nine months.² In Edinburgh the Convenor of the Relief Committee (a man who was a committed Tory) was appalled by “the abstract political economy” of the Scottish Liberals which, he claimed, looked “with a cold eye upon the exertions” being made to mitigate “the existing destitution”.³

Self-help and thrift were the hallmarks of the ideology embraced by the urban labour movement, and in towns and cities working class leaders, together with middle class Liberals, were uncompromisingly opposed to legislative interference with the hours of labour of adult workers. At the same time the possessing classes were not opposed to trade unions *per se*, and in schools and in school textbooks there was a general recognition that trade unions occupied a legitimate place in the social structure of Scottish society.⁴ By contrast the textbooks provided by and used in Church of England schools were notorious for their hostility to trade unionism.⁵ The Scottish possessing classes recognised and approved of trade unionism as a form of self-help.⁶

Social problems were frequently discussed in the Presbyterian Free Church in the 1860s and 1870s, and the clergy invariably confronted the problems of an industrialising society – the problems of drunkenness, poverty, illegitimacy and insecurity – by impressing upon the working classes the need for temperance reform, thrift, self-discipline and self-

¹ Edinburgh Evening Courant, 19 January 1867.

² North British Daily Mail, 28 September 1867.

³ Edinburgh Evening Courant, 19 January 1867.

⁴ The Scottish delegates informed the delegates to the British Trades Union Congress that they would not tolerate the textbooks being used by the Church of England. The Edinburgh delegate put the views of the Scottish trade unionists thus: “If articles of the nature in question were found in a book in Scotland, the school in which it was used would be shut tomorrow.” Report of the British TUC, 1879, pp. 34-35.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “It is quite within the scope of school instruction that correct views [on strikes and combinations] should be formed by the pupils in their schools.” William Ellis, *Combinations and Strikes from the Teacher’s Point of View* (Edinburgh, 1865), p. 1, Edinburgh University Library, pamphlet 576/2; A. D. Wilson, *Trade Unions and Self-Help* (Edinburgh, 1873), p. 11, in the Arthur Elliot Papers, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4246.

help.¹ The Free Church and the Scottish National Reform League, an organisation created to agitate for the second Reform bill,² were in sympathy with the agitations for land reform (as distinct from land nationalisation), and the clergy were often very critical of the cash nexus and the acquisitive spirit of the age.³ The Trades Councils simultaneously advocated thrift,⁴ emigration,⁵ and temperance reform,⁶ and the interaction of the Trades Councils and the Free Church cemented the hegemony existing in mid-Victorian society.

The Scottish working classes had played a major part in the struggle for the second Reform bill, and the general election of 1868 had seemingly provided the Scottish working class movement with an opportunity to evolve an independent political posture.⁷ In fact the general election exposed and accentuated splits and divisions in the working class movement. A heterogeneous working class, existing in a capitalist society dominated by *laissez-faire* ideology, had conflicting social and economic needs, and the Scottish workers lacked the militant socialist traditions of the English.⁸ The coal miners represented an implicit threat to social and political stability; but, since many of them had not been enfranchised by the Act of 1868, their militancy and opposition-mindedness were not sufficient to politically transform an evolving capitalist society.

Emigration had been a prominent feature of Scottish social life since the early nineteenth century, and the psychological acceptance of emigration had a major influence on culture and imaginative literature.⁹ Trade union leaders, in marked contrast to their English

¹ Proceedings and Debates of the Free Church of Scotland, 1867, p. 7.

² In a letter to the editor of the North British Daily Mail, George Jackson, the secretary of the Scottish National Reform League, reaffirmed the League's programme of arbitration, legalising the trade unions, "liberating the churches and unlocking the land". North British Daily Mail, 21 August 1867.

³ Proceedings and Debates of the Free Church of Scotland, 1870, p. 20.

⁴ North British Daily Mail, 17 February 1876.

⁵ Glasgow Sentinel, 4 May 1867; North British Daily Mail, 29 June 1876 and 6 November 1879; Minutes of the Edinburgh Trades Council, 29 September 1863 and 23 June 1868.

⁶ Ibid., 22 February 1870; North British Daily Mail, 4 March 1870.

⁷ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁸ T. C. Smout, *History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (London, 1969), p. 448; L. C. Wright, *Scottish Chartism* (Edinburgh, 1953), *passim*; Alexander Wilson, *The Chartist Movement in Scotland* (Manchester, 1970), *passim*.

⁹ "In the mid-19th century the Scottish literary tradition – the writing by Scotsmen of fiction and poetry of more than parochial interest – paused; from 1825 to 1880 there is next to nothing worth attention. This was also a period of very heavy emigration – a landslide of people away from Scottish soil. It seems, *prima facie*, likely that the literary break was connected somehow with the social force which was then bursting in upon thousands of Scottish lives." D.

counterparts,¹ *were* enthusiastic about the emigration of unemployed members. Scottish trade union leaders, depending on whether they were miners or artisans, quarrelled about the methods by which the emigration of unemployed working people should be promoted. The leaders of the carpenters, iron moulders and engineers, with their secure funds for assisting unemployed members to emigrate, were not in sympathy with the agitation for state-aided emigration. During the general election of 1868 the miners in the west of Scotland opposed George Anderson, the advanced Liberal Parliamentary candidate for Glasgow, because of his refusal to support their demand for state-aided emigration.² Much later *Blackwood's*, the Scottish Tory journal, criticised the agitation for state-aided emigration as detrimental to "the impulses of self-help".³ In 1868 James Dawson Burn, who had been a leading member of the Glasgow Trades Council in the 1830s and 1840s, expounded his view that unemployment and poverty could only be effectively solved by emigration:

"This could be done by enabling the surplus hands in the various trades to emigrate either to the United States or some of the other colonies. The money spent on strikes during the last seventy years, if it had been applied to the purpose of emigration, would have been sufficient to have relieved the country of at least thirty thousand people who are dead weights on the labour market."⁴

Side-by-side with the trade union leaders' acceptance of emigration as an aspect of self-help, they also propagated and practised a more positive philosophy of collective self-help. What working class leaders envisaged by collective self-help was explained by Robert Cranston, the ex-Chartist leader, when he addressed the members of the Edinburgh Working Men's Club in 1867:

"If you take my advice, do what you have been doing for the last twenty years – do what the Convention of London recommended you to do – stick to your trade unions, co-operative and

Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1680-1830* (London, 1961), p. 273.

¹ "Emigration, as a cure for unemployment, was a panacea in which the trade union oligarchy itself had little faith, although as an established part of their credos, they turned to it on occasion." Royden Harrison, "The Land and Labour League", in: *Bulletin of the International Institute of Social History*, VIII (1953), p. 185.

² *Glasgow Sentinel*, 12 September 1868.

³ *Blackwood's*, CXLVI, No 885 (1889), p. 48.

⁴ J. D. Burn, *A Social Glimpse of the Conditions of the Working Classes during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1868), p. 148.

investment companies and mechanics institutes. Depend upon it, none will attend to your interests but yourselves."¹

The miners, however, were the most oppressed group of industrial workers in the whole of Scotland, and the formidable difficulties confronting the miners – and the near impossibility of forming stable and effective trade union organisation in the coalfields – meant that collective self-help was denied to a very large number of the mining population. Moreover, the miners who did emigrate to America were usually the relatively well-off elite of skilled workers; and in conditions of appalling poverty and oppression – the coal owners, for example, imposed compulsory deductions from the men's wages for housing, schooling, medical attention, lamp oil, blasting powder and pick-sharpening – there were not very many miners who could afford to pay trade union dues or imitate the thrifty artisans. Nevertheless the miners' leaders constantly urged the miners to "lift themselves out of servitude" by practising self-help.² Alexander MacDonal frequently "blamed the miners for much of their poverty",³ and in 1873 he criticised them for gambling, dog-fighting and drinking.⁴

II

A distinguished historian of British working class politics has described the Scottish workers' programme of 1868 – a programme formulated by Presbyterian artisans⁵ – as an attempt by some working men to strike out in the direction of independent political action.⁶ An important plank in the Scottish workers' programme was the demand for a national compulsory system of education, and the *Spectator* observed that the agitation for free and unsectarian education had been influenced by the example of the American system.⁷ American ideas and reports of American experience were publicised and popularised by British radicals;⁸ and Scottish trade unionists occasionally visited America, lived there for brief periods,⁹ or were in touch with activists in

¹ Glasgow Sentinel, 29 June 1867.

² Ibid., 26 January 1867.

³ Ibid., 18 April 1868.

⁴ North British Daily Mail, 16 October 1873.

⁵ Spectator, 24 October 1868.

⁶ Harrison, op. cit., p. 206.

⁷ Spectator, 24 October 1868.

⁸ H. Pelling, *America and the British Left* (London, 1956), pp. 28-29.

⁹ Robert Brown, the leader of the Mid and East Lothian miners, worked in the American coalfields during the years 1869-1871. Monthly Circular of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, February 1918.

the American labour movement. But the workers who formulated or wholeheartedly welcomed the Scottish workers' programme, also sabotaged the formidable efforts of the miners' leaders to put forward independent working class candidates.¹

The attempts of the miners' leaders to promote independent working class candidates had been at least partially inspired by what American labour was doing; and, ironically, they had been opposed by working class leaders who were enchanted with American democracy. The urban labour movement – most miners lived in relatively isolated rural communities and their trade unions were not affiliated to the urban Trades Councils – had been very impressed by American educational institutions, opportunities of social mobility and the creation of enormous wealth which they largely attributed to the existence and functioning of democratic institutions.² This was the background against which James Dawson Burn bitterly attacked the decision the American Federation of Labour had taken in 1867 to send delegates to Europe to persuade foreign workers not to emigrate to the United States of America.³ But though Alexander MacDonald and the miners' leaders envisaged tremendous social opportunities for miners who could afford to emigrate to America, they were nonetheless vaguely aware of the existence of a class struggle within America. Thus MacDonald described what he regarded as the emergence of American labour as an independent political force:

“The working class of this country are slowly awakening to a sense of their power at the polling booths of the country. In several instances of this they have shown that they will no longer be duped by the Reps or Dems, as the politicians are called. [...] The working men have adopted a platform, and on that they have acted with some show of strength. At Cincinnati, Ohio, they concentrated their energy on the return of a working man candidate to Congress, and they carried their point most triumphantly in the return of General Carey.”⁴

And in 1872 he welcomed the publication of two American labour newspapers – the *Working Man's Advocate* and the *Monitor* – and expressed the hope that they would be sufficiently powerful to “smite the oppressors and to defend the oppressed”.⁵

¹ See, for example, *Glasgow Sentinel*, 11 July 1868.

² *Address to the People of Scotland*, Scottish National Reform League, Glasgow, 1867.

³ J. D. Burn, op. cit., p. 152.

⁴ *Glasgow Sentinel*, 11 January 1868.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 March 1872.

In the 1860s and 1870s the Scottish landed aristocracy was criticised bitterly by the labour movement and the middle classes. This bitterness was forcibly expressed by a number of influential elders and clergymen at the General Assembly of the Free Church in 1869, and one speaker asserted that the lairds were “aliens from, and hostile to, the national faith”.¹ The land agitations of the 1880s were, moreover, already foreshadowed in the 1860s, and in 1868 a protest movement against tolls in the Highlands reached a high point of violence and physical force.² The land agitation of 1868 had been initiated by Alexander Robertson, and in 1878 he contemplated standing for election in the city of Perth as “a Working Man’s Candidate”.³ The land agitations in the Highlands were, however, vitiated by the Roads and Bridges Act of 1878 which resulted in the abolition of tolls.⁴ But so long as land agitations were conducted within the context of “free trade principles”, there was no real possibility of consensus politics being seriously challenged.

In the mid-Victorian period Lib-Lab-ism, self-help and class consciousness co-existed within a militant labour movement. Strikes were often sanctioned and supported by influential sections of Scottish society, and in some communities clergymen and local newspapers sometimes sided with labour against capital. A militant labour movement existed in the 1870s, and militancy and class consciousness were not sudden or abrupt eruptions which occurred in the 1880s. The cultural attitudes and the consciousness of class among the vast majority of unorganised working people have yet to be investigated by historians of Scottish labour, but two distinct, though ascending levels of class consciousness – the elementary and the intermediate – have been defined as “a fairly accurate perception of class membership on the part of a particular individual” and “a certain perception of the immediate interests of the class of which one is conscious of being a member”.⁵ In both senses the labour movement was class conscious, and the class consciousness of the activists in the labour movement found expression in the manifesto published by the Edinburgh

¹ Proceedings and Debates of the Free Church of Scotland, 1869, p. 229.

² Glasgow Weekly Herald, 11 July 1868.

³ Alexander Robertson’s letter indicating his desire to stand as “a Working Man’s Candidate” is pasted into the Minute Book of the Labour Representation League.

⁴ See the essay on “Dundonachie” (Alexander Robertson), in H. Dryerre, Blairgowrie, Stormont and Strathmore Worthies (Blairgowrie, 1903), p. 283.

⁵ Ralph Miliband, “Barnave: A Case of Bourgeois Class Consciousness”, in: Aspects of History and Class Consciousness, ed. by I. Meszaros (London, 1971), p. 22.

Workman's Electoral Council immediately after the general election of 1874. A part of it read thus:

"Bitter experience has taught us that common justice for working people is not yet a tenet of Middle-Class interests, we are abandoned the moment we begin to attend to our own. We are still despised as a servile class, and it is for us to wipe out the stain of class-inferiority by incessantly demanding from the Legislature equality before the law."¹

Class consciousness was also expressed in the decision of the Glasgow Trades Council, in 1876, to create "a consolidation fund to furnish some little assistance to those who, in their struggles with capital, were worsted from the lack of the sinews of war".²

Liberal-Labourism and self-help complemented each other, and middle class Liberals and Lib-Lab working class leaders accepted the implicit assumption of Liberal individualism – personal responsibility for poverty. The leaders of the labour movement, whether they represented artisans or miners, adhered to "the petty bourgeois values of thrift, betterment and self-help", and thereby separated the artisans from the labouring poor.³ In the 1860s and 1870s the labour movement was just as opposed to collectivism as the middle class members of the Liberal Party. Working class collective self-help as well as Smilesian self-help with its well-known emphasis on individualism, were strong underpinnings of the status quo, and in the early 1870s self-help was reinforced by the emergence of the Good Templars – an organisation "framed upon an American model"⁴ – in working class communities throughout the central, industrial belt. The Good Templars were enthusiastic evangelicals, and in 1871 Dr Blakie told the General Assembly of the Free Church that this new temperance organisation was "a working man's movement".⁵ Working class commitment to self-help, in its various forms, was a barrier obstructing the emergence of socialist ideas among the working classes; and in the 1880s and 1890s the Americans were to undo the unwitting, but solid contribution they had previously made both to self-help and the social and political stability of Scottish capitalism.

¹ The Manifesto of the Edinburgh Workmen's Electoral Council was only published in the newspaper press by the (Tory) Edinburgh Evening Courant during the general election of 1880 when the same working class leaders were again supporting the middle class Liberals. Edinburgh Evening Courant, 19 March 1880.

² Glasgow Weekly Herald, 20 May 1876.

³ Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, No 16 (1968), p. 9.

⁴ Proceedings and Debates of the Free Church of Scotland, 1871, p. 269.

⁵ Ibid., p. 272.

III

An activist in English radical politics recorded his impression that Henry George, though not a socialist himself, had done more “than any other single person to stir and deepen in this country an agitation which, if not socialist, at least promises to be the mother of socialism”.¹ In contrast to the English Land and Labour League² the Republican elements in the Scottish labour movement in the 1870s had not agitated for land nationalisation, and George’s subsequent agitation for the nationalisation of the land had an explosive impact on Scottish politics. There were no Scottish social investigators comparable to Charles Booth or the author of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, and George made an important contribution to the growth of socialist sympathies by rediscovering the poverty of the labouring poor. By dramatically directing attention to the hopelessly inadequate living standards of crofters and industrial workers,³ he challenged the implicit assumption of the ruling class that the poverty of working people was an inescapable consequence of thriftlessness and indolence.

By tracing poverty, unemployment and inadequate wages back to structural factors within capitalism, Henry George helped to destroy the Scottish labour movement’s enchantment with American democracy. The accusation that poverty was created by capitalism struck at the cultural, psychological and spiritual roots of the hegemony existing in Scottish society, and James Leatham, a leading young socialist in the labour movement in Aberdeen in the 1880s, subsequently recalled this forgotten aspect of Georgeite propaganda:

“Like Henry George at a later date and from a different opening, Marx taught la Misere – the intensification of misery, or as George called it, the increase of want side by side with the increase of wealth.”⁴

For once the Scottish Land Restoration League had been formed in 1884, the image of America as “a land of golden opportunity” for working people was increasingly blurred; the class struggle within America was discovered or in some cases rediscovered; and a discovery of widespread poverty among people in all capitalist countries led a new generation of working class leaders to look to American labour organisations for ideas, inspiration and moral support.

¹ Quoted in H. Lynd, *England in the Eighteen Eighties* (London, 1954), p. 143.

² R. Harrison, “The Land and Labour League”, loc. cit.

³ T. Johnstone, *History of the Working Classes in Scotland* (Glasgow, 1920), p. 289.

⁴ *The Gateway*, Mid-May 1919, p. 18.

In September 1884 Bruce Glasier told a mass meeting of Lanarkshire miners that the extension of the franchise would not touch the problems with which the working class was confronted. As he put it:

“In America, France and other countries those measures so loudly called for have already been obtained, and the working classes in those countries were as badly off as were the masses in Great Britain. The reason why people were compelled to waste their lives day after day without sufficient reward for their labour was because labour was day by day systematically robbed”.¹

Then Lawrence Gronlund, the secretary of the Socialist Labour Party of America addressed meetings of the Lanarkshire and Broxburn miners which had been organised by the Glasgow and Edinburgh branches of the Scottish Land and Labour League. Such lectures on the subject of “Are the Rich growing Richer and the Poor Poorer” challenged the egalitarian image that American society had hitherto enjoyed among working people. A number of pioneer socialists were influenced by Gronlund, and James Leatham subsequently recalled the enormous influence that Gronlund’s book *The Co-operative Commonwealth* had had on socialists in the north of Scotland, including the Shetlands, in the 1880s.²

The Georgeites were important catalysts in the growth of socialist trends in the Scottish labour movement, and in the early 1880s the Georgeites and the socialists worked together in propagating both the nationalisation of the land and “the nationalisation of society”. In Edinburgh Andreas Scheu, an Austrian *émigré*, concentrated on influencing George’s supporters. In a letter to Miss Reeves, a member of the Edinburgh branch of the Scottish Land Restoration League, he argued:

“Not that I believe you to be a Socialist; but I am aware that you are supporting a movement which goes very far in the direction of Socialism. Two years ago I heard Mr. Henry George admit that himself by saying he knew full well that the nationalisation of the land would not solve the social question; but he was convinced that it was a sure step towards bringing that solution about”.³

But the Georgeites and the socialists were not so much separated by

¹ Archives of the Socialist League, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam.

² See James Leatham’s letter pasted into the front pages of the Gateway, Vol. VI, in the National Library of Scotland.

³ Papers of Andreas Scheu, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis.

ideology as they were divided by tactics. The Georgeites worked within the Scottish Liberal Association, where they advocated the nationalisation of the land and the introduction of a legal eight hour day, while many of the members of the Scottish Land and Labour League shared William Morris's antipathy for "the shams" of bourgeois Parliamentary democracy.

The Third Reform bill had created a larger working class electorate, and the local caucus-dominated committees of the Liberal Party had now to confront the challenge of some trade unionists and middle class radicals who were pressing for the acceptance of certain socialist demands. *Laissez-faire* Liberalism, with its "night watchman's idea of the functions of Government", was henceforth questioned by permeationists who were committed to collectivist solutions to the social problem. The propertied classes had already been frightened by the spectre of German social democracy, and Labour radicals, who belonged to the Scottish Liberal Association, played on these fears in order to persuade the wealthy Liberals to accept a radical programme of social reform.

A profound fear of social revolution was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the propertied classes, and in 1887 a member of the Glasgow branch of the Socialist League described the response of one influential Liberal academic to the new threat to social stability:

"I have just come in from the [Glasgow] Philosophical [Society] where I heard Smart deliver a lecture on Factory, Industry and Socialism. Marx almost from beginning to end – vigorous and outspoken – conclusion of the whole matter something like this: 'If we who call ourselves the upper classes do not take Carlyle's advice and become real Captains of Industry and organisers of the people working not for gain but for the good of all, so as to open up to every man the opportunities for the higher life of culture at present the possession of a very few – if we do not do this within a very few years, then we shall have to prevent Revolution by leading it.'"¹

Nonetheless the Scottish Liberal Association repeatedly rejected the demands of the Labour radicals and the Georgeites for land nationalisation and a legal eight hour day,² and the Liberal-Unionists like Lord Melgund, who had just recently left the Liberal Party, criticised the agitations for the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland and

¹ Archibald McLaren to R. F. Muirhead, 16 November 1887, McLaren-Muirhead Correspondence, Baillie's Institute, Glasgow.

² Minutes of the Scottish Liberal Association, 22 October and 22 November 1889.

Irish Home Rule. In his election address to the people of Selkirk and Peebles, for example, Melgund attacked the "Irish-American agitators" who were working for "the creation of a self-independent, disaffected State close to our own shores".¹

Moreover, Scottish Liberal-Unionism, in contrast to its English variety, was a conservative rather than a radical social force, and the Scottish Liberal-Unionists were frightened by the land agitations in the Highlands where the Whig elements were being challenged by the Crofters' Party. And by then John Murdoch,² the crofters' leader who had obtained financial assistance from Dr William Carroll, of Philadelphia, to prevent the collapse of his weekly agitational newspaper, *The Highlander*, was agitating among the coal miners in the west of Scotland.³ Land and labour agitations were now converging, and what Professor Hanham has perhaps erroneously called 'the porridgy uniformity of the 'sixties' was being watered down by the stirrings of discontented socialists and radicals.⁴

Henry George and land agitations had a catalytic impact on miners' leaders in the west of Scotland,⁵ and James Keir Hardie subsequently described his own conversion to socialism:

"Some years later, Henry George came to Scotland and I read *Progress and Poverty*, which unlocked many of the industrial and economic difficulties which beset the mind of the worker trying to take an intelligent interest in his own affairs and led me, much to George's horror in later life when we met personally, into Communism."⁶

In the early 1880s George already had connections with Michael Davitt⁷ and John Murdoch, and in 1884 the miners in the west of Scotland warmly accepted Davitt's advice to agitate for the nationalisation of mineral royalties. Davitt suggested that mineral royalties should be nationalised and the funds used to provide State insurance for the miners, and the miners' leaders proceeded to form a Scottish

¹ Address to the Electors of Selkirk and Peebles, June 1886. Melgund contested Northumberland instead of Selkirk and Peebles. See the Minto Papers, Box 175, National Library of Scotland.

² James D. Young, "John Murdoch: A Scottish Land and Labour Pioneer", in: *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No 19 (1969), pp. 22-24.

³ *Hamilton Advertiser*, 20 September 1884.

⁴ H. J. Hanham, "The Problem of Highland Discontent, 1880-1885", in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XIX (1969), p. 33.

⁵ Obituary notice, *Scottish Co-operator*, February 1903.

⁶ James Keir Hardie in *Review of Reviews*, June 1906, pp. 57ff.

⁷ T. W. Moody, "Michael Davitt and the British Labour Movement, 1882-1906", in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, III (1953), p. 46.

Anti-Royalty and Labour League.¹ This important development signalled the beginning of the labour movement's revolt from the values of *laissez-faire* Liberalism.

William Small, the influential miners' leader,² tried to enlist the support of other miners' leaders, and John Weir, the secretary of the Fife and Clackmannan Miners' Association, was in full sympathy with the agitation for the nationalisation of mineral royalties.³ Moreover, Weir and other working class leaders in Fife were deeply dissatisfied with orthodox Liberalism, and they proceeded to form branches of the Fife People's League. The People's League was committed to a radical labour programme, including the demand for the nationalisation of the land and the abolition of Royalty and the House of Lords, and they were financed by Andrew Carnegie. It is difficult to believe that Carnegie was aware of their agitations for land nationalisation and a legal eight hour day, as he had taken great pains to inform the members of the Dunfermline Radical Association, in 1887, that they should not confuse republicanism with socialism.⁴

In any case Carnegie's unwitting contribution to the growth of socialist agitations in Fife was halted by the decision of the executive committee of the Fife and Clackmannan Miners' Association to withhold their support from Small's agitation for the nationalisation of mineral royalties.⁵ In the coalfields of the east of Scotland, where there were no Roman Catholic miners of Irish origin, socialism was halted for a few more years. But in the coalfields of the west of Scotland, where a number of Roman Catholic miners were active in the branches of the Irish National League, socialism spread like wildfire. In most Scottish towns, cities and rural areas a large number of industrial workers were in sympathy with the agitation for land reform; but in the coalfields of the west of Scotland, where land nationalisation and the nationalisation of mineral royalties were sanctioned and legitimised by the Roman Catholic clergy,⁶ socialist ideas transformed the social consciousness of the activists in the labour movement. The Free Church of Scotland agitated for the reform of the land laws within the context of *laissez-faire* economics;⁷ and in towns and cities, where the vast majority of working people were at least nominally Presbyterian, the labour movement was much slower to

¹ Hamilton Advertiser, 20 September 1884.

² See the Papers of William Small, National Library of Scotland, Mss Acc. 3359.

³ Dunfermline Journal, 27 September 1884.

⁴ Joseph F. Wall, Andrew Carnegie (New York, 1970), pp. 447-48.

⁵ Dunfermline Journal, 11 October 1884.

⁶ Glasgow Observer, 11 September 1886.

⁷ Proceedings and Debates of the Free Church of Scotland, 1884, pp. 151-59.

support the demands for land nationalisation and a legal eight hour day.

In October, 1887, Michael Davitt addressed a conference of the Knights of Labour in Minneapolis on the Irish question in relation to the American labour movement. In the course of a long speech he told the Knights of Labour that "the struggle between the classes and the masses in Ireland was but a counterpart of the battles which were being fought in the cause of industrial humanity in every land under the sun." The Knights then passed a resolution expressing sympathy with the Irish people's struggle for national independence, and they engaged Davitt's services to "aid in developing their order in Europe".¹ A few months later John Ferguson,² an Irish nationalist, who was working in the Scottish Liberal Association with Labour radicals such as Shaw Maxwell,³ published a long letter in the *Scottish Leader* entitled "The Liberal Association and the Organisation of Labour".

The readers of the *Scottish Leader*, a Liberal newspaper, were informed that the American Knights of Labour had "again and again" beaten "railway rings and other capitalistic forces by which Gould and others" had "exercised despotic control over production". Then Ferguson made it clear that the leaders of the Irish immigrants in the west of Scotland would organise Scottish branches of the Knights of Labour unless the Liberals were prepared to nationalise the land and introduce a legal eight hour day.⁴ Andrew Carnegie had already written to Professor J. Stuart Blackie, of Edinburgh, who had been advocating reform of the land laws since the 1860s, recommending the Danish system of land ownership where there was "a heavily graduated tax on land holdings over 25,000 acres".⁵ By 1887 Carnegie was extolling the virtues of Republicanism and land reform before enthusiastic members of the Dunfermline Radical Association and the Glasgow Trades Council, and the Scottish Trades Councils had not yet come out in support of land nationalisation. And this was the background against which the Knights of Labour developed in the coalfields of the west of Scotland.

Being more susceptible to socialist propaganda than either the Scottish urban workers or the French, German or Russian coal miners,⁶ the miners in the west of Scotland were soon attracted by the

¹ Glasgow Observer, 15 October 1887.

² See the biographical sketch of John Ferguson in Labour Annual, 1895.

³ Obituary notice, Glasgow Herald, 7 January 1929.

⁴ Scottish Leader, 21 May 1888.

⁵ Andrew Carnegie to J. Stuart Blackie, 22 April 1884, Blackie letters, 1883-4, Ms. 2635, National Library of Scotland.

⁶ John Saville, "Ideology and the Miners, 1880-1914", a paper read to a conference on Welsh labour history on 17 April 1970.

Knights of Labour's programme of land nationalisation and a legal eight hour day. In August, 1888, William Small took the initiative in organising branches of the Sons of Labour "on the lines of the Knights of Labour".¹ Secret oaths among agricultural and rural workers, who were involved in trade union organisation, were perennial, and the miners, who were flocking to the Sons of Labour, decided to conduct their agitations in the coalfields in great secrecy. The Sons of Labour recruited many members during the early months of 1889,² but a conflict soon developed between the advocates of secret organisation and those who wanted to organise "openly in the old fashion". A decision was then taken to form new organisations on traditional lines.³

The Sons of Labour worked alongside the open branches of the County Unions, though the Knights never again enjoyed mass support among the miners. Miners' leaders were still confused about the best tactics to pursue in conditions where the coalowners were quick to suppress strikes by calling on the police and the military, and even committed socialists among the leadership were often caught in a blind impasse. An understanding of socialist theory did not automatically provide a blueprint for trade union tactics, and their inability to provide a miners' programme superior to the one being offered by the Lib-Labs was reflected in the support and inspiration they sought from the American Knights of Labour. Small was at the centre of the controversy surrounding secret oaths, and in May 1889 he broke with the Sons of Labour.⁴ The new generation of miners' leaders were hectically searching for new ways forward,⁵ and in January 1889 Small wrote to Thomas Binning of the Socialist League, in London, asking for the League's "specific aims" for bringing trade union organisation into "harmony with the advanced thought of the age".⁶

As the Sons of Labour lost substantial support in the Lanarkshire coalfields, new branches of the Knights of Labour were formed among the dock labourers and unskilled workers in Glasgow and Ayrshire.⁷ American labour organisations still provided the leaders of the ad-

¹ North British Daily Mail, 27 August 1888.

² Hamilton Advertiser, 25 January, 23 March and 20 April 1889.

³ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1889.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Fred Reid, "Keir Hardie's Conversion to Socialism", in: *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923*, ed. by Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1971), pp. 17-46. Reid, I think, underestimates the extent to which William Small was also searching for new ways forward.

⁶ William Small to Comrade Binning, 2 January 1889, Archives of the Socialist League.

⁷ North British Daily Mail, 20 January 1890.

vanced thought of the age with an ideological pivot, and in 1890 Shaw Maxwell wrote to Terence V. Powderly as follows:

“I am to-day desired by my friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham, the president of the Scottish Labour Party and leader of the Eight Hour Party in the House of Commons to ask of you a special favour.

His motion for an 8 hours Act for the miners of Great Britain is down for discussion early next month. He is aware of the fact that 8 hours is one of the principal planks of our platform.

His wish is that you should send to him an Autograph Letter, addressed to the House of Commons, and dealing with 8 hours. A very short letter will do. In it please state the number of Knights in the States and possibly also Associated bodies, who are all for the 8 hours movement. A statement from you to him that it is the general wish of the Workers of America would greatly strengthen his hands.”¹

However, when the Glasgow Trades Council refused to let the Knights of Labour affiliate,² efforts to popularise land nationalisation and a legal eight hour day were temporarily halted, though the Knights had contributed to serious questioning by working class activists of the implicit assumptions of *laissez-faire* Liberalism.

A few months before the dramatic Homestead strike Andrew Carnegie, who was questioned by a reporter representing a Liberal newspaper in Aberdeen about the importance of the Knights of Labour, replied thus:

“Say rather, we had. It was one of these ephemeral organisations that go up like a rocket and come down like a stick. It was founded on false principles, viz., that they should combine common unskilled labour with skilled.”³

After the Homestead strike had broken out, the Glasgow Trades Council denounced Carnegie as “a new Judas Iscariot”, though they thanked him for “calling world attention to the plight of labour”.⁴

¹ Shaw Maxwell to Terence V. Powderly, 27 February 1890. I am indebted to Moreau B. C. Chambers, the archivist of the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., for sending me a copy of this letter.

² North British Daily Mail, 17 April 1890.

³ Andrew Carnegie on Socialism, Labour and Home Rule, an interview reprinted from Northern Daily News, Aberdeen, September 23, 24, 26 and 29, 1892.

⁴ Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 573.

But American labour was to make a further contribution to the growth of socialist ideas in the west of Scotland.

The major importance of American labour organisations in the 1880s and 1890s was that they heightened the class consciousness of some activists in the Scottish labour movement by transforming “a perception of class membership” into a commitment to “advance the interests of the class” through agitation for the Parliamentary enactment of a legal eight hour day and the nationalisation of the land. For though working class agitations were focused on the need for Parliamentary legislation rather than an immediate commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society, the propertied classes were not unaware of the implicitly “revolutionary” threat to the hitherto untouchable rights of private property. In 1867, for example, a trade unionist told a conference of middle class radicals of the pre-conditions for an alliance: “If you will support us, if you will labour with us to gain a fair representation in Parliament, we will aid you in seeking protection for your private property.”¹ By the 1890s a new generation of working class leaders had little reverence for the rights of private property, and they were increasingly challenging immigration and thrift as solutions to the problems confronting working people.

What American labour did was to heighten Scottish working class activists’ awareness of the problems and tensions created by capitalist society, and in 1896 Jewish workers, who were refugees from the pogroms in Tsarist Russia, formed branches of the International Cigarette Workers’ Union² and the International Jewish Tailors’ Union.³ Under the leadership of Maurice Hyman they had become revolutionary socialists “whose class consciousness had risen to a very high level”, and they had won higher wages and shorter hours in struggles with their employers.⁴ They affiliated to the Glasgow Trades Council, and, while they helped to popularise socialist ideas there, they were also convinced of the need for revolutionary socialists to participate in Parliamentary elections. As well as keeping in touch with their parent organisations in America, they continued to work in the Scottish labour movement until at least 1900. By then American labour had had an enormous ideological influence on Scottish working

¹ North British Daily Mail, 18 September 1867.

² Rules and Constitution of the International Cigarette-makers Union, F.S.7/99, in the Scottish Records Office, Edinburgh.

³ Rules and Constitution of the International Tailors’ Union, F.S.7/101, in the Scottish Records Office.

⁴ Arbeiter Freund, 25 July 1896. I owe this reference to my friend, Dr Joseph Buckman.

class activists, and the Scottish Parliamentary Workers' Election Committee, representing all branches of the labour movement, had evolved a fully socialist programme of social, economic and political demands.¹

IV

Now that the traditional hegemony was being subjected to a rigorous scrutiny, if not ideological assault, by new social forces, middle class administrators, intellectuals and medical experts were forced to declare where they stood in relation to socialist agitations. Towards the end of the century a few Presbyterian clergymen came out in favour of socialism; but the Rev. John Clarke, who probably represented the views of a sizeable section of the clergy, made the implicit ruling class assumptions about the nature and causes of poverty sharply explicit:

“Much of our poverty and misery is due to our sins and follies. This is overlooked by Socialists. Unless the people can be made moral, sober, industrious and thrifty they cannot be improved.”²

Other representatives of ruling class views, who nominally opted for what they considered to be socialist remedies to the social problem, recommended what can only be described as fascist notions. Thus D. Lennox, a lecturer in social medicine in the University of St Andrews, put forward his own panacea for solving the problems created by poverty:

“from a Socialistic point of view there is still more to be said in favour of State parentage. It is not sufficient that it should take charge of children when they are born. It must superintend their pre-natal conditions, determine the progenitors, and keep the mothers in ideal hygienic circumstances after delivery.”³

But history as Engels once observed is the most cruel of goddesses, and the vast majority of ordinary working people were much slower to take account of the new socialist forces the American labour movement had helped to unleash than the Scottish ruling class.

¹ Glasgow Weekly Mail, 3 February 1900.

² Dunfermline Press, 14 January 1900.

³ D. Lennox, Working Class Life in Dundee, 1878-1905 unpublished typescript (n.d., probably 1905), p. 54, St Andrews University Library, Ms. DA 890.

The growth of a mass labour vote was inhibited by working class adherence to the values of the ruling class. A majority of working people thought that *they* were responsible for their own poverty, and the ideas of thrift and self-help were deeply rooted in their social consciousness. Within the labour movement itself the older Lib-Lab leaders continued to preach the traditional values of thrift and self-help, and even after the miners unions affiliated to the urban Trades Councils in the late 1880s the Sons of Labour tried to implement the collective self-help the miners had hitherto failed to accomplish:

“by a united determination, concentrating all our efforts towards one end, we shall be able to better our condition, to raise ourselves in the social scale to a position of social equality with the mechanics, artisans, and other workmen of our country.”¹

If these ideas lingered on in the labour movement, they still dominated the social consciousness of ordinary working people for the first two decades of the twentieth century. As late as 1900 William Nairne, the militant leader of the Social Democratic Federation in Glasgow, was forced to admit that “the virtue of thrift” was believed in “by a very large number of the very poor”.² Moreover, Scottish workers were more involved in the process of thrift than their English counterparts, and Professor Payne has concluded a careful study of banking in the west of Scotland thus:

“It would appear that those who have argued that the trustee savings banks failed to achieve the high hopes of the founders may well be right if only English experience is analysed. In the West of Scotland the Glasgow Savings Bank did attract and retain the support of the manual workers. In this matter Scottish economic history appears once again to diverge from the so-called ‘British’ pattern.”³

But when thrift, with the concomitant implications of individualistic self-help, was the antithesis of collectivism, and when working people believed that their poverty was self-created, the Scottish labour movement, under the influence of Henry George, Lawrence Gronlund and the Knights of Labour, had moved far to the Left of the vast majority of working class electors.

¹ Hamilton Advertiser, 22 June 1889.

² William Nairne, Scottish Co-operator, 25 January 1901.

³ Peter Payne, “The Savings Bank of Glasgow, 1836-1914”, in: Studies in Scottish Business History, ed. by Peter L. Payne (London, 1967), p. 165.

Meanwhile Scottish capital and workers continued to move to America; the Americans exported their socialism to Scotland; and Scottish working class immigrants to America in 1900 sometimes came back to lead militant, rank-and-file, direct action movements in the coalfields.¹

¹ "A conference of unofficial delegates from all the Socialist and progressive districts in Lanarkshire was summoned at Hamilton in July 1917, and as a result of its deliberations the Lanarkshire Miners' Reform Committee was founded and the heads of a Manifesto, of which 50,000 copies were to be printed and distributed at the pits, were agreed upon. It is worthy of remark that a prominent part was played in this conference by Lanarkshire men who had experience as officials or members in the United Mineworkers' Union of America, either in Illinois or in British Columbia. Other Scots-Americans were very active in spreading the movement into the eastern counties. Many features of the new programme were consequently drawn from the practice of the American mine-workers." James D. MacDougall, "The Scottish Coalminer", in: *The Nineteenth Century and After*, December 1927, p. 767.