

Edward Carpenter: A Radical Life

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By Michael Lewin

It was friend of mine who first introduced me to the thoughts and works of Edward Carpenter (1844- 1929) – poet, visionary, socialist and advocate of gay rights. He was quoting passages from Carpenter's book: *Civilization: Its cause and Cure* – and I increasingly become fascinated with this radical and his views. Later I was loaned Carpenter's autobiography: *My Days and Dreams*, first published in 1916, and managed to delve even deeper into his philosophy, thoughts and beliefs. I recall the reading experience as being like a breath of fresh air, I revelled in the thought that this revolutionary figure came out of an austere, divided Victorian age that seemed to stifle so many people's hopes and aspirations. It was the progressive, radical nature of his political and social beliefs that drew me on to carry out some of my own home spun research into his life....

Edward Carpenter was born in Brighton, Sussex in 1844. His family came from a distinguished naval background, his grandfather was Admiral James Carpenter (1760 – 1845) who fought against the French in the West Indies. He was a studious child who went on to Brighton College and entered Trinity College, Cambridge in 1864. He was ordained into the Anglican Church in 1870 and was appointed as a curate to Fredrick Denison Maurice, leader of the Christian Socialist movement who was an acknowledged early influence on him. However, increasingly he became disillusioned with what he saw as the hypocrisy of Victorian life. During this time he discovered, to his delight the poetry of Walt Whitman. This

had a profound effect upon Carpenter and after visiting Whitman in America he came back to England to reject his former life. In 1882 Carpenter Senior died leaving Edward in a financially comfortable position which allowed him to pursue his dream of embracing an authentic, simple lifestyle, giving his time to socially engaged politics, writing and extending education to the working classes. On receipt of this inheritance he bought a small holding in Derbyshire called Millthorpe and started on this work. Later he joined the Fellowship of the New Life whose primary aim was none other than to transform society by living exemplary examples of clean, simplified living so that others could follow. It's stated objective being: *The cultivation of a perfect character in each and all.*" Carpenter, like many other members of the Fellowship believe in pacifism, vegetarianism, and green, simple living. Their philosophy derived, in large measure from the writings of Leo Tolstoy but there were progressive political elements active in the fellowship. When a group of its members wanted to engage more fully in radical politics they set up the Fabian Society but didn't break away completely from the fellowship.

Carpenter came under the influence of a number of writers including Thoreau (he sent William Morris a copy of *Walden*, Thoreau's two year 'experiment' in living an alternative, simple lifestyle but Morris was not impressed).

Ruskin was also a major influence especially his thoughts of educating and empowering the working classes and the ultimate goal of building a utopian future which would embrace a communitarian culture. In 1883 Carpenter joined the Social Democratic Federation, coming under the influence of H M Hyndman who had recently converted to socialism. As well as Carpenter, William Morris, Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx were members. During this time he penned socialist influenced songs and hymns, including the popular: *England Arise*. In 1889 he published: *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure*, where he

argued that capitalism amounted to a social and moral 'disease' that spread injustice, inequality, poverty and pollution in its wake.

"I can see only one ultimate way out of the morass in which we are engulfed. The present commercial system will have to go, and there will have to be a return to the much simpler systems of co-operation belonging to a bygone age . . . To that condition, or something very like it, I am convinced we shall have to return if society is to survive. I say this after a long and close observation of life in many phases.

Edward Carpenter

He also became a member of the Humanitarian League which campaigned for the abolition of capital punishment, cruel sports and vivisection. The league also campaigned vigorously for prison reform. Eventually Carpenter, along with a range of other committed socialists like Keir Hardie, George Bernard Shaw, Ben Tillett and Philip Snowden formed the Independent Labour Party. Its primary focus being to: *"...secure the collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange"*. Carpenter was very critical of so called 'civilization' and thought the 'cure' was a movement towards, and return to, the fundamental connection to the land and nature in general. He also thought another very important component in this societal development should take place on a personal level – the spiritual autonomy of the individual. This approach was based on Carpenter's experience in India which left an indelible mark on his consciousness. He had travelled to Si Lanka and India in 1890 coming under the influence of a guru named Gnani thereafter he believed that socialism should not only address the issues of macro-economics eg, production and distribution of material wealth but also peoples' spiritual development as well. What one might think of a 'spiritual socialism' or 'mystical socialism'. His correspondence with Gandhi touched on these

themes.

Carpenter was a strong advocate for sexual liberation and was a close friend of the pioneering author Havelock Ellis who wrote one of the first serious studies on homosexuality. Carpenter despised the repressive sexual climate of the Victorian age and devoted a considerable amount of his time writing about this issue himself, although early on it was somewhat couched in disguised, euphemistic terms. In 1885 the House of Commons had passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act which effectively recriminalized male homosexuality, this obviously made it very difficult for Carpenter but he did continue to live openly with his partner: George Merrill and still publish works on the issue

Carpenter's libertarian values and views extended to the support of the Women's suffragette Movement and he actively engaged with working alongside Charlotte Despard of the Woman's Freedom League. He also spoke out against the Boer War and the First World War as a pacifist, joining forces with the No Conscription Fellowship which tried to discourage men from serving in any military activity. The organization asked of 'war eligible men' to: *"refuse from conscientious motives to bear arms because... human life [was] sacred"*.

During the last years of his life he moved from his small holding in Derbyshire to a house in Guildford, Surrey, along with his partner George Merrill. On the 28th of June, 1929, he died and was buried in the same grave as George. He was eighty four years old.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately Carpenter's reputation declined markedly after his death despite the very real and continuing relevance and validity of his thoughts. And this marginality still unfortunately remains today thus ignoring and diminishing his intellectual, artistic and spiritual weight. Carpenter was a

one off – an extraordinary feeling man who won the love and affection of many who came into his orbit.

Within the Labour Party he is largely a forgotten figure which is understandable considering its pull to the right of politics and abandonment of Clause Four – the very principle that Carpenter himself helped shape which became the foundation stone of socialist policies for an earlier, more progressive generation.

As a writer and poet Carpenter has been sorely neglected. Even his friend, the novelist EM Forster thought that his ‘ style ‘ of writing wouldn’t endure for a more modern audience. It is only within a narrowly defined ‘ minority interest ‘ culture – which I include myself in – that Carpenter is paid respect and paid attention to. This and the gay community who now recognize him rightly as a pioneering gay activist who tried to change the climate of sexuality – a vigorous campaigner who challenged all forms of discrimination against gay and lesbian people.

I remember once visiting an old, dusty bookshop in the Charing Cross Road (one of many that existed there but now all sadly gone) and looking over some creaking bookshelves at a collection of dirty hardbacks. Amongst them was *Towards Democracy*, Carpenter’s lengthy seminal poem. During the summer of that year I often tucked into this volume at a slow, leisurely pace – it was delightful. To finish this article I would like to share with you some short passages from the work:

The Law of Equality

“You cannot violate the law of equality for long. Whatever you appropriate to yourself now from others, by that you will be poorer in the end. What you give now the same will surely come back to you. If you think yourself superior to the rest, in that instant you have proclaimed your own inferiority.... Seek

not your own life – for that is death. But seek how you can best and most joyfully give your own life away...To pass out, free, O joy! Free to flow down, to swim in the sea of equality”.

A Mightier than Mammon

“When it is recognized that culture and manual labour are not only compatible but necessary in combination with each other, and yet society remains divided into brutalized workers and cultivated nincompoops...

When men and women everywhere are hungering for community life, to pass freely, to love and be loved; and yet they remain frozen up, starched, starved, confined, each in their own little cells of propriety, respectability, dirty property and dismal poverty.”

Empire

“Where anywhere over the surface of England today do the necessary conditions exist for the outcrop of a decent population...where are the conditions for the growth of men and women...Loving and trustful of each other, united and invincible in silent faith?

Where is the Statesman who makes it the main item of his programme to produce such a population? Where the Capitalists, where the Landlord? Where indeed – in a country in which Politics are but a game of party bluff, where labour is modified slavery and where land is simply not to be had.”

This article is dedicated to the memory of Edward Carpenter a creative, visionary thinker – never to be forgotten....

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