

FOOTE GEORGE WILLIAM

REMINISCENCES OF
CHARLES BRADLAUGH

George Foote
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G. W. Foote

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INTRODUCTION

The following pages are reprinted, with some alterations and additions, from the columns of the *Freethinker*. They are neither methodical nor exhaustive. I had the privilege of knowing Mr. Bradlaugh more or less intimately for twenty years. I have worked with him in the Freethought movement and stood by his side on many political platforms. It seemed to me, therefore, that if I jotted down, even in a disjointed manner, some of my recollections of his great personality, I should be easing my own mind and conferring a pleasure on many readers. Beyond that I was not ambitious. The time for writing Mr. Brad-laugh's life is not yet, but when it arrives my jottings may furnish a point or two to his biographer.

G. W. FOOTE, March 30, 1891.

REMINISCENCES OF CHARLES BRADLAUGH

When I came to London, in January, 1868, I was eighteen years of age. I had plenty of health and very little religion. While in my native town of Plymouth I had read and thought for myself, and had gradually passed through various stages of scepticism, until I was dissatisfied even with the advanced Unitarianism of a preacher like the Rev. J. K. Applebee. But I could not find any literature in advance of his position, and there was no one of whom I could inquire. Secularism and Atheism I had never heard of in any definite way, although I remember, when a little boy, having an Atheist pointed out to me in the street, Naturally I regarded him as a terrible monster. I did not know what Atheism was except in a very vague way; but I inferred from the tones, expressions, and gestures of those who pointed him out to me, that an Atheist was a devil in human form.

Soon after I came to London I found out an old school-fellow, and went to lodge with his family: They were tainted with Atheism, and my once pious playmate was as corrupt as the rest of them. They took me one Sunday evening to Cleveland Hall, where I heard Mrs. Law knock the Bible about delightfully. She was not what would be called a woman of culture, but she had what some devotees of "culchaw" do not possess – a great deal

of natural ability; and she appeared to know the "blessed book" from cover to cover. Her discourse was very different from the Unitarian sermons I had heard at Plymouth. She spoke in a plain, honest, straightforward manner, and I resolved to visit Cleveland Hall again.

Three or four weeks afterwards I heard Mr. Bradlaugh for the first time. It was a very wet Sunday evening, but as 'bus-riding was dearer then than it is now, and my resources were slender, I walked about three miles through the heavy rain, and sat on a backless bench in Cleveland Hall, for which I think I paid twopence. I was wet through, but I was young, and my health was flawless. Nor did I mind the discomfort a bit when Mr. Bradlaugh began his lecture. Fiery natural eloquence of that sort was a novelty in my experience. I kept myself warm with applauding, and at the finish I was pretty nearly as dry outside as inside. From that time I went to hear Mr. Bradlaugh whenever I had an opportunity. He became the "god" of my young idolatry. I used to think of him charging the hosts of superstition, and wish I could be near him in the fight. But it was rather a dream than any serious expectation of such an honor.

When the new Hall of Science was opened I became a pretty regular attendant. I heard Mr. Charles Watts, who was then as now a capital debater; Mr. G. J. Holyoake, Mr. C. C. Cattell, Mr. Austin Holyoake. and perhaps one or two other lecturers whom I have forgotten. Mr. Austin Holyoake frequently took the chair, especially at Mr. Bradlaugh's lectures, and a capital chairman he

was, giving out the notices in a pleasant, graceful manner, and pleading for financial support like a true man. He was working hard for the success of the enterprise himself, and had a right to beg help from others.

Mr. Bradlaugh, however, was the great attraction in my case. Perhaps I was more impressionable at that time, but I fancy he was then at his best as an orator. In later life he grew more cautious under a sense of responsibility; he had to think what he should not say as well as what he should. He cultivated the art of persuasion, and he was right in doing so. But at the earlier period I am writing of he gave a full swing to his passionate eloquence. His perorations were marvellously glowing and used to thrill me to the very marrow.

Gradually I began to make acquaintances at the Hall. I got to know Mr. Austin Holyoake and his charming wife, Mr. and Mrs. Bayston, Mr. Herbert Gilham, Mr. R. O. Smith, and other workers. By and bye I was introduced to Mr. Bradlaugh and shook hands with him. It was the proudest moment of my young life. I still remember his scrutinising look. It was keen but kindly, and the final expression seemed to say, "We may see more of each other."

In 1870 I wrote my first article in the *National Reformer*. For a year or two I wrote occasionally, and after that with tolerable frequency. I was also engaged in various efforts at the Hall; helping to carry on a Secular Sunday School, a Young Men's Secular Association, etc. Naturally I was drawn more and more

into Mr. Bradlaugh's acquaintance, and when he found himself unable to continue the Logic Class he had started at the Hall he asked me to carry it on for him. Of course I was proud of the invitation. But the Class did not live long. It was not Logic, but Mr. Bradlaugh, that had brought the members together. Nor do I think they would have learnt much of the art from Mr. Bradlaugh, except in an empirical way. He had a very logical cast of mind, but as far as I could see he had little acquaintance with formal Logic as it is taught by Mill and Whately, whom I select as typical masters of Induction and Deduction, without wishing to depreciate the host of other authorities. Mr. Bradlaugh really gave his class lessons in Metaphysics; his talk was of substance, mode, and attribute, rather than of premises and conclusions. Mr. Bradlaugh and I were brought into closer acquaintance by the Republican agitation in England after the proclamation of the present French Republic. I attended the Republican Conference at Birmingham in 1871, when I first met my old friend Dr. Guest of Manchester, Mr. R. A. Cooper of Norwich, Mr. Daniel Baker, Mr. Ferguson the Glasgow Home Ruler, and other veterans of reform. We held our Conference on Sunday in the old meeting-place of the Secular Society, which was approached by very abrupt steps, and being situated over stables, was not devoid of flavor. On Monday the Conference was continued in one of the rooms under the Town Hall. A long political programme was concocted. I was elected Secretary, and had the honor of speaking at the public meeting in the large hall. It was my first

appearance in such a perilous position. I was apprehensive, and I said so. But Mr. Bradlaugh put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to fear. His kind looks and words were an excellent tonic. When I rose to speak I thought next to nothing about the audience. I thought "Mr. Bradlaugh is listening, I must do my best." And now as I am writing, I recall his encouraging glance as I looked at him, and the applause he led when I made my first point. He was my leader, and he helped me in an elder-brotherly way. Nothing could exceed his considerate generosity. Other people did not see it, but I remember it, and it was typical of the man.

One incident at the Conference is worth noting. It occurred in the afternoon, when Mr. R. A. Cooper (I think) was in the chair. The question of Free Education was being discussed. Mr. Bradlaugh did not quite like it, nor did I. He asked me to go with him into an ante-room and consider an amendment. What it was I can hardly remember, although I recollect that Mr. Cooper was very sarcastic about it. Since then my own opinion has changed, as I dare say Mr. Bradlaugh's had changed; and the incident would not be worth recalling if it did not throw a light upon Mr. Bradlaugh's philosophy. He was always in favor of self-help and individual responsibility, and he was naturally hostile to everything that might weaken those precious-elements of English life.

During the years immediately after the opening of the Hall of Science, Mr. Bradlaugh was there a good deal. Sometimes he

attended the week-night entertainments and gave a reading from Shelley or Whittier or some other poet. The audience applauded as a matter of course. They always applauded Mr. Bradlaugh. But he was no reader. He delivered his lines with that straightforward sincerity which characterised his speeches. He cultivated none of the graces or dexterities of the elocutionist. Besides, he was too original to be a successful echo of other men. I think he only did justice to Shelley's lines "To the Men of England." But this is a piece of simple and vigorous declamation; very fine, no doubt but rather rhetoric than poetry.

Mr. Bradlaugh was anything but a cold man. I should say he was electric. But his tastes, so far as I could discover, did not lie in the direction of poetry. Certainly I heard him once, in those old days, read a great part, if not the whole of Shelley's "Sensitive Plant." He loved Shelley, however, as an Atheist and a Republican, and I suppose he took Shelley's poetry on trust. But I do not think, though I speak under correction, that he cared very much for poetry *as such*. I could never discover from his conversation or writings that he had read a line of Shakespeare – the god of Colonel Ingersoll. His mind was of the practical order, like Oliver Cromwell's. He had a genius for public affairs. He was not only a born orator, but a born ruler of men. Naturally he had, as the French say, the defects of his qualities. And it may be that the terrible stress of his life tended to repress the poetical side of his nature, and less developed his subtlety than his strength. Yet his feelings were deep, and his heart was easily

touched. When William O'Brien delivered that great speech in the House of Commons after his imprisonment by Mr. Balfour, with all its needless indignities, there were two men who could not restrain their tears. One was an Irish member. The other was Charles Bradlaugh. One who witnessed the scene told me it was infinitely pathetic to see that gigantic man, deemed so hard by an ignorant world, wiping away his tears at the tale of a brave man's unmerited suffering.

Mr. Bradlaugh used to attend the social parties pretty often in those old days. He did not dance and he stood about rather awkwardly. It must have been a great affliction, but he bore it with exemplary fortitude. Once or twice I saw Mrs. Bradlaugh there. She had a full-blown matronly figure. Miss Alice and Miss Hypatia came frequently. They were not then living in the enervating air of London, and they looked extremely robust. I also remember the boy Charles, of whom Mr. Bradlaugh seemed very proud. He was a remarkably bright lad, and full of promise. But he was carried off by a fever. Only a day or two after the lad's death Mr. Bradlaugh had to lecture at the Hall. I was away, and I wondered whether he would fulfil the engagement. He did fulfil it. A friend wrote to me that Mr. Bradlaugh walked through the hall and mounted the platform with a face as white and rigid as that of a statue. He made no reference or allusion to his loss, but all could see he carried a bleeding heart. His lecturing in such circumstances was characteristic. Weaker men would have indulged their grief; he was made of sterner stuff, and would not

let it interfere with what he deemed his duty.

Splendid as was his eloquence at that time, Mr. Bradlaugh did not draw the large audiences that flocked around him a few years later. The Hall of Science was at first but half its present size, the platform standing on the right as you entered, with a small gallery on the opposite side. Its holding capacity could not have been more than half what it is at present, yet I have seen the place far from full. But the audiences grew larger and larger, and eventually the hall was increased to its present proportions, although for a long time there was not cash enough to put on a proper roof, and the building was defaced by a huge unsightly beam, on each side of which there was an arch of corrugated iron.

Those were glorious times. Difficulties were great, but there was a spirit at the Hall that laughed at them. How the foremost men about the place did work! Mr. R. O. Smith and Mr. Trevilion, senior, could a tale unfold. Whenever Freethinkers are at all dejected they should have a chat with one of those gentleman. Perhaps it would make them ashamed of their dejection, and fill them with the spirit of the heroic days.

Friends have told me with what energy Mr. Bradlaugh fought the battles of the old Reform League. I *know* with what energy he threw himself into the Republican agitation that followed the downfall of Napoleon III. He tried to get to Paris but failed. Jules Favre and his friends did not want him. Favre himself was an eloquent historian, and no doubt he felt afraid of a man like Mr. Bradlaugh. But if Mr. Bradlaugh could not get to Paris he fought

hard for France in London. Meetings at the Hall of Science did not suffice. There was money from French sources and St. James's Hall was taken for a big demonstration.

The Positivists shared in the proceedings. Their chief man was Mr. Frederic Harrison. Mr. Bradlaugh and he were a tremendous contrast. In fact a London paper (I think the *Echo*) remarked that Mr. Bradlaugh spoke as well as Mr. Harrison wrote, and Mr. Harrison spoke as badly as Mr. Bradlaugh wrote. There was some truth in this, though like most epigrams it was not all true. Mr. Bradlaugh was a born orator, but not a born writer. Yet he often wrote with a forthright power, naked and unadorned, which could dispense with the aid of literary artifices. During this English agitation on behalf of France, held firmly under German feet, Mr. Bradlaugh came into contact with a French countess, who, I believe, either supplied or was the channel of supplying the necessary funds. As the lady is mentioned in Mr. Headingley's *Life of Charles Bradlaugh*, which was published with Mr. Bradlaugh's sanction, there is no reason why I should not refer to her. She came several times to the Hall of Science, and I was introduced to her. She had been a beauty, and although time was beginning to tell on her, she retained a good deal of charm and distinction, which, like a true Frenchwoman, she heightened by the art of dressing. Then as now, of course, foul tongues wagged in foolish heads, and Mr. Bradlaugh's enemies were not slow to point to the French countess with prurient grimaces. Unable to understand friendship between man and

woman, owing to their Puritan training or incurable rankness, they invited the orthodox in religion and politics to note this suspicious connection. Something of this malicious folly must have reached Mr. Bradlaugh's ears, but I imagine he was too proud and self-contained to let it disturb him.

After the Birmingham meeting, and the founding of the Republican League, of which Mr. Bradlaugh became president, and I secretary, he visited Spain on private business, taking with him a message from the Conference to Senor Castelar, the leading spirit of the short-lived Spanish Republic. I remember writing out the message in a clear, bold hand, and addressing the foolscap envelope in the same way. When Mr. Bradlaugh fell among the Carlists he cursed my calligraphy. Happily, however, the officer who scrutinised that envelope could not read at all, and Mr. Bradlaugh escaped the consequences of being known to carry about letters addressed to the devilish Castelar.

During Mr. Bradlaugh's first visit to America I was a frequent contributor to his journal, and I corresponded with him privately. I went down to Northampton and delivered a lecture at his request, under the auspices of his electoral committee. The old theatre – a dirty, ramshackle place as I recollect it – was crowded, and I had my first taste of the popularity of Mr. Bradlaugh in the borough. Every mention of his name excited the wildest enthusiasm.

While Mr. Bradlaugh was lecturing in the States a general election took place in England. It was impossible for him to

return in time, but his friends looked after his interests. A committee was formed at the Hall of Science to raise the necessary funds, and Mr. Charles Watts and I went down to Northampton to conduct the election. We addressed outdoor meetings in the day, and crowded indoor meetings at night.

Again I saw what a hold Mr. Bradlaugh had on his Northampton followers. They sang "Bradlaugh for Northampton" in the Circus with all the fervor of Scotch Covenanters on their hillsides "rolling the psalm to wintry skies."

Mr. Watts and I did not win the seat for Mr. Bradlaugh, nor did he win it himself at the next election, but we managed to increase his vote, and he expressed his pleasure at the result.

Soon after the election Mr. Bradlaugh returned to England. Mr. Watts and I went down with him to Northampton. There was a crowded public meeting, I believe in the Circus; and I saw Mr. Bradlaugh, for the first time, in the presence of his future constituents. They were simply intoxicated with excitement. The shouts of "Bradlaugh" and "Charley" were deafening. Hats and handkerchiefs were waved in the air. The multitude rose to its feet and gave its hero a splendid welcome. Then we settled down to speech-making, but all that followed was somewhat tame and flat after that first glorious outburst of popular devotion.

The next election came quickly. It resulted in the return of a Tory majority for Benjamin Disraeli, and Mr. Gladstone went off to sulk in his tent. Two Tories were returned for Radical Northampton. Mr. Bradlaugh let them in. He was determined to

have one of the Northampton seats. To get it he had to make himself inevitable. He had to prove that if Northampton wanted two Liberal members, one of them must be Charles Bradlaugh. It took him thirteen years to demonstrate this, but he succeeded, as he succeeded in most things. At last, in 1880, he ran as official Liberal candidate with Mr. Labouchere, and both were returned. I assisted Mr. Bradlaugh during his second (1874) election. It was then that I first saw Mrs. Besant. She had not yet taken to the platform, but she was writing for the *National Reformer*

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