

Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891)

Charles Bradlaugh was as a political and social activist in the seventeenth century in England. He held leadership positions in various organizations focused on social and political activism including the Reform League, the London Secular Society, the newspaper National Reformer, and the National Secular Society. Throughout his career, Bradlaugh advocated for better conditions for the working poor, and for the separation of government and religion. The British government prosecuted him numerous times for violating laws prohibiting the publication, sale, and transmission of antireligious, antigovernment, and obscene materials. In 1877, Bradlaugh and another secularist, Annie Besant, republished *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a pamphlet about contraceptive techniques originally whose author was physician Charles Knowlton. In the nineteenth century, individuals did not have access to information on sex, reproduction, and contraception, as much of society argued such information encouraged immoral behavior. Bradlaugh and Besant were tried for publishing information on sexual anatomy, conception, and methods to control reproduction. Bradlaugh expanded public knowledge of reproduction and contraception, and initiated the process of dismantling the obscenity laws.

Charles Bradlaugh was born in the neighborhood of Hoxton in London, England, on 26 September 1833. Bradlaugh was the oldest child of Elizabeth Trimby and Charles Bradlaugh. He had seven siblings, two of whom died in early childhood, and the family lived in tenement housing in the Bacchus Walk neighborhood. As Orthodox Christians, Bradlaugh's family attended weekly church services. Bradlaugh attended a local school until age eleven, when he was forced to leave school and find work to help financially support his family.

Bradlaugh began working as an office boy and became involved in the worker's rights movement. According to his daughter, when Bradlaugh was fourteen, his interest in worker's rights and unionization led him to attend a meeting, held by William Lovett. Lovett advocated for revised voting laws and working class radicalism, a movement that was meant to improve working conditions for the poor. After Bradlaugh attended Lovett's meeting, Bradlaugh's neighborhood reverend accused him of atheism and suspended him from Sunday school for three months. During his suspension, Bradlaugh attended open air meetings of Freethinkers, a group who rejected religious traditions, in a field near his neighborhood. At those meetings, Bradlaugh discussed Orthodox Christianity with the group, who adamantly rejected religious ideas. According to his daughter, Bradlaugh was swayed by the opinions of the freethinkers and abandoned Orthodox Christianity. By 1848, Bradlaugh considered himself an atheist and his father forced to leave home.

Eliza Carlile, the widow of Richard Carlile, a freethinker and social activist, allowed Bradlaugh to live with her. Bradlaugh continued to attend lectures and, in 1850, gave his first lecture in which he criticized the Orthodox Christian church. Shortly after that first lecture at the age of seventeen, he published his first pamphlet, *A Few Words on the Christian Creed*, in which he criticized the adherence of the church to the Bible. Bradlaugh continued to write other works, but according to his daughter, he was unable to support himself through writing alone.

In December 1850, he enlisted in the Seventh Dragoon Guards of the British army. He was stationed in Dublin for three years until he purchased his discharge with an inheritance from his great-aunt. After leaving the army, Bradlaugh returned to his recently widowed mother's home in London in 1853. At that time, he met Abraham Hooper, a social radical and freethinker. According to his daughter, Hooper encouraged him to develop his ideas as a freethinker. In the spring of 1854, Bradlaugh met Hooper's daughter, Susannah Lamb Hooper.

Later in 1854, Bradlaugh was involved in his first lawsuit. Bradlaugh, working as an office clerk,

was imprisoned after being sent to pick up a set of books from an inn and being accused of stealing them. Bradlaugh was not convicted of stealing, though in April of 1854 he brought an action for false imprisonment against the solicitor who prosecuted him. Bradlaugh won the trial and received a payment for wrongful imprisonment. He used the money to marry Susannah Hooper on 5 June 1855. They had three children together.

That same summer, Bradlaugh attended a Hyde Park meeting, an open-air meeting held on Sundays and advertised to the working class. According to Bradlaugh's daughter, the purpose of the meeting was to protest Christian Sunday laws, which prohibited many activities on what was considered a holy day. The police ultimately broke up the protest, but thousands of attendees remained in the park as a demonstration of the working class's power. Several protesters, including Bradlaugh, brought a case against the governor about the right to protest in a private space, and the Royal Commission called Bradlaugh as a witness. Bradlaugh met with the governor, who ultimately dismissed the case.

Furthering his antireligious work, Bradlaugh wrote a series of papers criticizing the Church of England for its outdated practices, such as the laws making divorce and work on Sundays illegal. He published the articles using the pseudonym Iconoclast, meaning religious dissenter. In the late 1850s, he gave his first public antireligion lecture in Northampton, England. According to his daughter, Bradlaugh's popularity increased following that lecture and he traveled to London to speak on the same topic. In 1858, Bradlaugh was elected president of the London Secular Society in London, England, a group that advocated for the separation of the English government and the Church of England. The following year, Bradlaugh began working as editor for the secular newspaper *National Reformer* in Sheffield, England. The newspaper published content focused on advocacy for atheism, neo-malthusian thought, and political and social activism.

Upon his return to Northampton, Bradlaugh ran for English Parliament. He twice ran unsuccessfully for Parliament. During Bradlaugh's campaign, in 1869, the government prosecuted him as the editor of the *National Reformer* for violating the Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act of 1819, which made it illegal for the publication to publish antireligious or antigovernment material. The charges were dropped after the act was repealed in 1870.

In 1877, Bradlaugh hired Annie Besant, a fellow political activist and secularist, to write a column for the *National Reformer*. Together, they republished a pamphlet about contraceptives as part of the Neo-Malthusian movement. Bradlaugh and Besant both participated in the Neo-Malthusian movement, a radical political movement that advocated for expanded access to information on controlling reproduction in the 1870s to prevent overpopulation and poverty. Based on an essay by Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthusians maintained that the human population was growing faster than the environment could support. Neo-Malthusians like Bradlaugh and Besant believed that birth control solved the problem of overpopulation. However, at the time in England, very little information on contraceptives was available to the public. To address that problem and work toward population control, Bradlaugh and Besant republished a pamphlet, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, originally written by Charles Knowlton in 1832. The pamphlet, also called *The Private Companion of Young Married People*, contained detailed descriptions of the reproductive organs, conception, and methods of birth control.

As a result of the republication of *The Fruits of Philosophy*, Bradlaugh and Besant were arrested for violating the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which made the sale of obscene literature illegal. The solicitor general who prosecuted Bradlaugh and Besant argued that the material in *The Fruits of Philosophy* was indecent and encouraged immoral behavior. Bradlaugh's trial lasted five days, during which time he and Besant argued that everyone had the right to the information in the pamphlet. The court found Bradlaugh and Besant guilty and they were sentenced to heavy fines and six months' imprisonment. However, on appeal, their convictions were overturned.

In 1880, Bradlaugh ran for Parliament again as a self-identified radical and won a seat in the House of Commons. To officially take his seat, Bradlaugh was required to take a religious Oath of Allegiance. Due to his antireligious views, Bradlaugh requested to affirm the principles of the oath, rather than take the religious oath. His request was denied, and he was forced to forfeit his seat in the House of Commons. Bradlaugh was re-elected to Parliament four times and refused to affirm

and had to forfeit his seat. In 1886, Bradlaugh finally took the oath and his seat in Parliament. In 1888, Bradlaugh proposed The Oaths Act of 1888, a bill that would allow politicians to affirm their place in Parliament instead of requiring them to take an oath.

Bradlaugh served in Parliament for two years before he died on 30 January 1891.

Sources

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