



# Annie Besant, 1847–1933

*‘Better remain silent, better not even think, if you are not prepared to act.’—Annie Besant*

**A**NNIE BESANT WAS A SOCIAL REFORMER, activist, socialist, feminist, atheist-turned-theosophist, independent publisher, writer, advocate for Irish home rule and Indian independence leader—she was a busy woman. She was born Annie Wood in London, to a middle class family of Irish descent. Her father died when she was five years old, leaving the family financially unstable, so Annie was sent to live with a family friend, Ellen Marryat. Marryat ensured that Annie received a thorough education, teaching her a broad variety of subjects and encouraging her to think critically and to not underestimate her abilities as a woman. Marryat was also devoutly religious—Besant described her as a fanatic—and Besant was made to study the Bible and *Foxes Book of Martyrs* closely; this evangelical education, whilst encouraging Besant’s later atheism, also likely inspired her intense sense of social duty. In 1867, she married the clergyman Frank Besant and they had two children, though the marriage ended in 1873, due to her increasingly anti-religious views.

Following her separation, Besant became closely associated with Charles Bradlaugh and his newly-formed National Secular Society (NSS) and began co-editing Bradlaugh’s secularist journal, *The National Reformer*. In 1877, Annie Besant was sent to court, alongside Bradlaugh, on obscenity charges for establishing the Freethought Publishing Company in order to republish an instructive birth control pamphlet, *Fruits of Philosophy*. They won the trial on a technicality, paving the way for future publishers to publish literature around birth control, however the scandal around the trial led to her losing custody of her children.

As well as her secular links, Besant was also a member of the socialist Fabian Society from the 1880s in which she became involved through her friendship with George Bernard Shaw. In 1887, the Fabians became involved in protests against widespread unemployment and on the thirteenth of November, a protest at Trafalgar Square ended in riots with many people being injured, one death and hundreds of arrests. The events came to be known as Bloody Sunday and Besant became heavily involved in supporting the jailed workers and their families.

In 1888, Annie Besant supported female workers at the Bryant and May match factory in their successful strike for fair pay and improved working conditions. The women had protested against starvation wages and the terrible effects on their health of phosphorus fumes. The success of this action led to the formation of the Matchgirls’ Union, of which Besant was leader, which acted as inspiration to workers throughout the UK to unionise and campaign for employment rights.

That same year Besant was elected to the London School Board, winning with over 15,000 votes. Women at that time were still not able to take part in parliamentary politics, but had been accepted into the local electorate in 1881. Besant’s manifesto proclaimed, ‘No more hungry children’ and her campaign utilised her feminist beliefs, ‘I ask the electors to vote for me, and the non-electors to work for me because women are wanted on the Board and there are too few women candidates.’ On winning the election Besant wrote in the *National Reformer*: ‘Ten years ago, under a cruel law, Christian bigotry robbed me of my little child. Now the care of the 763,680 children of London is placed partly in my hands.’

Continuing to campaign and write about a number of issues around women’s rights, secularism and social inequality, Besant also became interested in theosophy. This was a new religious movement founded by Helena Blavatsky, a Russian religious mystic, based upon Hindu teachings of karma and reincarnation. Besant was international president of the Theosophical Society from 1907 until her death, and she moved eventually to live in Madras, India for this role. Whilst in India, she became involved in the Indian nationalist movement and in 1916 established the Indian Home Rule League. Besant spent the rest of her life in India, aside for a period touring the USA in the late 1920s with her protégé and adopted son, Jiddu Krishnamurti, whom she claimed was the reincarnation of Buddha. \*

PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF ANNIE BESANT USED IN HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY, CONWAY HALL COLLECTIONS

**VIC  
TOR/  
AN  
BLOG  
GING**

**CONWAY  
HALL** Humanist Library