



Charles Bradlaugh, 1833–91

‘Better a thousandfold abuse of free speech than denial of free speech. Abuse dies in a day, but the denial stays the life of the people, and entombs the hopes of a race.’ —Charles Bradlaugh

CHARLES BRADLAUGH WAS AN ATHEIST, a political activist, politician, lawyer, publisher, orator and founder, in 1866, of the National Secular Society. In 1880 he was elected as the Liberal MP for Northampton. In order to take his seat he was required to swear, on the bible, an oath of allegiance to the crown. As an atheist and republican he preferred not to take an oath to God and the Queen but presented the speaker with a letter ‘begging respectfully’ that he be permitted to affirm instead. This, and his subsequent attempt to take the oath, were both refused. Bradlaugh declined to leave the House of Commons and the Serjeant-at-Arms was called forcibly to take him into custody where he was incarcerated for the night in the Prison Room of the clock tower that holds Big Ben. He is the last person ever to have been imprisoned in the cell of what we now call the Elizabeth Tower. Unable to take his seat it effectively became vacant but, following four successive by-elections, Bradlaugh regaining his seat on each occasion, he was finally allowed to take an oath in 1886. A parliamentary bill (that he proposed) became law in 1888, enshrining in law the right of members of both Houses of Parliament to affirm, if they so wished, when being sworn in.

As a young man he became a Sunday School teacher but soon questioned the doctrines of the Anglican Church and the Bible. He was suspended from teaching by the vicar and turned out of the family home, before being taken in by Eliza Sharples Carlile, the widow of Richard Carlile, who had been imprisoned for printing Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*. Soon he was introduced to George Holyoake, who organised Bradlaugh’s first public lecture as an atheist and, at the age of seventeen, he published his first pamphlet, *A Few Words on the Christian Creed*. Bradlaugh became a convinced free-thinker and pamphleteer and many works followed including tracts on women’s rights, poverty, Indian home rule, and labour laws. He became President of the London Secular Society from 1858. In 1860 he became editor of the secularist newspaper, the *National Reformer*, and in 1866 co-founded the National Secular Society, in which Annie Besant became his close associate. The founding principles of the NSS were: ‘to promote human happiness, to fight religion as an obstruction, to attack the legal barriers to Freethought’. The organisation stood against religious privilege and demanded a secularised society, including an end to all political support for religious purposes and especially the disestablishment of the Church of England. In 1868, *The Reformer* was prosecuted by the British Government for blasphemy and sedition. Bradlaugh was eventually acquitted on all charges, though fierce controversy continued in the courts and in the press.

Bradlaugh and Besant formed the Freethought Publishing Company and in 1876 decided to republish the American Charles Knowlton’s pamphlet advocating birth control, *The Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (1832) whose previous British publisher had already been successfully prosecuted for obscenity. The two activists were tried in 1877 and sentenced to heavy fines and six months’ imprisonment, but their conviction was overturned by the Court of Appeal on the basis that the prosecution had not set out the precise words which were alleged to be obscene in the indictment. As a result of the trial, the Malthusian League was founded in order to advocate for the elimination of penalties for promoting birth control as well as to promote public education in matters of contraception.

Bradlaugh died in 1891. His funeral and burial in unconsecrated ground was attended by 3,000 mourners, including a twenty-one-year-old Mohandas Gandhi. Bradlaugh’s daughter, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, became a peace activist, author, atheist and freethinker, and, after her father’s death she wrote a pamphlet *Did Charles Bradlaugh Die an Atheist?* (1898) in answer to the many who questioned her as to whether her father had ‘changed his opinions and become a Christian’ before he died. Bonner set out the evidence and concluded that her father had given no indication that his beliefs had changed in the ‘smallest’ way. *

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH OF CHARLES BRADLAUGH IN A RATHER FETCHING HAT, CIRCA 1890, CONWAY HALL COLLECTIONS.

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