

'Natural fire' and the Idyls of Labour: a socialist poet in nineteenth century Bristol

Gerrard Sables is a local historian and has been researching the life and work of John Gregory for several years. He has given lectures and poetry readings on Gregory in many parts of the country.

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The first two and a half pages of the July 1922 issue of Bristol Co-operative Society's *The Wheat sheaf* covers the death and funeral of a Bristol bootmaker named John Gregory. Clearly, the man being interred at Greenbank cemetery was no ordinary artisan. Described in his obituary as a 'Chartist, socialist, trades unionist, co-operator and poet'¹, Gregory had also been a strong supporter of the North in the American Civil War, of national independence movements in Poland and Ireland, and a prominent local campaigner against imperialism and the death penalty. His importance and popularity as a figure in the city can be assessed from the list of mourners at the grave, for they included representatives of the Mayor, of the University, the Teachers Association and the Board of Guardians as well as the Bristol Socialist Society, the Trades Council and the Co-operative movement². *Gerrard Sables* explores Gregory's life and legacy.

John Gregory, the second of eight children, was born in New Road, Bideford in north Devon in 1831. His father was an energetic Methodist lay preacher accustomed to walking several miles to preach to small congregations, and although his mother, described rather unkindly by an early chronicler of local poets as 'the daughter of a peasant at Hartland'³, died in 1852, there is nothing to suggest that he had an unhappy childhood and his father's influence can be seen in early poems drawing upon John Bunyan and the Bible. At the age of 11, young John was apprenticed to a shoemaker named either Hore or Hoare (both spellings are used)⁴, and gained a reputation while serving his seven-year apprenticeship for reading the Chartist newspaper, *The Northern Star* aloud to his less literate workmates⁵.

Primroses and Patriotism

The first poet to inspire John Gregory was probably the Bideford postman-poet, Edward Capern. Capern's poetry was safe and uncontroversial enough to persuade the Duke of Wellington, Lord Palmerston and Charles Dickens to finance his first collection. Most were nature poems, focussing upon flowers, birds, sunshine and trees but he also wrote what he called his 'patriotic poems' celebrating great British figures and these were to provide a model for Gregory's own work for two decades. His angry and racist 'Massacre of Cawnpore', inspired by events during the Indian Mutiny, a collection of Royalist verses and odes to illustrious men like Wellington provide examples and they run strongly against the grain of his later writing⁶. Other early efforts betray a certain naivety; the earliest I have discovered, 'Education', arguing simply



for greater education to solve the problems of humanity⁷. By the time he wrote this he had finished his apprenticeship, gone looking for work around the Bristol and South Wales areas as a tramping brother⁸, been disappointed, and returned home.

'Love went out from many homes when Poverty came in'

We know from the 1851 census returns that John Gregory was by this time living with a married couple and their baby rather than with his parents. He left north Devon again in about 1853 and seems to have moved around obtaining work in Tenby, Aberavon and Swansea⁹. In 1856 on Temple Meads station, he met Ann Arman and within weeks they were married. For the next four years the couple lived in Cardiff where they had two children, John and Eva and in 1860 the Gregorlys moved to Bristol where they remained for the rest of their long lives. In 1864 the couple had another son, Richard, who would later accept a knighthood as a scientist and become the editor of *Nature*.

In 1871, now with two more children and living at 19 Walpole Street, Gregory had his first book of poems published. In this collection, *Idyls of Labour*, he showed how far he had developed since those early emulations of Edward Capern. It does contain the 'Massacre at Cawnpore' as well as an 'In Memoriam - The Late Prince Consort' and several nice poems about flowers

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and sunshine, but it also explores other less comfortable and conventional themes. Poems such as 'Abraham Lincoln', 'Reflections on the American War' and 'A Prayer for Poland' indicate the foreign policy concerns of English radicalism. His 'End of a Life' is a commentary on the grim face of contemporary hunger, poverty and starvation:

...The factory gate
Was bolted by depression. Starving men
Dotted the streets like statues of Despair;
And savage Famine, from their sunken eyes,
Shot the sharp shafts of Envy. Love went out
From many homes when Poverty came in;
A man became a wolf that fought his wife
For a bare crust of bread their hungry child
Snatched from the hand of Pity.

Another poem in the collection, 'The Wail of Labour' demands government action to alleviate such poverty from the country and asks,

*If war should wake and ask a fleet,
Would England answer, Nay?*

Gregory's earlier patriotic odes to Generals and Statesmen are superseded in the Idyls by poems to the liberal Corn Law reformer, John Bright and, more poignantly, Ernest Jones the Chartist hero (and a fellow poet), but the most interesting section comes in his twenty-page 'Stories of Labour'. The influence of Longfellow shows as he tells how Labour has to kill his evil old mother, Want:

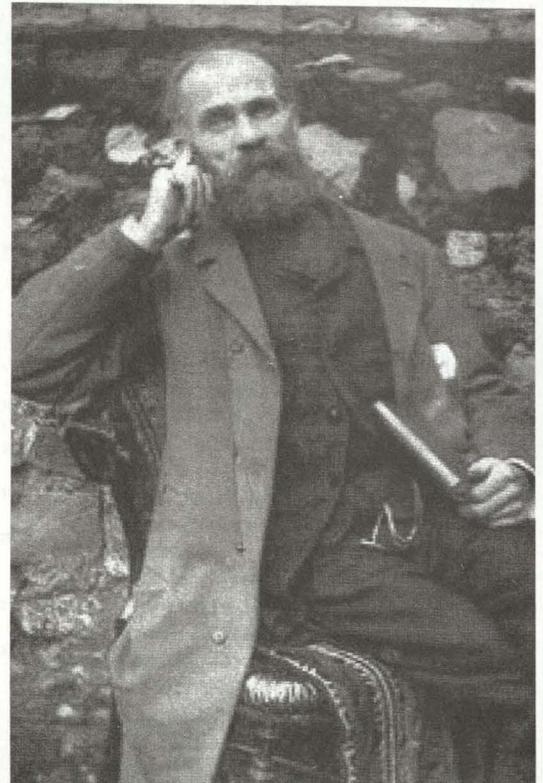
*Then he rose and stamped his big foot,
Bared his brawny arms and smote her
At his feet. I saw him strike her
With the heavy sledge of Vulcan.
With St. Crispin's awl he stabbed her;
Choked her with his pegs and rivets;
...With the stoneman's tools he chipt her ;
Ript her with the hedger's billhook ;
With the pens of midnight toilers ;
With the type that tells my story ;
With the plough, and with the crowbar ;
With the shuttle, loom, and needle ;
With the pencil, brush, and burin ;
With the hatchet, trowel, and mallet ;
With a thousand awful weapons
Labour fought his wretched mother —*

At this point in his political development, Gregory clearly felt strongly critical of the excesses and effects of Capitalism, but he was unclear about solutions to the problem. The central message in 'Stories of Labour' is simply that all good men should help in making the lot of the workers better. He was certainly influenced however by

the arrival in Bristol in 1872 of George Odger, like Gregory a shoemaker by trade, secretary of the London Trades Council and chairman of Karl Marx's International Working Men's Association. Odger came to Bristol to fight a by-election and became, like Ernest Jones, a hero to Gregory who honoured him in verse¹⁰. In his second collection, *Song Streams* (1877) Gregory continued to develop these themes. His satirical 'The Meeting of the Emperors' tears apart the 1873 *Dreikaiserbund* alliance between Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia with a first verse that reminds one of the witches scene in Shakespeare's Scottish play:

*When shall we
Who are three
Of the mighty great and vain,
Link our gory hands again?
Much our meeting is a wonder
To the friends of peace that ponder,
Lest that we of battle fonder,
Should their dearest hopes disdain.*

In 'The Dying Hangman', Gregory gave voice to his opposition to capital punishment in a poem that conjures up the phantoms attending an executioner on his lonely deathbed:





'No time for cuddles?'

The Wartime residential nurseries at Durdham Park

Hyla M. Holden

*Their throats are bound with strangling bands,
With bursting eyes they stare ;
He knows their blood is on his hands,
With which he beats the air
In a mad strife
For further life -
It is his curse to bear.*

Bristol Gets Organised

1873 saw the birth of Bristol Trades Council, formed of branches dominated by skilled (time-served) male workers who eschewed any talk of politics¹¹. However of the first three branch secretaries two, Tom Thomas and J. W. H. Wall, were very active in socialist and working class politics. A body called the Working Men's Reform Association which operated from The British Workman Coffee House in West Street, Old Market, changed its name in 1879 to the Bristol Radical Reform Association and we know that our poet was involved in this organisation until it ceased in 1883¹². He was also active in the Bristol Socialist Society, formed from a branch of Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation in the same year, and in the Bristol and District Labour League, established in 1880 by the Trades Council to campaign for working class representation on local councils, school boards and other bodies¹³. These organisations would become the driving force behind new unionism in Bristol as the decade came to a close.

Socialism and Struggle

John Gregory's third and most interesting poem collection was *Murmurs and Melodies*, published in 1886. The customary flower and nature poems are balanced by verses attacking the government's role in South Africa, the Sudan and India and 'A Song to the Poor' is the 16 page story of Singfred who comes from a land of pure communism to tell the poor what life could be like under such a system. It was probably influenced by his friend and fellow socialist William Harris Dowding's 1876 poem 'The Christian Socialist's Dream'¹⁴. Lists of orders show Sir Joseph Weston M. P. and his sister-in-law Mary Carpenter among those buying the book¹⁵.

In the summer of 1888, as the city fell prey to increasing levels of poverty and mass unemployment, Gregory joined the radical solicitor Francis Gilmore Barnett, in setting up an Unemployed Labour Registry in an effort to alleviate the problem. Bristol's recovery from recession in the autumn made the venture short-lived¹⁶, but within a year, Barnett and Gregory were involved with perhaps the greatest strike wave ever seen in the city. Together with Dan

Irving, Robert Weare, Robert Tovey and John Sharland they met Ben Tillett, Tom Mann and Will Thorne on 26th October 1889 to join the 15,000 strong demonstration which rallied on Durdham Downs. So dense was the crowd that the young reporter Archie Powell of the *Bristol Observer* had to seat himself on the shoulders of a brawny docker to get his copy¹⁷. During the strike wave, the number of workers in branches affiliated to the Bristol Trades Council trebled to 6,000 and it has been estimated that some 10,000 new trade union members were recruited in Bristol at this time. The boot and shoe trade was hit hard by lockouts and Gregory responded by establishing the co-operative Bristol Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Society in order to help support his fellow shoemakers. It was wound up in 1894 following customers' bankruptcies and two disastrous robberies at their Pennywell Road workshop¹⁸.

The boom that had increased the price of labour was short lived and the employers went on the offensive. The Bristol Socialist Society, Trades Council and Strike Committee had to confront this and John Gregory's song-writing abilities played their part. In January 1890 he published his 'Battle-Song of Labour' copies of which were sold to raise money to support various Bristol strikers¹⁹. Its chorus is uncompromising:

*Let the maid, the wife, the mother,
Scorn the scab that wrongs a brother;
Pass their names to one another,
Gallant Union Men!*

When the Sanders' female operatives struck in protest at wage cuts they chose Barnett and John Gregory to negotiate for them²⁰. Negotiations failed but the women did not return since they were found other jobs in Bristol at higher rates of pay. A letter shows Gregory visiting Curry Rivel in Somerset to help organise agricultural workers in May 1892²¹.

A Respected Old Age

A surviving schedule of outdoor speaking engagements for the Bristol Socialist Society for the first few months of 1899 shows a highly organised set of Saturday talks²². Gregory appeared as a speaker in the Haymarket on 'The Need for Socialism' and on the Poor Law and in April he addressed a meeting on Durdham Downs on the Boer War. Heckled for his 'anti-patriotism', Gregory responded by accusing his critics of wrapping the body of Jesus Christ in a 'bloody Union Jack'²³.

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When the Gregorlys celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary in 1906, congratulations came from several leading figures in the labour movement, including Ben Tillet, leader of the Great London Dock Strike of 1889, and from his old friend Robert Weare who added, 'I should also like to complement Mrs G on the wonderful skill, good management and tact she has exercised for fifty years in keeping you in sweet poetic temper. Your natural fire, or hereditary fighting bump (sic) would likely have landed you in gaol or on the gallows but for the grace of Mrs G's forceful environment'²⁴.

Though largely overlooked today, John Gregory was an important figure in the social history of nineteenth century Bristol. His many inspirational poems, songs, letters and articles won him a host of influential admirers, including H. G. Wells, Ben Tillet and Ernest Bevin and it is right that his life and work should be rediscovered now.

Note on Sources

Readers interested in learning more about John Gregory will find The John Gregory collection, Special Collections, University of Bristol library and the card index at the Bristol Central Reference Library the best places to start. The Sir Richard Gregory archive at the University of Sussex may hold some material not to be found locally but I have yet been able to see it. Samson Bryher's *Account* provides useful information as does W. H. G. Armytage's biography of his son Sir Richard Gregory. I would be interested in the work of any scholars researching John Gregory. My e-mail address is gerrard.sables@phonecoop.coop

Gerrard Sables has recently published a booklet of Gregory's shorter poems, *A Souvenir of John Gregory, 1831-1922* (Fiducia Press, 2007, ISBN 978-0-946217-29-8). An excellent introduction to Gregory's work, it is available from him at the e-mail address above.

- ¹ *The Wheatsheaf*, July 1922, p.2.
- ² See scrapbook of newspaper cuttings (source not annotated) in the Bristol Reference library cat. no. 21416.
- ³ Wright W. H. K., *West Country Poets: Their Lives and Works* (Elliot Stock, 1896) p.211
- ⁴ See Gregory's *Idyls of Labour* (1871); and the poems, 'Lily Hore', p.15 and 'Grandfather Hoare the good shoemaker', p.117.
- ⁵ *Daily Chronicle*, 14 June 1910, an interview to mark his 79th birthday.
- ⁶ *Idyls of Labour*, pp. 139-152.
- ⁷ *North Devon Journal*, 30 September, 1852.
- ⁸ *South Wales Daily News*, 15 June 1911.
- ⁹ Wright, *West Country Poets* p. 211.
- ¹⁰ Samson Bryher, *An Account of the Labour and Socialist Movement in Bristol*, p. 11. For the poem see Gregory's *Murmurs and Melodies* pp. 86-87.
- ¹¹ Bryher, *An Account* p. 13.
- ¹² *Western Daily Press*, 31 October 31 1921.
- ¹³ Bryher, *An Account* pp. 18 & 32.
- ¹⁴ William Dowding, *To Freedom's Lover* (Bristol, 1917), B11654, Bristol Reference library.
- ¹⁵ See list in the John Gregory collection, Special Collections, University of Bristol library.
- ¹⁶ 'Minute book of Unemployed Labour Registry', John Gregory collection, University of Bristol Library.
- ¹⁷ *Bristol Observer*, 11 June 1949.
- ¹⁸ Edward Jackson, *A Study in Democracy: being an account of the rise and progress of industrial co-operation in Bristol* (Manchester, 1911).
- ¹⁹ Sally Mullen, 'Sweet Girls and Deal Runners', in Ian Bild (ed.), *Placards and Pin Money* (Bristol BroadSides) p.118.
- ²⁰ Mullen, 'Sweet Girls', p.122.
- ²¹ Letter from Fred Weston to John Gregory, John Gregory collection.
- ²² *Bristol Socialist Society papers*, Bristol Reference library.
- ²³ Letter to Justice, 22 June 1922.
- ²⁴ Letter from Robert Weare to John and Mrs. Gregory, John Gregory collection.