

Edward Carpenter

Unsung Hero

Michael Barratt Brown

Sheila Rowbotham has completed her earlier studies of Edward Carpenter in *History Workshop Journal* (1977) and in *History Today* (1987) with a full-length biography. She has been able to draw on the large Carpenter Collection now in the Sheffield City Archive, but her research has extended world-wide to archives in London, Manchester, Leeds, Oxford, Cambridge, Texas, Syracuse, Ohio, Washington, Amsterdam, and New Zealand, and to interviews with anyone who personally knew Carpenter or had relatives who did. Sheila Rowbotham's present position as Professor of Labour and Gender History at Manchester University has enabled her to carry to completion this labour of love. And it is a splendid piece of work, beautifully written and engaged in her subject as only Sheila, with her feminist commitment and communal experience, as described in her autobiographical *Promise of a Dream*, could have achieved. For, this is not just a history; it contains profound reflections on the deep problems of personal and political choice that engage us in our own time.

There is practically no important issue which engages us today that Carpenter did not raise and throw new light upon just over a hundred years ago, and this applies most particularly for those of us involved in struggles to correct the continuing inequalities and injustices in society, which were Carpenter's chief concern. These issues range from environmental pollution, most disastrous before the smoke abatement acts in the poorer housing of the steel-making city of Sheffield, from which Carpenter fled to the surrounding

Michael Barratt Brown was founding principal of Northern College near Barnsley. Here he discusses Sheila Rowbotham's new book, Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love, (Verso, 2008).

countryside; to the oppression of women and of colonial peoples and their exclusion from equal opportunities in employment and remuneration; to the class structure in British society which holds back the majority of men and women, in Carpenter's day the vast majority, from receiving a complete education and enjoying the benefits, social, financial and cultural which such an education assures. Carpenter's response to these injustices was not only to throw himself into every campaign he could find and many which he generated himself – for slum clearance, for conservation in nature reserves, for recycling waste, for garden allotments, for women's suffrage, for birth control and legal abortion, for prison reform, for universal education, for animal rights, and for his particular brand of socialism – of which more later.

To advance these causes Carpenter took on a prodigiously heavy programme of lecturing on the whole range of his concerns and of writing – books and pamphlets – giving carefully argued support to advocates of these causes, often combined with generous financial assistance. He everywhere sought out friends and associates to join with him in these endeavours. But Carpenter did not confine his activities to intellectual work. He tried always to practise what he preached. He did not eat meat. He built a simple house in the country a few miles outside Sheffield with enough space for visitors and enough land to grow his own fruit and vegetables and keep chickens. A stream ran through the garden and Carpenter's day began with a 'skinny dip' in the water at all times of the year. He made his own sandals and went for long walks through the local valleys and onto the moors, and took his friends and visitors with him. Provisions and furnishings were brought by hand cart from the shops in nearby Chesterfield.

How does it come, then, that Carpenter, who was a pioneer of so many progressive causes, remains unsung? His circle of friends was not only wide but influential, and their names well known, including not only his guru, Walt Whitman, and Oscar Wilde, but John Ruskin, Bertrand Russell, E.M.Forster, Havelock Ellis, Bernard Shaw, Evelyn Sharp, H.M.Hyndman, Olive Schreiner, Roger Fry, Miles Malleson, Hugh Massingham, Henry Nevinson, Fenner Brockway, Annie Besant, George Lansbury, Hugh Dalton, Charles Trevelyan, and Ramsay MacDonald. But none of these attended his funeral, in 1929 at the age of 85. He had been ill for some years before the end and had fallen out of touch with many of these famous people, but this cannot explain the disappearance of Carpenter from the histories. Most of the issues he fought for, against fierce prejudice and vested interest, have become commonly accepted

parts of our lives (the exception is, perhaps, his rejection of vaccination and vivisection). This cannot quite explain the neglect.

There are two or three possible explanations for this neglect. The first must be that many people felt, and some may continue to feel, uncomfortable about his blatant homosexuality. His 'coming out' in a long-term male partnership, and many sexual adventures throughout his life with eligible young men, after some years of concealment, was very courageous, and sometimes dangerous, but was calculated (deliberately so) not to attract everyone. The second reason for neglect is that Carpenter was not a 'joiner'. He supported but did not join progressive causes. He never joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) or the Labour Party, which were formed during his lifetime, and he never joined a trade union, although Sheffield was full of them. So, he does not appear in their histories, along with Keir Hardie, Tom Mann, Bob Williams or Ernest Bevin. The third reason is Carpenter's mysticism. This is a much more complex matter, which few people are prepared to understand. He was not only interested in Hindoo thought, through a Sinhalese friend from Cambridge days, but saw the marriage of the soul, in a mystical sense, and the body, in a richly physical sense, as the basis for living and for understanding life. It was all part of his belief in the human need to return to nature, and to remove all artificial impediments to living the simple life. It is well summarised by Sheila Rowbotham in 'Carpenter's vision of the new order in touch with nature and satisfying the heart – free from domination and imbued with the values of association while allowing space for self expression, sex and the inner life ...'

Hard though it is today to understand Carpenter's thinking about the emancipation of the body and the spirit, as anyone who has tried to read his great tone poem 'Towards Democracy' will have found, his absolute insistence on preserving individual thought and choice in a planned socialist economy, something which the Soviet leaders neglected, has a very modern resonance. His determination to retain his individualism was part of his personal pride as a man, and a man's man, and was reflected in his dress and old fashioned courteous behaviour, which so endeared him to his many friends. Roger Fry's painting of Carpenter, which is reproduced in this book, shows a tall man with beard neatly trimmed, meticulously dressed in a long tailored coat, polished shoes, upturned shirt collar and florid cravat. He affected a silk kummerbund with his regular everyday tweed jacket and sandals. This is not the apparel of the simple country worker, which he liked to present to the world. It reveals the remarkable complexity of the man – philosopher, teacher, poet, activist, organiser,

musician, market gardener, mystic, and withal a lover of men in every sense.

Carpenter's attitude to the 1914-18 War says it all. He was not opposed to the war, as were most of his friends and associates, such as Russell and Forster, Brockway and Olive Schreiner. He came from a military family. Many of his relatives were high-ranking soldiers or sailors. He was too old to be called up himself. His partner was not, but was rejected on health grounds. Carpenter's position was much more complex than these superficial reasons suggest. He saw destruction in nature as a necessary preparation for regeneration. With D.H. Lawrence he therefore saw 'hate and conflict' acting as a crucial catalyst for change, leading to a new social order. In Russia the 1914-18 War did just that, but the new order did not embrace the sort of collectivism Carpenter believed in. What he did oppose most vehemently was military conscription, since this denied to the individual the right to make his own choice. So he supported the No Conscription Fellowship, of which Russell was the chairman. He was unsympathetic to both religious and political pacifism. That left a sort of humanistic pacifism, which avoided the stark choices such as Carpenter always shied away from.

Carpenter's attitude to Quakerism interests me greatly because my father was a very active member of the Society of Friends and had a great admiration for Carpenter. At an early age I was given *Towards Democracy* to read. It was a long time afterwards that I cottoned on to the homosexual references. Walt Whitman was one of my father's favourite poets along with the Quaker Whittier. It was therefore a great surprise to find no references to Quakers in the exhaustive index to Sheila Rowbotham's book. In fact there are three references: one is to a Quaker neighbour of Carpenter's in Derbyshire, Mrs. Doncaster, a member of the steel-making family firm in Sheffield; the second is more relevant: Carpenter is quoted saying in 1915 that he did not think 'peace societies ... and Quaker and Tolstoyan preachments were adequate to plumb such depths' as the 'emotions, habits, instincts, myths' which war engendered. A few pages later, 'more radical Quakers' are referred to, talking about social reconstruction after the war. This was following lectures by Russell, which had brought him and Forster and D.H. Lawrence briefly together. That was all, the snide reference to 'preachments'. But in my memory many of our family's Quaker friends had for years adopted a simple lifestyle and speech, minimal furniture (but William Morris designed wallpaper and curtains), plain clothes with open neck shirts, tweed jackets and sandals, and their belongings (and vegetarian sandwiches) in a small rucksack. My

father always wore a large broad brimmed hat. He had a cold bath every morning and, during his years in prison for anti-war activities, persuaded the warders to hose him down in the prison yard. We grew our own fruit and vegetables and went long walks, called rambles. Women had absolutely equal status with men in Quaker families and in Quaker business meetings. Non-procreative love making was accepted and cherished. The Quaker faith was not really Christian, but a kind of mystical humanism.

Now the question I am bound to ask is which was dominant, Quakerism or Carpenterism? The near absence of reference to Quakerism in Carpenter's many writings and activities suggests a parallel development. But the Quaker influences must have been strong. The poet Whittier was a Quaker, Bertrand Russell's first wife, Alys Pearsall-Smith, was a Quaker, the mother of William Temple, president of the Workers Educational Association, was a Quaker, the Adult School Movement was a Quaker stronghold. The Quaker chocolate companies – Cadbury's, Rowntree's, Fry's and Terry's – and the brewers – Truman, Hanbury & Buxton – were at their highest influence at the turn of the century, through the *News Chronicle* and the banks – Barclays, Lloyds, Midland, National Provincial. Even Marie Stopes was the daughter of a Quaker brewer. Nearer Carpenter's home, there were not only the Sheffield Quaker businessmen, Doncasters and Coopers, but also the Brayshaws and other Quaker lawyers and lecturers. Most of the leading members of the No Conscription Fellowship, like my father, were Quakers. In India Gandhi's close friend and adviser, Horace Alexander, was a Quaker. So many of the organisations Carpenter supported and lectured to were financed by Quaker philanthropists. Perhaps, that is why he did not wish to acknowledge their influence.

What remains to be said is a final word about Carpenter's socialism. The point has already been made that it was based on a romantic individualism, to which collectivist ideas had to be adapted. Carpenter favoured nationalisation, most especially of the mines, but on the basis of guild socialism and not of state ownership. In 1910 Carpenter took the chair at a mass meeting in the Albert Hall, organised by the Social Democratic Party and the ILP, to welcome Tom Mann back from Australia. Mann's syndicalism particularly attracted Carpenter, who had high hopes of industrial unionism developing into industrial syndicalism, on lines that G.D.H.Cole was to argue for intellectual as well as for manual workers, but extending syndicalism to the making of beautiful things, beautiful clothes and, thus, beautiful people. Unfortunately, it was never very clear

how such beauty fitted into Carpenter's new social order. Bertrand Russell had to spend a whole night in the attic of his young girlfriend, the actress Colette O'Neil, alias the Hon Constance Malleon (née Annesley), who became Russell's most long lasting love, disabusing her of her infatuation with Carpenter's romantic idealism. But, many socialists then and now must recognise the place of love and liberty in any social order moving 'towards democracy'. There is so much in Carpenter's life, and in Sheila Rowbotham's evocation of it, to make us think about what we should do with our lives and how we could make them more productive.

The gist of Carpenter's message is a refutation of the concept of economic man making rational decisions in response to the pressures of authorities and markets. A whole-ist approach is required to human organisation and behaviour which allows for the rich diversity of individual human tastes and emotions, and should indeed encourage such diversity. In practical terms this means cooperative organisation, workers' control, decentralised government and popular community participation – in effect, development from the bottom upwards in place of the top-downwards rule by employers and state authorities. This was a hard enough programme to advocate in Carpenter's day, although his efforts – organising groups of free thinkers and working with the unions, especially the coal miners, as well as writing and lecturing - did have some success. In our own time of giant international corporations and combinations of states' powers in a United States, a European Union, a multi-state China or India, it must seem well nigh impossible. Yet Carpenter's dream remains a very real aspiration in the national movements of many peoples sharing common historic experiences, languages and cultures. The building of such movements within the limits of our shared planet remains the challenge for us all.