GREAT DEMOCRATS

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Edited by
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by MICHAEL BARRATT BROWN

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I well remember my father working away in 1933-4 at this great volume, over 700 pages for Ivor Nicholson and Watson, choosing 39 candidates as 'Great Democrats' from the last 150 years, finding authors for each entry, about 6,000 words for each, rather more for three combined entries on the Chartists, the Christian Socialists and Early Fabians. As I look at the book again after 80 years, I am struck by the fact that there are 33 men and just three women, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Mary MacArthur and Mary Wolstonecraft. No mention of Alexandra Kollontai or Clara Zetkin or Rosa Luxemburg. Nearly all my father's Democrats are English; out of 39, two Scots, Keir Hardie and Robert Owen, four Americans, Eugene Debs, Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson and Walt Whitman, a Frenchman, Jean Jaurès, an Italian, Giuseppi Mazzini and, perhaps surprisingly, three Germans, Karl Marx, Carl vom Stein and Gustav Stresemann. The last two were included, no doubt, because the whole purpose of my father's book was to respond to the current rise to power of the dictatorships and, most particularly, of Hitler. My father had gathered together a group of fellow Quakers to go to the Sudetenland and lie down in front of Hitler's tanks as they entered. To our family's great relief, they were refused Czechoslovak visas. The celebration of Great Democrats was to be what my father felt that he had do to correct the democratic defeatism that was spreading over Europe in the 1930s. The inclusion of Karl Marx as a 'Great Democrat' will surprise many, but it is the inconsistencies in Marx's life and works that M.M. Postan draws on for his entry.

My father's chosen candidates for greatness appear in the book in alphabetical order. There is not a chronological order, let alone any attempt to assign relative greatness or particular forms of greatness. In this my father was undoubtedly very wise. They stand or fall from what is written of them by their authors; and, on re-reading them, I find that they stand well. Naturally I find some more attractive than others, sometimes because of the style of writing of the author's story of his or her character, as in the

case of the Countess of Warwick's entry on Joseph Arch and H.N. Brailsford's William Godwin. At other times, it is because of the characters themselves: Edward Carpenter, for instance, who was actually known by his author Henry Nevinson; Tom Paine celebrated by Bertrand Russell; Walt Whitman, so much loved by Gerald Bullett. But there are so many. The book is worth reading for all who appear in it. There is one surprising author – the entry for William Morris by Oliver Baldwin. He was the son of Stanley Baldwin, the Tory Prime Minister, but himself a Labour candidate and, more importantly, the nephew of Edward Burne-Jones's sister. Hence the connection with Morris, but I know that my father had first asked Francis Meynell to write about Morris, and Francis was too busy at the *Daily Herald* to do it.

Who would we now add today, eighty years on, to my father's 39? One or two choose themselves; Chinua Achebe, Mikhail Gorbachev, Nelson Mandela, Rigoberta Menchu, Mary Robinson, Franklin Roosevelt. Then, perhaps, Patrice Lumumba and Dag Hammarskjöld, and Václav Havel, Jack Jones of the Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU), and my hero, Josef Broz Tito, and of course my father, who died in 1947, and my friends Ken Coates, Raymond Williams and Tony Benn. Choosing the authors would be harder. So much has been written about them and they have written so much themselves. I would take advice from other friends, especially from Robin Murray, but I would like myself to write about Ken Coates. John Hughes should have written about my father, as a subsequent Principal of Ruskin College, but his wife, Vi, is still coping with his poor health. Perhaps then, Stephen Yeo, his successor at Ruskin, who has written a foreword to this new edition of *Great Democrats*. And there is now no shortage of possible women authors: Angela Davis, Anita Desai, Nadine Gordimer, Germaine Greer, Helena Kennedy, Naomi Klein, Caroline Lucas, Fiona MacCarthy, Sheila Rowbotham and Hilary Wainwright, to name a few.

This leaves us with the big question that my father poses in the Epilogue that he contributes to the book. Among all the dangers and failures of democracy, wherein lie its strengths? It is not, my father suggests, as a form of

government – a representative assembly, local government bodies, open opinions of speech and press, wide consultation of the several interests – that it should be recognised, but as a principle of government that implies the triad of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity: free respect for the individual personality and physical person; equality of rights, against every kind of exploitation, of race or class or sex; and, finally, the extension of love and fellowship to embrace the whole of mankind, in resistance to injustice and inhumanity of any kind. It is hard to improve on the words spoken by Eugene Debs called before an American court of law on charges of sedition in the Civil War, and quoted by my father,

> 'While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal class, I am of it. While there is a soul in Prison, I am not Free.'

Hard to better the wording, but harder still to live up to in life! My father's Epilogue had the same title as his annual Swarthmore lecture for the Society of Friends and, when he gathered the support in the UK of some 150 distinguished representatives of politics, economics, religion, art, science and education, to form the Next Five Years' Group, as the title of the Group's Manifesto and Further Statement on *Liberty and Democratic Leadership*. This which was largely written by my father as the Group's Secretary, and published in the winter of 1933-4, became the basis for the Labour Party's successful bid for the UK's democracy in 1945. If any English name should be added now to my father's list up to 1934, it should surely be his own. But then I am his son and inevitably harbour some prejudice.

Derbyshire, April 2013

FOREWORD
by STEPHEN YEO

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For an historian the Contents page of Alfred Barratt Brown's book is exciting enough, particularly when combined with 1934, its date of publication.

How is it possible not to plunge straight into Frances Evelyn Countess of Warwick on Joseph Arch? The mistress of the future Edward VII, a member of Britain's Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and supporter of the October Revolution, writing about the Warwickshire farm labourer who saw himself as Moses, leading the members of his National Agricultural Labourers' Union into the promised land? How is it possible, for that matter, that a social historian like me hadn't read *Great Democrats* until this re-publication? Having been converted to socialism by Robert Blatchford, editor of the *Clarion*, the most lively and most democratic socialist newspaper Britain has yet produced, the Countess was a good friend of the labour movement, sending money from Warwick Castle. She opposed the First World War, against Henry Hyndman, the founder of the SDF.

And then there is Henry Nevinson on Edward Carpenter, Katherine Bruce Glasier on Keir Hardie, Oliver Baldwin on William Morris. The authors are as interesting as the subjects. And I mention these particular pairings because I wish Barratt Brown's collection had been known to me when I was writing 'A New Life, the Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896' for *History Workshop Journal* no. 4 (1977). The History Workshop movement and journal – a pioneer of history-from-below in our own times – was a product of Raphael Samuel's work as a Tutor in History at Ruskin College. The movement towards more democratic, more feminist history-writing took off within and against the orthodoxies of Billy Hughes' time as Principal. Billy succeeded Barratt Brown in 1945. Without the Workshop movement I would never have become Principal of the College in 1989, many years after Barratt Brown retired.

The imaginative author-subject couplings in this book will whet any appetite. G.D.H. Cole on William Cobbett; Ray

Strachey (novelist and author of the classic *The Cause: a short history of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, 1928) on Millicent Fawcett; Norman Thomas on Eugene Debs; Henry de Man on Jean Jaurès; Bertrand Russell on Thomas Paine. And, oddly perhaps, C.E.M. Joad on Robert Owen, 'a pioneer founder of model communities, Trades Unions, Labour Exchanges and Co-operative Societies (who) also contrived to anticipate many of the ideas of the most enlightened educationalists of our own time'.

The first sentence of *Great Democrats* is one of the best. Raymond Postgate, co-author with G.D.H. Cole of classic histories of the working-class movement in Britain and later the instigator of *The Good Food Guide*, writes about Robert Applegarth (1834-1924). Applegarth was the first Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, appointed in 1862. 'When the writer of this met him', writes Postgate, 'he was a little old man with very white hair and beard, and blue eyes. He was weak with old age (he was nearing ninety) but still had a queer spry energy, and a manner of speaking and holding his head which reminded the hearer of a bird'. How could anyone I was able to meet as an apprentice labour historian in the late 1960s also have met Applegarth, 'the Grand Old Man of the trade union movement' whose best work was done in the 1860s? History comes alive.

Barratt Brown confesses to having been 'considerably perplexed' about whether to include Karl Marx in this book. In the end he asked M.M.Postan, a pioneer of Economic History in Britain, to write about him. The *Economic History Review* was never a friend of Left social history. So I read Postan carefully:

> 'the political implications of Marxian philosophy … are too inconsistent to give him a secure seat among the nineteenth century democrats. Democracy as a political creed benefited relatively little and suffered a great deal from Marx and his followers. Yet there is one sense of the word "democracy", and one aspect of Marx's activity which entitle him to a place in the gallery of great democrats … Democracy is not only a theory of government, but also a scale of moral values … Majority rule, representative institutions, government by consent and respect for

> opinions, are merely broad applications of humanitarian ethics to problems of state government. Nevertheless, the link, natural as it is, need not always be accepted. It does not require more than the usual allowance of inconsistency to believe in the ethical principle of democracy without subscribing to its political applications, or to accept its political forms without believing in the underlying ethical principle. This is exactly what Marx did … He betrayed over and over again his unquestioning and almost instinctive dependence on the ethical principle of modern democracy.'

Discuss!

I can imagine Barratt Brown at any time between 1926 and 1945, or for that matter myself at any time between 1989 and 1997, using such a quotation to provoke a tutorial essay and discussion among Ruskin students. I could have used it in a course I taught at the College called 'Socialisms'. We identified three socialisms, each with a different class trajectory: collectivism or expert, managerial socialism; statism, which confuses socialism with state size and power; and associationism. Marx devoted a section of *Capital Volume 3* to what he called the 'associated mode of production'. Associationism was particularly strong in Britain as working-class practice during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was democratic, like Arch's Primitive Methodists and like the Co-operative Movement, and resisted the label 'socialist'. Barratt Brown might have included George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) among his democrats. Holyoake was an associationist writer and activist whose critique of the capture of state power, whether by revolution or election, as *the* socialist goal is still worth attending to.

Who should be in, who should be out? This book is endlessly thought-provoking. 'A study of the portraits that are included in this volume', writes the editor in his Epilogue on Democratic Leadership, 'yields rich matter for consideration in the light of happenings in our own time'. Indeed it does.

1934 was a dark time. Our own times are, too; hopefully, but by no means certainly, in different ways. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who do not feature in this book, come to mind. They were busy writing their *Soviet Communism, a New Civilisation?* Having visited Stalin's Russia in 1932, they

published this appreciation of the Soviet regime in 1935, and in the second edition dropped the question mark from the title. Fifty years before that, Beatrice had identified strongly with working-class democracy in Lancashire – the direct democracy of chapel, mutual improvement society, trade union, friendly society and co-operative society. In other words, 'old old', pre-Parliamentary Labour Party 'associationist' labour in Britain. It could be helpful for democrats in our own time to re-visit the theory and practice of working-class association from the early-nineteenth century onwards, particularly the co-operative movement, as an entire alternative both to 'social democracy' and to 'revolutionary socialism'. Mightily impressed by the Co-operative Wholesale Society (now the Co-operative Group, one hundred and fifty years old in 2013) and by J.T.W. Mitchell its outstanding leader at the time, who also deserved a place in *Great Democrats,* Beatrice then began to study the Co-operative Movement. Then, with Sidney, she produced their masterpiece, *Industrial Democracy,* in 1897. In this classic of labour history/ democratic theory, which was of great interest to Lenin, the Webbs theorised and sought to transcend what they saw as direct, unscientific, unmanaged, anti-state, working-class or 'primitive' democracy. From the point of view of trades unions, they saw the 'Method' of Mutual Insurance underpinned by the 'Doctrine' of Vested Interest as having given way (from Applegarth's time onwards) to the method of Collective Bargaining underpinned by the doctrine of Supply and Demand. Unfortunately, they spent much of their expertise and spirit during the rest of their lives identifying (and identifying with) what they saw as the next method of social advance for labour. They saw this as the 'collectivist' method of Legislative Enactment underpinned by the doctrine of the National Minimum. In some sense for them, the Soviet Union completed their statist journey, with politics firmly in command, the long journey from what they saw as 'individualism' to what they saw as 'collectivism'. The tone of C.E.M Joad's critique of Owen is relevant here.

> 'The fact is that, as the Russians have discovered, if you want to turn average individuals into Communists, you must catch them young and cultivate them intensively from birth onwards; apart

> altogether from the fact that every normal society contains, in addition to its mass of ordinary individuals, not only its percentage of saints, but its percentage of incorrigible scoundrels, who will wreck any community unless they are forcibly restrained or painlessly exterminated.'

As Michael Barratt Brown makes clear in his Introduction, this was never his father's tone. In our own differently hard times, it is perhaps a pity that Barratt Brown was 'not here concerned with institutions and machinery, but with the persons who control them'. But there has been plenty of work on institutions since his time, resisting the all too familiar attempt by our rulers to collapse the very idea of 'democracy' into how, in 'the West', We Are Governed. The idea that we might govern ourselves, economically as well as politically is now seen, all over again, as utopian. The sense of the 'social' in its Owenite meaning, as a critique and replacement of the economic and the political, has largely been lost, most sadly among would-be 'social democrats'.

Barratt Brown was a Quaker, as I am. He gave the annual Swarthmore lecture at the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends in 1938 under the same title as his Epilogue. For him, democracy was a matter of 'faith' and 'temper'. I have already drawn attention to the opening sentence of this book. Its final four pages are equally riveting, and as challenging in the second decade of the twenty-first century as they were in the mid-1930s. 'The democratic faith and the democratic temper reach to wider issues that those of political method and machinery'. 'Faith and temper' is a key phrase in this book. Barratt Brown continues, with characteristically Quaker originality in a work on great democrats, 'and they are found, perhaps supremely, in men and women whose political influence has been slight'.

And later 'the democratic faith which I have attempted to define and illustrate has not been characteristic of all democrats' and 'it has been most fully embodied in men who were not politically active'. Again, discuss! The discussion might be even more animated than the one on Marx.

Barratt Brown uses the phrase 'comrade-leader' on his final page. 'Rarely found but singularly influential', the

practice of equality and comradeship as the most precious and most democratic value of all, in democratic education as much as in politics, was clearly at the centre of his democratic practice. It sounds banal but he clearly believed in 'everyman', 'the people' as expressed in the prophetic ways of Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter. Fellow-travelling was what he advocated in a very un-Webbian, un-1930s sense. In 1934, he cites Jesus, 'the little poor man of Assisi' and then, most interesting, 'the Quaker tailor of New Jersey'. John Woolman, the eighteenth century American Quaker, ends the book almost as its emblem. Woolman pioneered the cause of anti-slavery a century before the Abolition. His 'whole life was an expression of this faith and temper' (of democracy). He 'confined himself to methods of persuasion and influence brought to bear on individuals and groups rather than on Governments … His appeal both in his personal dealings with individuals and in his writings on slavery and other social questions is always to the spirit of "universal love".'

Reading *Great Democrats* for the first time, I wondered whether this was something of a self-portrait by Barratt Brown. I wish I had met him in Ruskin between 1989 and 1997 during not-always-easy years in the College when I passed his photograph-portrait every day on a Walton Street wall. He was surely right that 'something of this spirit of universal fellowship and identification with others is required both to explain and to inspire the democratic faith'.

Woolman's *A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich* (1793) was republished by none other then the Fabian Society in 1897, as part of the 'New Life, Religion of Socialism' years. It was reprinted as late as 1921. Now that *Great Democrats* is available again, at a time when the rich are much in evidence and showing no signs of caution, is it time to bring Woolman back into circulation?

May 2013

PREFACE

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DEMOCRACY has had its leaders no less renowned than the Cæsars who exact obedience and worship from their followers. Greatness in human affairs is not to be measured only or chiefly in terms of military leadership or dictatorial domination. Force of character counts for as much as force of arms, and indeed in the course of time for infinitely more. Greatness is a relative term, and when applied to some of the Democrats included in this volume is bound to be a disputable one. There are great men who have also been Democrats, but the figures chosen for these pages are principally those of men and women who have been great *as* Democrats—great, that is to say, either in the extent to which they embodied in their lives and characters the democratic temper and attitude to mankind, or in the measure of their contribution to the democratic movement. I started by considering some seventy or eighty names, and I do not profess to have selected all who deserve a place in such a volume, even after fixing certain delimitations of time and place and quality. At one time I had thought of starting from the 17th century, and including men like Milton and Locke, and groups such as the early Quakers and the Levellers. But for the sake of whatever unity the volume may possess, it seemed well to confine the list to the last 150 years or so, during which the main growth of Democracy has taken place. Again, the majority of the names selected are those of Englishmen, though I have added a few American and one or two Continental figures, taking these few from different periods within the 150 years concerned. But the question of greatest difficulty was the application of a standard by which a Democrat should be defined. Should I only include those who have most fully embodied in their lives what I have called in the Epilogue "the democratic faith"? Should I confine myself to champions of parliamentary government, or of individual freedom of expression and discussion? It would have been a slenderer volume if I had rigorously

applied such tests as these. But if I flung a wider net I was likely to land some strange fish of ill-assorted company.

Among the statesmen I hesitated over the names of Fox and Burke, of Lord John Russell and Sir Robert Peel, but decided to reject. Among the advocates of freedom I excluded more reluctantly such names as John Wilkes, Richard Carlile, George Jacob Holyoake, and Charles Bradlaugh. The final selection is made with a view to including representatives of different aspects of the democratic movement. Thus the range is wide enough to include an Anarchist like Godwin, a Tory Democrat like Disraeli, Socialists like William Morris and Keir Hardie, Liberals like Bright and Gladstone, Trade Unionists like Robert Applegarth and Joseph Arch, and pioneers of women's emancipation like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mrs. Fawcett, as well as poets and philosophers.

Here the difficulty was to select my representatives, and I would gladly have added many other names. I find on my supplementary list the names of Cobden and Fowell Buxton, Morley and Bryce, Tolstoy and Victor Hugo, Blake and Burns, Dickens and Meredith, William Lloyd Garrison and William Jennings Bryan, Daniel O'Connell and Arthur Griffith, Saint Simon and Lamennais, Lassalle and Bernstein, Francis Place and William Wilberforce, Harriet Martineau and Josephine Butler, Margaret MacDonald and Margaret Macmillan, Lord Shaftesbury and Sir Charles Dilke, Henry George and Bruce Glasier.

It has been difficult to refuse a place to many of these. It has been equally difficult to decide as to the claims of some of those I have included, and in particular of those whose faith in Democracy can be called in question. Thus I was considerably perplexed about both Karl Marx and Thomas Carlyle. Their influence upon the democratic movement has been unquestionably immense, but Marx, while defending parliamentary methods against the Anarchism of Bakunin, projected the notion of working-class dictatorship which has been developed by the Communists in our time, while Carlyle not only treated the people with a certain contempt, but propounded views on government that are not unlike those of present-day Fascism. None the less, I decided to include them both, and readers who turn to

the chapters by Mr. Postan on Marx and by Dr. Jacks on Carlyle will, I believe, agree that the decision has been justified.

Howbeit, " there they are, my fifty men and women," and this volume will have fulfilled its purpose, if it enables Democracy to

> " Enter each and all, and use their service,
> Speak from every mouth "

to this age which indubitably needs to be reminded of their message.

A. BARRATT BROWN

Ruskin College, Oxford.
September, 1934.