

WILLIAM STOKES (1803-1881)

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William Stokes was born at Purfleet in Essex on 1 July 1803. Little is known about his early life beyond the fact that he became a Baptist pastor and began his ministry in the Midlands. His name first surfaces in the historical record in January 1841 when, as a recently appointed agent of the London Peace Society (LPS), he toured South Wales as a peace lecturer. He succeeded in establishing an auxiliary of the LPS at Neath. He later recorded that it was an unbiased perusal of the New Testament that had led him at this time to the conviction that war was incompatible 'with the spirit and precepts of pure Christianity'. For the rest of his active life he was an ardent peace campaigner.

From 1843 onwards Stokes was a prominent figure in the attempts to establish an international peace congress movement. In 1843 he attended the first general peace convention, held in London, as a representative of the LPS. In 1848, he assisted in organising the first international congress at Brussels, where two of his essays were read out in French translation by Louis Chamerovzow, the secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society. The first was an appeal for the regularisation of arbitration between nations as the prelude to establishing a permanent Congress of nations and a code of international law. The second essay enumerated six reasons why 1848 was a propitious moment for instituting general and simultaneous disarmament 'throughout the Civilized World'. Although Stokes's inspiration may have come from Christianity, these essays make clear that in terms of practical policies he was very much influenced by the American theorists William Ladd and William Jay. Following the Brussels Congress he was appointed secretary of the Joint Committee of the Peace Congress Movement, the body responsible for coordinating the various national peace societies involved in the international movement. Thereafter, he was instrumental in organising the congresses at Frankfurt (1850), London (1851), and Edinburgh (1853). He did not speak at any of the congresses, and it is clear that his main contribution was behind-the-scenes as a facilitator, secretary, and general organiser.

It was in his capacity as a committee official that he began his long and useful connection with Manchester radicalism. Because of the dramatic growth in the activities of the peace movement between 1848 and 1851, the London Peace Society found it necessary, in May 1851, to appoint Stokes as full-time assistant to Henry Richard, the Society's secretary. In his new role, he was sent to Manchester in 1852 to assist with the preparations for the forthcoming peace conference there. However, the Manchester peace activists, strongly influenced by Cobdenite and commercial arguments, were resistant to subordination to the religiously-inspired, and to their minds more impractical, dogmatism of the total pacifists who preponderated within the LPS. The Manchester men therefore stuck out for a degree of independence from London. A compromise was arrived at with the creation of a Joint (Manchester and London) Peace Congress Committee. Manchester's truculence in this matter would explain why Stokes played no part in the organisation of the conference held there in January 1853.

However, the Crimean War effectively ended the international peace congress movement, and by 1855 the Manchester Peace Conference Committee was in serious financial difficulties. In

February it was proposed that Stokes should move permanently to Manchester to take over as secretary of the Manchester Committee from Frederick Chesson, who had been appointed editor of the anti-war *Empire* newspaper, and who was soon to become secretary of the Stop-the-War League. Within little over a year, the London Committee was writing to Stokes to recommend that the Manchester Committee be dissolved unless means could be found to revive it. The Manchester Committee struggled on for a further eighteen months. It met on 20-21 July 1858 formally to wind itself up. Stokes prepared for the meeting a 'Brief Statement' of its work since 1853.

The committee was, however, immediately superseded by the Peace Conference and Arbitration Society. Stokes, once again secretary of the new body, was a particularly diligent member, frequently speaking and writing on its behalf. When Austria and Sardinia, backed by France, went to war in April 1859, Stokes persuaded the Mayor to allow the Town Hall to be used for a public meeting at which an address urging neutrality on the part of the British government was unanimously adopted. The Society folded the following year because of financial difficulties. Richard, on behalf of the LPS, agreed to pay the arrears of salary owed to Stokes provided that the Manchester Society gave up its independent existence and reverted to auxiliary status. Stokes continued as the LPS's agent in Manchester.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s Stokes had been an indefatigable peace lecturer. For example, he had toured widely in support of the very first parliamentary arbitration motion, introduced into the Commons by Richard Cobden in 1849, and had prepared a summary of the debate for wider circulation. He had continued lecturing throughout the Crimean War, risking life and limb in the process. His earlier triumph at Neath came full circle when, in July 1854, he was prevented from speaking by 'patriotic' demonstrators, and had to escape the hall by a side door. When the Crimean War effectively sealed the fate of the mid-century international peace movement, Stokes turned to writing as the principal method by which to disseminate his peace views.

From the mid-1850s until his death, a wide number of publications came from Stokes's prolific pen - mostly on the subject of war and peace, but occasionally touching upon other radical liberal causes. The most active phase of his literary output coincided with his move from the Midlands (where he had been a minister at Chesterfield, Burton-on-Trent, and West Bromwich) into the Manchester area. He continued with his ministry, becoming pastor first of all at Bury, and thereafter at Ancoats, Ashton-under-Lyne (1863-64), Oldham (1864-66), and Drake Street, Rochdale (1875-77). He was also an active member of the Strict Baptist Society, which retained a conservative attachment to high Calvinist doctrine.

This period saw the publication of *Indian Reform Bills* (1858), which was partly an historical survey of British mismanagement of Indian affairs, and partly a call for the establishment of representative government in the wake of the Indian Mutiny. This sixpenny pamphlet had originally appeared as a series of letters in the *Manchester Examiner and Times*. Two years later, one of Stokes's lectures, delivered at Hope Hall, Liverpool, repeating his long-held belief in the desirability of establishing a permanent European Congress, was issued as a twopenny

pamphlet. It must have achieved a sizeable circulation for by 1863 it came out in a third edition, and included copies of letters sent by Stokes to Prince Albert, Louis Napoleon, the King of Belgium, Garibaldi, and the British Foreign Secretary, Russell, urging them to work for the establishment of just such a Congress. In 1863 the penny pamphlet *Private Hangings and Capital Punishments* was circulated. This took the form of a letter to the Bishop of Manchester in which Stokes expressed his abhorrence of capital punishment. Public hangings had not acted as a deterrent, and therefore private executions could hardly be expected to do so. Judicial execution merely served to brutalise the population and encourage society to emulate it with its own acts of violence. Only God, Stokes wrote, had the right to take life away. Life imprisonment was a more preferable form of punishment.

In 1869, Stokes published a sizeable book with the self-explanatory title, *British War History. During the Present Century*. It was mainly a historical narrative which condemned the social and economic costs of wars and gave space to the activities of the peace movement. Once again, the book demonstrated that Stokes did not allow his religious commitment to peace to outweigh or distort practical arguments. This political acumen could also be seen in his decision to draw upon his researches for the book to issue a cheap pamphlet, entitled *British War Taxation* (1869), directed at a wider and more popular audience. In it he calculated, with zealous precision, that British war expenditure for the period 1800-68 amounted to no less than £1,714,795,503 - an astonishing sum. Under this severe burden, the labour market 'groans', manufacturing industry 'reels and quivers', and only poverty flourishes. In characteristic middle-class radical fashion, Stokes traced the roots of this evil and of the excessive war taxation to 'an irresponsible Aristocracy'. The pamphlet concluded with several of the usual peace nostrums for achieving a reduction in defence expenditure - arbitration, disarmament, abolition of pensions and sinecures, withdrawal of troops from the colonies unless the colonies paid for them, and so on.

Stokes's last significant piece of political writing appeared in 1876. *Popular Delusions Sanctioned by the Church of England. An Essay* used theological and historical arguments to criticise the Church for supporting wars and for its consecration of buildings, people, churchyards, and flags and banners. The same year also saw the circulation of a flysheet in which Stokes calculated that *The House of Commons in 1876* included 240 'War Members', and which urged voters to avoid returning such representatives in future.

In addition to these directly political writings, Stokes was also something of a historian, poet, and journalist. He published two books on the history of the Baptists - *The History of the Midland Association of Baptist Churches from the Years 1655 to 1855* (1855), and a *History of the Baptists and Their Principles* (1863). A collection of thirty-three of his poems - on the general themes of 'peace, liberty, and friendship' - appeared under the title *The Olive Branch* in 1860. In addition to his anti-war sentiments, the poems also reveal his abhorrence for slavery. Certain of them are encomiums to recently deceased friends. Other of his poems can be found among the pamphlets in Manchester Central Reference Library and in the pages of the *Cheshire County News and Stockport Chronicle*, to which Stokes was an irregular contributor, not just of poems but also of occasional pieces on aspects of contemporary Liberal politics. Stokes was not by any means a great poet. Many of his poems have the character and simple structure of contemporary hymns from which, as a preacher, he no doubt drew inspiration. But they are full of feeling and reveal his passionate commitment to the cause of peace.

Although peace was the preponderant issue, Stokes was also active in other aspects of local Liberal politics during the Manchester phase of his career. In October 1868, he wrote to Sir Elkannah Armitage, the chairman of the United Liberal Party, opposing the nomination of the former Chartist Ernest Jones as Manchester's third Liberal candidate, on the somewhat curious grounds that he was a lawyer (a merchant, he held, would be a more appropriate representative for Manchester), and that he had not been properly selected by the party. This opposition did not prevent him from attending Jones's funeral three months later, or from penning a poetic epitaph which, despite reference to his 'failings', described Jones also as 'the workers' truest friend'. Stokes was also involved in the activities of the local branch of the National Reform Union in the late 1860s, though to what extent is not clear. However, in August 1870 when he was apparently on the point of moving away from Manchester, the executive committee of the Union moved an address thanking him for his services in the cause of 'Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform'. It was signed by George Wilson and J.D. Morton, and a year later Stokes reciprocated by writing a eulogistic elegy upon the deaths of these two men.

By this time Stokes's own health was deteriorating, and in 1871 he resigned from the London Peace Society after thirty years' service. Six years later he gave up his ministry, then at Rochdale, and went to live with his son at Hawthorn Grove, Heaton Moor, Stockport. He died there on 17 September 1881, aged seventy-eight.

Stokes provides an example of an assiduous and lifelong campaigner for humanitarian and radical causes, working for the most part behind-the-scenes, taking on mundane secretarial and lecturing roles, yet whose name crops up again and again in brief references to his involvement in these many and varied tasks. Moreover, he was, as we have seen, no mean writer, and his name must have crossed the threshold of thousands of homes throughout the country appended to the numerous peace pamphlets and tracts for which he was responsible. Yet his passing attracted little attention from the obituarists, and he was quickly forgotten. He is not mentioned in the standard history of the English baptists, and nor does its author, A.C. Underwood, even make use of Stokes's historical writings. This anomaly can only be explained by the fact that the peace programme with which Stokes was associated never succeeded in capturing the central terrain of liberal ideology. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century age of imperialism, advocates of disarmament, anti-colonialism, and permanent peace congresses were increasingly pushed to the margins by the more strident theorists of peace through *realpolitik* and the balance of power. William Stokes is therefore one of those rare examples of a member of the middle class who needs (and deserves) to be rescued from the enormous condescension of posterity.

SOURCES

Stokes's ideas can be examined through his writings. His two essays - 'The Importance of Constantly appealing to Arbitration for the determining of national disputes, until there shall be formed a 'Congress of Nations' for the framing of a Code of International Law', and 'The Fitness of the Present Time for Instituting a Simultaneous Movement among the various Nations for a General Disarmament throughout the Civilized World' - are in *Report of the Peace Congress at Brussels on the 20th, 21st, and 22nd September, 1848* (1848). The following of his publications are available in Manchester Central Reference Library: *The Patriotic Fund Meeting, and 'The Peace Societies'* (letter of 18 Nov. 1854); *Indian Reform Bills; or Legislation for India, from 1766 to 1858. Also, An Argument for a Representative Government in India, in a letter to the*

Right Hon. B. Disraeli, M.P. (1858); *Brief Statement of the Labours of the Manchester Peace Conference* (1858); *The Olive Branch; or Poems on peace, Liberty, Friendship etc.* (1860); *A Permanent European Congress, as a Substitute for War, in the Settlement of International Disputes* (Manchester, 1860; the third edition (1863) is also available with Stokes's letters to various dignitaries); *Private Hanging and Capital Punishments* (Manchester, 1863); *The Representation of Manchester. Who Shall be its Third Member? A Letter, Addressed to Sir Elkaniah Armitage, Knight, Chairman of the United Liberal Party* (2nd ed., Manchester, 1868); *British War History. During the Present Century* (1869); *British War Taxation; its Magnitude, and the Means of its Diminution* (1869); *Popular Delusions Sanctioned by the Church of England. An Essay* (1876). In addition, the library has copies of miscellaneous poems by Stokes along with a copy of the flysheet, *The House of Commons in 1876*. I found references to, but was unable to trace copies of, the following: *The History of the Midland Association of Baptist Churches from the year 1655 to 1855* (1855); *History of Baptists and their Principles* (1863); *Prize Essay on War* (nd); *Arminianism and Calvinism* (nd); 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' (nd); *Fixed Principles: or, Solidity of Character* (nd); *Reform: or, Where are We?* (nd); *Wisdom is Better than Strength: or, Armed Men not the best National Defence* (nd); and *The War History of Christian Europe* (nd); it was referred to as being 'nearly ready' in 1877). Stokes also

contributed occasional poems and political articles to the *Cheshire County News and Stockport Chronicle*.

Information on Stokes's life has had to be gleaned from snippets of information in multifarious sources. Among the more useful were: F. Boase, *Modern English Biography. Vol. VII-Z. Supplement to Vol. III* (1st pub. 1921; 1965); Goronwy J. Jones, *Wales and the Quest for Peace* (Cardiff, 1969); Cuttings from Newspapers on Microfiche and for the Peace Conference and Arbitration Society in the Local History Room of Manchester Central Reference Library; and several items held by the International Peace Society, Fellowship House, 3 Browning St., London: *Peace Society Conference Committee Minute Book 31st October 1848 - 8th February 1856*; *Peace Conference Committee Minute Book 18th February 1856 - 14th October 1859*; *Peace Society Letter Book 22nd May 1851 - 28th January 1889*.

Stokes's peace activities can be placed in context by reference to W.H. van der Linden, *The International Peace Movement 1815-1874* (Amsterdam, 1987); D. Nicholls, 'The Manchester Peace Conference of 1853', in *Manchester Region History Review*, vol. V, no.1 (Spring/Summer 1991); and D. Nicholls, 'Richard Cobden and the International Peace Congress Movement 1848-53', in *Journal of British Studies*, vol.30, no.4, (Oct. 1991), pp.351-76.

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