

# FREETHINKER

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## TO OUR READERS

IN a few weeks, the FREETHINKER will be in new hands. The Board of G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd. has made the wise decision to appoint a full-time editor. For nearly eight months now I have borne the strain of editing this weekly paper in my spare time. I have been glad of the experience, glad to have been associated in this way with a paper which has such a noble history, but I shall also be glad to have a much needed rest before embarking on my next literary activity.

To all those who have written to me—whether as contributors, carping critics or congratulating complimenters—I tender my belated apologies for the briefness of my replies and further apologies to writers of those letters which I would have liked to have answered, but which pressing priorities have prevented me from even acknowledging.

The problems confronting the new editor, whoever he may be, are immense. The challenge is great, but the prospects of success are not inconsiderable. One need not be unduly pessimistic about the future of the Freethought movement in general or the FREETHINKER in particular. The prerequisite to success is the realisation that the Freethought movement has a long tradition of being a pioneering movement. We are in danger of dragging our feet behind those outside the movement who, although not calling themselves Freethinkers, are doing the work of Freethinkers. If certain of the Moaning Minnies within our own ranks were to have their way we would be stuck in the quagmire of the churned battlefields of twenty and more years ago. Fortunately, the Moaning Minnies, who are

mainly men, are very much in the minority and my personal view is that, seeing they are so concerned with the aforementioned quagmire, we had better let them stay stuck in it whilst the rest of us get on with the rewarding business of moving forward.

It is clear that some people who call themselves Freethinkers think about as freely as a retarded amoeba. They may be energetic bible bashers. They may be rabidly anti-Catholic. They may be fervently, almost psychopathically, anti-religious. But are they Freethinkers? There's the rub. And the answer, for some of them at any rate, is decidedly No. When it comes to certain important issues, and ones highly relevant in the context of today, they are outdone in freethinking by a multitude of religious people.

Freethought is not, or should not be, confined to the subject of religion. The principles of freethought are applicable to a host of varied issues, areligious as well as religious. I venture to suggest that one of the factors obstructing the development of the Freethought movement, particularly since the early forties, has been the lack of freethought. Paradoxical, but I regretfully suspect that it is true. Christians are beating Freethinkers at freethinking. And the FREETHINKER is, perhaps, being beaten at freethought by other far more influential journals. *The Guardian* is a daily freethinking paper circulating in hundreds of thousands. *Playboy*—whether you like it or not—is a freethinking, unashamedly humanist, glossy monthly with a circulation of millions. What hope is there then for the FREETHINKER if, far from pioneering new ideas, new thinking, it becomes enchained to old and no longer relevant concepts, bogged down in ancient battles, and drugged by dreams of the past?

I am as interested as anyone in the battles of the nineteenth century Freethinkers. I believe that it is nothing less than a disgrace that their heroic and valuable deeds of self-sacrifice should be so little taught in our so-called educational establishments. How many schools teach their children about Carlile and Hetherington and Holyoake and Bradlaugh? Too few, far too few. It is a shame to be expiated. The names of these pioneers should be writ large in the historical record. The wrong of omission should be righted. The historical record is important, if only because it has a bearing on the issues of today. However, progress is not made simply by recalling the past. Progress is made by influencing the present and making the future. You do not move forward by standing still or stepping back.

A separate notice, advertising the full-time post of editor, will be found elsewhere in this issue.

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Harry Lamont

## HOT GOSPELLERS AND KINDRED MATTERS

## Speaking Personally

IT is about 40 years since I read *Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair Lewis, but still recall clearly the thrill caused by that powerful novel that depicts how a plausible scoundrel can stump the country, rampaging on behalf of Christ, and saving countless immortal souls very expeditiously, cutting overheads to a minimum and dispensing salvation.

The hot gospeller is a charlatan who trades on human credulity. He gets people worked up into an emotional state where they feel they must accept salvation.

Some people profess to be surprised at the success of Billy Graham, but when you promise peace, bliss, joy and security to anxious wayfarers on life's stormy seas, you are bound to make converts. There are still credulous folk who believe in the torments of a hell that can be avoided by accepting Christ.

A good-looking, presentable youngish man, eloquent and sincere, will always make a powerful appeal to sex-starved spinsters and lonely wives. They fall in love with him by proxy. He is their guide to paradise. When Billy Graham makes his impassioned appeal and gazes into the lonely female's optics, she responds with alacrity.

After the vicissitudes of this perilous existence the hot gospeller promises eternal celestial bliss. What could be more alluring? If you grant the hot gospeller his major and minor premise all is well. Christ died to save the world and you are OK if you believe in him. But if you refute his assertions the holy mountebank can do nothing with you. And increasingly sceptical persons are disputing his dogmas. So he beats the air and appeals to the credulous. It is rather pathetic to listen as a Holy Joe does his stuff, exhorts, pleads, threatens and rings the changes on his hocus-pocus.

I have been reading an article in which the author says man is the only moral animal. What exactly he means by that I don't know. *Moral* comes from the Latin *mores*, *habits* or *customs*, and of course plenty of so-called lower animals have habits or customs. Our author appears to assume that man's morality has supernatural sanctions, which seems to me a false assumption, a *non sequitur*. I have heard it said that there must be a heaven or we would not long for it. Which seems to me as absurd as to maintain that because my dog likes to stretch out on a sofa covered with cushions he must have been accustomed to them in a previous existence.

We like to think we are a little lower than the angels, but at certain stages of our development we resemble other animals very closely. I watched the birth of a child on television. The infant was yanked out and the umbilical cord cut, exactly as would happen with any other animal.

When I was a student in France I had a friend in the medical faculty. Often at night I accompanied him to the dissecting room where corpses were cut up until only small fragments remained. From time to time buckets of offal were burnt. I could not believe that such detritus could ever be resurrected.

A favourite trick of the medical students was to hang a nude corpse in the corridor leading to the dissecting room.

In the dark the visitor suddenly finds himself clutching a cold clammy *cadaver*. It happened to me.

Whatever nebulous faith I had before the 1914 War was destroyed by what I saw on the Western Front—the dead rotting in No Man's Land and hanging on the wire like slaughtered sheep. I know it sounds illogical, but I refused to believe that men with immortal souls could be exterminated like rats.

When a lunatic is summoned for judgment, is he suddenly made sane again? It would be manifestly unfair to punish him for what he does while his mind is deranged.

If you believe in evolution—and most people do nowadays—you must admit that either all animals have souls or that ours was inserted at some intermediate stage, which seems rather far-fetched.

Some people assume that there must be a benevolent God since man organises his life intelligently. But ants are also capable of a highly organised society. It rather stretches one's imagination to postulate an ant's heaven, an ant's God and all the celestial trappings.

It has been said you are all right if you choose your parents wisely. When two people marry and produce children with certain mental and physical characteristics, are those offspring to be condemned for vices or taints due to heredity? To blame a stupid person for not having brains is just as unfair and absurd as to blame a weakling for not having strength.

Charles Colton wrote that men wrangle for religion, write for it, fight for it, anything but live for it. I have known many parsons who paid lip service to religion, but only one tried to live his creed and he ended up in the loony bin. He gave his clothes to the poor, appeared nude in public and was arrested for indecent exposure.

Francis Bacon asserted that a little philosophy inclineth men's minds to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men to religion. For long the idea of a Big Boss upstairs satisfied believers, until the most discerning of them realised the absurdity of such a doctrine. Among intelligent people the concept of God as a glorified man is dying and will in due course be completely dead. Something more intangible will take its place. Parsons aware of the transformation are busy hedging and coming to grips with the new theology. But they have to take care not to be too blunt. No need to scare the old superstitious clients who comprise the backbone of every flock.

There are many reasons for religion's strong appeal. It seems to me the most powerful of them is the assurance of support from an all-powerful Deity: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. It is infinitely comforting to feel that the Big Boss is looking after us and all is well. It takes a strong personality to refuse such an alluring bait. Thomas Paine advocated what he called the religion of humanity and that is what humanists practise. They cut out the prayers, hymns and confessions of sin to a mythical Deity, and concentrate on the greatest good for the greatest number. Too often the professional holy man puts his religion into a water-tight compartment and becomes thoroughly selfish, paying lip service to a fossilised creed, idolising an outworn ideology.

## PRE-RELIGIOUS MAN

Otto Wolfgang

WHEN sparse groups of primitive men roamed the earth in quest of food, they could not waste their time on gods and ghosts. Lacking the means of producing their life and thus safeguarding their bodily existence, they remained entirely dependent upon Chance and Nature. The importance of chance in their lives led to the observation of *omina*: if a man tripped over a certain object or heard a certain bird or animal and afterwards met with good or bad luck, he construed a causal connection between these two happenings and expected from encountering this good or bad omen a good or bad outcome in his efforts. At the same time, his inextricable connection with Nature resulted in his conception of everything around him being just as animated as he was himself: spirits dwelled not only in trees and rivers, but even in stone and wood, garments and weapons.

In his lifelong struggle for survival, primitive man had use for nothing but what provided him with food and shelter, and this only occupied all his thoughts. At this stage, the spirits remained *amoral*, such as Matter and Nature are: pervading and animating anything when and how they chose, and changing form and appearance at will, they were neither good nor bad, but just peevish and whimsical—now offering, then refusing food. If it so chose, man's own life spirit could leave the body and cause it to fall down, become limp in sleep or illness and appear dead; if the spirit (later equalled with the 'soul') found its way back and was prepared to re-enter the body, the man awoke or recovered from his illness. Under the stimulus of dream appearances, savages and barbarians believe in the re-appearance of the dead; since even inanimate objects can appear in dreams, they too have their spirits and can be made responsible for their behaviour. It is the stage of the little child that lashes out against the table-corner where it got hurt; and the fluid interchange of forms and shapes has survived in fairy-tales, the degenerated remainders of former mythologies.

In their food-collecting and primitive hunting stage, men gained their living collectively; accordingly they also consumed collectively. Within the nomadic horde the women represented the more sessile element and so came to notice that littered seeds took root and began to sprout; when they eventually took to primitive planting, they were able to set the group up on a safer footing, and collective work as a whole divided along the line of sex. Owing to women's more important contributions to the collective economy,

"kinship is naturally reckoned in the female line, and the system of 'mother right' prevails" (Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*).

This, however, does not mean any social preponderance of women. Most primitive people are less troubled about physical paternity than they are about social paternity; consequently, children with them are less an individual than a social concern, therefore economic relations are more important than sexual connections. This explains why eating together can be of greater (social) importance than cohabiting (cf. Malinowski's Trobrianders).

A Kai (of New Guinea), for instance,

"does not marry because of desires he can readily gratify outside of wedlock without assuming any responsibility; he marries because he needs a woman to make pots and to cook his meals, to manufacture nets and weed his plantations, in return for which he provides the household with game and fish and builds the dwellings" (R. H. Lowie, *Primitive Society*).

Gardening with the hoe was women's distinctive economic employment; on the other hand, the domestication of such animals as the ox, dog, sheep or pig was undoubtedly achieved by man. At the same time man improved on woman's invention of tillage by developing the use of the plough in agriculture, thus diminishing the relative importance of woman's contribution to the larder. It stands to reason (although laboriously denied by the American school of Anthropology) that the domestication of animals presupposes some sort of tillage for the fodder supply.

Pre-literate societies hold the fundamental axiom that everything is owned by him or them who produce or work it; hence, while food-gatherers own collectively, in neolithic societies of primitive tillers or horticulturalists (with all labours and holdings assigned to women) sex groups as such own and exchange (for instance the vegetable produce of the female group against game or fish of the male section).

In this stage of partial ownership and division of labour the transition from spirits into gods sets in, with stress on the Mother-Goddess of the fertile soil. When stockbreeding and husbandry makes survival even more secure through planned food production and surplus, man attains overwhelming influence, social and economical, and kinship is patrilineal. Eventually, the hitherto harmoniously co-operating human groups split into social classes, defined through the presence (or lack) of private property. This is the stage that gives birth to the conception of God.

The relative security of life in the matrilineal society induced the members gradually to settle down; the first building was the "Long House" for common use. Improved living conditions resulted in the increase in numbers of clan members on the one hand and the splitting up of the group into subdivisions—families. They then start segregating within the Long House and finally move out into family huts; the Long House becomes the Council Hall of the warriors. For a time the crop is still harvested and stored in common; out of this stock every family gets its proper share according to its want. Then fields were allotted (and re-allotted in certain periods), yet the custom lingered on that anybody was permitted to enter any hut at hand and help himself to food, if in need; similarly, hospitality to the traveller was a matter of reciprocity. The public building still served for the main meals which were taken in community; this at least held good for the male members of the clan. The Spartans fought in groups of mess mates, hence the military 'company' = those who eat their bread together (*com-panis*). Another residue is the banquet to celebrate marriage, baptism or similar events by treating to food and drink a good number of guests.

\* \* \*

Socrates already understood that Religion was the offshoot of private property. Piety—according to Platon's report—he called the way of knowing how to please the gods: people pray and offer sacrifices only with a view to gaining benefit in this world or hereafter. Some skilful mediator is wanted to deal successfully with the mysterious forces, therefore the priest too is entitled to receive his commission for his good services, for religion is nothing but "a means to do business between god and men".

## NEWS AND NOTES

THE second half of the National Secular Society's annual report is devoted to the organisation's activities during the twelve months under review. It includes detailed information on lectures, cultural and social events, publications, and campaigns for secular education and Sunday freedom. Many distinguished people have participated; some of them have become members of the NSS.

An increasing number of local humanist groups are affiliating to the NSS, and group officers becoming full members. During the last three years the Society has established good relations with many groups, providing them with literature and speakers. The aim has been to keep secularism alive in the movement, and judging from recent developments it appears to be succeeding. All of which must be rather galling for the self-styled "mainstream" humanists who have been conducting a campaign of ridicule and abuse, depicting the NSS as a backward-looking, isolated body.

The report is entitled *The Second Hundred Years*, and copies are obtainable free from 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1.

### School protest

A REPORT that the Hillingdon Education Committee is thinking about handing over to the Church of England a distinguished 4-form entry grammar school in so-called exchange for a 2-form entry secondary modern school has caused a storm of protest. Public financing of sectarian schools is scandalous enough in the light of widespread concern over segregation, and to extend the system in the blatant way suggested in Hillingdon would be an outrage to democracy and education. It is to be hoped that local ratepayers will, if necessary, ask the Minister of State for Education to intervene.

### Ex-priests

CHARLES DAVIS is now living in Canada, but his name is not likely to be forgotten in this country. Indeed it is possible that his forthcoming book will cause a furore equal to that which followed his departure from the Roman Catholic Church. Davis explains in it why he decided that leaving the church was the most honest and logical action.

As one famous ex-priest leaves Britain another arrives. Emmett McLoughlin is paying a visit next month, and the National Secular Society is organising a meeting at which he will be speaking. When Mr McLoughlin left the Roman Catholic Church nearly twenty years ago there was far greater hostility towards ex-priests than today. He was subjected to a campaign of calumny and hostility which would have broken lesser men. He wrote a number of

books including *Crime and Immorality in the Catholic Church*, *American Culture and Catholic Schools*, and *Letters to a Catholic Priest*. Large numbers have been sold despite a boycott by the press and trade.

### Abortion Law Reform

A FORMER Tory Lord Chancellor and the Archbishop of Canterbury make a fitting brotherhood to confound the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill with limiting or unworkable amendments, but it is a pity the House of Lords should spoil the reputation for liberalism it has acquired in recent years by making a last-ditch stand. The Bill's sponsors must invoke the Parliament Act to override their Lordships' obstruction.

Meanwhile, the Abortion Law Reform Association will continue to function. Congratulations are due to its members, particularly the activists who campaigned with such tenacity and imagination. Like all reformers they had to contend with ignorance, prejudice and apathy, plus the unscrupulous and dishonest propaganda of their Roman Catholic opponents. The secretary of ALRA is Mrs Diane Cossey, 19 Kenneth Court, 173 Kennington Road, London, SE11.

### The Latey Report

ONE of the recommendations in the report of Mr Justice Latey's Committee on the Age of Majority received little press comment, but has been warmly welcomed by the National Council for Civil Liberties. For the last twelve months the NCCL has been engaged in a campaign to draw the attention of the Government and others to the problems of boys who, for various reasons, sign on for long periods of military service. Three main reasons for the present regulations given by the Minister of Defence have been rejected by the Latey Committee.

The Committee recommends that the present statutory right for discharge within three months of recruitment should be extended to six months; that all boy entrants should be entitled to be released as of right on application within three months of their eighteenth birthday, and that parental consent to enlistment should be required under the age of 18 rather than 17½ as at present.

The Minister of Defence is conducting a departmental enquiry into this question and has promised to report within six weeks of the publication of the Latey Report.

### Last word

"DO all Cliff Richard's fans go around believing in God? No. When it gets down to personal issues we make our own decisions." Paul McCartney of The Beatles.

E.A.

### Challenge '67

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## FILIBUSTERING IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

a dialogue between **JEAN STRAKER**  
and **WILLIAM HAMLING** (MP for Woolwich West)

**STRAKER:** I want to ask some questions, Billy, which have been nagging me since I spent all night listening to the alleged debate on the 29th and 30th of June. When I left you at 10.30 in the morning to go home to bed, you put me to shame by saying 'I start work again at 11'. Now, how many hours had you been up and when did you finally get some sleep?

**HAMLING:** I got up at 7.30 on Thursday morning and went to bed at midnight on Friday. I slept till 8.30 on Saturday morning.

**STRAKER:** You clearly took the strain in your stride; but can you say anything about the strain on other individual members on June 30th?

**HAMLING:** One Member was taken to hospital, as you saw, with suspected pneumonia; it turns out that he has food poisoning. There's no evidence that 30th June in itself was a strain, but I feel a succession of events like this over a period of years cannot do some of our dear friends much good.

**STRAKER:** Wouldn't pairing help to avoid personal distress?

**HAMLING:** It's of limited value, especially in cases like mine: I was determined to be present and to vote — deeply felt opinions and principles and all that. It must have been a strain on Leslie Sprigg's heart — he complained of the heat when I spoke to him, but he stayed all night. He told me 'I would sooner die than give way to threats'. And Leslie Hale, elderly and not very well these days, stayed for the same reason — 'To bear witness' by his presence. Then Alan Beaney, an older member and one who was very sick not long ago, stayed as well. What we know nothing about is the effect of excitement, the tension of making speeches in an exciting and, at times, tumultuous gathering — yet, is there a therapeutic value derived from getting pent-up anger off one's chest?

**STRAKER:** These are questions which have certainly prompted David Kerr to draw up his questionnaire. I see that the Government have agreed to let the British Heart Association circulate it to Members. Will you answer it?

**HAMLING:** I've seen the questionnaire — I filled my copy in at midnight last night in five minutes.

**STRAKER:** Good. You see I feel that I have some responsibility, as an enfranchised citizen, to ensure that the representative I help to send to Westminster shall not be subjected to such hazards in the execution of his duty that his life may be shortened — this is essentially a humanist attitude — it probably does not apply to the believer in heaven or hell. Elizabeth and I had felt strongly about David Steel's Bill and we contributed to the letter writing campaigns of the Abortion Law Reform Association and the Humanist Lobby. Yet what I found, as I listened to the speeches at the House, was that a large number of busy men were losing a night's sleep to listen to a filibuster . . .

**HAMLING:** That's one of the hazards of democracy . . .

**STRAKER:** . . . a filibuster organised by what appeared to be a kind of Catholic cabal for the purpose of ensuring that the time given by the Government to the Bill's sponsors — which should have been enough to complete the Third reading — was largely wasted. I've looked at *Hansard* and find that there are over 206 pages reporting what appears to me to be a use of words and manoeuvres which seem to make a mockery of the democratic parliamentary process.

**HAMLING:** We can't entirely overcome this on private Member's Bills. We might someday be opposing a reactionary Bill and we might want to resort to any lengths to resist it, to delay it and to tire out its supporters.

**STRAKER:** But why did each amendment have to be given so much time when there was no real debate? Why couldn't closures be more frequent?

**HAMLING:** It's the same answer for both questions: the rules for this sort of Bill prevent the use of the guillotine.

**STRAKER:** I think that you, as a social historian, may be able to see these events in perspective as part of a democratic progression towards a more humane society. But it does seem to me that the democratic process is defeating its own ends when it has to establish by means of doubtful statistics what most freethinkers know to be broadly true — that Parliament and MPs are overworked in seeking too much to interfere with the freedom of the individual to make personal choices which harm no other person and which should be the concern of no one but himself.

**HAMLING:** This is our opinion, but others disagree. What about freedom to kill oneself, to take dangerous drugs, and so on? You and I may need no rules — and, indeed, no laws because we are reasonable and civilised persons. Could we trust everyone to behave reasonably?

**STRAKER:** No, not unless our basic education is better than it is. I think we have enough social evidence to show that trying to teach morality is different from educating responsibility and you just cannot educate without giving people time and opportunity to form personal judgments. In some paradigmatic way I see the anti-abortion cabal as a microcosm of a social force in which ecclesiastical morality, vested interests in maintaining the *status quo*, sadistic nature and self aggrandisement appear to have a common interest in preventing social advancement for the masses.

**HAMLING:** This is a different point. Most laws operate in favour of existing social rules or conventions. It is our job to change objectionable — but objectionable to whom? — rules and conventions by social education and by changing the law.

**STRAKER:** You know that my personal involvement is in the obscenity laws. But there are a great many other areas of interference which cause daily frustration to millions of citizens, as for instance, the licensing laws, the shop hours acts, religious instruction in schools, the oath in courts of law.

**HAMLING:** And the divorce laws.

**STRAKER:** To come back to the debate: there seemed

to me to be three occasions of heightened tension only in the whole twelve hours of the sitting: when Douglas Houghton exploded on the motion to adjourn, seeing his precious time being wasted away — he said that Members did not know how to use their time and were not doing credit to the reputation of Parliament — and that the reputation of the House would sink lower than it was already.

HAMLING: Douglas can't have done himself much good by losing his temper.

STRAKER: Then there was a kind of charade in which the Speaker said that he would have to instruct the Sergeant at Arms to take the names of hon. Gentlemen who refused to pass the Tellers; and when Andrew Faulds, on the instructions of the Speaker, withdrew his remark that the hon. Member who was delaying consideration of the measure had not the capacity to put a bun in anybody's oven. From the spectator's point of view, these incidents were highlights in a dull session, but they did not advance the business of the House one bit.

HAMLING: Are you sure?

STRAKER: One is never sure of anything, and I hope you will not resent the question I am going to put to you, for Mr Speaker is a kind and wise man as much loved by those members of the public who take an interest in the proceedings of the House as by the Members of the House, but it did seem to me that he too was playing a game of delay.

HAMLING: I think he acted fairly according to the rules of the House.

STRAKER: Surely as the House had agreed to an all-night sitting there was no need to spend nearly an hour discussing and dividing on an adjournment?

HAMLING: I have known adjournments moved before in the middle of the night: it's a recognised method of opposition. We must be careful not to take away all the weapons an opposition may use.

STRAKER: Yet, sometime later, when a similar motion was put it was peremptorily rejected.

HAMLING: This was because the House had decided against adjournment a short time before.

STRAKER: Mr Speaker, in a recent broadcast, as I remember it, described his job as an art in which he had to sense the changing needs of the House. Could he not, on this occasion, have sensed a need for urgency? Was he not a little too kind to the cabal?

HAMLING: No. He came back regularly to give us the closure.

STRAKER: Lord Gardiner has said that he wants this Parliament to be one of the great reforming parliaments of history; Roy Jenkins has announced a programme of law reform in relation to the freedom of the individual. How much of what is proposed do you think will remove issues relating to personal choice from the sanctions of the law?

HAMLING: I hope increasingly that Governments will have the courage to take up this sort of measure and not leave it to private members.

STRAKER: What's next?

HAMLING: The next in the pipe-line to which I give my full support is the reform of our divorce laws.

STRAKER: Why can't such a Bill be presented by the Government on a free vote basis? Why does every Government Bill have to be a test of confidence in the Government? A matter for the whips?

HAMLING: Why not, indeed. Harold Wilson said not long ago that he hoped to see more free votes in the House — and we might then begin to think that an opposition would not seek to overthrow the Government at every turn, but contribute to a general debate on the issues at hand. I would like to see, for example, in the next session of Parliament, a Government sponsored Bill on the reform of the Divorce laws, with the Government showing itself eager to accept improvements suggested by back benchers, and offering each member freedom to vote according to his or her own wishes.

STRAKER: Yes, but this raises fundamental matters of belief. At the recent annual dinner of the National Secular Society, Barbara Wootton said that people in high positions should make open confession of their agnosticism — or atheism or humanism, whatever word you use — in order to strengthen the hand of people who are in a weaker position. What I find about Parliament is that there is plenty of open statement on the part of religious thinking, but precious little in the line of freethought.

HAMLING: Yes, certainly, I'd like to see a Parliamentary humanist association — I don't mind what we call it.

STRAKER: But what I am afraid is that this would tend to be a back benchers' affair while the Government would still appear to represent the established religions — and this would weigh in favour of religious attitudes where there was Government sponsorship of social measures

HAMLING: I look forward to the day when Governments will have the courage to introduce Bills in the social field and accept that Government whips should not drive men and women into the lobbies against their deeply felt convictions. One of the most formative books I read in my youth was Collet's *History of the Taxes on Knowledge*. It was concerned with freedom of communication. It has been a parliamentary tradition that freedoms of this type ought to be promoted by back benchers, with Governments adopting an attitude of non-participation. I think this is wrong.

STRAKER: I too, hope that we shall see freethought in Parliament — and that Governments will use their authority to implement the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms — and that there will be guarantees against the imposition of one particular religious or moral attitude on all.

## Flashback

HAPPY CHRISTIAN ENGLAND! On Monday last it was found that in the coffin of a pauper woman, four pauper children had been crammed, and to economise space one of the babes had its neck broken; this at the Bethnal Green dungeon for the poor. The Queen has announced that at the next drawing room all ladies and gentlemen will wear "slight mourning" — not for these poor tortured subjects but for the death of her late Majesty the Queen of Wurtemberg. (*The International Herald*—March 29th, 1873)

## PERSONAL NOTE FROM DAVID COLLIS

I SHALL soon be giving up the editorship of the FREE-THINKER, but I will certainly not be giving up my interest in and work for the freethought movement. I urgently require, for the purpose of research, various free-thought, Chartist and Radical publications. In particular, bound volumes of 19th century Freethought journals, eg. *National Reformer*, *Republican*, *Secular Review*, *Reasoner*, *National Secular Society's Almanack*, and *Freethinker* (but this one only from 1881 to 1891). Debates are also required as are 19th century freethought pamphlets. Certain other 19th century freethought books are also useful.

There are still a number of Freethinkers with this material, although my experience is that not all of them continue to actively use it. Will anybody with such material, which may possibly be of use to me, please write to me stating what they have available for sale. Please state titles, authors, year of publication (if given) and price required. In the case of those people with a lot of suitable material available for sale I may be prepared to call personally and collect, without trouble or expense to the vendor.

Please mark envelope 'BOOKS' and address as follows: David Collis, 23 Hamilton House, Corby, Northants.

All letters, which should be sent *immediately*, will be answered. I gratefully anticipate the co-operation of a number of readers in this matter.

## SUBMISSIONS OF THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY TO THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

### Registration (Births, Deaths and Marriages) and Marriage Laws

MOST of the matters here open to your consideration are of a technical nature, but the following points concern us: Though it may be embarrassing to illegitimate or adopted children to record the true facts of their birth in a register, we cannot think of any suitable way of re-registration which would not be misleading to genealogists, historians and other experts. But we should hope that for ordinary purposes it might be possible for a superintendent registrar to issue a certificate indicating the ostensible parents as the real ones, outside the existing provisions for re-registration after legitimation. In all official documents we would advocate the replacement of 'first' for 'Christian' names, and we hope it can be made clear to all parents that baptism has no legal or other non-religious significance.

The present system of religious marriages involves, in our view, many irritations and much needless work for registrars. Anglican special licences do not provide proper safeguards, nor do the unique arrangements for Quaker and Jewish weddings. The whole principle of licensing special buildings and so-called 'authorised persons' is vexatiously complicated, while the obligation of registrars to attend non-Anglican weddings where no authorised person has been appointed can involve burdensome travelling. The whole notion of publishing banns in Anglican churches has largely become meaningless with the mobility and absence of church-going of the average couple today. Clearly

since marriage is something which has secular legal consequences and today involves secular registration, we consider it should take place only in register offices, where registrars could the more conveniently supervise it and the preliminaries. This would entail the building or designation of many more register offices and we think that would be a good thing for the large and increasing number of people who want only a secular ceremony but must now sometimes go a long way for one. A religious ceremony could be added later for those who want it.

We should like to take this opportunity of paying tribute to the general run of register offices which exist today. Some few years ago we jointly sponsored a survey into the amenities and atmosphere of such premises and found that there were an appreciable number of complaints at unfriendly or unaesthetic civil weddings. In the last few years, however, great improvements have been made. The average civil wedding today is dignified and warm, as well as simple, and takes place in bright and harmonious surroundings. The great increase in couples availing themselves of such ceremonies who a few years ago would have chosen a church wedding on purely aesthetic grounds, is the best tribute superintendent registrars could have.

## GPO AND BILLY GRAHAM

Jim Little

PERHAPS I should have asked the Postmaster-General how many of the centres that ran Billy Graham's crusade on closed circuit television got a boost from the GPO. Our "Ship through Bristol" postmark-slogan was changed (for some local letters) to: "All-Britain Crusade, Eastville Bus Depot, June 23-July 1st". Did London have Billy Graham cancelling the stamps of local letters?

When the first letter with this postmark arrived I wrote to Bristol's Head Postmaster: "... can any organisation or commercial undertaking buy this space? If on the other hand it is a gratuitous boost for the 'Crusade' I wish to protest most strongly.

"Mr Graham represents an approach to the Christian religion that cannot be reconciled with the modern scholarship of believers, nor with the scientific knowledge that is available today.

"Some may find comfort in deluding themselves with fundamentalist notions, but for the Post Office to lend itself to this nonsense is a scandal."

His reply had the normal "Ship through Bristol" postmark and he explained at length, "... all applications for the use of a postmark slogan are submitted to the GPO Headquarters, where a decision is given to approve or reject the application". He listed three purposes, (a) Government campaigns, (b) events of local or national importance, (c) items of tourist or prestige importance. There is a basic charge of £50+ and he quoted the 1953 Act "... as the PMG may in his discretion think proper, including words or devices constituting advertisements in respect of the use of which as postmarks payment is made by any persons to the PMG"—so it seemed appropriate to pass on my complaint to the PMG.

In the meantime the *Bristol Evening Post* was running Billy Graham "specials". I wrote to the Editor that I appreciated the need "in your business to take advantage of every occasion to add to the circulation, but lending your talents to more than a normal news coverage of this hocus pocus gives the event a credibility it does not merit".

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Items for insertion in this column must reach THE FREETHINKER office at least ten days before the date of publication.

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1. Telephone HOP 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Holidays, Art Holiday, Burton Galleries, Wirral Cheshire, 29th July to 12th August. Small Youth Camp near Yeovil, Somerset. Details of both from Mrs M. Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey.

Humanist Letter Network (International) and Humanist Postal Book Service. For information or catalogue send 6d stamp to Kit Mouat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

### OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mound)—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN, MCRAE and MURRAY.

Manchester Branch NSS, Platt Fields, Sunday afternoon, 3 p.m.; Car Park, Victoria Street, Sunday evenings, 8 p.m.

Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

### INDOOR

Birmingham Branch NSS (Midland Institute, Margaret Street), Sunday, August 6th, 6.45 p.m. "Freethought Past and Present". Speaker: David Collis (editor of FREETHINKER).

West Ham Branch NSS (Wanstead and Woodford Community Centre, Wanstead, London, E11). Meetings at 8 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month.

He replied, "you are a little unfair . . ."—but that's another story.

The Crusade postmark slogan did continue to appear, though local letters more often had "Ship through Bristol", and not one person I've talked to about this matter noticed any letters marked "Eastville Bus Depot"!

After a fortnight the Postal Services Dept., London, replied "we were glad to receive your letter as your comments are useful in helping us to decide what is acceptable to the public . . . in this instance we required the sponsors to limit the wording to the time and place of the Crusade. By doing this it would seem that generally we avoided giving offence, for so far we have received only one complaint besides your own"!

## LETTERS

### Re "A Matter of Freedom"

I SIMPLY can't stand the torrent of cheap and salacious sneering in this article and as I have no use for it—for I simply cannot pass on this copy to anyone—I am returning it to you.

The quality of the editorial articles has certainly deteriorated and if a further one should sink as low as this again I shall have to regretfully cancel my subscription.

I. M. DAVIS.

### Making babies welcome

V. T. BOWEN'S sentence in his letter "To make abortion legal is only playing into the hands of the wrong people", is surely based on a lack of knowledge of existing conditions. Should it not read "The law as it is at present is playing into the hands of the wrong people", followed by a statement that the Law as it ought to be must be capable of being administered by qualified people in all the essential fields of Medicine, Social Administration and the Law itself. Of course all children should be "wanted" but that is not so at present and unless the Law is amended in other directions more and more "unwanted" children will make their appearances. An ideal society could "want" all "planned" children but we are far, far from that ideal. V. T. Bowen surely forgets the mother, at present with too many children, who suddenly finds that she is again in a state of pregnancy and has the worry of months, perhaps years, ahead of her. Adoption is not so very easy; it can bring a trail of anxieties to mother, brothers and sisters, adoptive parents and even, sometimes, the father; above all to the child itself. Surely an Ideal Society, which is the one I hope we are aiming for, should have the courage to plan its population in such a way that it can comfortably provide all the essentials for each member of that population. By essentials I do not limit them to food, clothes and housing but also to the cultural side of life, Education, Arts and Sports. Does V. T. Bowen think that this can be accomplished by a "free-for-all" Society in which both marital and ex-marital conjugation is the accepted way of life? If we feel that we have to pray at all, let us pray to our Members of Parliament to pass sensible and rational laws about the questions of Abortion and Family Planning.

D. MOLYNEUX.

### Hume and miracles

I HAVE great admiration for Hume, both for the man and his philosophy. Into the few pages of the *Enquiry*, he has packed a sounder philosophy than many eminent philosophers in fat volumes. Mr Joseph's criticism sent me back to Hume's essay on miracles—a pleasant half-hour's reading. I can find, however, no statement in that essay to support Mr Joseph's assertion that Hume derives the conclusion that "Miracles could not have occurred" from the premiss that "Miracles have not occurred".

Hume antedated Cardinal Newman in asserting that religion is founded on faith, not reason; he is hardly likely to advance the appeal to reason by stating that if miracles occurred, the existence of God would be proved. Hume doubts the occurrence of miracles solely on the very rational ground of their improbability, pointing out how liable men are to error, and how ready they are to accept statements without question when those statements are advanced by religious people. Perhaps Mr Joseph will give us the quotation on which he relies.

HENRY MEULEN.