

Labour's Lost Leader

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The Life and Politics of Will Crooks

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In Memory of Will and Elizabeth Crooks

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The life story of Will Crooks has a Dickensian resonance. He was a cockney lad born into abject poverty, and experienced the rigours of Poplar Workhouse and Poor Law school. Nearly forty years later Crooks became Chairman of the Poplar Board of Guardians, the very board that had given him shelter as a boy, during the depressing time of his young life. He entered Parliament in 1903, and later became a Privy Councillor in 1916. This monograph is a pioneering biography of a significant Labour figure, and an important reinterpretation of the early trade union and labour movement 1887-1921. The study of the public life of this influential, but controversial, Labour leader, has drawn upon material not uncovered before. Historians have not told Crooks' story, and have failed to recognise his significant contribution to the Labour cause in any way. This book remedies this.

This study is based on my doctoral thesis, and taken as a whole is the result of nearly twenty years study, which began with an undergraduate extended essay on the 1903 Woolwich bye-election in 1987, and ended with the research for this book. I do not apologise for the time it has taken for me to complete my research on Will Crooks. He did not leave any personal papers, except for a few letters that are in private hands, and a number of pamphlets in the British Library of Economic and Political Science. Using George Haw's two books *From Workhouse to Westminster* (1907) and *The Life Story of Will Crooks MP* (1916) as points of reference, I began an extensive search for primary material — digging out and accessing a large amount, especially newspaper articles by and about Crooks, reports of his political activities, and his Parliamentary speeches.

I have been greatly encouraged to publish my findings by a number of colleagues to whom I owe an enormous debt, and who in numerous ways

helped me through the writing, and the complexities of publishing a biography on Will Crooks. My supervisors Professor Denis Judd, Dr. Dennis Dean, and my two examiners, Professors Michael Newman and John Shepherd, all encouraged me to publish my thesis as a book. Further, I am greatly indebted to the History School, University of North London (London Metropolitan University) for funding my research studies for ten years, and for granting me a number of bursaries. I am also grateful to Brian Roper, Vice Chancellor, and London Metropolitan University for a financial contribution towards the publication of this book.

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National Newspaper Library, Colindale; National Records Office; Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool; University of London; Working Class Movement Library, Salford. My thanks also go to John Edmunds and Peter Carter at the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union (GMB), for their support and hospitality.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers.
BOT	Board of Trade.
BL	British Library.
BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science.
BWL	British Workers' League.
CVLU	Colne Valley Labour Union.
GHC	Greenwich Heritage Centre.
HMM	History of the Ministry of Munitions
ILP	Independent Labour Party.
LHASC	Labour History Archive & Study Centre
LCC	London County Council.
LGB	Local Government Board.
LMA	London Metropolitan Archive.
LMU	London Metropolitan University.
LPL	Labour Protection League.
LRC	Labour Representation Committee.
LTC	London Trades Council.
LU	London University.
MAB	Metropolitan Asylum Board.
MBW	Metropolitan Board of Works.
MRC	Modern Record Centre, Warwick University.
NEC	National Executive Committee.
NFWW	National Federation of Women Workers.
NTWF	National Transport Workers' Federation.
OF	Ordnance Factory.
Parl. Deb.	Parliamentary Debates.
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party.
PLEC	Poplar Labour Election Committee

PLL	Poplar Labor League.
PLRA	Poplar Liberal Radical Association.
PRC	Parliamentary Recruitment Committee.
PU	Poplar Union of Poor Law Guardians.
RACS	Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society.
RCF	Royal Carriage Factory.
RGF	Royal Gun Factory.
RL	Royal Laboratory
SDF	Social Democratic Federation.
TEB	Technical Education Board.
THLHL	Tower Hamlets Local History Library
TUC	Trade Union Congress.
WLP	Woolwich Labour Party
WLRA	Woolwich Labour Representation Association.
WTC	Woolwich & District Trades Council.
SDF	Social Democratic Federation.
TEB	Technical Education Board.
THLHL	Tower Hamlets Local History Library
TUC	Trade Union Congress.
WLP	Woolwich Labour Party
WLRA	Woolwich Labour Representation Association.
WTC	Woolwich & District Trades Council.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to examine the political life of Will Crooks of Poplar, a leading pioneer of the trade union and labour movement, who has been overlooked by modern historians. In order to rectify this, the career of Will Crooks will be examined both at the local and national level. This study aims to assess what effect his participation was to have on the trade union and labour movement in a Poplar and Woolwich context during the struggle for independent Labour representation and his contribution towards the emergence of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), and the consolidation of the Labour Party. The record indicates that Crooks was at the forefront in the pioneering days of Poor Law reform and the campaigns against unemployment both locally and nationally. He was a party activist for thirty years. It is against this background of progressivism that Crooks' contribution to the development of the Labour Party will be examined and assessed. He fervently believed that it was his sacred duty to serve the people, and help bring about the emancipation of the working-class. Crooks believed that the workers had to put right the wrongs done to them, they 'had to seize it as a sacred obligation.' If they did not 'they committed a crime against their own class, and against common humanity.'¹

While Labour historians have concentrated their attention on the lives of leading activists, such as John Burns, Keir Hardie, George Lansbury, Tom Mann, and Ramsey MacDonald, they have neglected to explore the important and enabling contributions of other pioneers of the trade union and labour movement.² Most notably, Will Crooks (Cooper), Pete Curran (Gasworker), Robert Banner (Compositor), and Fred Hammill (Engineer). Historians need to recognise that Will Crooks played an important part in the creation of a Labour culture in Poplar, especially towards the

strengthening of Fabian socialism, trade unionism, religious nonconformity, and the level of political awareness in the area. For example, Susan Pennybacker and Kenneth Brown both wrongly describe Crooks as the Labour 'councillor for Woolwich'.³ The question of whether Crooks was a Labour man politically active in Woolwich, or a Radical in Poplar, is crucial to an understanding of Crooks' early public life; what events nurtured his radical outlook, and his subsequent worldview.

By changing his political environment, the socio-political perspective is obscured, confused, and therefore misunderstood. One of the aims of this book is to correct this view, and at the same time present a revision of orthodox thinking on the emergence of Labour. Further, this approach will help explain and clarify any ambiguities historians may feel about Crooks' place within the radical tradition of Labourism.

The radical tradition of Labourism emerged from a continuous chain of ideas and efforts, founded upon the Reform movement of the 1820s; the political radicalism of Mazzini and the Young Italy movement of the 1830s and 40s; Chartism, and its recovery at a lower level in George Julian Harney's Society of Fraternal Delegates, and Ernest Jones' International Committee. The influence of the European Revolutions of 1848, and the development of Trade Unionism in the 1850s and 60s were an integral part of this progression. Similarly, also, the popular radicalism of John Bright and Gladstonian Liberalism, together with the founding of the Socialist societies in the 1880s, and the advent of New Unionism in 1889 were of major significance in the evolution of nineteenth century political ideas and organisation. For example, Biagini and Reid 'maintain that popular radicalism not only survived after 1848, but remained a major political force, with a substantial impact both on the Gladstonian Liberal party and on the Labour party in its formative years'.⁴ It is essential to recognise this development of radicalism, especially the early period 1830-1848, often ignored by Labour historians, which saw political émigrés from France, Germany, Italy and Poland imbue the notion of class-consciousness and solidarity with the European working-class.

It was important in influencing the internationalist ideas of the early Labour pioneers such as Hardie, Crooks, Shackleton, and Henderson. It helped inform them, and underlined the necessity of working-class unity in the common struggle for liberty, freedom, and emancipation. Ramsay MacDonald later wrote; 'the colonial and world policy of a democratic State' must be founded upon 'internationalism', and 'humanism'.⁵

Crooks typified this tradition. His view was complex and idiosyncratic. He borrowed from, and was influenced by, the various strands of

internationalism, radical liberalism, Fabian, and Socialist thought. The important difference about Hardie, Shackleton, Henderson, and Crooks' stance on social and political issues was that they were infused with strong Christian values. Crooks was a Congregationalist, and a follower of Joseph Mazzini, whose religio-radical writings appealed to Crooks' religious principles. Crooks said: 'There is a book that has had much to do with the saving of my life ... The Life of Joseph Mazzini', written 'more than sixty years ago'.⁶ Mazzini's message defined Crooks' political vocation, his duty to serve the people.

Both Mazzini's beliefs and that of the Congregationalists merge on the ethical position of Mission and Duty. For example, Mazzini said: 'Life is mission: duty, therefore is the highest law',⁷ especially in the struggle against despotism. 'The source of your Duties is in God. The definition of your duties is found in his Law. The progressive discovery and application of this law is the mission of Humanity.'⁸ Crooks saw his mission towards humanity as that of reforming the social condition of working people, especially the poor. Although Mazzanian radicalism influenced Crooks on issues such as poverty, education, women and the family, Empire and war, whenever he approached the question of monarchy his radicalism passed into a profound and reverent conservatism. Crooks' position on war is important because it informs the stance taken by him during the Great War. His views were obviously influenced by Mazzini, who believed democracy carried within it 'the gift of the obligation to life, and if need be readily to die for one's country.'⁹ It influenced Crooks' position on both the conscription campaign during the Great War, and the Military Service Acts of 1916. Lloyd George, who had studied the writings of Mazzini, wrote in *The Times*: 'I doubt whether any man of his generation exercised so profound an influence on the destinies of Europe as did Mazzini. The map of Europe as we see it today [1922] is the map of Joseph Mazzini.'¹⁰

The central aim of both Mazzini's and Crooks' life was to 'make democracy alike in thought and action religious.... it was the idea of political equality ... the claim for political justice.'¹¹ In other words, religion and politics were inseparable. It cannot be over-emphasised that Christianity was the driving force that underpinned Crooks' radicalism. With George Haw he would have agreed: 'There never will be a universal freedom, or universal brotherhood, nor universal peace on this earth, except by the faith in the Universal Father.'¹² Crooks' commitment to the cause of humanity was unshakable. He said: 'The agitation of the Labour Party was a holy agitation', and when things did not go according to plan it

didn't shake his faith in God 'any more than to-days fog shakes my faith in the sun.'¹³

What characterised Crooks' life and values, besides his religiosity, were his formative experiences, which were shaped by the poverty and deprivation of London's East End. It was this environment that had taught him to approach political and social issues from a practical point of view. From the time Crooks entered public life, as a Trustee of the Poplar Vestry in 1886 he was always the pragmatist. There is no doubt Will Crooks was always an emotional, rather than an intellectual, activist. He was not ignorant of theory, nor did he despise it, but he knew it was not his strength.

Since Crooks was one of the earlier Fabians, it can be assumed he had some grasp of socialist political theory. He thought that within the political distribution of class power that was his world, the intellectual activist already had proportionately more power and recognition than those with working-class experience. Therefore given the circumstances, Crooks felt that he could best serve the interests of the working-class through what he considered the greater value of 'common sense' and practicality. It is likely that what contact he had with middle-class theorists, such as Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, Graham Wallas, and Edward Pease, was to lead to a rather deferential acceptance of those elements of liberal theory that most suited him. In Crooks' case, it seems that the Fabians themselves gave priority to political expediency over ideological purity, which confirmed the validity of his approach.¹⁴

Will Crooks was a member of the Fabian Society for thirty years. In December 1910, he gave the Fabians their first electoral victory when he regained the Woolwich seat after losing it in January.¹⁵ It is also important to recognise that Crooks, like his contemporary Thomas Burt (the Lib-Lab MP for Morpeth), was accepted to a great extent 'among the middle and upper classes, in industry as well as governing circles' because of his policies on industrial affairs. He was always a staunch advocate of conciliation, and supported 'a strike only after all other avenues to settlement failed. Compromise and practicality were for [Crooks] the norms in politics.'¹⁶ This was in spite of Crooks' attempt to draft a bill on industrial relations in 1911, which was received unsympathetically by both trade unions and industry. He put a poorly drafted bill before the TUC, which was for him an uncharacteristic tactical error. It is important to be aware that Crooks was not an opportunist. He sincerely believed that everything he did was in the interests of furthering the cause of Labour. He made mistakes, but unlike most politicians, he was usually the first to admit them.

Not since George Haw published his two biographies of Crooks (1907 and 1916) nearly one hundred years ago has there been any meaningful research into his life.¹⁷ The constituencies of Poplar and Woolwich have not been examined in any detail since Paul Thompson's *Socialists, Liberals and Labour* (1967). It is the only notable study of the London progressive movement, the

nature of which precluded a detailed analysis of the influence of independent labour representation on the trade union and labour movement in Poplar. Since the publication of Thompson's work, the early Poplar movement has attracted little attention from Labour historians, apart from John Shepherd, who in his biography, *George Lansbury*, looks at the involvement of Lansbury and Crooks as Poplar Guardians 1893-1907. Although Noreen Branson examines Poplarism and the Councillors' Rate Revolt of 1921, she neglects to recognise that the 'Poplarism' of the 1920s had its roots in the actions of the Poplar Guardians of the 1890s and 1900s. Shepherd acknowledges this link.¹⁸ It is necessary, therefore, to set the record straight by extending the debate around issues previously neglected, especially regarding the struggle for independent labour representation in Poplar 1891-1893, in which Will Crooks played a leading role.¹⁹

In all probability, historians have ignored Crooks' involvement in the trade union and labour movement because he was seen as part of a past generation, older than most of his Labour contemporaries and not worthy of particular note due to the seemingly localised nature of his politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Crooks was a standard bearer of welfare reform. He was known nationally as the man responsible for humanising the Poor Law. It was Crooks who drew to the attention of both the Tory and Liberal Governments that they had a responsibility towards the unemployed, old age pensioners, and the children of the poor. He was responsible for placing the welfare of the working-class in the political domain. His early work helped lay the foundations of what was to become the Welfare State. It is worth pointing out that reformers such as Crooks were debating old age pensions and labour exchanges well before they were implemented in 1908-09.²⁰

On the issue of welfare reform, for instance, historians, by default, usually give the credit to Beveridge, a notion that is misleading. Beveridge was an academic, who viewed poverty and unemployment from a theoretical perspective, and 'first directly encountered the problem of poverty whilst he was employed at Toynbee Hall', Whitechapel, 1903-5.²¹ During this period the Webbs, and the Warden of Toynbee, Canon Barnett, introduced him to the problems surrounding unemployment. By comparison, Crooks had lived through and experienced poverty and the exigencies surrounding unemployment for over fifty years, long before Beveridge promulgated his theories on the subject. In other words Beveridge's ideas on social reform in the Edwardian period were based on, and owed much to, the pioneering work done by those reformers such as Crooks, who were active in the 1880s and 90s.

Will Crooks' formative years and his involvement in the local politics of Poplar and London 1852-1907, together with his election as MP for Woolwich in March 1903, are examined and discussed in Part One. The recurrent themes throughout this period were Crooks' tireless agitation at

the local level against poverty and unemployment, and the campaign for the implementation of independent Labour representation. These demonstrations and protests underline the significance of his contribution towards Labour politics. The support that Crooks received from reformers and trade unionists in the district will be examined to determine what role he played in bringing them together. Questions will be asked; such as in what way was his campaigning style different? Why was it successful, why did a group of Radical Liberals, led by Crooks, and supported by the London Fabians and the New Unions split with the Poplar Liberal and Radical Association (PLRA) over the demand for independent Labour representation?

It will become evident that Crooks' political activity, and the creation of a Labour culture in Poplar, through Crooks' 'College' (the regular Sunday morning meetings at East India Dock Gate), was largely responsible for disseminating a culture based on trade union and labour values. One objective of this study is to show that these meetings were to concern themselves with the task of improving Poplar's environment, and eradicating impoverishment. The Dock Gate meetings, as will be shown, were responsible for placing the issues of poverty, destitution, and unemployment high on the political agenda of New Unionism. This research seeks to appraise the political ideology of Crooks during this transition, and examine his conversion from Radical Liberalism to Fabianism 1891-93. Further, the study aims to show that Will Crooks and the Poplar working-class Fabians were the chief organisers who led the movement to introduce independent Labour representation into the district. They provided the platform and focus that achieved a separate Labour identity, distancing it from the more moderate PLRA. The object of this discussion is to demonstrate that the left Fabian group in Poplar was atypical of Fabianism. They did not believe in permeation but in the organisation of a separate Labour Party, and were led by working-class trade union organisers, such as Ben Tillett, Tom Mann, John Burns, and Will Crooks.

The study shows that in the 1890s and even in the early 1900s, a 'Labour' man could do more for the cause locally than at a national level. As Keith Laybourn and other historians have argued, 'local politics can affect the attitudes of national parties and that to ignore the local perspective is to disregard a vital component in the make-up of national politics.'²² The agitation for independent Labour representation in Poplar 1891-93 exemplifies this view. The Liberal Party came under local pressure nationally because of the emergence of Labour societies, who put forward

the proposal of independent representation. Although there are a number of local studies on the ILP, the contribution to the development of independent Labour representation by local Fabian Societies has been ignored, possibly because of adherence to the orthodox view put forward by some historians that the Fabian Society had no place in the British political tradition. A study of the political agitation in Poplar challenges this view.

Since Crooks 'College' also agitated for the beginning of the construction of the Blackwall Tunnel, its contribution towards the pressure for a vehicular tunnel will be examined. It is argued that the construction of the tunnel not only provided work for the unemployed, but also facilitated the dissemination of radicalism on both sides of the river Thames by enabling activists to attend trade union and political meetings. For example, after the tunnel was opened in May 1897, the trade union and labour movement in Poplar helped the progressive movement in the Tory stronghold of Woolwich to improve its political organisation. In addition, the Poplar Labor League gave financial support to the Crooks Parliamentary Maintenance Fund in 1903. This link between the Poplar Fabians and the Woolwich trade union and labour movement is significant. A theme elaborated upon during the discussion around the campaigns in Poplar and Woolwich for independent Labour representation. The development of the Woolwich trade union, progressive and labour movement, and the Woolwich by-election of 1903, will be the subject of investigation to show that political activists in Woolwich were aware of the influence of the Poplar Labor League upon the politics of Poplar.

The replacement of the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW), by the London County Council (LCC) with the Local Government Act of 1888 (which left the Vestries and District Boards virtually unaffected), has been the topic of a number of studies by contemporary and modern historians.²³ Crooks' municipal career typifies this transformation; his introduction into, and participation in, elected public service began as a Poplar Trustee in 1886. Crooks' election to the Poplar Vestry in 1889, and his contribution to the development of Progressive and Fabian politics in the London County Council (LCC), especially its Progressive administration 1892-1907, is given close attention, especially his work on the Bridges, and the Parks and Open Spaces Committees. Also investigated are Crooks' involvement in the work of the LCC Technical Education Board 1893-1904, together with his terms of office on the Poplar Board of Guardians 1893-1907, Mayor of Poplar 1901-2, and the Metropolitan Asylums Board 1898-1904. The campaign around the building of the Blackwall Tunnel and the Fair Wages Clause in a Poplar and Woolwich context is discussed in detail using primary sources. It is argued that the construction of the tunnel, together with other building

projects, was the catalyst that made possible the fair wage movement, and the campaign for a Works Department to oversee the implementation and regulation of fair wages in the contracts of the LCC. Historians of the LCC have failed to acknowledge this, and by omitting Crooks and the Poplar trade union and labour movement from their studies have failed to perceive a fundamental contribution towards LCC policy.

The part of the book on the Poplar Guardians concentrates on the successful enterprise of Crooks and Lansbury, namely their efforts to humanise the Poor Law, and eradicate 'Bumbledom' from the workhouse. In this context, it is important to recognise that they both brought to the Board something that had been seriously lacking in their deliberations in the past - an understanding of working-class culture, and a commitment to change things for the better. Will Crooks and George Lansbury helped immeasurably to improve living conditions in the workhouse, provided education for children in their care, and set an example to the other guardians of how to treat poor people with dignity.

It is important to recognise that the Poplar Guardians did not involve themselves in the administration of unemployment relief until after Crooks and Lansbury were elected to the Board in April 1893. The local focus of this study will investigate Crooks' contribution towards Poplar's unemployment problems 1892-1905, and the administration of the Poor Law, including the setting up of the London Unemployed Fund in 1904. As early as 1892, Crooks urged Poplar's local authorities to deal with the distress that had arisen from a serious contraction of local industries. He argued that local vestries, local boards, town, and county councils should be allowed, and even encouraged to co-operate with boards of guardians in dealing with the distress. Public works should be introduced to alleviate the distress caused by unemployment, and the stigma of pauperism should not be attached to relief. To understand Crooks' commitment to the problem of unemployment at both the local and national levels, it is important to discuss the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905, and note the local employment and unemployment schemes that followed as a result of its implementation. Crooks' agitation in parliament — after fifteen years of unrelenting struggle to make the State admit a duty to the unemployed — was finally realised when the Balfour government implemented the Unemployed Workman Bill.²⁴

Will Crooks was able to adapt to work with varied interests, while remaining grounded in the local community and its concerns. He was able to exploit a vast range of committees and commissions that came into existence in the 1890s to investigate and alleviate unemployment. Crooks' vision of how to change society came not from abstract theory but from real experience, especially on issues relating to the viability of the Poor Law, and what could be done on a voluntary, private scale for the unemployed.

Thus, Crooks presents a valuable study of shifting public opinion between 1893-1905.

The story of the development of the Woolwich labour movement, and how in the late 1890s, with the support and backing of Will Crooks and the Poplar Fabians, revolves around the campaign for independent Labour representation, which saw Crooks elected Labour MP for Woolwich in 1903. It will explain that the political groundwork and agenda in Woolwich was put in place by a labour movement that were mindful of Crooks' leadership, and the part played by the 'College' in the Poplar militant experience 1891-93. His selection was based on a familiarity with his work of serving the interests of the working-class at both the local and municipal level. The Arsenal Gates meetings provided the focus for educating the workmen of Woolwich. Many historians accept the importance of industrial conflict in creating the climate for independent political action by the working classes.²⁵ In Poplar, such conflict was the Dock Strike of 1889. The agitation for the eight-hour day in the Arsenal, followed by the engineers' lockout, was the precursors to the eventual realisation of independent Labour representation in Woolwich. Historians have not considered the link between the Poplar and Woolwich labour movement, which enabled Crooks' election in 1903. This study will show that the Woolwich labour movement saw Crooks' selection as central to the development of independent Labour representation in the district.

Although Crooks' instinct was always to protect the weak, the helpless and unfortunate, his judgement was sometimes flawed. He was too trusting of other people's motives to help the poor. This was not helped by his ingrained habit of seeing the best in a man's conduct, and not his worst.²⁶ This weakness is exemplified by the mistake he made of remaining Chairman of the Poplar Board of Guardians after his election to Parliament. The majority of guardians were members of the Liberal and Conservative parties, and were out to 'take advantage of [Crooks'] relaxed attention to bring discredit on the Boards' administration.²⁷ They were instrumental in calling upon the Local Government Board to hold a public enquiry accusing Crooks and Lansbury, the two most prominent Labour guardians, of maladministration in 1906. "They were actually held up to reproach and ridicule for faults and follies committed by colleagues who had bitterly opposed their policy at every step."²⁸ Crooks resigned after being found not guilty of any offence by the Enquiry.

The mistake Crooks made in trusting his fellow guardians made him bitter, and suspicious of their motives in relieving pauperism. This can be seen as a contributory factor that influenced Crooks' future attitude towards people, namely Liberal and Tory politicians, whom he may have respected, but did not trust, especially after the events of 1906. Will Crooks' cynicism

towards hostile guardians surfaced sometime later when he referred to them as 'little tin gods'.²⁹ He believed their only interest was to preserve the status quo, and stifle Poor Law reform. This outburst was characteristic of him, but as William Barefoot, Crooks' agent 1905-21, explains there was another side to Crooks' nature that was not perceptible to his casual friends:

With all ... his humour there was a deep strain of sadness in his nature, which made him a peculiarly lonely man. The formative influences of his life, his early struggles, and the loss of loved ones, all tended ... to drive him within himself. Though a great conversationalist, there were outside his family, but a few intimate friends — they can be counted on one hand — who knew the real man.³⁰

These insights into the individuality of Crooks' makeup, given that he was a deeply religious man, reveal how his unwavering and personal belief in God sustained and galvanised him throughout the trials and tribulations of public life.

Discussion in this part of the project has focused on the political development of the trade union, radical and socialist movements in London, and upon Will Crooks' activities within these movements. Nevertheless questions of national political issues have not been ignored, especially regarding those policies that determined and influenced the movement's response to the Irish Question, unemployment, social and economic reform, free trade, imperialism, the franchise, and independent Labour representation.

The themes of unemployment and poverty take up a large part of this investigation. Throughout this study, it will be shown that the resolution of these issues was for Crooks of national urgency, and after 1903, when he was elected to parliament, he was in a stronger position to resolve and continue his agitation against them. Crooks brought to Woolwich and the LRC important skills that he had learnt in Poplar. He was an accomplished political leader, negotiator and conciliator, and an experienced Poor Law chairman, administrator, and school manager. For example, in Poplar 1887-92, Crooks led the campaigns for independent Labour representation and the building of a tunnel at Blackwall. He also through negotiation secured an improved scheme of wages for the tunnel workers: 'It was owing to Mr. Crooks' efforts that a revised schedule of wages was adopted. The result of this was that the contractors paid an additional £26,000 in wages.'³¹ Later as the Member for Woolwich, Crooks' leadership qualities proved invaluable to the Arsenal workers in their agitation against the War Office over the issue of discharges. It was through this protest that he demonstrated to his constituents how extra-parliamentary agitation together with parliamentary pressure could bring about positive results in the face of political opposition.

Crooks believed that the War Office, namely the Ordnance Department, conspired with private interests to undermine direct labour in Woolwich Arsenal. It began, according to Crooks, in 1901, and culminated in the 'Shell Scandal' of 1915, with the creation of the Ministry of Munitions; partly due, it is argued, to Crooks' disclosure of the War Office's incompetence and secrecy. By concentrating on the important issues that affected his constituents and the working-class in general — unemployment, low pay, education, old age pensions, and temperance — it will be shown that Crooks' contribution was significant, in both the local and national contexts, in bringing the aspirations and needs of the working-class and the Labour Party together.

Will Crooks' early ideas on unemployment and the role of Labour suggest that he was a man ahead of his time. He believed the government of the day should be responsible for the unemployed, and provide financial help through the exchequer. Given this, in 1893, he appealed to A. J. Mundella (President at the Board of Trade), pointing out that the government should reclaim land that would provide work for the unemployed: 'just the kind of work to absorb unskilled labour'.³² His recommendations were realised sixteen years later when the Liberal Government implemented the Development Bill, a clause of the 1909 'People's Budget'. In connection with employment schemes, Crooks believed a Department and Minister for Labour ought to be created to officially register the unemployed, and administer work schemes with the support of local guardians and councils. This was the essence of Crooks' argument in the House of Commons during 1904, when along with Keir Hardie; he recommended the setting up of a Labour Ministry to deal with the unemployment problem.³³ A Ministry of Labour was finally set up in December 1916, with John Hodge (Labour MP for Gorton) as Minister.³⁴

Part Two of this study examines Will Crooks' parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities 1903-1921. At the beginning, the MacDonald/Gladstone electoral agreement of 1903 — they met to formulate an electoral arrangement between the LRC and the Liberals — will be discussed to determine whether Crooks' victory at the Woolwich by-election played an influential part in the negotiations. The parliamentary debates around the Licensing Bill of 1904, the General Election and Trades Disputes Act of 1906, the Unemployed Workmen Bills of 1907-8, and the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908, will be assessed to determine if Crooks was able to influence the important issues of the day, especially those that shaped national politics. The General Election of 1906 is examined to establish whether the pact between the LRC and the Liberals delivered and

held together in the provinces. Crooks' role in the consolidation of the Labour Party will also be assessed to determine if he was able to sway the leadership upon the important issues of the day, especially those that shaped national politics. Crooks' extra-parliamentary agitation on behalf, and in defence of, Government workers, especially those that worked in the Woolwich Arsenal, will be a recurrent theme throughout this part of the study. The Arsenal discharge campaigns of 1907-8 will be examined in detail to show that Crooks was alert to the interests and needs of his constituents, and voiced their demands in the House of Commons.

Following this, the People's Budget of 1909, and the general elections of January and December 1910, provide the focus of analysis. Crooks' response to these events will be addressed. Why, for instance, did he welcome the budget, and call for the abolition of the House of Lords? Also the continuing debate on unemployment, and Crooks' contribution, will be examined to discern how far the Liberals kept their promise of introducing a new unemployment policy in 1909. Will Crooks' world cruise, taken for health reasons later that year, meant he was away for the January election – which he lost, only to regain the seat again the following December. This raises the question, was Crooks' absence from Woolwich a significant factor in his defeat? Both Woolwich elections are examined to establish whether Crooks' campaigning style was the secret of his success.

The events of the Constitutional crisis 1910-11, the Votes for Women agitation 1910-14, the Labour unrest 1911-14, and the Irish Home Rule crisis 1912-14, have shaped, and formed, a significant body of the political historiography of this period. However, very little, if anything, has been written about how backbench Labour MPs represented their constituents and the interests of the working-class. It is against this backdrop of political disorder, that the story of Will Crooks' contribution towards ameliorating the social conditions of the working-class, especially the poor, will be viewed. It is important to note that in this period, although Crooks did not contribute to the major debates in any significant way, except on the minimum wage and industrial unrest. He continued to campaign in Parliament on issues that were central to the needs of working people, such as the minimum wage, unemployment, the Poor Law, the feeding of school children, wages, and conditions of Government workers, Old Age Pensions, Elementary Education, and Army and Navy Estimates. This is not to say that Crooks did not have a position on the important questions of the day. He did, but there is no record other than in newspapers and Parliamentary debates on which to base an examination. Thus an investigation of the portentous events of 1911-1914 will help to determine where Crooks stood on them and will further enable an analysis of whether his contributions influenced Labour Party policy throughout this period.

Will Crooks' loyalty to the Government during the Great War will be examined, his patriotism towards the recruitment campaign 1914-15, and his support for the Military Service Bills of 1916; the recruiting campaign included a fifteen-month speaking tour of the country, and a visit to the Front in July 1915. These activities will be found crucial to the understanding of Crooks' patriotic Labourism, and his support for the war effort in the face of disapproval from both the local and wider trade union and labour movement. This criticism also included his brief dalliance with the British Workers' League 1916-17.

Early in 1915 Crooks disclosed the Shell Scandal, and the shortage of the manufacture of munitions. He insisted that the War Office was diverting work away from the Arsenal in favour of private interests. The historiography of this episode has neglected to record Crooks' involvement in publicising this scandal. Will Crooks' input in this dispute was more important than historians have indicated. Throughout the War, he continued to represent the concerns of workers, soldiers, children of the poor, and old age pensioners in the House of Commons. Historians of the period 1910-18, both contemporary and modern, have written little, if anything, about how Labour backbench MPs functioned. They have tended to concentrate their political and historical studies at the macro level — an approach detrimental to explaining how Labour MPs, such as Crooks, and their constituents viewed national political decisions locally. Evidence will show that Crooks was more than just a good constituency MP. He supported and spoke at meetings organised by religious, temperance, trade union, women's, Labour party, electoral reform, and Irish (Home Rule) organisations, throughout his parliamentary life. In addition, the period before the First World War is often looked upon as a golden age, an alleged *belle époque*, but contrary to this perception it was a period of political turmoil, that can only be described as disorderly, and violent. It was a time in which the Lords and women rebelled, there was unprecedented industrial unrest, and Ireland was on the brink of civil war over Home Rule.

It is probably because most historians have tended to focus upon the wider issues such as the Labour unrest, and the Home Rule Crisis, that the matters, which Crooks promoted, have been overlooked. 'Bread and butter' questions were for him crucial, but it seems that for most political historians these did not fit comfortably into national politics. The internecine strife of the Liberal party, with its emphasis upon the political differences between Lloyd George and Asquith, and the intrigues surrounding the questions of Coalition Governments dominate their studies. For them, it seems, the everyday social question was humdrum by comparison. This is probably the explanation why there is nothing on record of any importance that gives an insight into Crooks' feelings on the Liberal leadership. The Liberal Governments of 1906-15, together with Coalition, are looked upon as

Governments of social reform, but little is said about how they were pressured, harassed, and cajoled from below by people such as Crooks to put their ideas on social change into practice. It is the aim of the study to examine this, and to look at the problems and frustrations Crooks faced when trying to voice his concerns. His argument that there was an inextricable link between unemployment, low pay, poverty, and education, will be examined to see whether Crooks' ideas had any lasting influence upon social reform.

Throughout Crooks' public life, he was dogged by ill health – due mainly to physical exhaustion, which was brought about by his overwork in representing the interests of the working-class. During the war, Crooks' health was undermined and finally shattered. His platform work and constant travelling, as well as a major operation, coupled with the shock he suffered from the Germans' bombing of a school in Poplar, were the major causes of Crooks' worsening physical condition between 1917 and 1921. Crooks often attended Parliament against doctors' orders so that he could put forward the concerns of his constituents. Even though he was a shadow of his former self by 1918, Crooks proved to be dependable. Irrespective of his debilitating illness the Woolwich party in recognition of his loyalty and faithful service to the Labour cause, supported his candidature in the 'coupon election' of 1918. It is clear that throughout this period, Crooks struggled physically to fulfil his Parliamentary duties and that after the summer of 1917 his civic work and platform speeches ceased. Will Crooks' voice was to be heard no more in public. He finally resigned the Woolwich East seat in February 1921, and died the following June. Overall the significance of the work of Crooks and others is not so much what they achieved as what they prevented. Given the overwhelming conservative and traditionalist nature of the average working-class person (and Crooks epitomised an average working-class person), who were politically cautious, it is perhaps fitting that he played, with others like him, an important role in ensuring that the Labour movement played a part in the continuity of the British political system rather than becoming a catalyst for revolutionary upheaval.

PART ONE

Local Activist and Labour Pioneer 1852-1907

1

WILL CROOKS OF POPLAR

The district of Poplar is located on the Isle of Dogs peninsular opposite Greenwich, on the north bank of the river Thames, approximately two miles up river from Woolwich. The district covered three and half square miles. It was surrounded and intersected by various waterways, and extending about four miles from north to south and nearly one mile from east to west. With the opening of the West India Docks in 1802 and East India Docks in 1806, the district at the beginning of the nineteenth century concentrated on port and riverside industries. With the coming of the railway in the 1840s, Poplar's economy underwent a marked change. It gradually lost the predominance of sea borne and riverside activities as factories and workshops expanded after 1870-80.¹ From a port and dock area, the district evolved into a mixed economy in which manufacturing played a more significant role.

Poplar, unlike other neighbouring districts, was scarcely affected by the sweatshop system, and not at all by Jewish immigration, as the 1901 Census shows.² In both of these respects, Poplar differed from other parts of the East End. Moreover, not only did one find highly skilled labour in large numbers in the shipbuilding and metal trades, but side by side with these skilled workers was a large mass of low paid unskilled workers, general and dock labourers, and casual workers.³ By 1880 most of the industry carried out in Poplar was not in the small workshops typical of the East End, but in large factories such as Spratts, and Bryant and May, which at peak times each employed nearly two thousand workers.⁴ By 1900, industrial workers who were employed in factories numbered 90 per cent in the area. Poplar came in third place in London in this respect after Woolwich and Greenwich.⁵

A Nonconformist minister, William Lax, who lived in the district, said it was an area 'almost exclusively inhabited by the poor, by those who suffer the meaner miseries of London life', calling it a 'desert unrelieved by any middle class oasis'.⁶ The statistics confirming the general state of poverty at the end of the nineteenth century all show the same thing; the area was typically proletarian.⁷ Charles Booth's survey of poverty and unemployment in 1889

shows that nearly nineteen per cent of families in Poplar were poor or very poor, and also the income of these families was largely reliant on a male workforce who were employed either casually on a day-to-day basis, worked irregularly, or were dependent upon low paid labour.⁸ Given Booth's argument, the condition of employment in Poplar was largely to blame for the level of poverty.⁹ Ben Tillett, secretary of the Tea Operatives' Association during the 1889 Dock Strike, who gave a vivid description of the poverty and squalor of living conditions in the area, endorsed this view. He spoke of the dockers being laid off for three to six months a year because of a depression in trade:

... a capitalist complains of depressed trade; let them come down to the back streets and slums where the "Dockers" live, and they will see, in the misery and squalor, where the depression is felt. It strikes me they would sing another tune then.¹⁰

This area of deprivation was the focus of public attention between 1888-91, when the district was pivotal to New Unionism. The movement began with the Matchgirls' Strike at Bryant and May in 1888, followed in 1889 by the great Dock Strike, during which time 'The Wade's Arms', Jeremiah Street, Poplar, was the headquarters. The area was again brought into the public gaze in 1906, during the dispute over its administration of the Poor Law between the Poplar Guardians and the Local Government Board.

FORMATIVE AND EARLY YEARS

Will Crooks was born into poverty in a little one-roomed house on 6 April 1852, at 2 Shirbutt Street, Poplar, not far from Gough Street, where he lived most of his adult life, until his death in 1921. He was the third of seven children, the son of George and Charlotte Crooks. His early years were dominated by want and sorrow. To make things worse when Crooks was three years old, his father, who was a ship's stoker, lost his arm in a steamship accident. This accident forced his father to give up work, and this mishap, according to Crooks, was when the family's privations began. 'We were so poor', he said, 'that we children never got a drop of tea for months together. It used to be bread and treacle for breakfast, dinner and tea, washed down with a glass of water.'¹¹ With his father unable to work, it fell to Crooks' mother to strive to keep seven children as well as their father. In order to clothe and feed the family Charlotte Crooks suffered the ignominy of being at the mercy of the sweating trade for a long time, at least six years. Crooks recalled: 'I can picture her now as I used to see her when I awoke in the night making oil-skin coats by candle-light in our single room,' and he vowed: "Wait till I'm a man! Won't I work for my mother when I'm a man!"¹²

Crooks' mother broke down under the terrible strain, and since there was no other means of keeping them, she turned to poor relief. The family was