A HISTORY OF THE WORKING MEN'S COLLEGE 1854 - 1954

J. F. C. Harrison

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By

J. F. C. HARRISON

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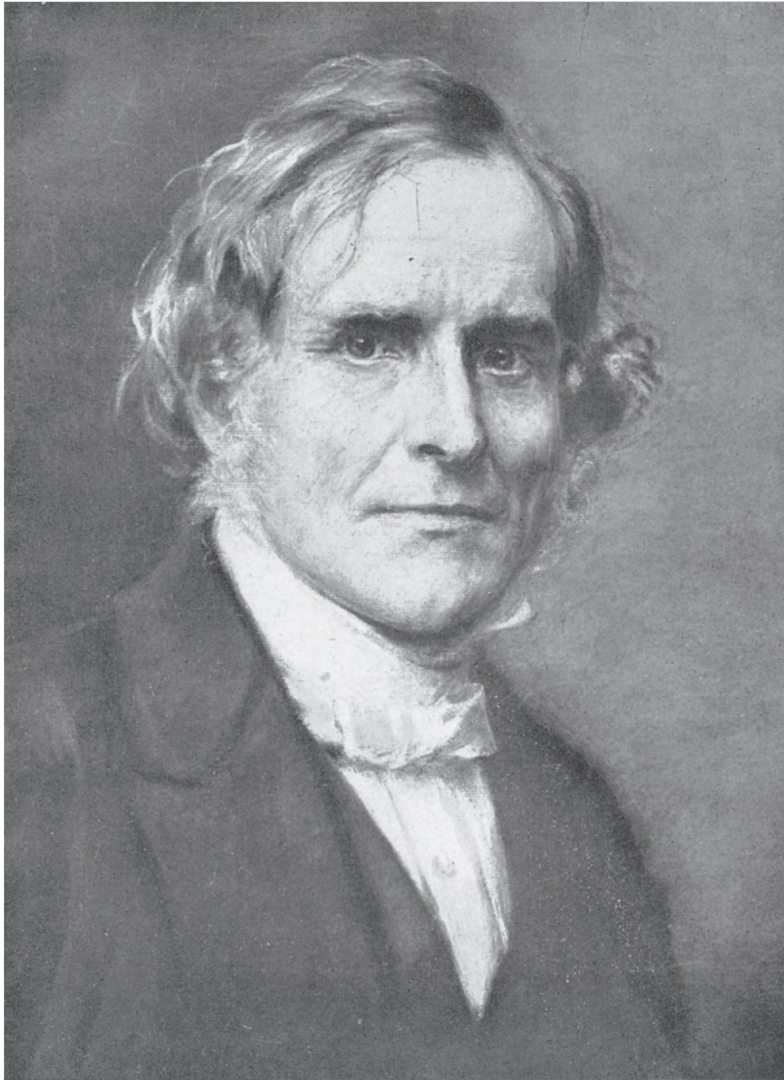

FREDERICK DENISON MAURICE
Founder and first Principal of the Working Men's College

A History of the Working Men's College 1854—1954

by

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'A people will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.'—BURKE.

'Think what we are, or ought to be; a body of men met together for general good—to use longer words—a community associated for education in fellowship.'—*The Working Men's College Magazine*, January 1862

Foreword

BY SIR WILFRID EADY, G.C.M.G.
Principal of the Working Men's College

THIS story of the hundred years of their College is written in the first place for the thousands of students and ex-students, teachers present and past, and friends, of the Working Men's College in St. Pancras. It is the first full-length account of the matter. It is a story of famous men and also of others who have left no memorial; but the author has seen that the College is greater and more enduring than the memory of those who have made it, that it has a life and spirit of its own, and a heart which gathers the affection of all who attend it and holds it for continuing years.

But this is not only a family tale. The College stands out as a distinctive monument of the splendid voluntary social service founded by the Victorians, unchanged in all its essentials yet adapting itself to the demands of each generation of students, and finding voluntary and unpaid teachers to hand on the torch of its tradition; it is a part of the social history of London for a hundred years.

It is the oldest adult educational institute in the country, governing itself, and—not without continued effort—paying for itself, so that it can do what it wants in its own way.

Above all it is not just a place for evening classes; it is a College, with all the ordered corporate life and free companionship that is in the word.

This year when we celebrate our Centenary, we shall hold a

service in the Chapel of Lincoln's Inn, where Maurice was Chaplain. It will be a service of remembrance and thanksgiving, but also of dedication, renewing the proud hope in the motto of the College—*Auspicium melioris aevi.*

WILFRID EADY,
Principal

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York, January 1954 J.F.C.H.

Introduction

THE custom of centenary college histories is on the whole a sound one. All successful institutions, educational no less than others, work out for themselves over a number of years particular attitudes, methods, and policies with regard to their own work and towards society at large. They seek stability rather than innovation: they prefer to absorb and adapt rather than consciously change: they become (even those with the most radical of intentions) essentially conservative bodies. Time mellows many of their original aims, and the experience of years brings them an accumulation of empirical wisdom. In this way they build for themselves a tradition. This is their greatest strength; and since it can only come after many years of work well done, a centenary is an appropriate time to consider it.

A tradition is only of value, however, if it is a living tradition; and it can only be kept alive if, from time to time, there is a vigorous questioning of it, an examination of its relevance to contemporary problems, and a re-statement of aims and purposes. Only with a firm grasp of the principles upon which the tradition is based can it be applied to contemporary needs. Such an examination of principles inevitably means a searching of past history; and, since the process is not always an entirely comfortable one, there will always be found those who argue, 'Why bother about the past? We have plenty to do in the present. Let us get on with the practical job in front of us and not waste time and energy in dragging out forgotten skeletons.' With such 'practical' sentiments all active teachers and students will feel much sympathy. There is so much to do, so little time to do it in, and so few hands willing to

do it. And yet we cannot really evade the problem. For how can we know where or how to go forward, if we do not know where we are at present? And how can we know that until we know where we have come from? Before we can plan the next stage of our journey we must be able to orientate the map. It will be the aim of this history to provide some of the materials for such an orientation as well as to be a commemorative volume.

There is, of course, something rather arbitrary in the decision to write the history of a college at the end of its first twenty-five or fifty or hundred years. Like our congratulations to a centenarian we may allow our wonder at his mere survival at all to such a great age to eclipse all thought of what he has or has not achieved during that span. And, indeed, its mere survival in anything like its original form is in itself quite sufficient to merit special attention for the Working Men's College. It alone, of all the colleges started as a result of the Working Men's College Movement, has survived intact; no Mechanics' Institute or Adult School can trace such an unbroken tradition of sustained adult educational effort; and later movements, such as the Workers' Educational Association, have yet to prove their capacity for equally sustained existence.

But the significance of the College does not lie in its achievement of mere survival, remarkable as that is. It is, firstly, as a link in the chain of development of adult educational institutions in England, as an important chapter in the history of the Adult Education Movement, that the College claims serious attention. At least two of the Founders, F. D. Maurice and R. B. Litchfield, saw the matter in this light. The Working Men's College was to them clearly a successor to the Mechanics' Institute Movement. Started in 1823, to provide scientific instruction for artisans, the Mechanics' Institutes had by 1854 long exhausted their original energies. There was a widespread feeling among contemporaries, shared by Samuel Smiles no less than by F. D. Maurice, that the Institutes had failed. With one or two notable exceptions they had not succeeded in attracting any significant proportion of the working class, and instead had catered for the lower middle-class clerks and shopmen. Instead of classes in science their main activity had all too often been the provision of popular lectures and amusing social activities; and democratic control of the Institutes had been frustrated by middle-class dominance on the boards of directors.

To Maurice it appeared that the Mechanics' Institutes did rather 'graze the surface of men's minds than penetrate into them'; and Litchfield was disgusted by their constant preaching from the text, 'Knowledge is Power', and their daily exhortation, 'improve your mind that you may rise in the world'. The Working Men's College was a reaction to this earlier development in adult education; it set forth with new ideas, with new methods, and with a different type of student and teaching body. It introduced a new element which had been lacking in the Mechanics' Institutes, namely, a more spiritual analysis of education: and this was embodied in a new form of organization, the College.

Later developments in the field of Adult Education did not leave the Working Men's College unaffected. With the rise of the University Extension Movement from Cambridge, the College turned its attention in that direction, and in 1873 even went so far as to consider turning itself into a centre for Cambridge University Extension lectures in London. When out of the University Extension Movement the Workers' Educational Association was born in 1903, the College again favoured the new organization. Through the Christian Social Union at Oxford, founders of the W.E.A., such as William Temple and Charles Gore, were directly linked both with the tradition of F. D. Maurice and with the persons of two other Founders of the College, J. M. Ludlow and Thomas Hughes. And in 1909 the first University Tutorial Class in the College was begun. The Working Men's College is thus to be considered not as an isolated institution but as part of the wider movement for Adult Education. It represented in 1854 a new stage in that movement—a response to new needs and demands; and in its turn it has lived to see yet other adult educational institutions develop to meet changed conditions and different ideals.

The College can be considered secondly as part of that great development of Voluntary Bodies, ranging from powerful Trade Unions and large Friendly Benefit Societies to local Temperance Societies and humble Mutual Improvement groups, which did so much to mitigate the worst excesses of mid-Victorian industrialism, and which have characterized so distinctively the form of British liberal democracy. The spirit behind this plethora of voluntary associations was a peculiar blend of Samuel Smiles's middle-class doctrine of Self-Help, with the Owenite teaching of the need for

the working classes to attain independence through their own co-operative efforts. The men who joined together in these various voluntary bodies, and who contributed both from their leisure and their pockets, did so from a variety of motives; but in any case their allegiance and purposes were thereby proclaimed. When in 1854, after a working day of twelve hours, a North London working man voluntarily gave up his scant leisure to a class in the Working Men's College, and, moreover, paid an entrance fee of 2*s.* 6*d.* plus a class fee of between 2*s.* 6*d.* and 5*s.* 0*d.* per term, out of his weekly wage of 30*s.* 0*d.*, he was doing something of great social significance. One of the original students, John Roebuck, a young wood-carver of twenty-three, recently married, and with a small family, tells in his reminiscences how hard he found it at this time to afford even these modest fees. The idea that leisure was anything more than the perquisite of those who had attained a considerable measure of worldly success, that the working class existed for any purpose other than to work, was only just being broken down by such pioneers as F. D. Maurice and the Founders. In joining the Working Men's College an artisan was therefore doing more than just getting a bit of schooling, or passing a quiet hour innocently. He was, in effect, making a quiet but effective protest against the society in which he found himself. His social philosophy and his ideals were proclaimed.

But in both students and teachers a third aspect of the Working Men's College is apparent, namely, its significance as a personal influence in the lives of many thousands of working men and many scores of young men from the Universities. This is undoubtedly the most difficult, but nevertheless in some ways the most important aspect of the history of the College to assess. It is, by its very nature, a purely individual thing, the main evidence of which must be the silent testimony of those thousands of students, who, for the last hundred years, have attested, by their continued membership, to the value of the College to them. All but a few of the early students, with their hopes and aspirations, have remained inarticulate; they are unrecorded, except as names and addresses in the early registers. But of those who have left any record, the testimony of the value of the College in their lives is unanimous. George Tansley, the greatest of all the College students, spoke for many before and since, when, as early as January 1859, he said at

the General Meeting that the College had 'now become a second home to him'.

In the pages which follow, these three aspects of the College—as an institution for adult education, as a voluntary body, and as a personal influence—will be found inseparably intertwined. They are separated here only for the purpose of analysis. The history of the College will inevitably in part be concerned with forms of organization, constitutions, and programmes. These are the aspects of it which survive most fully in documentary form, and which are therefore the most readily accessible to the historian. But in reality they are only the dry bones, essential for life indeed, but of themselves quite dead. It is only when we remember that these constitutions and forms of organization were the embodiment of the aims and hopes, and the compromises arising out of the differences of living men, that we can begin to appreciate the work of past students and teachers. The material for this is not so easily found in documentary form; it has to be ferreted out from obscure corners, and sometimes inferred from chance asides or oblique references. But it is essential for that most difficult of all historical tasks, the full apprehension of the ethos of a past age. It will not be easy to appreciate the spirit of the College in the past; but it is a task from which we must not on that account shrink.

1848–1854

I. Origins

Not all who seem to fail, have failed indeed;
Not all who fail have therefore worked in vain:
For all our acts to many issues lead;
And out of earnest purpose, pure and plain,
Enforced by honest toil of hand or brain,
The Lord will fashion, in his own good time,
(Be this the labourer's proudly-humble creed)
Such ends as, to his wisdom, fitliest chime
With his vast Love's eternal harmonies.
There is no failure for the good and wise:
What though thy seed should fall by the way-side
And the birds snatch it;—yet the birds are fed;
Or they may bear it far across the tide
To give rich harvests after thou art dead.

[MATTHEW INGLETT BRICKDALE] Preface to *Politics for the People, 1848*

THERE is a need for all educational history to be directly related to its social context; but especially is this so for adult education. Unlike other forms of education, where attendance is, in varying degrees, compulsory, the motives of the voluntary adult student are varied. To answer adequately the question, Why do they (or did they) come? would require an essay which would take us beyond the bounds set for this history. Clearly in each individual case, whether student or teacher, the reasons which prompted a man to join and then to continue at the College were diverse, and closely related to his particular interests, personality, and background. But certain general trends, which affected men in the mass, can be traced; and for an appreciation of these we have to turn to contemporary social conditions. Although the bewhiskered, tight-trousered gentlemen teachers (who look