

ROCHDALE POLITICS AND METHODIST SCHISM
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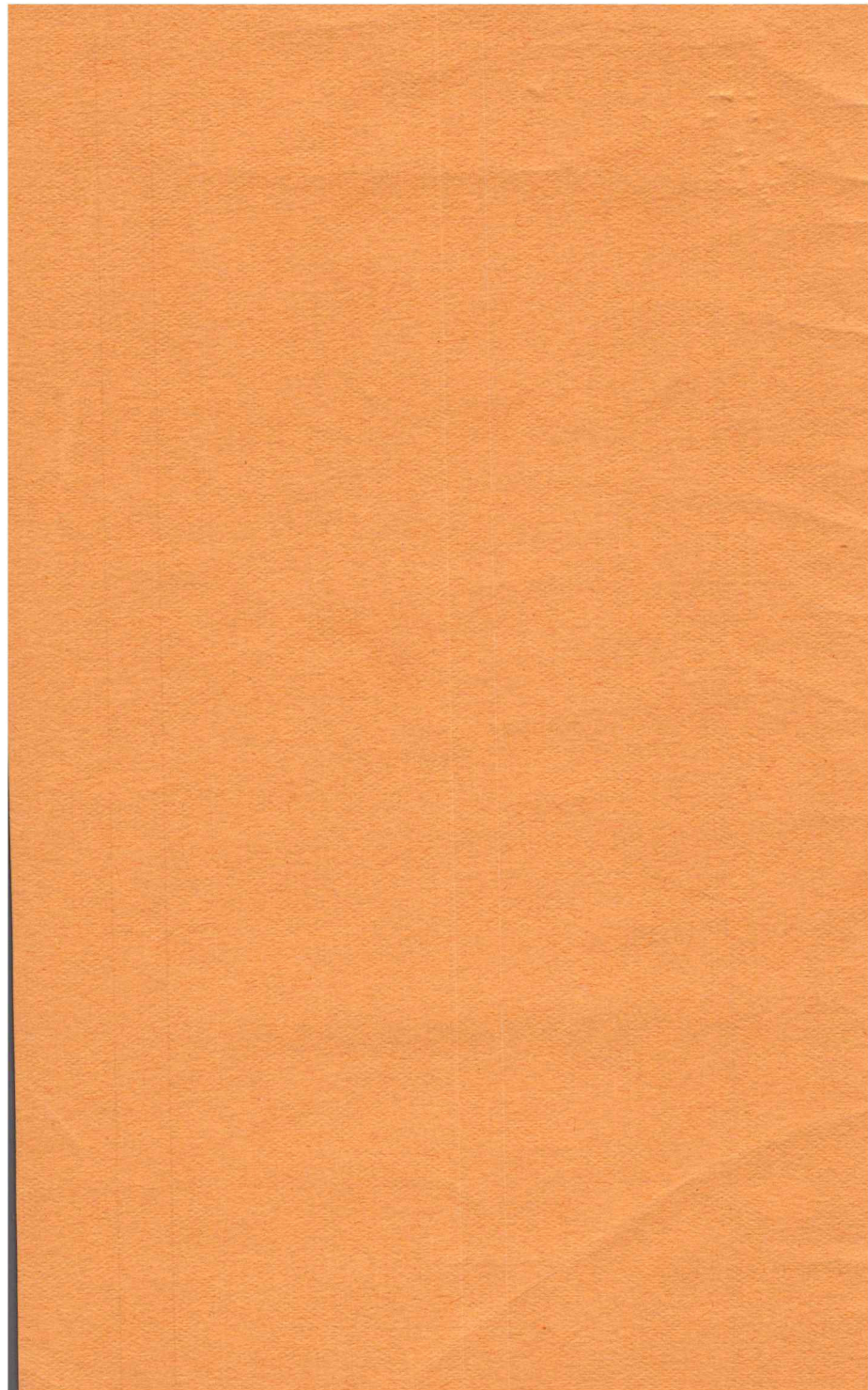
See pp 17- 20
for references to
John Ashworth.



**Rochdale Politics and Methodist
Schism**

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**WARDLE
SOCIETY**



R O C H D A L E P O L I T I C S

and M E T H O D I S T S C H I S M

by D A V I D A G O W L A N D .

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INTRODUCTION.

On October 1st., 1835, the Rev. John Sumner and T.P. Bunting hurried to Rochdale with an injunction from the Vice-Chancellor's court to forbid any meeting on Wesleyan premises unless conducted by one of the circuit ministers. The use of this device signified the climax of a series of incidents in which a majority of trustees, leaders and members at the wealthy Union Street chapel had attempted to discuss questions relating to the newly formed Grand Central Association, later called the Wesleyan Methodist Association. The ultimatum delivered by Sumner and Bunting proved sufficient to push the recalcitrant Rochdale Wesleyans one stage further in their revolt.

They had intended to convene a large public meeting at Union St., in order to discuss the Association's principles. However, with the arrival of the injunction, the meeting was transferred to the premises of West. St. Baptist chapel and St. Stephen's church (Lady Huntingdon's Connexion). The final breach had been made and the largest Wesleyan circuit in Lancashire reeled under a blow which had far reaching consequences. Apart from the resignations of 11 trustees, Wesleyan membership dropped sharply from 1,850 in 1834 to 745 in 1836, whilst the Rochdale Association boasted a membership of 1,710 in 1838.

The purpose of this paper is not to examine the causes of the Wesleyan agitation but rather to assess some of its effects on the life of one town. On a national scale, the controversy which raged in Wesleyan Methodism during this period focused attention on the paradoxical figure of Dr. Samuel Warren. After initial acquiescence in the Theological Institution

scheme, Warren made a volte-face and decided to challenge the appointment of the Rev. Jabez Bunting as President. The publication of the 'Remarks' and the formation of the Manchester Association (November 1834) led to Warren's expulsion from the ministry and the foundation of the Wesleyan Association. Spurred on by militant laymen like Robert Eckett (London), David Rowland (Liverpool) and John Petrie (Rochdale) Warren found himself at the centre of a lay revolt with which he had few sympathies. He had been caught in a web spun by professional religious agitators and he cut a very sorry figure as he retired from the Association and became an Anglican clergyman.

The secession of 1835 robbed the Rochdale Wesleyan Society of a majority of its leaders, severely reduced its congregations and necessitated the use of trustees who resided as far apart as Manchester and Halifax. In contrast, the Association flourished with a profusion of leaders who possessed wealth, eagerness and zeal. The Baillie St. share-holding system provided a curious but effective way of organising a united body. Stability was the prerequisite of a successful venture. Furthermore, the Associationists soon realised that they had to evangelise in order to survive as a viable form of religious life. They also recognised that if the principles of 1835 were to be handed down to the next generation, then the antagonism and bitterness of that year should not be allowed free play in case the Association's principles became irrelevant and resulted in an idle form of nonconformity.

At most points, the Rochdale Reformers established a tradition which differed remarkably from the ethos of Wesleyan Methodism, they steadfastly supported the temperance movement at a time when the Wesleyans steered clear of such an organisation. Secondly, they cut loose from the

Wesleyan respect for the Established Church by their advocacy of disestablishment and participation in the fierce anti-church rate contest of 1840. Thirdly, the Associationists took a keen interest in local politics and many of their number entered the council chamber, in the latter half of the C19. On the other hand, the Wesleyans were unable to make any large contribution to civic life simply because they lacked capable men who were prepared to support the right political party. In fact, the fundamental differences between the two groups are best exemplified in the parliamentary politics of the town.

PART 1.

One of the fallacies in any study of nineteenth century Wesleyanism is to assume that the period 1849 to 1857 forms an interlude between the second and third acts of a play. What is called the age of Bunting is portrayed as a period of secession, strict ministerial authority and persistent attempts to uphold the outmoded 'No Politics' rule. With considerable ease, some students of Wesleyan history have argued that prior to 1849 the Wesleyans invariably voted for the Tory party and that in succeeding years they gradually switched their allegiance to the Liberals. It has also been maintained that because the Warrenite and Reform agitations followed periods of political turmoil - the Reform Bill of 1832 in the first case and the year of revolutions and revived Chartism in the second - they were necessarily influenced by the spirit of the age. Correct or incorrect, these views are dependant on no exhaustive analysis of electoral records, and although this paper does not set out to

give a detailed study of information from such sources, it is possible to throw some light on the electoral behaviour of the Wesleyans and the Associationists in a specific area.

Despite the often half-hearted attempt of the Wesleyan Conference to uphold the 'No Politics' Rule, this body of ministers could not prevent the growing strength of the Wesleyan vote. In the localities, the press bore witness to the political voice of the Wesleyans and in his novel 'Coningsby' Disraeli wrote of a setting which might almost have been Cl9th Rochdale:-

"Tadpole... of larger grasp of mind than Taper, with more of imagination and device... was coquetting with a manufacturing town where he was to succeed by the aid of the Wesleyans, of which pious body he had suddenly become a devoted admirer."

However, even Taper acknowledged the injection of new blood into English political life and declared that he would sooner be "supported by the Wesleyans than by all the Marquesses in the peerage."

To which political party did the Wesleyans and the Associationists give their respective votes? At Rochdale the question received an answer beyond all doubt and the Associationists, at least, fostered a political liberalism, or what some preferred to call radicalism, which pervaded every facet of the town's life. In short, their political philosophy combined the old Whig stress on civil liberty and the Dissenters' emphasis on the primacy of conscience in religion and politics.

The nineteenth century political history of Rochdale shone with the achievements of two outstanding men - - John Bright, who lived there and Richard Cobden who represented the borough between 1859 and 1865. Of the 18 parliamentary elections between 1832 and 1895, the liberals to use a general and comprehensive term, scored 15 victories, whilst the Conservatives could only muster three and these on occasions when their opponents suffered from internal disagreements, e.g. the 1835 election with its Reform and Radical candidates, and the controversy over the Crimean War in the 1857 election. In the first parliamentary election of 1832, Rochdale returned the Reform candidate John Fenton in opposition to John Entwistle (Tory) and James Taylor (Radical). Since this election is the only one before the catastrophic events of 1835, it is interesting to observe the purely Wesleyan reaction to party politics. The tables below give a fair reflection of political opinion within the Wesleyan and Associationist communities. In numerical terms, the sample contains approximately 1/3rd of the total voting strength, and although this figure is small, it does not detract from the general impression which can be derived from such statistics since the persons concerned were selected at random.

Analysis of the votes registered by known Wesleyans and Associationists (Most of whom were either trustees, class leaders or local preachers) 1832 election (purely Wesleyan votes)

John Fenton (Reformer)	13
John Entwistle (Tory)	5
James Taylor (Radical)	3

1837 (bye-election)

John Fenton (Reformer)	.....	25
Clement Royds (Tory)	.....	5
Neutrals	.....	2

1841

William Sharman Crawford (Reformer)	..	22
James Fenton (Tory)	.....	6
Neutrals	...	0

1852

Edward Miall (Reformer)	.....	21
Sir Alexander Ramsay (Tory)	.....	3
Neutrals	...	3

1857

Edward Miall (Reformer)	.....	10
Sir Alexander Ramsay (Tory)	.....	3
Neutrals	...	1

In spite of the insignificant nature of these figures in comparison with the whole electorate (700 in 1832, 1100 in 1857), it is possible to deduce certain tentative conclusions. First, the wholly Wesleyan vote of 1832 reveals that those members who seceded from Union Street chapel in 1835 did not change their political opinions overnight. Secondly, this table illustrates the enlargement of Liberal support alongside a persistent core of Tory votes. The latter consisted solely of Wesleyans whose political affiliations were strengthened by the events of 1835. Indeed, it is significant that James Booth, the only Rochdale Wesleyan who managed to play a part in local political life, was a convinced Liberal. Consequently,

the leaders of the post-1835 Union St. society were sure of their political loyalties until mid-century when they either remained neutral or threw in their lot with Miall. In this later period, the Wesleyan Reform movement induced several Wesleyans to align themselves with Miall's platform. For example, Richard Baker, a Union St. trustee and Staunch Wesleyan voted for a Tory candidate in 1832, 1839 and 1841 but supported Miall in 1852. Likewise, Christopher Barker, a leading Wesleyan Reformer in the town, displayed the same electoral behaviour and switched to Miall in 1852.

Between 1832 and 1852, the most important parliamentary elections occurred in 1837 when the town was the scene of a bye-election on the death of John Entwistle and also a general election following the death of William IV. Both contests caused considerable interest and fierce electioneering. In the first place the Tory victory of 1835 meant that the Liberals were determined to recapture the seat and this ensured a keenly fought contest. Secondly, the election took place in the shadow of the 1835 secession which had made an impact on the town and had thrown a new element into the religious, political and social milieu.

In 1837, both political parties tried to gain the support of the Wesleyans and Associationists and attached great importance to their efforts. They recognised the Methodist strength in the town as well as the new order which had emerged as a result of 1835. Thus, many of the political squibs, addresses and pamphlets were addressed to this particular

section of the electorate. The Tories aimed to secure the Wesleyan vote, for what it was worth, as they feared that the events of 1835 might encourage a certain amount of political neutrality. They need not have worried because the few remaining Wesleyans faithfully cast their votes for the Tory candidate. Nevertheless Tory propaganda also attempted to win votes from the Associationists, hence one address from 'A townsman of Rochdale' commented on Wesley's attitude towards the Established Church:-

"Let the religious man, especially the follower of Wesley, pause, ere they advance a step further, in opposition to that Establishment, which he so justly honoured, or against that Altar he so devotedly loved. Let the admirers of Clarke, and the disciples of those consistent and shining Lights prove their respect to departed worth....and walk in the paths of Obedience and Loyalty..."

The subtle appeal and religious undertones of this type of literature showed that the Tories were not interested solely in the Wesleyan vote. Clearly, they dared to hope that one or two wayward Associationists, who regretted their departure from the Wesleyan fold, would be prepared to make amends by voting Tory. In spite of strife and contention within the Wesleyan society, John Wesley still remained a pre-eminent position in the Association as the fountainhead of the Methodist Doctrinal emphases. In this sense, the writer of the above passage used Wesley as a means to procure Associationist sympathy.

However, the passing reference to Dr. Adam Clarke probably had a greater effect since Clarke's name caused all kinds of emotional reactions. The Wesleyan Conference's treatment of Clarke had occasioned some degree of dismay, particularly in Liverpool and to a lesser extent in Rochdale. Clarke had his own peculiar and private views on the way in which Conference had succumbed to the domineering personality of Jabez Bunting. Consequently, Clarke became one of the Association's idols and his name was revered alongside that of Wesley's. Likewise, Clarke was held in great respect by the Wesleyan Reformers. Indeed, James Everett was one of his devoted admirers. A member of the Association who read the above address, might therefore have been tempted to vote for the Tory candidate since Clarke was portrayed as a man who had a high respect for the Church of England and the Tory party. In point of fact, he had been a staunch Whig.

Throughout the election campaigns of 1837, the Rochdale Tories tried to make political capital out of the cause of the Established Church. Cries of 'The Church in danger' resounded throughout the decade, and for the Tories this presented a convenient rallying point. In Rochdale they failed to discern the real differences between Union St. and Baillie St. in regard to the disestablishment issue. The Associationists soon figured prominently in the campaign to reduce any semblance of authority possessed by the Parish Church. However, the church rate battle and glebe lands controversy belonged to

later years, and so the Tories were inclined to treat the Association as a source of political support. In an address to the 'Wesleyans of Rochdale' (the title is misleading because it included Associationists) they magnified the issue with yet another reference to the Church-State question:-

"...the dissenting candidate (i.e. Fenton) must, according to his profession, vote for the separation of Church and State, and a breaking down of all Establishments to the Voluntary System..."

The writer, a Wesleyan, made several overtures to the Association and bound up the latter's prosperity with the future of Protestantism which "was never in more imminent danger than at this moment". And yet, most of these appeals did not gain access to Associationist ears and were largely ineffectual in the attainment of their main objective. Wesley's pronouncements were always open to various interpretations, and the state of panic over the future of Protestantism seemed unreal and irrelevant to members of a new religious denomination.

In the two elections of 1837, John Fenton the Reform candidate was returned on both occasions (proposed at the hustings by a leading figure in the Association - George Ashworth, a flannel manufacturer). During the second election campaign, the Tory candidate, Ramsay, worked hard to gain Wesleyan support before and after the election, and even attended the anniversary services at Union Street

chapel although the weak state of the society scarcely made his visit worthwhile. Certainly, a few Wesleyans wavered slightly in their political allegiances despite Tory efforts to identify their prosperity with the salvation of the Established Church. In contrast, Tory hopes of weaning the Associationists away from the Reform platform were quite unfounded. The Baillie Street members advocated Reform principles and threw themselves vigorously into the cut and thrust of political life. With the secession of 1835 still a topic of conversation, one pamphleteer, probably Oliver Ormerod, a well known dialect writer and member of the Association, took the opportunity to pen a satirical poem on the Wesleyan attitude to the 1837 bye-election. In this context, it is worth rescuing from the obscurity of a poll book:-

Beelzebub's Message to his friend Jabez.

I send this, friend Jabez to tell thee
that I,

On a visit for business, will call bye
and bye,

Meanwhile, do not fail, I beseech thee,
to send

Such a mandate to Rochdale as I recommend.

Bid each of thy servants who values his
place,

In the eyes of his Master would wish to
find grace,

To be and bestir him, and do what he can
To send Tory Royds as a Parliament man.

If any poor Brother or Friend be so weak,
As cause for the change in his conscience
to seek,
Press him hard, nor give him time to recover
his strength,
But beat out his conscience to CONFERENCE
LENGTH.

Our principal friends I've no doubt will be
true,
Their praises in Churches again we'll renew,
Should others less Orthodox, dare to refuse,
Vote with or leave us, now take which you
choose.

Do this now friend Jabez, t'will oblige even
me,
And strengthen the powers I've given to thee,
May'st thou like the Pope hold the conscience
of men,
And wear lawn in full length e're I write
thee again."

With a mordant pen, the writer has recreated the spirit of 1835 in a dramatic form. A contemporary could not be deceived by the intention of the poem nor unaware of its hostile undercurrents. The writer is merely transferring the issue from a religious to a political plane and in doing so echoes some of the spoken and unspoken grievances of both the Associationists and the later Reformers. Jabez Bunting, "the prime minister who never went out of office" is set firmly in his place as the "Master" and controlling influence within the Wesleyan Conference. Furthermore, he is portrayed as a Tory which in itself is a debatable point although he certainly shared no sympathies with the political inclinations of the Rochdale Associationists.

Apart from the personal characteristics of Bunting, the writer's main intention is to castigate Conference for its refusal to listen to the demands of its laity. In short, the Wesleyan tradition, the doctrine of the ministry and the power of Conference are, according to the writer interpreted by one man - Jabez Bunting. The "principal friends," the lay lords of Manchester, Liverpool, and London appear satisfied with the organisation whilst others "less Orthodox", i.e. the Associationists, chafe under the stringent control of a policy which has been considerably altered by Conference since the great contracts of 1795 and 1797. In fact the fourth verse of this poem contains the real cri de coeur of all those reformers past, present and future who attempt to agitate for a reform of Wesleyan discipline. In common with the Protestant Methodists and the Wesleyan Reformers, the Association received the same answer from Conference. Basically, Conference maintained that Wesleyan Methodism was a voluntary body and that as such, those members who found fault with its organisation were free to leave. Against this fixed position, no so-called reformers were able to make any headway. They were left with no choice or alternative but to sever their connections:- "Vote with or leave us, now take which you choose."

Naturally, many of the allegations in the poem were unfair and exaggerated, but the writer's purpose was to score a

political point rather than give a dispassionate account of Wesleyan Methodism. Nevertheless, the writer's sentiments poignantly illustrated the reasons why the Associationists had found their position in the Wesleyan connexion intolerable and untenable. Their departure was a welcome relief to both sides.

Besides the Associationists, the second election of 1837 provided the Rochdale Reformers with an opportunity to snatch a handful of votes from the Wesleyans. James Booth, the leader of Rochdale Wesleyanism in later years, was a case in point, and although his father and brothers joined the Association, he remained loyal to the Wesleyan cause. Even so, Wesleyan affiliations did not prevent continued support for the Reform party although Booth was a moderate Liberal who had little in common with the aggressive and pugnacious radicalism of some Associationists. A further pamphlet in the 1837 bye-election demonstrated that a few Wesleyans fought shy of the Tory vote and tended to agree with the Reformers on the Church-State question. In an address to the Wesleyan electors of Rochdale 'A Genuine Wesleyan Methodist of the town' saw fit to treat the question in a manner totally foreign to Conferences regard for the mother church. Wesley was presented as an opponent of the Established Church, and the writer concluded his address with a reference to an issue which soon came to the forefront of the town's life:-

"the Political Opinions of the Liberal candidate, Mr. Fenton, approach far

nearer to those of the founder of Methodism, than the sentiments of his opponent Mr. Royds, who would enforce the payment of Church rates, even at point of Bayonet..."

Curiously enough, Royds called out the troops during the Church rate contest of 1840.

The 1837 elections were important because they laid down the political pattern of the Wesleyan and Associationist bodies. The Wesleyan rump at Union St. rarely faltered in its support for the Tories whilst Baillie St. contained a remarkable phalanx of eminent men which in terms of political considerations was guided by Reform principles. The Reform programme of 1837 suited the needs of the Associationists because Fenton pledged himself to the abolition of the corn law and the church rate. Likewise, in later years they approved of the other candidates like Crawford, Miall and Cobden for whom some of the leading Associationist families, i.e. the Petries and Ashworths were amongst the chief backers. As Oliver Ormerod rightly observed in one of his literary works:- "Most of those who go to the Association chapel are Radicals, there are hardly any Tories amongst us." Undoubtedly in the 1830's they were Radicals whilst by 1870 they had become stalwart supporters of Gladstonian Liberalism. They were, therefore, protagonists of the Liberal Party as it appeared in 1868 rather than adherents of the Whig administration during the 1830's. Hence, they have been called a variety of names ranging from democratic leaders to municipal

socialists twenty years before Joseph Chamberlain, although they preferred to call themselves Rochdale Radicals of a respectable kind.

The leading Rochdale Associationists i.e. George Ashworth, John Petrie, Thomas Booth belonged to a well-defined class of Nonconformists whose political and business interests dominated the life of the town. Their ideas pervaded its atmosphere. During the 1830's many of the young Associationists (Baillie St. possessed a remarkably young congregation) derived a political philosophy from the Rochdale Reform Association founded in 1834 as a means to heal the gash between the Radicals and Reformers. Within this body Radical and Reform elements managed to find a common platform which had few ties with the Whig party. The fusion of these two parties produced a dynamic movement which drew a man like Bright closer to Chartism than to the Whig administrators of the 1830's. However, Bright did not play the role of the young rebel, at least in local affairs, but acted as the spokesman for the young men of Rochdale whose fathers had transformed the industrial patterns of the town. The political views had incalculable social and economic effects particularly in the alleviation of distress and an enlightened approach to the employer-employee relationship.

The discussions and debates of the Reform Association helped to create a Liberal stranglehold on Rochdale. In 1841 with the return of a Tory government, the Reformers' majority in Rochdale

increased as compared with that at the second 1837 election. Indeed, until 1857 the Reformers controlled the Parliamentary politics of the town. With the emergence of a recognisable Liberal party, the political attitudes of the Associationists (Now United Methodists) underwent perceptible change. In short, they steered clear of John Bright's radicalism and became staunch Gladstonian Liberals. On occasions when Bright found fault with Gladstone's foreign policy or solutions to the Irish problem, the Associationists loyally followed Gladstone on the 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform programme. In their view, Gladstone had transformed the vision of the 1830's into a living reality. As such, the Associationists had the fortunate experience of watching their youthful visions become part of the English political life. During the 1830's, they knew little of the Whig magnates and cared even less for their Whiggery. George Ashworth, a man of immense wealth, shared few common characteristics with either a Whig magnate or a Manchester millowner. Instead, one of his obituarists pointed to the mainspring of his political and social life by calling him "A progressive and consistent reformer." Similarly most of the obituaries of Rochdale Associationists provide a comprehensive history of political liberalism in its most aggressive form. With monotonous regularity, they illustrate the transition from the radicalism of youth to the mellow liberalism of later life.

PART TWO.

Political considerations apart, the Rochdale Associationists of the 1830's were alienated from the Wesleyans in a number of ways. In the first place, the

instigators of the 1835 secession belonged to a generation which had cut its political teeth on the Reform Bill of 1832. The history of 19th Rochdale was mainly a display of how this generation spread its talents, imagination and ambition over every sphere of the town's life. Hence in the early 1830's, the young Wesleyans were full of ideas and impatient of the control of the Wesleyan Conference. In age and temperament they were very similar. For example, in 1832, Oliver Ormerod, the Liberal with considerable literary gifts, was 21 years old; Edward Taylor, the pioneer of Rochdale's sanitary improvements and aptly called an early municipal socialist, was 19, whilst John Ashworth, founder of the Chapel for Destitute, was the same age. Intimate friends of John Bright, they came from families which had flowed into Rochdale at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

At Baillie Street these same men created an image of themselves in an ecclesiastical setting. The newly formed Association was not an experiment in democratic church government. Instead the 1835 secession was basically a question of power transferred from a compact ministerial body to an equally close-knit group of laymen. The Wesleyan and Associationist structures of government remained almost identical except in so far as the latter impinged on the Wesleyan doctrine of the ministry. The real transformation lay in the reversal of roles. Within the Association, the itinerant ministry came under the close scrutiny of self-conscious middle-class laymen. In common with the laymen, the itinerant ministers had to fight for a seat in the Annual Assembly.

At Rochdale, changes of this nature had widespread effects. Possibly the most important of these was that Baillie St. accentuated social class division that had been latent in the Wesleyan society. As a result, the Association's appeal was confined to a predominantly middle class population. The wide social spectrum displayed in the composition of the Wesleyan congregation was not so apparent in the Associationist counter-parts. Furthermore, the pioneers of the Rochdale Association were brash, blunt, forthright and outspoken men, slightly arrogant and doubtless intolerable to those of insufficient wealth and status to enjoy the recently gained independence. Although imbued with liberal views, they seemed incapable of avoiding a dogmatism and inflexibility which could not brook opposition.

As Baillie St. orientated itself towards a middle class congregation, so it lost contact with the working class poor and the economic as well as social outcasts. To its credit, the Association retained one or two men who recognised the needs of this section of the population. John Ashworth was the supreme example of such a man, and as founder of the 'Chapel for the Destitute' (1858) and author of "Strange Tales of a Humble Life" he soon perceived the Achilles heel of the Association's evangelistic enterprises. A symbol of Baillie Street's neglected task, Ashworth's chapel stood in the same street as the Association's edifice. Although he remained an Associationist local preacher for the rest of his life, Ashworth felt unable to link the clientele of his own chapel with that of his religious denomination.

In all, it was a tragic commentary on the shortcomings of Victorian religion and one which was confined neither to the Association nor to Rochdale. Perhaps John Ashworth adequately summarised the spirit of 1835 and the dynamic of the Rochdale Association when he wrote in later years:-

"You do not stop because impediments are in the way, but appear to be inclined to put forth strong and vigorous efforts to accomplish an end... Name, rank, titles and dignities have no weight with you. You have been tempted to extremes, and to use extravagant measures to accomplish an end, and you are liable to make excess of what you say and do..."

Thus, Ashworth portrayed the virtues and vices of the Association's position, and even the local hero, John Bright, would have found difficulty in capturing the mystique of nineteenth century Rochdale in such forcible terms.

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