REVIEW ARTICLE

The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners

by Raymond Challinor

(Frank Graham, 1972. 320 pp. 16 plates. £3.75)

and

Lancashire and the New Liberalism

by P. F. Clarke

(Cambridge University Press, 1971. 427 pp. £6.00)

There is ever a temptation for the local historian to exaggerate the importance of the history of the area which he studies. In part this derives from pride of possession, yet it is often justifiable because of the uniqueness of the local, when compared with the national, pattern. As a result, the local historian must above all things guard against loss of perspective and proportion. This, however, becomes most difficult when regional history is of general significance, for in these circumstances local research may be described as too specialised, whereas in fact its true importance needs to be rightly stressed. This is the special problem facing all students of north-west England in the nineteenth century. In so many ways from the industrial revolution onwards to the Great War, the region was a formative force in shaping the development of the country as a whole. Be it in the processes of industrialisation themselves, or in the evolution of the concomitant social problems of urbanisation; be it in the outbursts of popular discontent after the Napoleonic Wars or during the economic depressions following 1837; be it in campaigns for factory reform or for free trade; be it in the promotion of friendly societies or of the temperance campaign; be it in the
progress forged by the Established churches or by Dissenters or by Roman Catholics; be it in tory democracy or Gladstonian liberalism, in new liberalism or the labour movement, Lancashire and the surrounding area was at the forefront, shaping the country’s destiny.

These two books, by Dr Challinor and Dr Clarke, add to this accumulative argument concerning the significance of the history of the north-west in Victorian and Edwardian times. Both state a case for the uniqueness of the region. Dr Challinor’s traces the evolution of trades unionism amongst the coal miners of Lancashire and Cheshire, from the late eighteenth century. The thesis to emerge is that local colliers tended to be separatist from miners elsewhere, favouring localism, even within the north-west region itself, and because of this, they produced their own form of unionism. Eventually an accommodation was achieved with colliers in other areas, but only at a price on both sides. It is this process that constituted the substance of the history of coal miners’ trades unions in the nineteenth century, and as a result labour relations in the whole industry were influenced by the situation in the north-west. Accordingly the story which Dr Challinor narrates deserves attention for the light it throws upon trade union history as a whole, not only because regional developments illustrate the national, but because they affected them too. It is unfortunate that Dr Challinor does not explore this aspect of his study more fully.

Dr Clarke’s introduction to his book states his case for the importance of the north-west in national politics in the twenty years before World War I. He claims that the region was pivotal in the electoral fortunes of all the parties. It contributed to the success of the liberals in 1906 and helped to maintain them thereafter, even when support declined elsewhere; it became the object of a concentrated, though largely abortive, conservative attack in an effort to win back what had been lost; and it provided almost half of the labour M.P.s elected in this period. These electoral results denote a fundamental change in political attitudes. In 1895, of Lancashire’s 58 M.P.s only 9 were liberals, and even when the liberals gained power nationally, in 1885 and 1892, they won less than half the seats in the country. From 1906 onwards though, the pattern is changed. The north-west contributed to the initial liberal landslide, and thereafter, in by-elections and in the general elections of 1910, more or less maintained its new political allegiance. Tory democracy had given way to new liberalism, and in explaining this Dr Clarke argues that
Gladstonianism was replaced by 'progressivism', which, evolved especially to meet the exigencies of the liberal party's dilemma, appealed to, and won the support of, the urban working classes. The north-west, therefore, was the scene of a new political alignment in the country, frustrated by the outbreak of the Great War, but up till then auguring well for the survival of the liberal party. Once more the region was shaping national affairs.

Besides contributing to an understanding of national history, both books are valuable to the local historian per se. They provide useful information about the local scene, within their respective fields. Dr Challinor's approach is myopic, concentrating all but exclusively upon the miner's unions, rather than upon the miners themselves. Indeed to an extent, the book's title is a misnomer, save that at the end an attempt has been made to rectify this, by tagging on two chapters, one on social conditions in mining communities and the other on the problems of the mine owners. But both are sketchy, adding nothing to the argument of the book, and ought to have been worked into the general text, where, with profit, they would have given depth and breadth to the picture painted. After all, men are not unionists for the sake of the unions, but join them to fight for better conditions against oppressive employers. Accordingly Dr Challinor's theme is one dimensional, wanting reason and purpose besides its narrative. Yet for all this, the book is studded with episodes of local interest. Sidelights on contemporary society, albeit indiscriminate, are nonetheless ubiquitous. Good examples are the accounts of the local police, their numbers and efficiency, and of the 'Battle of Howe Bridge', at Chowbent in 1881, between the colliers and the authorities. Also more generally useful to the local historian is the repetitive discussion of the distinctive character of coal miners in Lancashire and Cheshire, and of the circumstances under which they worked. For example, it is shown that politically they were exceptional. Only at Wigan and Leigh were they sufficiently numerous to create a homogeneous, industrial electorate, and that even there they were divided by tories on one extreme and socialists on the other.

Similarly Dr Clarke's work will provide fruitful reading for local historians. Indeed this must be a source book for all who study politics in Lancashire in the two decades before 1914. Here will be found definitive analyses of the regional support for tory democracy in the nineteenth century, of the political attitudes of the cotton industry, of the mechanics of the franchise and of electioneering (from registration to personation,
corruption and heckling), of the progressive politics advocated by C. P. Scott through the *Manchester Guardian*, of local politicians' characters, opinions and class, of electoral fortunes in 1900, 1906, and 1910 (twice) as well as in by-elections. The wealth of local detail in this book is exhaustive and informative.

Nevertheless, within Dr Clarke's argument there remains one serious inadequacy. He shows that, from the mid-1890s, C. P. Scott campaigned nationally for an entente between the liberal party and the labour movement, as the only means by which the former could revive. Scott's success produced the new liberalism, or, as contemporaries called it, 'progressivism', which was an amalgam of social reform, free trade and peace. At the same time, because of financial difficulties, local liberal associations were forced to defer to central party organisation, so that they could not, through their candidates, assert their independence in the face of the policy changes in which Scott and his sympathisers were educating the party. Thus it is explained how the liberal activists became the advocates of progressivism. But what is not explained is why they won electoral support, when they appealed to the public with their advanced programmes. Why should the electors of Lancashire, once strong supporters of tory democracy, turn to new liberalism? It is in this regard that Dr Clarke's chapter of 'Fields of recruitment' for the progressives is so inadequate. Basically he claims that voting patterns changed because the cultural groups of the old politics declined in influence, and he specifically discusses the landowning, Catholic, Irish, Jewish, Welsh, Anglican, protestant, temperance and drink trade interests. But his discussion is weak, with the evidence produced often running contrary to the argument it is made to bear, and at best unconvincing. For instance it is dangerous to claim that protestantism was *passe* in 1910, when in the same chapter it is claimed that '1906 was the peak of Nonconformist activity'.

Indeed, it is perhaps this last statement that provides the basis for an explanation of the electoral changes that took place. Nonconformity was at its strongest in Lancashire. By the 1880s, the local organisations of Baptists, Catholics, Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians were all the strongest in England outside London, and attendance at dissenting churches appears to have continued to rise until round about 1908. Furthermore, as Nonconformist support grew, so its political attitudes changed. In early Victorian years, Dissenters had shown their rejection of all things socialistic and
materialistic, by their opposition to such working class radical agitations as the ten hour movement, trades unions, Chartism and Owenism. Yet Dissenters were most concerned about human conditions. Their charity was monolithic. Chapels were effective centres of social welfare, dispensed through Sunday school, libraries, church outings, benevolent societies, clothing funds, penny savings banks and the philanthropy of the rich. But as the social improvements achieved by their ‘Nonconformist conscientiousness’ failed to satisfy them, they turned to new means for the old ends. It was above all in education and temperance that they learned the limitations of voluntary action, and in the sixties and seventies it became necessary to invoke legislation and state intervention, so that Nonconformist political attitudes changed at the same time as they received their greatest numerical support. Thus Dissenters came to accept the need for state help, advocating legislative reforms to create equality of opportunity, to protect the oppressed and to achieve social improvement. It was precisely this development that underlay the preaching of the so-called ‘social gospel’ at the turn of the century, and which, it would appear, co-incided with the advocacy of ‘progressivism’. It is, therefore, unfortunate that, while Dr Clarke does include a chapter on Anglican politics, called “The conservative party at prayer,” he does not similarly examine Nonconformist political activity. In fact he seems to have closely identified Dissenters with temperance and protestantism, to the point where he has allowed these two concerns to obscure other campaigns on behalf of the working classes and the poor, even though it is conceded that by 1900 Nonconformist millowners had reconciled the politics of John Bright with those of Lloyd George, and the victory, at Radcliffe-cum-Farnworth in the ‘Khaki election’, of Theodore Cooke Taylor, a Batley wool manufacturer, is quoted by way of illustration.

Although the development of progressivism in the Free Churches will not of its own explain the resurgence of popular electoral support for the liberal party in the first decade of the twentieth century, it must have made some contribution, and it is unfortunate that, in a book otherwise so full, Dr Clarke should neglect this consideration. It is certainly reflected in much of what he discusses. The entente between liberals and labour becomes feasible, if, as they did, churches provided progressives for both parties. The labour party’s resistance to socialism, and preference for trades union moderation, is also explained. Similarly if laissez-faire in the chapels had given way to progressivism, it becomes explicable how, with so little
difficulty, unrepentant free traders were either prepared to join
the conservatives (and Anglican Church?) despite tariff reform,
or ready to abandon individualism, when the 1909 budget
made collectivism viable politics in the interests of social
amelioration. The adoption of new liberalism by Dissenters
helps to explain both the Liberal victory of 1906 in Lancashire
against Chamberlain's tariff reform, and the continuing succes­
es of 1910, when state intervention was the issue at stake.

In the same way recognition of the strength of the local
Free Churches would have improved Dr Challinor's book,
though in this case its exclusion must be attributed to the tena­
city with which the development of Miners' trades unions is
examined, to the neglect of outside influences. It is surely to
be expected that, in any work on coal mining, some discussion
of Primitive Methodism should be included. Because of this
neglect of 'peripheral' issues, criticism is levelled against
Samuel Woods, a miners' leader who became M.P. for the Ince
Division of Wigan, for not representing in Parliament the
socialistic ideology of his union. Yet such condemnation as
this can be made only if Woods is regarded solely as the
delegate of a collective organisation, and not as an individual
member. He was, in fact, firstly a Nonconformist lay-preacher,
whose opinions, as described in Dr Challinor's text, reflect
those of the Free Churches, in that they favour legislative action
on behalf of working people, but not in any socialist pro­
gramme. Woods's opinions were derived as much from his
faith as from his union. In fact, Dr Challinor quotes a sarcastic
comment in the Labour Leader, which describes Woods as 'too
good for this world,' and 'too heavenly,' but the significance of
this is not explored. Neglect of Dissenting history can produce
distortions.

These two books are very different however. Dr Challinor's,
interesting and fast moving, is nonetheless basically a narrative.
Dr Clarke's, easily read, is weighty, analytical and discursive,
though at times, concentration upon specific aspects of the
general regional context tends to distract from the overall,
important argument. One book is an illuminating story, the
other a detailed study. Their difference is marked by their
presentation. Dr Clarke's enjoys all the skill traditionally
associated with his publishers, but Dr Challinor's abounds
in typographical errors, both in the text and footnotes. Perhaps
the worst is on p. 216, where there is a discussion of handbills
'reproduced on the opposite page'. The reader will seek for
them in vain anywhere in the book. Such shoddy presentation
in a volume of this price is lamentable, because it denotes
carelessness and because it detracts from the importance of the text. Still neither book can be neglected by the local historian, though if he had to chose one, in both terms of content and printing, he will find most value for money in the more expensive of the two.

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