Prefatory Note & Remembrance

Carpenter, Edward & John Bruce Glasier · Verses · Labour Literature Society · 1893

Prefatory Note

The following verses, written by our late comrade, James Morgan Brown, are printed in accordance with the wish of a good many of his friends, who will be glad to have them, not only as a remembrance of a genial and loved companion, but for their own sake, on account of their tenderness and beauty. Brown has a great gift of poetic expression, and wrote easily when prompted by feeling. In a latter to a friend, of June, '92, he says, "I am still writing poetry – and I cannot help it. The mood comes, and along with it the theme. I will collect them all together and call them 'Songs of the Heart'." This, however, he never did; and in a later letter he says, "I am very indifferent to seeing any of my own productions in print. I shall have to satisfy myself first if they will be of any real help to anybody." Many of his pieces are, as may be supposed in consequence of this "indifference," unfinished in one way or another, and unsuitable for printing; but some of the following are real gems. Perhaps most of his verses were inspired – as will be recognised by those who knew him best – by that spirit of attached comradeship which is so marked and important a feature of the Labor movement to-day. Some articles from his pen appeared in Commonweal on October 6th, 1888; November 1st, 1890; and January, 1891; and he has left, besides, several MS. papers and essays – on Theosophy, Anarchism, Robert Burns, J. J. Rousseau, &c. – which show the subjects his mind was interested in.

A short notice of James Brown's life by our comrade Glasier is reprinted below from Freedom. After he settled in the neighbourhood of Sheffield (in 1890), Brown's health became gradually worse.

The fault was always laid to his brain and his heart, from whence the worst symptoms seemed to proceed; and it was not till a fortnight before his death that it was discovered that he was suffering from "Bright's Disease" – and then, though tenderly nursed by Shortland and others of his friends, it was too late for anything effective to be done. Brain-poisoning set in, and he died on the 7th March, 1893. He was buried at Norton cemetery, overlooking the moors on the south side of Sheffield.

Edward Carpenter

A Beloved Comrade and Genial Propagandist

Reprinted from *Freedom* for May 1893

Brown, together with his then inseparable chum, Dan McCulloch, became a member of the Glasgow Branch of the Socialist League immediately after its formation, early in the year 1885. I had previously known him in connection with the Secular Society as an enthusiastic student of Goethe and Carlyle, and was attracted towards him alike by what I had observed and what I had heard of his kindliness and self-abnegation.

He soon became one of the most earnest and helpful members of the League. Although not a public speaker, yet, by his good humour, good sense, and his remarkable gift of "chumminess" he exercised a most healthy and nurturing influence upon the propaganda. He attended all the meetings, indoor and outdoor, and sold literature. None of our propaganda excursions were successful without him – his snatches of song and amusing stories and comments enlivening our long tramps. He was always making converts, and ever and anon introduced to us new comrades of the most wonderfully diverse external and internal characteristics. He was a tailor by trade, and the confinement of his occupation, coupled with an organic weakness of the heart, brought him latterly into a state of serious ill-health and great physical suffering. Then it was that a comrade, better circumstanced socially, lifted him right out of the workshop, and gave him a chance of recovering his health by complete rest in the country; and in the course of a year or so his sojourn in the beautiful village of Comrie, in Perthshire, made Brown almost a new man, and he was able to resume work.

This he did in the town of Beith, Ayrshire, where he remained for about a year, making frequent visits to his old comrades in Glasgow. Some three years ago he removed to Dore, near Sheffield, at the solicitation of his friends R. F. Muirhead and Edward Carpenter. Brown at once became a favourite with the Sheffield Socialists and Anarchists, and did not a little to impart good humour and enthusiasm into their work. He, as he himself put it, "tried to keep them right by laughing at them when they went wrong." His enthusiasm during Dr. Creaghe's agitation, and his zealous efforts in defence of out Walsall comrades, are well known to the local comrades.

The above brief account of his career in the Socialist movement fails – as would any mere record however full – to give anyone who did not know him personally a notion either of his actual helpfulness to the propaganda or the remarkable and pleasant dominion which his friendship had over his comrades.

It is one of the huge blunders of our modern journalistic system of publicity that only men who make big speeches or do great deeds are regarded as of importance in the making of every-day history. Looking back upon the early days of the propaganda in Glasgow, I am sure I can say that not one of the orators has a greater influence upon the members and the course of the movement than had Brown. At Comrie and Beith, and wherever else he took up his abode, he succeeded in quite a marvellous way in interesting men of all kinds in the movement – workmen and masters, students and artists, farmers and stable-boys; and invariably the local physician and policeman. None who knew Brown will forget his beaming face, his infecting cheerfulness of disposition, his comical reproofs, his droll hypotheses, his quaint blasphemy, and, withal, his most-serious and deeply sympathetic interest in problems affecting the wellbeing of the race. Nor will they forget his songs – we all knew Brown's songs" – "John Grumlie," "Quivedo," "Annie Laurie" "When the Stares," "The Marseillaise" etc. He made us all become poets and musicians!

There is surely no living being – man, woman or child – yea, or animal, for he was a great friend of animals – that thinks otherwise than with affection of the "large, sweet soul that is gone."

He was a type of the highly socialised and intellectually sensitive natures that are growing up and quietly presenting themselves in the midst of the alien conditions of our time.

Physical suffering, and the actual modifications which ill-health induces in mental temperament, may latterly have told somewhat on the original sweetness and altruism of his disposition; but when in good health, he was certainly as well fitted as anyone to live, and be glad and make others glad, in a society of complete Anarchist Communism.

It is a pity that his letters cannot be published. The simplicity of his style, his graphic descriptions of men and things, and the humour and fancifulness that flowed, limpid and bright, through every page, made them ever welcome and delightful messengers. His letters descriptive of the men and incidents of local propaganda would, if collected, form an invaluable treasure of reminiscences of the Socialist agitation.

> *"By the door thou standest, wondering tenderly of him that is gone; presently the doorway shall be empty of thy form, and another shall stand there wondering of thee."*

John Bruce Glasier