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John Greaves

examines his life.



SIR EDWARD WATKIN AND THE LIBERAL CAUSE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Edward Watkin
c.1874

Because of his success in the sphere of railways, he was seen as having a sound grasp of the financing and administration of the new engineering and commercial projects of the day. In particular his thinking was informed by the emergence of the world's first industrial city, Manchester, and by the first wholesale application of Adam Smith's theory of free market capitalism. The main economic issue in his early days was the

Corn Laws – the imposition of tariffs on corn imports to protect or benefit sectional interests, which was creating great hardship for the poor. The organising of a free trade campaign was to give rise to a new political party, inspired by Christian ideals of fairness and compassion.¹ Watkin was one of those who quickly grasped the economics of the capitalist system, and was instrumental from time to time as an MP in bringing

in regulations and safeguards against its abuse.

Watkin's father was a Manchester cotton merchant, a Methodist lay preacher who had a committed involvement in the fecund social and political life of Manchester. Absolom Watkin (1787–1861) was the 'scribe' of several groups in the town, and, so tradition has it, the author of a Loyal Address to the Queen on the occasion of her marriage, and of a petition in favour of the Reform Bill of 1832. Edward became involved very early in this social idealism. He helped the Liberal cause in the election of 1837, when Gladstone was standing in the Manchester constituency as a Conservative. 'We beat him by two or three to one' said Watkin in a speech in 1885. He was prominent in the advocacy of public parks for the recreation of the urban working classes, publishing a pamphlet, *A Plea for Public Parks*, in 1843; and he agitated at about the same time for the provision of public baths and wash-houses, and for a Saturday half-day holiday each week for the hard-worked 'operatives' in the mills. In all these endeavours he was successful. In the Anti-Corn Law riots and street demonstrations, he and his brother John (who later became an Anglican priest) were engaged in battles against the Chartists and the Irish protesters against the Corn Laws, whose demands were far more radical than those of the Cobdenite Liberals.

Watkin's work as Secretary of the Trent Valley Railway (1845–47), a position he gained because of his financial wizardry as a director of the Manchester Athenaeum, brought him into prominence in Liberal circles in Stafford. He campaigned there for the election of 1846, securing popular acclaim as the free trade candidate, only to reveal that he did not fulfil the conditions for nomination – the ownership of land producing £300 per year. He was elected as Liberal MP for Great Yarmouth in

1857, but with his Liberal colleague was declared unseated on the grounds of bribery. A House of Lords committee absolved them both of personal involvement in paying money for votes (their agents having misapplied the funds), but his enemies kept the affair rumbling for over ten years. He served on Manchester City Council, representing the Exchange Ward, from 1859 to 1862. For the election of 1859, Watkin refused nomination to represent his native seat, Salford, half hoping that he would be asked to stand again for Great Yarmouth, but in the event he was not.

However, in 1864 he was returned for Stockport, with his fellow Liberal John Benjamin Smith, serving there for four years through a subsequent election. He was narrowly defeated in the campaign of 1868, after the constituency had been enlarged following the Second Reform Act to include an area of 'staunch country Toryism'. Watkin did much good in his Stockport incumbency, and was highly esteemed. In 1866 and 1872 he became the chairman of two additional important railway companies, the South Eastern and the Metropolitan; he had been Chairman of the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway since 1864. Nevertheless, when the Liberals of Exeter asked him to be their candidate in the December 1873 by-election, he accepted, and worked hard to win what had been for years, until 1868, a Conservative stronghold. In the event, he was defeated, but Exeter praised him for his efforts, and he later spoke in the House on the town's behalf.

In his Stockport campaign in 1864, he had been described as an 'independent Liberal Unionist', and he claimed that he always 'voted for what he saw as right, without caution for the official party line'. He admired Gladstone, he said, for 'his moral courage to change his

opinions'. After Gladstone's surprise dissolution in 1874, Watkin was approached by the Hythe and Folkestone Liberals to be their candidate in the election of that year. Because his position was, in his own words, that of a 'Conservative Radical',² and because of his record, he was returned unopposed, being of a sufficiently conservative nature to satisfy the Tories of the constituency. This position was maintained through the elections of 1880, 1885, 1886, 1892 and 1895. However, he was consistently in favour of electoral reform, and the extension of the franchise to working people. He spoke to, and voted in favour of, John Stuart Mill's amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867 to include votes for women, and later provoked Parliament by commending to its attention the Canadian Act of 1886, and that of the Manx House of Keys, for the enfranchisement of women.

In 1886, Watkin became an open Liberal Unionist in opposition to Gladstone's Liberal whip on Irish Home Rule. His position on Ireland was, and always had been, one of concern for the Irish economy and the rights of her people rather than the imperialist one of persuading a recalcitrant part of the Empire. He maintained that there was no reason to cast off the island in its poverty, but every reason to improve communications with it (through a railway tunnel from Stranraer to Larne), and to invest in its infrastructure (such as by creating a ship canal between Dublin and Galway), which would attract English investment and encourage industry and employment on a mainland scale. He saw it as anomalous that part of the British Isles should not share in its general prosperity, and in 1869 he invested in Irish railways and cross-channel traffic; but his enlightened views were not heeded, even though he pleaded with his friend Gladstone to set up, with Mr Parnell, a Royal

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Commission on Ireland with a view to encouraging unity.³

Watkin's chairmanship of the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway led to the development of Grimsby from a tiny and declining fishing village to one of the great harbour towns. In 1831 the population of Grimsby numbered 3,054; it had increased to 4,048 by 1841, but then expanded quickly to 24,000 by 1871, 64,000 by 1891 and 73,000 by 1901. It was not quite a 'pocket borough' of the MS&LR, but it was, from 1857 to 1895, solidly Liberal or Liberal Unionist except for six years, and for those the Member was the Conservative Chairman of the MS&LR, John Chapman. For seventeen of those thirty-eight years the town's MP was a director or a shareholder of the railway company, including Sir Edward's son, Alfred Mellor Watkin.

Watkin has never had the credit due to him either from the writers of railway history or from the City of Manchester. This has been, perhaps, largely due to two things: his autocratic manner, fuelled by vision and energetic enterprise, alongside an aggressive competitiveness and determination; and because of the prominent failure of two bold enterprises upon which he had set his heart – an 'Eiffel Tower' for London, set in parkland at Wembley with a large exhibition hall and sports facilities (only the Tower of which was unsuccessful), and a tunnel under the English Channel, which was thwarted in the end by the army and Joseph Chamberlain.

His greatest work was in helping the different provinces of Canada towards unity as a 'Commonwealth'. He was asked by the Colonial Office to take over the project, as President of the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada, the management and finance of which were in a sorry state, so as to make it the nucleus of a transcontinental

railway.⁴ The Confederation agreement was made in 1867, facilitated by Watkin's negotiations to purchase the Hudson's Bay Company, across whose vast territory a transcontinental railway would have to pass. The last spike of the railway was struck on 7 November 1885, though the Grand Trunk, by that time out of Watkin's hands, had by then excluded itself from the project.

Watkin was immediately awarded a knighthood, and later (in 1880) a baronetcy for his efforts; and whatever the discussion of the importance of his contribution, it is certain that unification could not have taken place without the commitment of the French Roman Catholic provinces, and the leader of that constituency – George Etienne Cartier – had been the solicitor of the Grand Trunk Railway and a colleague and friend of Edward Watkin.

Watkin described himself as 'A Politician with Railway Interests', but his speeches in the House on railway matters were far less numerous than those on economics and social justice. In one of his first speeches after his election in Great Yarmouth he supported a motion for the abolition of the slave trade, and he spoke several times on behalf of individuals who had suffered injustice at the hands of various authorities, and for the progressive extension of the franchise of working people, both men and women.

Towards the end of the century the first signs of 'robber capitalism' had begun to emerge. As the influence of a Christian conscience waned, individual greed and self-aggrandisement emerged on a significant scale: accumulation of private wealth and opulent lifestyles were perceived as normal by those tempted to play the system without regard for others. From this arose exploitation of the workforce in terms of pay and conditions – abhorrent to Watkin – which encouraged the rise of

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organised labour and eventually the emergence of a 'Labour Party' as a significant force in British politics. Watkin and his friend W. E. Gladstone remained among the few who maintained a balance between wealth creation and social conscience on an openly theological base: by the end of the century there had developed a far more 'secular' and pragmatic form of political and social theory, which was strengthened by two devastating world wars.

John Greaves, after leaving school, began work as a Clerk/Trainee Manager on the London and North Eastern Railway in 1945, when his childhood enthusiasm for railways kindled into commitment. In the late 1950s he was ordained into the Church of England, and his main theological interest has been the relationship between political theory and theology, the subject of a post-retirement Masters degree. His book Sir Edward Watkin: Last of the Railway Kings, based on a doctoral thesis completed in 2002, is published by The Book Guild. He now lives in partial retirement in South Shropshire.

- 1 John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857–1868*, pp. xvi and xvii.
- 2 'I am a radical, but I am a Conservative Radical. I want to see everything reformed that ought to be reformed in order to preserve the fabric of the State. I am strongly for reform. I am totally opposed to revolution', he said in a speech at Hythe in 1885. It was said about him that '[despite being] a Cobdenite, he was not a robust Liberal [for] there was more of the old Whig than the new Radical in his political leanings'. [*Blackburn Telegraph*, 15 April 1901].
- 3 In a letter dated 28 April 1888.
- 4 Such a railway, he had argued in an article in *The London Illustrated News* (of which he was editor for a short time), would enable 'A great outspread of solid prosperity and ... rational liberty ... the diffusion of our civilisation and ... the extension of our moral empire.'