

The Life and Legacy of Keir Hardie:

activist, Labour leader and social reformer:

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Along with considering the nature and mechanics of social reform, it is also important to assess the character of social reformers. Who is going to reform society? What qualities are required of those who are called to challenge unjust structures? What might the lives of past social reformers have to say about the social questions of today? This essay will consider these questions, developing them by reviewing the life and impact of one individual, Keir Hardie; trade unionist, labour agitator and the first leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

I will begin by discussing the importance of Christian biography and offering biblical and theological arguments for the importance of studying individual lives. I will then give an overview of the life of Keir Hardie, focussing on some important incidents and tracing the key themes of his life. I will particularly focus on his Christian faith, his internationalism, and his pacifism. Lastly, I will consider what lessons Hardie's life may be able to teach those who are involved in social reform today.

Why biography?

We must ask first some preliminary questions. Why study biography at all? What value is there in studying the lives of past social reformers? Is it possible for biography to go beyond inspiration and encouragement to produce lessons and reflections for our own context?

It is clear that God uses particular individuals to give direction and inspiration to his people, and many of these lives have been recorded, both within and outside of scripture. One key Bible passage to be considered in relation to biography is Hebrews 11. John Piper writes that "Hebrews 11 is a divine mandate to read Christian biography."² In this part of the letter, the writer calls to mind the lives and actions of great people of faith who have come before him, in order to inspire and encourage the Christian community now. The fact that all of the figures in the chapter are commended for their faith is important, which the author sees as "the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, CSB). This faith "behaves in a way that is consistent with the character of God and the promises that he has made, demonstrating the relevance of *what we do not see*...to life in the present."³ It is such faith, the text makes clear, that "[wins] God's approval" (Heb. 11:2). The writer

¹ This research essay was written as part of Jubilee Centre's SAGE Graduate programme 2020-21

² John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, (Nashville: Christian Focus 2003), 89.

³ David G. Peterson, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries vol. 15, (London: Inter-Varsity Press England 2020), 259.

gives an extensive list of figures from the Old Testament, beginning with Abel, Enoch, and Noah, and then details the actions of Abraham and his descendants, as well as Moses and those associated with him. He ends with a number of shorter descriptions of judges and prophets, and also of the actions of David. This “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) is seen as a continual encouragement to the believing community in the face of impending trials. The key to the encouragement these lives provide is that they help us to “run with endurance the race laid out for us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-2). They may be alienated from the culture around them, they may be badly treated or persecuted, but believers can be encouraged by the persevering faith of those who came before them. It is this encouragement to perseverance which forms a biblical basis for biographical studies.

In addition to the many biblical exhortations to record, remember and call to mind the past, the study of biography can also provide reflections on character; how it is formed and its importance for theology. “Leaders who have the character and resilience to thrive in the midst of adversity are not born; they are *formed* by the choices they make.”⁴ Understanding the lives of public leaders and the choices they have made in the course of their careers can give an insight into the ways in which leaders are formed. In particular, many public leaders who are thought of as ‘great’ have been formed through adversity, with many of their choices being made under high pressure. To understand how they faced such adversity, and the roles of both challenge and suffering in shaping their lives, may be helpful in assessing the impact of struggle in shaping social reformers today. Perhaps most importantly, biography can provide a touchstone for evaluating the leaders of today. Of course, it would be wrong to discredit a current leader simply because they compare unfavourably with a predecessor, but studying the lives of past leaders and what has made them effective can provide insights into the character of leaders against which we may test the leaders of today.

Several writers have conducted research into the possibilities of biography for producing theological reflection. James McClendon situates biography within the emerging method of narrative theology, arguing that narrative or story is a method of expression uniquely suited to theology. Biography is a particular form of story which is “distinguished by being always a human story, and always (in intention) a true story.”⁵ McClendon calls attention to particular compelling lives as a way of understanding the human experience of God. There are particular lives which are striking, which attract us, and in which the core doctrines of Christian faith can be seen to have been lived out. Through their striking qualities, or the things they have achieved, such lives prove the reality of the “things not seen” of Hebrews 11. McClendon draws upon the work of Catholic scholar Romano Guardini in order to argue that “saints serve as models for new ways of being Christian, opening paths which many others will follow.”⁶ Of particular importance to the study of social reformers is his comment that “there is a particular saintly task for today, and that is the task of changing or reshaping the world God has entrusted to human beings.”⁷ The use of biography as an approach to theology is an area in which much is still to be done, but McClendon’s work clearly demonstrates the value of examining individual lives as well as the potential of biographical enquiry to go beyond inspirational stories to become a method of seriously addressing theological questions.

⁴ Mercedes McGuire, “Public Leaders and the Slow Formation of Character”, 2019, online at <https://www.jubilee-centre.org/blog/public-leaders-and-the-slow-formation-of-character> (Accessed 25/02/21).

⁵ James Wm. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2002), 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Having established this principle, I will now focus on one social reformer, Keir Hardie, in order to assess what lessons may be learned from his life by the social reformers of today.

The life of Keir Hardie

Early life

Keir Hardie was born on 15 August 1856, in the tiny hamlet of Legbrannock in Lanarkshire, Scotland, the illegitimate son of Mary Paterson and a local miner, William Aitken. In 1859, Mary married a ship's carpenter named David Hardie, and shortly thereafter the family moved to Govan so that David could seek work in the shipyards there.⁸ By 1866, young Keir was working as a delivery boy for a baker and during this time an incident occurred which would prove formative. In late 1866, Hardie's younger brother was ill, and he had to help his mother nurse the child and prepare breakfast before leaving for work and, as result, he was late for several days in a row. Arriving at work, he was sent to see the master but was told to wait until he had finished praying. He was eventually ushered in to where the owner of the shop sat with his family at a breakfast table, piled with food. The man dismissed Hardie and fined him a week's wages. Hardie remembered this incident bitterly in later life, saying it made him "doubt the sincerity of those who make pretence in their prayers."⁹ Within this early incident, several themes appear which would become important to the rest of Hardie's life, notably his concern for the poor and the precariously employed, as well as his disdain for hypocritical Christians who made a show of their piety while mistreating their workers. By the time Hardie was ten, he was working in the mines as a trapper, regulating the flow of air into the shaft. The work was hard and often very dangerous, and while Fred Reid points out that there were happy times as well¹⁰, Hardie later stated categorically that "under no circumstances, given freedom of choice, would I live that part of my life over again."¹¹

In 1868, the Reform Act increased the franchise to sixty percent of males, leading to the election of the first working class MPs, who became known as Liberal-Labour (Lib-Lab) MPs. Hardie particularly admired Alexander MacDonald, a former miner who had become a Liberal Party MP and the President of the newly formed Miners National Association. However, as a Liberal, MacDonald found himself unable to be truly militant for workers' rights, as the mine owners who paid his salary were also Liberals¹², and was criticized for failing to bring in effective safety measures in the mines. The result of MacDonald's lack of success was the formation of a Hamilton branch of the Lanarkshire Miners Union, and Hardie agreed to be its Secretary.

In 1878, a key event occurred when Hardie became a Christian, although his parents were both atheists and had not raised him with any faith. One of the most important factors in his conversion was his involvement in the temperance movement, through which he also met his wife, Lillie. There was also the influence of a minister, Dan Craig, who had befriended Hardie and loaned him books. Hardie said that Craig, "completely changed the course of my religious thought."¹³ Craig died young in 1874. Hardie became involved with the Evangelical Union, a small denomination founded in 1841 by Reverend James Morison, in which Craig had been a minister. Morison had earlier been expelled from another denomination, the United Secession Church, for his denial of the doctrine of election and his preaching that the atonement saved non-believers as well as Christians. The chief tenets of

⁸ Bob Holman, *Keir Hardie: Labour's Greatest Hero?* (Oxford: Lion Books 2010), 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

¹⁰ Fred Reid, *Keir Hardie: The Making of a Socialist*, (New York: Routledge 2019), 13-14.

¹¹ Hamilton Fyfe, *Keir Hardie*, (London: Duckworth 1935), 61.

¹² Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 23.

¹³ Emrys Hughes, *Keir Hardie*, (London: George Allen & Unwin 1956), 23.

the Evangelical Union were total abstinence from alcohol, the autonomy of local branches, and the use of lay preachers, a role which Hardie took on. As it was “humanistic, international, working class based and democratic in its organization”¹⁴, Benn argues that this would have appealed to the young Hardie, who felt a deep affinity with the democratic spirit of authors like Burns, and that he “felt right about it”.¹⁵ As his prominence in trade union activities grew, Hardie was sacked and blacklisted from work in the mines and took a position as a paid miner’s agent for the Hamilton district. A failed strike in 1879 led to a public break with MacDonald, who had offered to pay off debts the miners had incurred during the strike on the condition that Hardie was dismissed. Hardie chose not to force the issue, and he and Lillie moved to Cumnock in Ayrshire, where they would live for the rest of their lives.

First steps in politics

In Cumnock, Hardie became committed to a local church and remained involved with the temperance movement. He obtained a job as a writer for the *Cumnock News*, writing a column about miners and mines.¹⁶ Fred Reid argues that “between 1882 and 1886...This rebellious and discontented young miners’ leader fell into an uneasy compromise with middle class radicalism and evangelicalism.”¹⁷ However, in 1886, he was invited to be the secretary of the Ayrshire miners’ union and accepted the post, despite the fact that the new position was less secure.¹⁸ At the end of 1886, miners in Lanarkshire went on strike, supported by Hardie. The strike ultimately failed after pit owners brought in ‘blackleg’ workers from Glasgow to work in the mines. This led to rioting and indiscriminate arrests of striking workers, which brought home to Hardie the fact that, if pressed, the state would act for the mine owners against the workers, even to the point of violence. He began to attend trade union conferences and also started a journal, *The Miner*, in order to advocate for independent labour representation in Parliament.

In 1888 Hardie fought his first by-election campaign in Mid-Lanark. Liberal Party officials had offered him a safe seat at the next election in exchange for *not* standing, but Hardie stood anyway, on a Labour and Home Rule platform, the latter referring to Hardie’s position on the question of home rule for Ireland, as there was a sizable Irish community in Mid-Lanark. He lost, coming bottom of the poll, but the election is noteworthy as the first time that the working class had made a decisive break with the Liberal Party.¹⁹

In the aftermath of the Mid-Lanark by-election, Hardie organised a conference in Glasgow in order to start a new political party, the Scottish Labour Party (SLP), with himself as Secretary and R.B. Cunninghame Graham, an adventurer and socialist MP, as President.²⁰ Hardie started a new journal, *The Labour Leader*, to replace *The Miner*. Some socialists from the constituency of West Ham South approached Hardie and asked him to stand as their parliamentary candidate. As well as the Tory incumbent, a Major Banes, the Liberal Party candidate, was also standing for election in the constituency. In January 1892, the Liberal Party candidate committed suicide for unknown reasons and the Liberals were left in disarray, with many local supporters deciding to back Hardie. In his election address, Hardie stated that, while he was generally supportive of the Liberal programme, he was also in favour of nationalising land, mines, banks, waterways, and tramways. Most importantly, he claimed that “my first concern is the moral and material wellbeing of the working classes, and if

¹⁴ Caroline Benn, *Keir Hardie*, (London: Hutchinson 1992), 19.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 32-38.

¹⁷ Reid, *Keir Hardie*, 68.

¹⁸ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 40.

¹⁹ Ibid., 47-54.

²⁰ Ibid., 54-55.

returned, I will in every case place the claims of Labour above those of party.” Hardie was elected with a majority of 1,232 votes, becoming one of the first independent socialist MPs.²¹

Keir Hardie entered the House of Commons of the 3rd of August 1892. His supporters had hired a wagonette to take him there, while a trumpeter played the Marseillaise. Hardie dressed like a working man, wearing a plain tweed suit and a deerstalker hat, and this caused an outburst among some MPs, most of whom wore frock coats and top hats.²² Hardie quickly gained a reputation as the “member for the unemployed”, raising the issues of unemployment and precarious work repeatedly in the Commons. He even went so far as to state that “the Government that does not legislate for the unemployed does not deserve the confidence of this House.”²³ He campaigned for higher income tax for those earning more than £1,000 a year, and for the money raised to be put towards old-age pensions and education for the working classes. He caused an uproar by criticising the monarchy, especially when he discovered that a motion had been made to send congratulations to the Duchess of York on the birth of her new baby, but not to send condolences to the families of miners who had been killed in a pit explosion in Wales.²⁴

Reid points out that many of Hardie’s proposals for dealing with the problem of unemployment were problematic by modern standards, in particular his proposal for the establishment of land colonies for the unemployed, rather than providing them with financial support.²⁵ However, it is important to note that Hardie succeeded in bringing the issue of unemployment to public attention. At the same time as Hardie was beginning to make an impression in Parliament, he was also taking steps to increase working class political activity. In January 1893, he presided over a conference in Bradford in order to form a new political party, dubbed the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which would later merge with the existing Scottish Labour Party. Morgan claims that the Bradford conference showed “the political genius of Keir Hardie”²⁶, as he was able to bring together a broad coalition to represent working class interests, distinct from the Liberals but not rigidly socialist. The ILP would serve as an important forerunner to the Labour Party.

In the election of 1895, Hardie lost his West Ham seat. He was downcast but wrote in the *Labour Leader* urging his supporters to fight on. In late 1895, he visited the USA and forged links with socialist activists there, such as the strike leader Eugene Debs. In July 1896 he stood unsuccessfully at a by-election in East Bradford and following this defeat spent time travelling around the UK giving speeches and supporting strike agitation.²⁷

Lord Overtoun

In 1899, Hardie became involved in very public dispute with a prominent industrialist, Lord Overtoun. Overtoun was a regular churchgoer, a generous philanthropist, and a champion of keeping the sabbath free from work. However, conditions in his chrome-making factory were extremely unsafe, with men working twelve hours at a time, breathing toxic vapours and dust. In addition, workers had their wages docked if they did not work on a Sunday. Hardie attacked Lord Overtoun in an excoriating series of articles in the *Labour Leader*, which were later collected as a pamphlet entitled *White Slaves*. Many of

²¹ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 63-65.

²² *Ibid.*, 66.

²³ Keir Hardie, “Maiden speech to the House of Commons, 7th February 1893”, in *What Would Keir Hardie Say?* ed. Pauline Bryan, (Edinburgh: Luath Press 2015), 157-169, at 167.

²⁴ Graham Dale, *God’s Politicians*, (London: Harper Collins 2000), 32.

²⁵ Reid, *Keir Hardie*, 168

²⁶ Kenneth Morgan, *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist*, (London: Wakefield and Nicolson 1984), 64.

²⁷ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 93-100.

Hardie's critics, including several ministers, responded in sermons and in print. Hardie was accused of being an atheist, and of trying to stir up scandal. However, as a result of his campaign, Lord Overtoun eventually agreed to increase his workers' wages, improved their conditions, and largely abolished Sunday working.²⁸ Perhaps most interestingly, this incident resulted in some of the clearest statements of Hardie's faith, as he was forced to defend his Christianity from attacks. He stated outright that "I believe in Christ's Gospel of love and brotherhood and service" and claimed that "I have great faith in the power of Christ's Gospel-which our churches so shamefully pervert- as a regenerating force over the hearts and lives of men, and because of this I want it to have a fair chance of doing its work, and that it cannot have so long as it is burdened by such weights as Lord Overtoun"

Around this time, Hardie was also building links between the ILP and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), which resulted in the creation of a Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in order to oversee the creation of a distinct Labour group in Parliament.

Later life

In 1900, the Tory government called a General Election, aiming to capitalise on some recent successes in the Boer War. At the time, candidates were allowed to stand in more than one constituency, and Hardie accepted offers from both Preston and Merthyr Tydfil: he lost in Preston but won in Merthyr. Despite the intentions of the LRC, there was still no independent Labour group in the Commons, and Hardie found himself politically alone again. He criticized the continuance of poverty and inequality and spoke out against the Boer War.²⁹ Between 1902 and 1903 the LRC won several by-elections and saw major figures, such as Arthur Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald, elected to Parliament. The key breakthrough came in 1906, when twenty nine out of fifty LRC candidates were elected. The LRC was then renamed the Labour Party. Hardie retained his own seat in Merthyr and received a letter of congratulations from 165 clergymen.³⁰

By this time, Hardie had become deeply involved with the controversial issue of women's suffrage. He first met Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst in 1888, and soon began to express support for Emmeline's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in his speeches and writings and "seemed unable to deny its members anything."³¹ In return, the Pankhursts and other Suffragettes campaigned for Hardie in several elections.

It has been suggested that, around 1906, he entered into an affair with Sylvia Pankhurst. Holman disputes such claims, arguing that they simply had a close friendship through which Hardie was able to recover a sense of childhood which he had never had in his own life, and that he also became something of a father figure to Sylvia.³² Most other writers have argued, however, that their relationship does seem to have gone beyond friendship, regardless of whether they were lovers in a physical sense. They were frequently seen walking together or on the terrace at the House of Commons, and visitors to Hardie's London flat at Neville's Court recall seeing Sylvia sitting on Hardie's knee, with her arms around his neck.³³ This certainly suggests a very intimate, if not romantic, relationship. Many have questioned the extent to which his involvement with the Suffragettes

²⁸ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 100-106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 115-121.

³⁰ Chris Bryant, *Possible Dreams: A Personal History of the British Christian Socialists*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1996), 127.

³¹ Fran Abrams, "Women's Suffrage: Unfailing Support", in *What Would Keir Hardie Say?* ed. Pauline Bryan, (Edinburgh: Luath Press 2015), 85-97 at 89.

³² Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 156-158.

³³ Benn, *Keir Hardie*, 238.

appeared to have consumed his political activities. Labour MP Philip Snowden complained that “Hardie never speaks to me. He seems completely absorbed with the Suffragettes.”³⁴

As a result of such concerns, Hardie was elected by only a very narrow margin in the leadership elections for the newly-formed Labour Party. Hardie’s leadership of the parliamentary party met with limited success, as weaknesses in his people management led to dissatisfaction among the party. Many writers have argued that Hardie’s real skills lay in organising and agitating among the rank and file of the party, and that he was less adept at working within the conventions of the House of Commons.³⁵

By February 1907, Hardie was ill, suffering from a chronic inflammation of the bowels and possibly a mild stroke. After having surgery and convalescing at a hydropathic centre in Wemyss Bay, he arranged to embark on a world tour, sailing for Canada in July. He visited India, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, returning to Britain in 1908. In the general election in 1910, Hardie not only retained his seat in Merthyr but increased his share of the vote substantially. In 1914, when the First World War broke out after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Hardie was dismayed by the general feeling among the public in favour of the war. His opposition to the conflict was met with widespread, and at times vicious, criticism. In January, Hardie suffered a stroke; despite being obviously ill, he initially refused to rest, although he later went to a hydro in Surrey before returning to Cumnock. He died of pneumonia in hospital on 26 September 1915 at the age of 59.

Hardie’s faith

Paul Bickley has characterised Hardie’s faith as “primitive biblical radicalism.”³⁶ Hardie took the Bible fairly literally and never seems to have questioned the historicity of Jesus nor the political relevance of his teachings. Hardie appealed frequently to biblical and Christian language in his speeches and writings. In his major work, *From Serfdom to Socialism*, he devoted a whole chapter to the relationship between socialism and Christianity. In this chapter, he drew on the Bible, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, and also on the writings and practices of several movements in church history. He claimed that “Communism, the final goal of Socialism, is a form of Social Economy very closely akin to the principles set forth in the Sermon on the Mount.”³⁷ He continued, “in its lofty contempt for thrift and forethought, it goes far in advance of anything ever put forward by any Communist, ancient or modern.”³⁸

In seeking an historical precedent for his brand of Christian Socialism, Hardie paid particular attention to radical movements and figures such as John Ball, Thomas Müntzer and the Levellers. He was also critical of the Reformation for what he saw as its selfish individualism and concluded that these examples are “evidence so strong as to be irrefutable that Christianity in its pristine purity had Communism as its invariable outcome, and that for nearly seventeen centuries the common people and their leaders believed Communism and Christianity to be synonymous terms.”³⁹ It should be noted that, as he was writing before the Russian Revolution, Hardie would not have had the same negative associations with the term “Communism” that many have today. His specific terminology aside, it appears clear that Christian faith was, at least in some sense, a driver of Hardie’s socialist

³⁴ Morgan, *Keir Hardie*, 54.

³⁵ Dale, *God’s Politicians*, 36.

³⁶ Paul Bickley, *Building Jerusalem? Christianity and the Labour Party*, (Swindon: Bible Society 2010), 32.

³⁷ Keir Hardie, *From Serfdom to Socialism*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd. 2015), 81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

outlook. "He met a Christ who sympathized with the poor rather than the rich and who urged his followers not to lord it over others but to act as their servants. They were brothers."⁴⁰

Despite the importance of his faith in motivating his social activism, Hardie often had an uneasy relationship with the established church. Having been very committed to the Evangelical Union in his twenties and thirties, he does not seem to have attended church at all after entering the Commons and frequently found himself being labelled as an atheist by the evangelical clergy of his day, many of whom opposed socialism. Hardie, for his part, would also level caustic criticisms at the Church, which he saw as uncaring in the face of the suffering of the poor. He went so far as to state in 1897 that:

"A holocaust of every church building in Christendom tonight would be an act of sweet savour in the sight of him whose name is supposed to be worshiped within their walls. If the spiritually proud and pride blinded professors of Christianity could only be made to feel and see that Christ is here, ever present with us, and that they are urging on the stripes and binding the brow afresh with thorns and making shed tears of blood in a million homes. Surely the world could be made more sweet by the establishment of His kingdom."⁴¹

Such harsh language clearly demonstrates Hardie's disdain for religious hypocrisy and complacent Christianity and the rhetoric of God's Kingdom employed here also appears to show a strong continued commitment to Christianity, despite his lack of church attendance at this time in his life.

Considering Hardie's affinity with certain radical figures mentioned above, I believe that it may be possible to situate him within the tradition of the Radical Reformation, although it is debatable whether he would have accepted such a label himself. In a way similar to many figures of that tradition, Hardie believed doctrine and theology, at least as expounded by the church, to be a distraction from the genuine Christianity of Christ. Hardie claimed that "The more a man knows about theology, the less he is likely to know about Christianity."⁴² Through statements such as this, Hardie leveled a stinging critique of the institutional church. For Hardie, theology seemed mostly to be a way of evading the demands of the Gospel, a distraction from knowing the living Christ and obeying His commands to care for the poor and needy. Given the opposition such ideas met with from members of the ecclesiastical establishment, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hardie did not attend church during the latter part of his life. However, despite the oppositional nature of his dealings with the church, in general I am persuaded by Holman's conclusion that "Christianity continued as a main factor-and possibly the main factor-which drove his life."⁴³

A global vision

Hardie's world tour is perhaps the best demonstration of his internationalism as well as his anticolonial politics. While in India, he spoke out against the British Raj, and when in South Africa, he also criticised the colonial regime there. Throughout his career, he repeatedly expressed support for home rule for the colonies, but consistently argued that this should be achieved through peaceful, rather than violent, means and worked with Asian and African nationalists to promote gradual change through the improvement of social and economic conditions.

It should be noted that some of his ideas of global political community may appear problematic from a modern perspective. At times, he appears to have argued for a form of imperial federation, under which colonial nations would have their own governments while still under the banner of the British

⁴⁰ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 135

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴² Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 87.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 198.

Empire, with seats at an imperial parliament in London.⁴⁴ While ideas of this nature may sound odd, Hardie was in a minority and ahead of his time in advocating for home rule at all.

Another important way in which his internationalism can clearly be seen is in his strident pacifism, seen in his staunch opposition first to the Boer War and later to the First World War. Hardie saw war as essentially created by Capitalism, writing in the *Labour Leader* that “The war is a capitalist war. The British merchant hopes to secure markets for his goods, the investor an outlay for his capital, the speculator more fools out of whom to make money, and the mining companies cheaper labour and increased dividends.”⁴⁵ Hardie saw the war as a situation in which young working-class men were being sent abroad, many of them to die, in order to defend the interests of the landed and propertied classes. His most savage criticism was reserved for those members of the clergy who supported the war:

“He, by his office stands forth as a representative of Him who taught the doctrine of non-resistance even when attacked as an integral part of His philosophy of life...When clergymen advocate or support a war like the one now being waged they but proclaim themselves infidels who do not believe the Gospel...nowhere is Mammon more firmly seated than in the Church.”⁴⁶

Hardie saw all war as inherently contrary to both Christianity and Socialism. When the First World War broke out in 1914, he was shocked by the level of support given to it by socialists and working-class people: “High-sounding resolutions gave way-in some cases almost overnight-to celebrations of nation and empire, and the rush to vote through the war credits that would set the munitions factories humming and propel the troop trains toward the frontiers.”⁴⁷ Hardie spoke out clearly and consistently against the war, and in return received perhaps the most vicious criticism of his life, being vilified in the press. At one point, when speaking at a meeting in his own constituency at Aberdare, he was met with a hostile crowd who shouted, “turn the German out.”⁴⁸

Many believe that witnessing the death of working-class young men on a scale hitherto unseen and seeing the ruin wrought by the war on the international Labour movement may have precipitated the stroke which led to Hardie’s death. The socialist journalist Fenner Brockway wrote that he had been “killed by the war equally with any soldier on the front.”⁴⁹

Lessons for today

From a modern perspective, Keir Hardie appears a deeply complex and, at times, contradictory figure. There is much to admire in him, but also not a little that is difficult to admire. Fred Reid writes that “Every Labour tendency can construct its own Keir Hardie...the “broad church”; Socialist “momentum”; Christian Socialism; political pragmatism...Hardie is not one of us...he belongs to history and to no political movement of the present time.”⁵⁰ A wide range of movements, socialist and non-socialist, Christian and non-Christian, appear able to hold Hardie up as representing their political or religious ideals. Within a context such as this, it could be difficult to discern what his relevance to today may be, but I believe that he cannot be claimed by any one of these movements. Nevertheless,

⁴⁴ Reid, *Keir Hardie*, 124.

⁴⁵ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 113.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁴⁷ John Callow, “A Divine Discontent: Keir Hardie and the Genesis of British Socialism”, introduction to Keir Hardie, *From Serfdom to Socialism*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd. 2015), 11-49, at 11-12.

⁴⁸ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 176.

⁴⁹ Fenner Brockway, *The Keir Hardie I Knew*, Hyde Park Pamphlet no. 10, (London: Self Published 1987), 5.

⁵⁰ Reid, *Keir Hardie*, ii.

his powerful moral voice can still speak today, and there are distinct lessons that can be drawn from his unique life.

Hardie in many ways appears almost paradigmatic of a certain kind of social reformer; those who are unappreciated within their own lifetimes and yet achieve the greatest popularity and results for their ideas after their own death. It is apparent that, in his own lifetime, Hardie did not succeed in doing much more than raising the consciousness of working-class people. However, in 1924, within ten years of his death, the Labour Party achieved its first short period in government, and twenty years later in 1945 won a parliamentary majority for the first time. Clement Attlee's Labour government was able to realise policies that Hardie could only dream of during his own terms in Parliament, not least the establishment of a welfare state and a universal healthcare system - the crowning achievements of a political movement that would not have been possible without Keir Hardie.

There is a clear lesson here about the nature of success in social reform: while some reformers have achieved real success in changing laws or structures in their own lifetime, sometimes this lies in creating or promoting a movement which will last.

An additional lesson for social reformers of today may lie in Hardie's willingness to stand alone and to endure sometimes vicious opposition for his beliefs. In response to his opposition to the First World War, Hardie underwent such vitriolic public opposition that he was heard to say, "I understand what Christ suffered in Gethsemane as well as any man living."⁵¹ "Generally speaking, our wider culture does not embrace difficulty and suffering as vehicles of growth, but rejects them as impositions to our freedom and happiness."⁵² The life of Hardie and others like him who faced opposition for their beliefs, makes a sharp statement: if we truly seek to reform the conditions of society, struggle will come. This struggle may be intense and may result in damage to our reputation. Hardie's life shows us that such struggle is "the price of the ticket"⁵³ if we desire real change.

Lastly, Hardie's life can speak to us of the importance of popular pressure and agitation in achieving social reform. To the end of his life, Hardie regarded himself as an agitator more than a politician and said that "my work has consisted of trying to stir up a divine discontent with wrong." "Throughout his remarkable but relatively short life...he demonstrated an unstinting commitment to the rebellions and restlessness of those excluded from power or used agitation himself to promote often unpopular causes."⁵⁴ While he never advocated revolutionary violence, Hardie consistently felt more comfortable on a platform at a mass demonstration than in the chamber of the House of Commons. Our own time has witnessed numerous mass agitations of precisely this type, from the Occupy movement to Extinction Rebellion to Black Lives Matter: while Hardie may have had some catching up to do in regard to these issues, it is likely that he would be found supporting such movements today. His life is a testament to the power of popular, consciousness-raising movements to make real change, regardless of the actions of individual politicians.

This paper has considered the life and impact of Keir Hardie. Born into grinding poverty, he "rose from the pits of Ayrshire to change the world"⁵⁵ and inaugurated a movement that sees its fruit in the welfare state and the modern Labour Party. Hardie was a man with a deep faith in Jesus, which was a

⁵¹ Holman, *Keir Hardie*, 177.

⁵² McGuire, "Slow Formation of Character".

⁵³ Melissa Benn, "An Agitator: The Enduring Principle of Agitation", in *What Would Keir Hardie Say?* ed. Pauline Bryan, (Edinburgh: Luath Press 2015), 149-157, at 153.

⁵⁴ Benn, "An Agitator", 150.

⁵⁵ Kenneth O Morgan, "Labour's Greatest Hero: Keir Hardie", *Guardian*, 19.09.08, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/19/labour.labourconference1>, (Accessed 26/02/21).

powerful driving force behind his activism, although it sometimes manifested itself in unconventional ways. While not without its flaws, Hardie's life can teach real lessons to the social reformers of today. Chief among these are the fact that success sometimes consists in promoting a movement that will outlast us, that struggle is inevitable and is to be embraced for the social reformer, and the importance of popular pressure and agitation in driving social change. As with any biography, it is hoped that this discussion of Hardie's life will lead to a fresh examination of our own lives and our own efforts at reform. Most of all, I hope that considering the life of Hardie may help us focus anew on the life of Christ.

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