

The Rev. Stewart Headlam and Friends: Anglo-Catholics, Atheists, Actors, Aesthetes and Radicals

Talk given by NIGEL SINNOTT to the Existentialist Society, Melbourne, 1 August 2006

There is something rather incongruous, or even amusing, about an eccentric Anglican curate being the subject of a talk by a staunch atheist to an Existentialist meeting in a Unitarian church half-way round the world from the parts of London where the curate lived a century earlier and died eighty years ago. Another conundrum is that it is atheists in particular who remember the curate, and that he would probably be grateful for this.

Stewart Headlam was no run-of-the-mill Church of England curate, and if he were here this evening he would probably take me to task for talking about *him* instead of matters he would consider far more important, such as asylum seekers, Aboriginal communities and their problems, and social justice in general.

I therefore apologise from the outset to the shade of Stewart Headlam who is the nearest thing I have come across to a patron saint of atheists. In his lifetime he was certainly regarded with respect and love by the sort of atheists who would have regarded any other Anglican in a dog collar with scant respect.

However, this *is* an Existentialist meeting, and in a strange way Headlam seems an appropriate subject for this evening. He, after all, believed that people had a right to enjoy themselves, so if what I say this evening gives pleasure to a few or to most of you, Headlam would be content.

To my way of thinking, existentialism seems to be involved with the willingness to face or accept conundrums and apparent contradictions, such as that human beings are obliged to make choices, especially in serious situations: they are “forced to be free”, so to speak. If this is a fair interpretation, then I think Stewart Headlam deserves considering this evening.

I was attracted to the personality of Headlam many years ago partly because of one of his sayings, and also because of my surname. It was the habit of the Sinnotts in Ireland to adopt mottoes that were puns on the surname Sinnott, like “Love God and keep his commandments” or “*Sine macula*”, “without a stain”. And I came across a saying of Headlam’s that I immediately warmed to: “It is difficult,” he said, “to be angry and sin not; it is much easier not to be angry at all.” These words strike me as having a very existentialist flavour, and I need hardly tell you that Headlam did not believe in taking the easy path of not being angry at all. He was a man with a great capacity for righteous indignation about the wrongs and injustices of the world.

John Orens, formerly of the University of Boston, and now George Mason University, had this to say in 1979:

“To those of us familiar with his life and work, the neglect of Stewart Headlam by both churchmen and historians is nothing less than scandalous. The leader of the Christian Socialist movement in England after the death of Maurice, a prominent Fabian, and a fearless champion of the music hall, Headlam was one of the most colorful and controversial figures of late-Victorian radicalism. Yet only a few years after his death he was all but forgotten, save as one of those eccentric priests with whom it pleases Almighty God to grace the Church of England. The reasons why Headlam passed so quickly from memory are not hard to find. Despite his courage,

intelligence, and tenacity, Headlam did not exercise as much influence upon the Church and his secular comrades as did better known but less imaginative men. Failure, I regret to say, is often regarded by scholars as evidence of unworthiness, just as poverty was regarded by some Puritans as proof of sinfulness. Moreover, whether consciously or not, historians and even some churchmen seem to have accepted the Marxist view that Christian Socialism belongs to the pre-scientific or "utopian" era. Revisionists, even secular Fabians, can be taken seriously, but not the Anglican parson of Bethnal Green."

Stewart Duckworth Headlam was born in 1847, and went to school at Wadhurst and Eton. As well as turning out a lot of leading lights of the British establishment, Eton has also produced a number of nonconformists: the poets Shelley and Swinburne, for example, and also one of my heroes, Henry Salt, freethinker and vegetarian, who coined the idea of animal rights. Unlike Shelley and Swinburne, Salt and Headlam seem to have been reasonably happy at Eton. Headlam continued his education at Trinity College, Cambridge, which he did not much care for, and was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England in 1870. Thereafter he dressed like a Nonconformist minister and conducted services like a Catholic priest.

Headlam's first appointment was a three-year stint from 1870 as curate to the Rev. Richard Maul, vicar of St John's, Drury Lane. The parish had a mixed population of market-porters, actors and actresses, shopkeepers and craftsmen. There were a few slums in the area, but not many. He found he got on well with theatre people and had an excellent rapport with the local children. Headlam's theological views did not entirely please his bishop, but Headlam was finally ordained as a priest in 1872 (despite objections by a schoolmistress to Headlam's notion that "all men shall be saved").

The next appointment, in 1873, was as curate to the Rev. Septimus Hansard, rector of St Matthew's, Bethnal Green. Headlam obtained permission to hold 8 a.m. communion services on Sundays and important holy days on condition, his rector said, that at least two or three communicants turned up. However, one Sunday not enough people attended, and the service had to be abandoned, leading to the formation in 1877 of the Guild of St Matthew. Its members pledged themselves to take communion on all the great festivals, to attend Holy Communion on Sundays and Saints' days, and to meet for a special service on St. Matthew's Day. There were also social meetings and classes for theological and other studies. I will have a bit more to say about this guild later on. While at Bethnal Green Headlam also joined two local political organizations, the Radical Club and Commonwealth Club.

While at Drury Lane and later at the Commonwealth Club in Bethnal Green Headlam met a number of secularists, supporters or members of Charles Bradlaugh's National Secular Society, founded in 1866. Instead of treating these predominantly working-class atheists and (usually) radicals with contempt, he befriended their leader, Charles Bradlaugh, and vice-president, Annie Besant, and asked leave to address freethought gatherings at the Hall of Science in Old Street, London. He was given his wish and obviously enjoyed every opportunity: his audiences argued with him, but they liked his style. In a characteristic manner he commented: "How much nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven are these men in the Hall of Science than the followers of Moody and Sankey". And of the president of the N.S.S. he remarked: "Bradlaugh may not know God, but God knows Bradlaugh."

Headlam virtually appointed himself chaplain-cum-missionary to the National Secular Society. Something like three generations of freethinkers disagreed with him on theology and applauded him on almost every thing else. One of the reasons they liked him was that he never talked down to them. My reason for saying this is because of another comment by John Orens: “Newman wondered if it were wise for the masses to be taught the Nicene Creed; Headlam taught the Athanasian Creed to working-class atheists in Charles Bradlaugh’s Hall of Science.”

Headlam’s debates and friendly banter with the secularists explain why the first object of the Guild of St Matthew was: “To get rid, by every possible means, of the existing prejudices, especially on the part of Secularists, against the Church, her sacraments and doctrines, and to endeavour to ‘justify God to the people’.”

As a result of Object 1 the Guild was soon nicknamed “the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Atheists”.

1877 was a hectic year, not only for Headlam, but also for the secularists. In December 1876 Bristol police summonsed Henry Cook, bookseller and printer, because he “unlawfully wilfully maliciously and scandalously did publish a certain indecent wicked scandalous and obscene book”. It was *The Fruits of Philosophy; or the Private Companion of Young Married Couples*, written by a Massachusetts doctor, Charles Knowlton, and first published in 1832. Cook was convicted and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment. On 8 January 1877 Charles Watts, printer of Bradlaugh’s *National Reformer*, was also charged with publishing and selling Knowlton’s tract, but without the illustrations that Cook had used. In February Watts decided to plead “in point of law guilty” and undertook to destroy all plates. He was discharged on recognisances (or a bond) of £500 and £25 costs. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, on the other hand, saw this as a matter of press freedom, and reissued their own edition of the *Fruits*. They were prosecuted, and one of the witnesses for the defence was Stewart Headlam. The jury’s verdict was that “We are unanimously of the opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave public morals, but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any corrupt motives in publishing it.” Bradlaugh and Besant were sentenced to six months’ gaol and fines of £200 each. They appealed, and eight months later the sentence was quashed because the indictment had been faulty: it had not specified specifically obscene words.

Meanwhile the National Secular Society’s members had taken sides. Matters came to a head at the annual conference at Nottingham in May. Watts and his supporters resigned and almost immediately established a rival British Secular Union, which lasted until 1884.

Back to 1877 and Stewart Headlam.

On 7 October 1877 Headlam lectured to the Commonwealth Club on “Theatres and Music-Halls” — and in very approving tones. According to F. G. Bettany, his biographer, Headlam “put in a plea for actors, singers and dancers as God’s creatures, like the rest of us, and protested at the Puritan notion of the theatre as the anteroom of hell”. He naively lent his notes to a member of the audience and the text eventually appeared in the newspaper *Era*.

Headlam’s rector and bishop were displeased, and on 4 January 1878 he was not only banned from preaching at St Matthew’s but was given notice to leave. The Anglican youngsters in the parish protested to the rector, but in vain. And Bradlaugh and his freethinking supporters immediately organised a testimonial for Headlam — they remembered his support for Bradlaugh and Annie Besant.

After Bethnal Green Headlam was, for a while, unable to secure regular work, but at least he had some independent means. For a while he was locum for the prison chaplain at Coldbath Fields. In 1879 he was sent to St Thomas's, Charterhouse, to assist the Rev. John Rodgers, and then to Fr Nihill at St. Michael's, Shoreditch. In the 1880s he lived at 22 Hyde Park Gate and then 26 Alfred Place, off Tottenham Court Road.

Headlam's removal from Bethnal Green did nothing to dampen his courage. On 30 May 1879 he formed the Church and Stage Guild (lasting until 1909) which helped to remove the social stigma attached to music-hall artists. Within a year the Guild had 470 members, of who 172 were from the theatre and 91 clergy. Headlam described its purposes as follows:

"The objects of the Guild were to break down the prejudice against theatres, actors, music-hall artists, stage-singers, and dancers, in those days only too common among Churchmen; to promote social and religious sympathy between Church and Stage; to vindicate the worthiness of acting and dancing as arts, no less capable of being dedicated to God's service than any other work of man conscientiously pursued; and to claim for religious persons the right to take part in theatrical amusements, whether as performers or spectators."

He also emphasized: "There was one thing we always repudiated as a Guild, and that was having any idea of undertaking a mission to the dramatic profession. Such a notion would have seemed to us an impertinence. Rather, we used to say, should there be a mission among the clergy to teach them a right understanding of the stage and the player, and to preach to some of them a broader charity."

Among the most enthusiastic approvers of the Guild was John Ruskin, who had always rated dancing highly, and hated religious intolerance of the arts. When the Guild was started, Headlam wrote to Ruskin, who replied saying "he was amazed, amused, and pleased at the line I had taken . . . So we began our career with Ruskin's blessing."

Ruskin's sympathy was not shared in other quarters. Bishop Fraser of Manchester wrote: "I am afraid that the Church and Stage Guild has not recommended itself to me as an institution likely to be productive of much good. If you will not be angry with me for speaking plainly, the whole idea seems too fantastic." Even more harsh in his criticism was Canon Liddon; "a dancing priest becomes invested with grotesque associations of which, unfortunately, he cannot rid himself in the pulpit or before the Altar."

In 1880 Charles Bradlaugh successfully contested the parliamentary seat of Northampton. But then trouble started. A cabal of Conservative M.P.s refused Bradlaugh the opportunity either to take the oath of allegiance or, as he would have preferred, to affirm before taking his seat. When he defied them, he was confined for a while in the clock tower (St Stephen's Tower) of the Houses of Parliament. Headlam, who was on Bradlaugh's nomination committee, sent Bradlaugh a telegram: "Accept my warmest sympathy. I wish you good luck in the name of Jesus Christ the Emancipator whom so many of your opponents blaspheme." Headlam's bishop (Dr J. Jackson of London) wrote to him "anxiously awaiting a denial". In his dreams! (If we have some time to spare at the end I will give you Headlam's reply.)

The Rev. John Rogers, Shoreditch, to the Bishop of London: "But, my Lord, I am not responsible for Mr. Headlam's opinions: they are his affair, not mine. I am not Mr Headlam's godfather."

Dr Jackson had also heard a rumour that Headlam “did not believe in the Divinity of Our Lord”. On this at least Mr Rogers could offer reassurance – of a sort: “Of course he does, and I think he believes in the divinity of Our Lady also!”

Headlam continued to be an embarrassment to the Bishop, who was not best pleased to learn that Headlam had been elected chairman of the science classes run by the secularists in Old Street. Then in 1882 Headlam turned up one Sunday afternoon with the fiery Irish orator Michael Davitt in Hyde Park. They both spoke at a public meeting which called for the abolition of the House of Lords. “I am sorry,” responded Dr Jackson, “I must refuse . . . to licence Mr. Headlam. Both in doctrine and discipline he goes beyond the bounds of the most lenient interpretation.”

For the next few years Headlam was provided with a pulpit and an altar by the Rev. W. E. Moll of St Mary’s, Soho, and by Moll’s successor, the Rev. William Busby. And finally, in January 1898, Headlam was granted a general licence for the diocese by a new Bishop of London, Dr Mandell Creighton.

I don’t really have time this evening to give you a full account of Headlam’s involvement in the London School Board and the London County Council, but here is a very brief “overview”.

While at Bethnal Green, Headlam and the Commonwealth Club ran a candidate for the London School Board, and in 1888 Headlam’s friends persuaded him to stand as Independent Progressive candidate for Hackney. He got in, and remained on the Board as long as it existed. Headlam advocated an end to school fees and of the payment-by-results system. He called for the provision of school dinners, health lessons, teaching of handicrafts, union rates of pay for school employees and secular education. Other Headlam innovations were high chairs for women teachers, so they did not have to stand all the time, and a piano in each school. Also on the Board for a while was Annie Besant (vice-president of the N.S.S.). In 1904, however, the Board was superseded by the Education Committee of the London County Council. Headlam expected to be co-opted to the new committee, but was not. However, in 1907 he was elected to the L.C.C. and was on various L.C.C. committees and subcommittees from 1907, and was also L.C.C. representative on the Council of the Metropolitan Water Board.

While preparing an article on Headlam for *The Freethinker* in the early 1980s, I came across a story which his biographer, F. G. Bettany heard from an unnamed correspondent. “I recall,” said the correspondent “a meeting of the Guild of St. Matthew, with Headlam taking the chair, at which he had to stop a speaker from among the audience who was wandering away from the topic that was being discussed. Twice he called the man — a Secularist — to order, and then the speaker lost his temper and said bitterly, ‘You are like all parsons; you’ll never let a man have his say out.’ Headlam mildly answered that the speaker could say as much as he liked so long as he kept to the subject that was before the meeting. Instantly there jumped up in his defence a rabid atheist, an eccentric who combined the work of bill-posting with Hyde Park oratory and the printing of an unique news-sheet styled *The Atheistic Communistic Scorcher*. He called out to the other man, ‘You let him alone. I’ve been turned out of every public-house debating society in London for saying things which this here parson let me say at his meetings without a murmur. He is fair, this man, and don’t you forget it!’”

The story fascinated me. Who was the soap-box orator and editor-printer of *The Atheistic Communistic Scorcher*? I searched lists of British 19th century magazines

and serials, but could find no such title. It looked as if the trail was cold. My article had to go to press without the orator's name.

Patience, alertness and serendipity, however, were on my side, for in September 1985 *The Freethinker* carried an article by Andrew Whitehead on Dan Chatterton (nicknamed "Old Chat") who, among other things, was editor, printer, publisher and principal vendor of *Chatterton's Commune: The Atheistic Communistic Scorcher*.

Chatterton was born in 1820 and died in 1895. In an article in *History Workshop*, published in 1988, Andrew Whitehead paints this word picture of "Old Chat":

"Dan Chatterton was part of the underbelly of popular politics. In his writings, in his street-corner oratory, in his furious contributions from the floor at political meetings, he expressed a burning and unornamented anger at the injustices which forced him and thousands of others to live in poverty in the slums of late-Victorian London. A participant (by his own account) in the Chartist movement and the Reform League, Chatterton rose to prominence in the ultra-radical organisations which flourished briefly in the early 1870s. . . .

"There's much about Chatterton that is unattractive. He was eccentric beyond the normal bounds of tolerance, and he could be more than a minor irritation to those chairing public meetings. The self-confidence which impelled him to articulate his grievances could also be seen as an overbearing self-importance. Sometimes his rebellious rhetoric spilled over into revolutionary bloodlust:

'Oh, yes! workers of to-day, there is nothing left for you to-day but to steel your nerves, dry your powder, sharpen your weapons, tighten your grasp, and drive the bright, flashing steel clean through the quivering heart of your Blood Stained Foe.'

". . . Yet Chatterton stands within a distinct radical tradition, and behind his ravings there lies a consistent political outlook: denunciation of royal and clerical privilege and the inequalities and intolerances they championed; dismay at the 'shams and swindles' which sought to alleviate social sufferings without addressing the root problem; determination to persuade the downtrodden to do away with everything and start again. Echoing Tom Paine and Richard Carlile, Chatterton preached against kingcraft and priestcraft, 'two rascals who have [ever] gone hand in hand to cramp the brain'.⁴ He also followed Carlile in seeking to popularise methods of birth control, which he favoured not simply on Malthusian grounds but also because sex was worth enjoying without risking the misery which too many children so often brought upon poor families. When he died in 1895, there were obituaries not only in the anarchist and secularist press, but also in the radical London evening paper, the *Star*, accompanied by a drawing of 'Old Chat'.⁵ All paid tribute to his courage and personal integrity. Chatterton cannot simply be dismissed, as he was once by the paper of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation, as 'a blatant idiot'."

I suspect that the "blatant idiot" jibe may be connected to the fact that Chatterton referred to the Social Democratic Federation's leading light, H. M. Hyndman, as "a swash-buckling blatherer".

Whitehead has this to tell us about the *Scorcher*:

"The first issue appeared in September 1884, and it came out quarterly until April 1895, just a few months before Chatterton's death. The early issues were cyclostyled, but the *Scorcher* soon established its regular four- or eight-page format, printed rather haphazardly in jumbled type on coarse paper, or more frequently on insubstantial yellow tissue. Chatterton was the sole contributor, the compositor, the printer and the vendor. He had no proper

press, and so achieved an impression by rubbing with his fingers or a small block of wood. That necessarily restricted the print run (if that's the right term) to about 100. . . .”

Cyclostiling was a form of stencilling using a pen with a toothed wheel to make a stencil plate. Andrew Whitehead also explains that “It’s only possible for Dan Chatterton to be the subject of an article because he attracted, by the exuberance and outlandishness of his propaganda, the attention of journalists and novelists, and more particularly because he took the trouble to deposit a copy of all (or perhaps nearly all) of his pamphlets and of every issue of his entirely self-produced paper . . . with the British Museum.”

Chatterton was buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave, but he received a freethinker’s funeral, conducted by Robert Forder, secretary of the National Secular Society. Difficult Chatterton may have been, but he certainly admired and respected Stewart Headlam.

Although he called himself a Christian socialist, Headlam remained a supporter of the Liberal Party rather than the new Independent Labour Party. John Orens explains why:

“Unless the truths of liberalism were held dear, a socialist triumph might lead to the establishment of a draconian discipline as soul-destroying as the tyranny of capitalism and landlordism.” This view, by the way, was shared by many secularists such as Charles Bradlaugh and John Mackinnon Robertson. Orens continues:

“It is important that you keep in mind the extraordinary atmosphere in which the socialist revival of the 1880s and 90s took place. All sorts of nostrums were being peddled by the hucksters of utopia. The abolition of marriage, free love, eugenics, and euthanasia were the banners behind which otherwise sensible men flocked. Not only did these proposals have little or nothing to do with socialism, many of them contradicted the spirit of socialism as well. The aim of true socialism, Headlam told the members of Guild of St. Matthew, was ‘the greatest economic change with the least possible interference with private life and liberty. Spurious socialism, on the other hand, postpones the initiation of those reforms which are necessary to bring about the economic changes, but interferes with the individual in every possible way; and especially does it take delight to interfere with the pleasures and morals of the individual.’ [*Church Reformer*, Oct. 1895]

Elsewhere Orens says:

“Like John Ruskin and William Morris, Headlam understood that poverty was not the greatest curse borne by the mass of English people. Rather, it was the degradation of men to the status of mere hands, the mechanization of life, and the loss of vision. God’s purpose that men ‘live nobly and truly’ and enjoy ‘all that is beautiful and pure’ was being cruelly frustrated by the same wealthy Puritans who had robbed the people of their land and wealth. The poor were perishing, Headlam lamented, ‘for lack of beauty, and joy, and pleasure’. Thus, the question of art for the people was not one that could be passed over casually. On the contrary, it was ultimately more important than any other with which socialists had to deal.

Furthermore, says John Orens:

“Apart from Morris, Shaw, and his comrades in the Guild of St. Matthew and the Church and Stage Guild, there were few socialists who understood what Headlam was saying. . . . They too wanted more museums, more schools, more concert halls, and more libraries. . . . But Headlam was not content with these things; he insisted that there be better pubs and more music halls. The

Puritan was not necessarily opposed to Art, Headlam contended; what he opposed was pleasure. By the 1880s Puritans both Nonconformist and Anglican were flocking to the theater. But they asked that plays be of an improving sort, teaching the rewards of virtue and the penalties of vice. Headlam, on the other hand, insisted that entertainment, sheer amusement, was good in itself. It was not middle-class morality which the laborer exhausted by hours of drudgery needed; it was pleasure. The very fact that there was no message to be found in the ballet recommended it all the more highly to him.

“. . . In the beauty of the ballet Headlam saw a sign of the Kingdom of God. Thus, to those who complained that the music-hall dances were sexually suggestive he replied bluntly that the Church must decide whether the human body was evil or the temple of the Holy Spirit. To watch the body in motion was to witness a sacrament: the presence of God in flesh. The same incarnate Lord adored in the Mass was present on the stage of the Alhambra. Lest you think this a careless or outrageous argument [says Orens], listen to Headlam's plea that the ballet be regarded as an eighth sacrament. 'Dancing,' he wrote, 'has suffered even more than other arts by the utter anti-sacramentalism of the British Philistia. Your Manichean Protestant and your superfine Rationalist' — notice how cleverly he associates Puritanism with atheism — 'rejects the Dance as worldly, frivolous, sensual and so forth; and your dull, stupid, sensualist sees legs and grunts with some satisfaction. But your sacramentalist knows something more than both of them. He knows, what perhaps even the dancer herself may be partially unconscious of, that we live now by faith and not by sight, and that the poetry of motion is the expression of unseen spiritual grace.'”

Orens, who empathises with and understands Headlam's theology far better than a rusted-on atheist like I can, adds: “But who can question the wisdom of his observation that the movement of graceful dancers, like the motion of trees in the wind or swallows in the air, mirrors perfectly the grace of God? And seeing this so clearly, how could Headlam have been silent when the dance came under attack from the same conservative clerics who ridiculed the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth?”

In 1884 Headlam became proprietor and editor of the *Church Reformer*. Its previous owner was a fellow curate, the Rev. R. H. Hadden. Under Headlam's control the paper became, in Bettany's words: “an organ of that form of Christian Socialism which he elaborated out of the programme of Kingsley and Maurice”. Its motto came from a well-known poem by William Blake:

*I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

The paper, which I think was a monthly, ran at a loss, and Headlam covered this himself. Bettany says that by October 1895 Headlam had spent £1200 on the magazine, or £110 a year. It was printed by the Women's Printing Society. I need hardly add that the editor was also the chief contributor. He was, however, assisted by a subeditor, Frederick Verinder, a champion of Henry George's ideas about *Progress and Poverty*. A regular contributor was the Rev. Thomas Hancock, who described the Magnificat as the “Hymn of the Universal Social Revolution”; occasional contributors included Sidney Webb and Ramsay MacDonald.

The main reason the *Church Reformer* never broke even was that it covered two

subjects. As Bettany points out, “Demos, though no longer actively hostile to the Church and the Bible, had no wish to have religion mixed up with his politics, and much preferred a more popular and secular paper such as the *Clarion*. With middle-class opinion Headlam was suspect. All that inert mass of the community which dislikes instinctively the political parson, largely because it likes its own conservative views implied or respected in pulpit utterances, . . . was sure to give this fomentor of discontent, this critic of the rich, a very wide berth.” And Bettany adds: “It was read, of course, in Guild of St. Matthew groups, but if it went into more than a hundred East-End homes I should be surprised. . . . It attracted attention in School Board and County Council circles. The chiefs of bureaucratic Socialism took note of it, if only because they sometimes came in for attack. And the leaders of the Church kept an eye on it — its numbers reached deaneries and even archiepiscopal palaces.” It lasted, by the way, until 1895.

In 1886 Headlam moved to 31 Upper Bedford Place [today’s Bedford Way?], Bloomsbury, and just before the move made friends with Selwyn Image, a former Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. A little later the Anti-Puritan League was founded, probably at Headlam’s new home, consisting of Headlam, Image, G. K. Chesterton, Cecil Chesterton (Gilbert’s brother) and Edgar Jepson. It did not last very long, but G. K. Chesterton remembered that he enjoyed a number of convivial meetings. “A League calling itself Anti-Puritan”, says Bettany, “challenged all Nonconformists in their tenderest point, and seemed to make a mock of the chief romance in their history. At once they were up in arms over dead issues such as Charles I. and Laud, to say nothing of the Puritan Fathers. If the League had been styled an Anti-Prohibition League or an Anti-Faddist League, it would have escaped such attack and rallied to its side many of the more broad-spirited Nonconformist clergy and laity.” And Gilbert Chesterton pointed out: “But both my brother and Headlam, when they got hold of an idea, delighted in pushing it to its most logical and provocative extremes.”

At one of the meetings a member of the League objected to the waste of money the wealthier classes were responsible for when they attended the Derby, and Headlam blandly replied that he did not see much harm in the expenditure of these folk on the Derby, so long as they did not compel him to go to the race. This was a good instance, thought G. K. Chesterton, of Headlam’s tolerance and practical interpretation of the principle of liberty.

Now I have mentioned Headlam’s interest in the theatre and the music hall. This brings me to one of the most popular theatrical entertainments of the 1880s and early ’90s: a one-act, one-man production — Oscar Wilde starring Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde (born 1854). “My name”, he explained, “has two Os, two Fs and two Ws. A name which is destined to be in everybody’s mouth must not be too long. It becomes so expensive in the advertisements!”

He was the son of Sir William Wilde, Dublin ear surgeon, archaeologist and womaniser, and Jane Francesca Elgee, writer, romantic and Irish nationalist — nom-de-plume “Speranza”. Oscar was a brilliant and flamboyant student, was influenced by Cardinal Newman and Walter Pater, and became a tireless advocate of the idea of “Art for Art’s Sake”. He did not, however, like sport: “I do not play cricket because it requires me to assume indecent postures”; and “I feel that football is all very well for rough girls, but it is hardly suitable for delicate boys”.

Oscar Wilde became, in the words of Mark Nicholls, “author of an unrelenting torrent of aphorisms, epithets, maxims, epigrams, paradoxes, quotes, asides, ad-

libs, cut-and-thrust exchanges, bons mots, scintillating repartee, barbs and satirical sayings”.

Oscar’s aesthetic antics were lampooned in *Punch* and satirised in a play, *The Colonel*, by the editor of *Punch*, F. C. Burnand. He was also sent up in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Patience*:

*Then a sentimental passion
of a vegetable fashion
must excite your languid spleen,
An attachment à la Plato
for a bashful young potato,
or a not-too-French French bean!
Though the Philistines may jostle,
you will rank as an apostle
in the high aesthetic band,
If you walk down Piccadilly
with a poppy or a lily
in your mediaeval hand.
And everyone will say,
As you walk your flowery way,
"If he's content with a vegetable love
which would certainly not suit me,
Why, what a most particularly pure
young man this pure young man must be!"*

Oscar remained incorrigible. The jokes and satires merely served to fan his boundless appetite for publicity and applause. “Caricature is the tribute mediocrity pays to genius!”

“The first duty of life is to be as artificial as possible; what the second duty is, no one has yet discovered.”

“Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.”

Wilde could write poetry, stories for adults, fairy tales for children, and plays that the public flocked to. Despite his flippant, frivolous image, he could also be a serious writer of essays such as “The Soul of Man under Socialism” and “The Critic as Artist”. He had a devoted wife, Constance, and two sons Cyril and Vyvyan, who thought he was a marvellous father.

As I am sure almost everyone here knows, Oscar Wilde’s charmed life began to unravel when he became friendly with Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed “Bosie”, a talented but rather effete and, I suspect, disturbed young man. The problem was not so much Oscar’s friend as the friend’s father, the eighth Marquis of Queensberry. Oscar and the Marquis were chalk and cheese, aesthete and philistine. Mark Nicholls describes the Marquis, with good reason, as “a despotic bully, a nobleman with a grudge against life who had an almost pathological hatred of his wife and children”. He was known in London society as “The Black Marquis”. Ironically, Queensberry had been president of the “respectable” but short-lived freethought splinter organisation, the British Secular Union (1877 – 1884).

Queensberry set out to put an end to his son’s friendship with Oscar. The Marquis turned up at Oscar’s house, made a scene, but was no match for Wilde when it came to repartee, and left. He then went round the gentlemen’s clubs and London drawing rooms vilifying Wilde. Queensberry tried to turn up at the first

night of Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, with a "bouquet" of turnips and carrots, but he was denied entry to St James's Theatre. The furious Queensberry then threatened to disown Bosie, who replied with a telegram: "What a funny little man you are."

Bosie in fact begged Oscar to prosecute the venomous Marquis, but Wilde had enough sense to be patient. However, as I think many of you know, the last straw was when Queensberry called at the Albermarle Club and left a card addressed "To Oscar Wilde posing as a somdomite [*sic*]".

Most of Wilde's friends tried to dissuade him from legal action, but this time Bosie's nagging prevailed and a writ was served on Queensberry for criminal libel. He was committed for trial on 3 April 1895. Now Queensberry was a nasty piece of work, but he was a wealthy man, so his lawyers could afford the services of private detectives, and the detectives did not return empty handed.

Wilde expected the trial to be short and decisive, and on the first day entertained the court with witty remarks from the witness box. But on the second day Queensberry's counsel, Edward Carson (later Lord Carson), who had been at Trinity College, Dublin, with Wilde, produced proof that Wilde had lied about his age. On the third day Carson announced that he intended to call as witnesses a number of grooms, valets and coachmen who had been entertained by Wilde with champagne in, as Carson put it, "dim-lit, perfumed, curtained rooms".

The "most particularly pure young man" was 40, not 39, and he had been hobnobbing with "rough trade" and rent boys!

On the fourth day Wilde's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, felt he had no alternative but to abandon the case. Queensberry was acquitted, and minutes later a bundle of documents and depositions was sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Wilde could have fled the country, but he chose not to, and was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel later the same day. He was charged under the "Labouchere amendment" to the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which provided a maximum of two years' imprisonment for "any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is party to the commission . . . by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person".

Queensbury petitioned the courts for costs, and Oscar Wilde was declared bankrupt. His house and possessions were auctioned off. Meanwhile Lord Queensberry was involved in a street brawl with another of his sons, Lord Percy Douglas. They were both charged with disorderly conduct.

Wilde came up for trial three weeks after the libel case, on 20 May 1895. The jury was unable to reach a verdict, and a retrial was ordered. Bail was fixed at several thousand pounds. But who would put up that amount of money? One offer came from Lord Douglas of Hawick, Bosie's eldest brother, but for reasons that are not clear to me the offer was not carried out. Selwyn Image of the Anti-Puritan League was approached, but could not afford the surety, so Image suggested a friend of his. And that is how an obscure London curate gained brief but nationwide notoriety.

"I lost a housemaid," Headlam recalled, "who fled at once. I was also threatened with stoning in Upper Bedford Place."

Later Headlam wrote:

"On looking back I am quite convinced that I did right in the matter, that if my reputation suffered — and, after all, it did not suffer as much as I expected — my character did not suffer. But of all the public difficulties I have

been in this was the most painful. Each morning I met Mr. Wilde and went with him to the court, and in the evening took him back. He could easily have left the country, but when once he had made up his mind to see it out he refused to go. More than once he said to me, 'I have given my word to you and to my mother, and that is enough.'

There may be another reason for Headlam's sympathy for Wilde. It has been suggested that Headlam's short-lived marriage foundered because his wife was probably a lesbian. Indeed, Headlam's biographer, F. G. Bettany, mentions that Headlam was married on 24 January 1878, but does not give his wife's name.

Despite pleas behind the scenes for leniency from Edward Carson, the second trial went ahead. Sir Edward Clarke again appeared for Wilde, this time without a fee. The judge's summing up was hostile, and this time Wilde was found guilty and Mr Justice Wills sentenced him to two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Wilde was held temporarily at Holloway Gaol and Wandsworth Prison, then transferred to Reading Gaol. During the transfer he had to suffer the indignity of waiting at Clapham Junction station handcuffed to his guards. He had once remarked that "artists, like gods, should never leave their pedestals".

In *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1981), Mark Nicholls says that, when Wilde was imprisoned, George Bernard Shaw drafted a petition for his release. Soon afterwards Shaw told Willie Wilde, Oscar's brother, "that nobody would sign it except himself and Stewart Headlam, and that as they were both notorious *frondeurs* their signatures would do more harm than good." Willie agreed. My French dictionary tells me that *frondeur* is an adjective meaning rebellious or anti-authoritarian.

Wilde was fortunate that, at Reading, the governor, Major Nelson, was sympathetic towards him, and supplied him with notepaper. Wilde put this to good use, and on leaving Reading, on 18 May 1897, the governor, contrary to regulations, handed Wilde his manuscript, *De Profundis*. It ends with these words:

"Society as we have constituted it will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on just and unjust alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole."

Wilde was transferred to Pentonville to foil any demonstration by Queensberry or his cronies, and very early the following morning Wilde was released. Two people met him: his loyal friend Robbie Ross, and Stewart Headlam. He was taken to Headlam's home and given his first cup of coffee for two years.

That night, with Robbie Ross and Reginald Turner, Oscar Wilde, alias Sebastian Melmouth, left for France. He wrote a long article on prison conditions, which was published in the *Daily Chronicle* and stimulated a number of prison reforms. And he also wrote one of his most famous poems, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", about a man who is sentenced to death.

*The man in red who reads the Law
Gave him three weeks of life,
Three little weeks in which to heal
His soul of his soul's strife,
And cleanse from every blot of blood
The hand that held the knife.*

*And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand,
The hand that held the steel:
For only blood can wipe out blood,
And only tears can heal:
And the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal.*

*In Reading gaol by Reading town
There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
Eaten by teeth of flame,
In a burning winding-sheet he lies,
And his grave has got no name.*

*And there, till Christ call forth the dead,
In silence let him lie:
No need to waste the foolish tear,
Or heave the windy sigh:
The man had killed the thing he loved,
And so he had to die.*

*And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

Oscar Wilde died at the Hôtel d'Alsace, in Paris, in November 1900. "I suppose I shall have to die as I have lived — beyond my means!"

I would like now to go back nineteen years to 1881, when George William Foote, a vice-president of the National Secular Society, launched a no-holds-barred secularist magazine, *The Freethinker*. As one of its many editors, David Tribe — an Australian, has put it, "Though he was often brash, crude and unfunny, his *Freethinker* was to sparkle in an entirely new way; it swooped and raged and ridiculed and pleaded and delighted and, above all, surprised. It was alive, and has outlived all other freethought weeklies."

In 1882 a prosecution was launched by what Foote termed "that mass of pious imposture, Sir Henry Tyler". Various issues of the paper were cited as containing blasphemous libels (March – June 1882) and especially the Christmas number for 1882 which, among other offerings, contained a cartoon based on Exodus 33: 22 and 23:

And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:

And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

The cartoon was entitled: "Moses Getting a Back View".

Foote was tried before a hostile judge, Mr Justice North, a Catholic. The first trial resulted in a hung jury; a retrial delivered a guilty verdict. North gave Foote a year's imprisonment as editor, W. J. Ramsey nine months as publisher, and H. A. Kemp three months as shopman (presumably for selling it).

There was an immediate and loud outcry. North had previously handed out three months' imprisonment for manslaughter. A petition was launched, and even T. H. Huxley, who strongly disapproved of *The Freethinker*, signed it.

A National Association for Repeal of the Blasphemy Laws was formed. Two of its

leading supporters were Unitarian minister, W. Sharman, and Anglican curate, Stewart Headlam.

From 1903 to 1922 there were a number of other blasphemy prosecutions, mainly in Yorkshire, of Ernest Pack, Harry Boulter, T. W. Stewart and J. W. Gott. As time is limited I will deal with the last and most serious of these. John William Gott (born 1866) lived in Bradford and was in the clothing trade. He also ran a monthly magazine, founded in 1894, called the *Truthseeker*. He was imprisoned for blasphemy four times between 1911 and 1922. The 1922 case was particularly sad, because Gott was in frail health: he was a diabetic. Despite a recommendation of clemency by the jury, he was given nine months' hard labour and was described by Mr Justice Avory as "a socialist and atheist of the worst type". His appeal was heard by Lord Chief Justice Trevithin and two other justices, and was refused because he had committed "a most dangerous class of crime". Gott was released in 1923 and died soon afterwards. It says much for Headlam that, despite poor health (he turned 75 in 1922), he dutifully turned up to protest meetings called by the N.S.S.

I mentioned earlier that in 1898 Headlam was finally granted a licence. In that year or perhaps in 1899 Headlam moved to middle-class St Margaret's, a part of Twickenham just across the Thames from Richmond Bridge. And in the 25 years he lived there, Bettany says that Headlam "never failed on Sunday to conduct Mass at the local church of All Souls, taking the 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock or 11:15 service, according to the Vicar's wishes".

In August 1904 an anonymous complaint was made to the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline about Headlam's conduct at a choral communion at All Souls. Headlam of course declared that the charges were worthless unless the complainant could be questioned. Headlam then proceeded to defend himself in characteristic style:

"According to the custom here, a cross was carried before me. I am informed by one learned in ritual that this should not have been done — that the cross should only be carried when the Archbishop is celebrant—and if the ritualist is right, I apologise to the Archbishop, and hope that he will pardon me, and will deal with my friend who carried it as leniently as may be. He was not unknown to the Archbishop in his youth, and is now a manager at a well-conducted music-hall. . . .

"The writer says he could not hear the words of my private prayers, neither could I hear his. . . Afterwards the writer says, 'I appeared to kiss the Holy Table'. I am sorry I only 'appeared' to kiss it, for I really did kiss it. A beautiful action on the part of a priest who loves the altar."

Then he went over to the offensive:

"Ecclesiastical discipline should be directed against the real disorders in the Church; these disorders are social and industrial, and not ritual, and they are terrible.

"Whether I was right in leaving out the two long exhortations or in making the sign of the cross in the air, or in kissing the altar, are matters of infinitesimal importance compared with the facts that in the London diocese and the Canterbury province so many little children have no clean beds to sleep in, so many of our dearly beloved brethren have not healthy homes to live in, so many are out of work, so many are overworked, so many are underpaid."

On Easter Day 1923, while saying Mass, Headlam had a mild heart attack. He recovered but, as Bettany says, "it was a warning to him that his time might now be

short". He adds: "His, however, was not the type of mind to brood over such a prospect; he faced it boldly, and then turned back to his work, and went on with it just as if there were years still in front of him."

Headlam's health broke down again in February 1924. He improved during the spring, but had another, more serious, heart attack in June. He recovered reasonably well, and had a holiday in Sheringham, Norfolk. However, his health began to deteriorate. In early October he wrote to Selwyn Image: "I am forbidden to walk any distance, and even then [am] to stop when out of breath; so I would have to drive to my work, which, of course, will limit that work considerably. . . . It is a great come down, and will prevent me from doing my most valuable work, which has been in the schools."

The same day he wrote, in another letter: "The doctors say that *if* I will do this and *if* I will not do that they give me another ten years. . . . But I see no reason why, when I do get to my work, I should not be able to do it."

He was like the elderly marshal in a John Ford Western: not keen on the idea of hanging up his badge, his holster and his six-shooter.

At the end of October Headlam was in bed, feeling weak and depressed. The post arrived, and it contained a letter from a rather unlikely address: Lambeth Palace. It was from Dr Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury!

My dear Headlam,

I hear a report — rather vague, and I hope incorrect — that you are unwell.

I hope it is not serious, and that work can go on, for I fear that your absence in some circles, educational and other, would be bad for "affairs" in the country.

. . .

You, at least, whatever be said about the rest of us, have been consistent in your devotion to the cause or causes for which you care. God keep and bless you.

I am, as always,

Most truly yours,

RANDALL CANTUAR.

Headlam's face lit up, and he exclaimed: "Now I feel I can say I have won." He soon felt strong enough to get out of bed and into a chair, and then dictated an affectionate reply.

Stewart Headlam died on 18 November 1924. His funeral was held at All Souls', St Margarets, and he was buried at East Sheen Cemetery, London, on 24 November. Memorial services were also held at St Matthew's, Bethnal Green, and at St Martin's-in-the-Fields in central London. F. G. Bettany commented that Headlam "lived long enough to hear the Archbishop of Canterbury in a City church not only commend the London Shakespeare League [of which Headlam was president], but praise the work of his Church and Stage Guild, once the victim of episcopal frowns. Times had changed, but not Headlam."

After Headlam's death, The Archbishop of Canterbury had this to say:

"He was one of those men who served his day and generation with really remarkable power, but on lines which he had carved for himself rather than on any conventional pathway. I have always entertained for him the warmest regard, even when I felt him to be acting in a manner which seemed to me mistaken, or when his manner of championing his cause seemed to carry implications or consequences detrimental to the best life of the Church of England. He always knew his own mind, and I respect a man who goes bravely forward in obedience to conscience if, as in Headlam's case, he has deliberately thought things out. To the elementary education of London he has contributed the devotion of a lifetime, and hundreds of teachers and thousands of children owe to him more perhaps than many of them realise..."

It is doubtful if he ever convinced any secularists that “the Christian Church is the great Secular Society”, but Headlam left his mark among them. *The Freethinker* gave him a lengthy obituary, almost certainly written by editor and N.S.S. president Chapman Cohen, which in one respect echoed the words of the Archbishop: “There is probably not a child or teacher in London’s Council Schools who does not feel that they have lost the best friend they ever had.” The *Freethinker* obituary particularly singles out Headlam’s work at Bethnal Green:

“As a young curate in Bethnal Green, fifty years ago, he gathered round him a group of eager young folks, who met in the workman’s flat in which he lived in Waterlow Buildings. He did his duty as a parish priest and had a high ideal of what that duty was. He not only prepared the youths and maidens for Confirmation, and read the Bible with them. He also read, in these classes, Shakespeare and Tennyson: he taught the lads to swim: he went for country walks with them: and took them to the theatre. They studied together the laws of health and political economy. In those early seventies of last century were the beginnings of great things, which developed later, when the people of Bethnal Green called him to a wider sphere of service on the London School Board and then on the L.C.C., into the Evening Continuation Schools, the London Schools Swimming Club, the London Shakespeare League, of which he was President till his death, and the visits of thousands of happy school-children to the ‘Old Vic.’

“In Bethnal Green he fought the slum landlords, who tried to prevent the establishment of the Free Library. He joined the Commonwealth (Radical) Club, and gave it a library of useful books from his own shelves. . .

Deeply devoted to religious principles, he held to them with characteristic tenacity, but all the time with the widest and most respectful tolerance of others. Freethinkers were glad to meet such a clergyman, and his relations with them were always of the most cordial nature. His opponents were among his greatest admirers. His love of liberty was all-embracing: liberty of thought, of publication of political and economic freedom. In all the years of his public life no call to action on behalf of freedom of thought or speech ever found him wanting. . . He taught the Church Catechism to those who were sent to him at Church, but was a life-long advocate of Secular Education in the State schools.”

The general secretary of the N.S.S. in the 1980s, Terry Mullins, told me how proud he was of once winning a Stewart Headlam award for public speaking at Toynbee Hall; and in 1979, on the other side of the world, I met someone who, as a East End Jewish boy, never forgot old Headlam’s kindness. The boy was (the late) Jack Abrahams, and he had become president of the New Zealand Rationalist Association.

John Orens says this of Headlam:

“Despite the uncomprehending hostility of the Church, and the bemused indifference of the secular Left, Headlam never lost his faith in God or the people. He could have no better epitaph than the triumphant climax of the Nicene Creed with which he closed his lecture on Christian Socialism before the Fabian Society in 1892: ‘*Credo in vitam venturi saeculi*: I believe in the life of the age to come’.”

Headlam’s friends are not forgotten. Charles Bradlaugh has a terracotta statue in Northampton and a block of council flats named after him in the east end of London. George William Foote’s monument is *The Freethinker*, now a monthly, but still being published after 125 years. Oscar Wilde has a plaque on one of the walls of Reading Gaol and a monument by Epstein in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris. For

Headlam the respectable gentlefolk of St Margaret's-on-Thames built a new vestry for All Souls' church. But St Margaret's was where Headlam lived: he regarded Bethnal Green as home. The less respectable Cockney battlers of Bethnal Green named a street after him, put a memorial plaque on the Wilmot Street house where he had lived in the 1870s (it is no longer there), and renamed his favourite school in Somerford Street in his honour. It has survived the Blitz and the vagaries of time. So next time you are in England, ladies and gentlemen, take a trip to London's east end. Immediately south of Bethnal Green mainline railway station is Tapp Street, and there you will find an aging but enduring and practical monument to a turbulent but much-loved curate, Stewart Headlam Primary School.

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