The Life of R. H. Tawney: Socialism and History

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Author: Lawrence Goldman

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Reviewer: Adam Timmins

In 1977 – fifteen years after his death – a spat about the merits of the work of R. H. Tawney broke out in the letters pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. The catalyst was a feature called ‘Reputations revisited’, in which contributors were asked to nominate their most overrated and underrated books and/or authors of the past 75 years. One of Richard Cobb’s choices for most overrated historian was ‘the unimaginative Tawney – a mean man’.⁽¹⁾ Over the next few weeks, both pro- and anti-Tawney letters graced the pages of the *TLS*. Theodore Rabb put it that ‘for an English audience, Tawney was the creator of a new subject, the sociology of religion’, while John Vaizey pointed out that ‘It is a little rough to call a man mean who served as a sergeant through the First World War – and was wounded – and who had a generous sense of the waste and futility of the businessman’s peace that followed it’.⁽²⁾ However, Geoffrey Elton – who had taken a shot at Tawney almost ten years earlier in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Constitutional History at Cambridge – rejoindered that ‘Tawney as a historian has been consistently and unthinkingly overrated, partly because he was a nice man, partly because he wrote so well, and partly because he seemed to invest historical study with moral and social purposes ... *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* has some claims to being one of the most harmful books written in the years between the wars’.⁽³⁾

50 years after his death, the first full biography of Tawney has finally appeared. Certainly his was a singular life: how many who have read *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* are aware that its author began his career as a social worker in the East End, or was gravely wounded on the Somme? Insofar as people have focused on Tawney’s life, it tends to be on his political ideas – in part due to restrictions on the utilisation of Tawney’s papers at the LSE. As a former editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Goldman has opted not for an unbroken biographical narrative; but rather, to organise the biography around key themes and periods, an approach that works well on the whole. Tawney’s legacy can generally be divided into three spheres; the influence of his views on socialism; the work he put in to reform secondary education, and his works of history.

Goldman’s central thesis so far as Tawney’s socialism is concerned is that 1919 marked a turning point in his thought; prior to this Tawney’s campaign to convert people to socialism was ‘to be achieved through argument and persuasion and focused on individuals’ (p. 195). After 1919, he adopted a more state-socialist position – that is to say, the task of converting people to socialism ‘had become a series of manoeuvres

requiring the powers of the state and the threat of coercion, and was focused on industry, shareholders and property owners' (p. 195). For Goldman, of the 'two Tawneys', the authentic one is the former; 'the young Tawney whose socialism was moral and spiritual and who practised it in workers' education, where individuals, and through them, communities could be inspired by ideas of fellowship and service' (p. 309).

For Tawney, socialism was about human behaviour; this was part of the reason why he rejected the economic determinism of Marxism. It was also where he differed from the Webbs – 'economic privileges must be abolished not because they hinder the production of wealth, but because they produce wickedness' (p. 170). Tawney's socialism was infused with a strong spiritual element – according to G. E. Aylmer, Tawney was a Christian, a democrat, and a socialist – in that order (p. 173). As Goldman points out, Tawney's socialism was of a vintage from the 1880s and 1890s, before the Labour party was subordinated to winning elections: 'the founding MPs of the Labour Party admitted, when asked in 1906, to the overwhelming influence of Ruskin and the Bible above all other authorities in the formation of their beliefs' (p. 188).

However, after the war Tawney's position changed. One of Tawney's most famous works, *The Acquisitive Society*, reflects the transition in his thought – while linked to the spiritual and moral themes of Tawney's pre-war writings, the focus moves from individual conduct to the desirable ordering of society. A decade later, *Equality*, based on Tawney's Halley Stewart Lectures of 1929, was published. The book was 'an important milestone in the development of socialist thinking in Britain and a prescient guide to the intentions and achievements of the Labour governments after 1945 ... But much of the work was an angry attack on a relatively small and privileged elite and Tawney often seemed more insistent on bringing this group down than on lifting up the rest of society' (p. 193). One could argue that the later Tawney was simply more of a realist: but for Goldman, 'the younger Tawney was the more original thinker, a socialist of the heart if not of the head – had Tawney stuck with the position of his youth, the "fruits might have been more rewarding"' (p. 195).

In the 1920s Tawney unsuccessfully attempted to be elected as a Labour MP on several occasions. He stood in Rochdale in 1918, where he was the only one of the candidates to have fought in the war – characteristically, he banned anyone from making reference to his military career. In 1922 he ran for South Tottenham, but his campaign was hampered by his falling ill; he asked Bernard Shaw to open a function in the constituency, and received the reply 'Do you suppose I should still be alive now – at age 66 – if I opened bazaars?' (pp. 127–8). He was adopted as a candidate for Swindon in 1924, but was once again unable to campaign due to illness. It was probably for the best; Tawney would have struggled in the Commons. His student Frank Emery campaigned with him in Rochdale, and remembered people saying 'this man's a genius, this man's a really great man he's far too good for Westminster, this man will never get in because no one will vote for a god. They'd rather vote, you know, for an orthodox party person, but this man – look at him, he's no politician' (p. 129).

Tawney's role in adult education and educational reform is generally less well-known than his historical and political works; yet in his 'maturity he probably gave more of his time to the cause of educational reform – and the reform of English secondary schooling most notably – than to anything else, and he probably did more to achieve this than anyone else in the 1920s and 1930s' (p. 199). He was a member of numerous educational bodies, and built up an almost unrivalled knowledge of the different elements of education.

When Tawney taught classes for Oxford and the WEA prior to the First World War, he noticed that many of those he taught were handicapped by a poor or non-existent level of secondary education. In the inter-war period Tawney devoted much of his attentions to fleshing out what he called the 'skeleton of a public system of secondary education' (p. 201). It was to be a long and testing campaign though; McDonald's 1929 Labour administration was as ineffective on this as it was on most issues, and measures to raise the school-leaving age to 15 were either withdrawn due to lack of time, or thrown out by the Lords. Reflecting in 1940 on the seemingly endless political obstruction he faced, Tawney remarked of politicians that 'Heaven, doubtless, will forgive them, though I can't' (p. 208). During the Second World War however, the tide turned in his

favour; in 1943 a White Paper on Education was published which he broadly agreed with, and Tawney had several meetings with then-Education Secretary R. A. Butler in order to make suggestions about the details. Although he believed that the 1944 Education act could have gone further than it did – the school leaving age wasn't raised to 16 until 15 years after his death – nonetheless, its passing into law 'was the culmination of Tawney's struggle since the Edwardian era to improve secondary education in England' (p. 271).

It would be slightly unfair to call Tawney an 'amateur' historian, unless we clarify what we mean here by amateur – for Goldman, he was not an amateur in the sense that 'he neglected the requirement to work from sources and substantiate his arguments ... rather, it implies the absence of restraints that often stunt scholarly work, and the willingness to develop grand ideas and to link them in a unfamiliar ways' (p. 222). To use Le Roy Ladurie's famous phrase, Tawney was a parachutist rather than a truffle hunter.

Tawney's most famous work of history, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, was not without its faults. Elton was correct in his charge that Tawney's portrayal of Puritanism as, in Goldman's words, 'a religion of materialism fails to capture its complex spirituality and the agonised search for evidence of election from those who embraced it from the later sixteenth century onwards' (p. 232). Additionally, Tawney seemed to treat the Middle Ages as if they were, as Goldman puts it, 'a state of mind and an immanent social philosophy rather than a civilisation in time and space'; and he failed to differentiate between the different theological schools that came out of the reformation, 'largely generalising on the basis of Calvinism only' (p. 232). However, Goldman argues that its successes far outweigh its failures – *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* was 'a heady synthesis tying together many of the crucial elements of modern history, including the waning of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the rise of Puritanism, the civil wars, the triumph of the landed aristocracy after the reformation, [and] the growth of the middle class and the origins of industrialisation' (p. 232). The book struck a chord in the early 1930s; its depiction of capitalism 'as destructive of spirituality and deficient in humanity' struck a chord at a time when a capitalist crisis was causing misery to millions (p. 233).

It was also Tawney who – of all people – triggered what has been referred to as one of the biggest historical firefights of the 20th century. Published in *The Economic History Review* in 1941, 'The Rise of the Gentry' argued that a change occurred in the ownership of property in the century before the Civil War, with a new class of gentry replacing the old land-owning classes. Tawney's most important piece of empirical evidence was what later came to be referred to as the 'counting of manors' – between 1561 and 1680 'the number of landholders owning more than 10 manors fell from 612 to 347. Impressionistically, the number of lesser landholders grew but the wealthiest landholders were losing their grip and declining in numbers and wealth' (p. 234).

Sensibly, Goldman does not try to outline the whole story of what happened next, but concentrates on events from Tawney's point of view. Briefly: Lawrence Stone – who stated that he visited Tawney regularly when he was on leave from the Navy in the Second World War – became interested in the period before the Civil War as a result.⁽⁴⁾ Stone returned to Oxford after the war to resume his studies; Hugh Trevor-Roper, who was doing some work on the period in question, lent Stone some papers on the subject, which the latter used in part to further Tawney's arguments. Trevor-Roper felt that Stone had 'stolen' the sources that he had let him see, and then set out to 'smash' Stone, as he put it in a contemporary letter. However, after publishing his article criticising Stone, Trevor-Roper then launched a full-scale assault on Tawney.

As Goldman notes, most historians thought Trevor-Roper was justified in making an example out of Stone; but the attack on Tawney was unjustified – 'why, if he had killed the child, did Trevor-Roper go on to kill the father?' (p. 237). At the end of a massive article which had to be published as a supplement to the *Economic History Review*, 'for all the huffing and puffing Trevor-Roper had merely offered an alternative and admittedly better model of social structures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ... Trevor-Roper had not vanquished Tawney, merely corrected him ... The judgement that he had delivered an 'annihilating opusculum' to Tawney's article is in need of revision' (p. 240–1). Perhaps so; but at the time Tawney seemed to be yesterday's man; as Stone put it years later, 'Tawney attempted to defend some of his

statistical methods, but he now lacked the vigour to take up the gage of battle which had been thrown down'.
(5)

Trevor-Roper's motivation in attacking Tawney seems to have been the desire to demolish what he thought was a Marxist interpretation of history. This is fairly ironic in hindsight, as Goldman argues that Tawney was not a Marxist: indeed, after the war Tawney cut himself off from many of those who became the next generation of social and economic historians, 'distrusting not only their politics but also their intellectual honesty' (p. 281). (The exception was Christopher Hill, with whom he had had dealings towards the end of the war when Hill was working at the Foreign Office). As Rowse put it in one of his rare reasoned judgements, 'Tawney was more familiar with Marx and Marxism than most historians, but he took it pragmatically and certainly did not swallow it whole'.
(6)

One might argue that ironically Trevor-Roper and Tawney had in common the fact the neither man published the great work on 17th-century history that both were more than capable of. By the end of the Second World War, Tawney 'was still as intellectually as sharp as ever, but he was weary and the scale of the task was beyond him' (p. 273). He was supposed to write an authorised biography of Sidney Webb, but pulled out after Margaret Cole rushed out an edited collection of essays on the Webbs in 1949 – not unreasonably, Tawney was unhappy about Cole's behaviour. A. J. P. Taylor subsequently remarked that Tawney's unwritten books were 'among the lost masterpieces of the twentieth century' (p. 274).

Tawney was the exemplar of the absent-minded scholar, and legends abound of the chaos that he lived in; legend has it that he once entertained William Temple (a future archbishop of Canterbury) to supper, 'and removed three musty volumes from his bookshelf to reveal two cold chops on a plate' (p. 139).
(7) The herbal mixture he smoked in his pipe was of such a composition that it continued to burn when Tawney set the pipe aside: on at least one occasion T. S. Ashton 'saw him while lecturing suddenly burst into flames. Tawney leaned down, gently patted his pocket [and] said 'I see I burn prematurely', and continued his discourse, the smoke still emerging from his burnt pocket' (p. 140).

Reading *The Life of R H Tawney*, the ultimate reaction is that we are reading about a type of thinker that simply doesn't exist anymore. It is hard to imagine a Tawney in the 21st century – or at least, a Tawney that would have had the influence and reach that the original did. Religion and politics these days are seen as a mixture to be avoided – witness a recent British Prime Minister being overruled by his spin doctor over answering a question on his religion on the grounds that 'we don't do God'.
(8) Indeed, a study of the evolution of the Labour Party from its Christian socialist origins to its current incarnation would provide interesting reading (and probably make Tawney roll over in his grave). In a postscript addressing Tawney's relevance in the 21st century, Goldman concedes that Tawney's name is synonymous with 'a former era when socialism was the acknowledged goal of millions and the Labour party its supposed servant and agent. We are far from those days now' (p. 318).

What of Tawney the historian? As we saw from the controversy over the rise of the gentry, his work was already being subjected to the empiricist rigor which if anything has only increased since his death – as have instances of academics behaving badly.
(9) In the aforementioned exchange of letters in the *TLS*, Elton complained that Tawney invested historical study with 'moral and social purposes'.
(10) Some would argue that this was Tawney's greatest strength: 'he was never attracted to scholarship for its own sake ... by relating past to present so intimately, he generated powerful and structuring historical ideas which fascinated a generation and which have had an influential and controversial afterlife' (p. 316). Nonetheless, to borrow a phrase from Alan Ryan, it is doubtful whether his works of history are little more these days than a historical curiosity, to be studied only by those interested in historiography.

It is most likely that Tawney will be – or at least should be anyway – remembered as a kind of social prophet in the mould of Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris. Like these men, 'Tawney was a public figure and a controversialist, like them he published on many different subjects and in several different genres; like them he built a large and devoted public following which endured for at least a generation after his death. And like

them he was enabled to exploit and deploy a rich language and style which is no longer part of our culture' (p. 312).

Notes

1. Richard Cobb, 'Reputations Revisited', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Jan 1977, 66. To be fair to Cobb, he did apologise for this comment after the furore had broken.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Theodore Rabb / John Vaizey, 'R. H. Tawney', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Feb, 1977, 214.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. R. Elton, 'R. H. Tawney', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 Feb, 1977, 156.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See John Brewer's introduction to the edition of Stone's *The Causes of the English Revolution*, p. xi. Goldman counters that 'Stone apparently cultivated Tawney, whose work he deeply admired, though this simply may have meant paying him visits in Mecklenburgh Square where Tawney would see anyone and everyone, and would offer help and encouragement as he could' (p. 236).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution* (London, 2002), p. 28.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A. L. Rowse, *Historians I Have Known* (London, 1995), p. 95.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. A L Rowse was (predictably) more uncharitable – 'When I penetrated his study in Mecklenburg Square I was amazed: not only the litter of books and papers on every chair, table or ledge, but trays with scraps of food, unwashed teacups etc ... Tawney sat imperturbably in the midst of the mess, he didn't seem to notice the squalor', *Historians I Have Known*, pp. 93–4.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Quoted in Michael Temple, *Blair* (London, 2006), p. 88.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Witness Gerald Feldman's behaviour in the David Abrahms case – see Jon Wiener, *Historians in Trouble* (New York, NY, 2005), pp. 95–104.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Elton, 'R. H. Tawney', 156.[Back to \(10\)](#)

Please note that this review was commissioned before Professor Goldman's appointment as IHR Director.

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