

Alf Mattison

(1868-1944)

Socialist pioneer,
labour archivist
and local historian



Socialism has always needed its scribes and its archivists. Alf Mattison was both, and without him Labour history in Leeds would be much the poorer. He was a participant in the split of the Socialist League from the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1885 and was present at the inaugural ILP conference in 1893. Virtually every account of socialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century uses Mattison's diaries and notebooks but never dwells on Mattison the man. He remained with the ILP after its disaffiliation from the Labour party in 1932. Despite his lifelong involvement and activism, Alf Mattison remains a shadowy figure, always in the background. Tom Woodhouse, in his history of early Leeds socialism, commented that "although never a leader of opinion, Mattison was a lifelong observer of labour politics and personalities."¹

His wife, Florence (known always as Florrie) whom he married in 1902, was very different and was four times a City Council Labour candidate in Leeds, always, alas, in heavily Conservative wards. She achieved the distinction of being expelled from the Labour party in 1952, at the age of 75 and seven years after Alf's death, for taking part in a peace movement visit to Russia with what the Labour party regarded as



largely a Soviet front organisation.² She protested that she had spent a lifetime working for peace and was not going to stop at the behest of the Labour party. Her final years were spent as a member of the Communist party after more than fifty years in the Labour party.

Alf, always 'Alf' and never 'Alfred', was born in Hunslet the son of a locomotive engineer and the grandson of the lockkeeper at Thwaite's Lock at nearby Rothwell. His mother was from Huddersfield where she had been in the textile trade. Alf was the third of eight children (one other child had died in infancy) and was the elder son. He attended the local Jack Lane School and, at the age of eleven, he began work as a half-timer in a wool mill. The whole family was squeezed into back-to-back houses until, in the mid-1880s, they were able to move to a through terrace, still in Hunslet. By this time Alf was apprenticed to the engineering trade at the same workplace as his father. His father died in 1890 but Alf remained an engineer for a further sixteen years until he became a clerk in the City's tramways department. Whilst at the Hunslet Engine Company he was part of a seven month lockout of engineering workers.

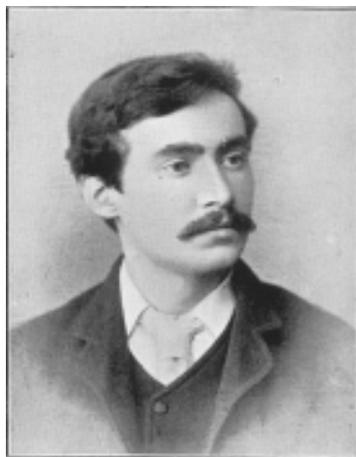
Mattison had an early experience of political activism when in December 1877, at the age of nine, he was present on Hunslet Moor when a crowd of 40,000 gathered to support and assist an agitator in the campaign to make the Middleton Railway remove a railway line laid across the moor, regarded as an infringement of the rights of the commoners.

A few years later, in 1881, an inquisitive teenage Mattison was on the edge of the huge crowd gathered to hear Gladstone speak at the Coloured Cloth Hall - roughly on the site of today's Leeds City Square - and managed to fall through the railings. He was then transported over the heads of the crowd to the front of the rally.

One Sunday afternoon early in 1886, walking through the centre of Leeds, Mattison arrived at Vicars Croft, a space by the central market noted for its open air speakers:

.... my attention was attracted by a pale but pleasant-featured young fellow, who in a clear voice was speaking to a motley crowd. After listening for a while I began to feel a strange sympathy with his remarks, and - what is more - a sudden liking for the speaker; and I remember how impatiently I waited for his reappearance on the following Sunday. A few months later and I joined "the feeble band, the few" and became a member of the Leeds branch of the Socialist League.³

The young man in question was Tom Maguire, a remarkable individual and a mythical figure in Leeds socialism. Only a couple of years older than Mattison, he had, entirely through his own reading, arrived at socialist views - and also at secularism. He eked out a living as a photographer's assistant but his main occupation was as a writer and poet for socialist journals and giving three open air lectures every Sunday, plus two or three others during the week. Having been attracted into politics by Tom Maguire, Mattison was one of the few Leeds socialists who had no background in the Liberal party.



TOM MAGUIRE

In 1884 Maguire had joined first Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and set up a branch in Leeds. Hyndman was too autocratic for many of his erstwhile followers and the Leeds party split from the SDF and, instead, Maguire set up a Leeds branch of the Socialist League, an organisation inspired by the socialist and somewhat mystical William Morris. All this is painstakingly recorded by Mattison, and the published histories duly follow and trace the evolution of socialism in Leeds - as if there was a large party. In fact, Mattison records that when they took stock of their Socialist League branch there were precisely eighteen of them. Florrie recalled later that around 1900 "there were not more than 100 to 150 avowed socialists" in the whole of Leeds.

Tom Maguire died of pneumonia in 1895 at the age of 29, in a house with no means of heating and without any real food. Mattison was one of the two comrades who had gone round to his house to find out why he had not turned up for a meeting. He records movingly in his diary the immediate efforts they made to secure fuel and food, but he continues:

It is to the everlasting regret of his friends that help and succour did not come to him sooner. The probability is that he might have been spared longer.⁴

Maguire's funeral was a remarkable event with four hundred mourners accompanying his coffin on foot from his home in Burmantofts, and a thousand present at the cemetery. Mattison was one of the speakers at the service. Maguire's death was a huge blow to the Leeds socialist

movement and it made it vulnerable to the excessive influence of demagogues such as John Lincoln Mahon⁵. It was up to Mattison and a few others, such as fellow engineer, Arthur Shaw, to hold the group together.

Tom Maguire's early death certainly hit the Leeds socialist movement hard, although Edward Carpenter suggested that he was already becoming weary and even depressed by the slow rate of achievement and the tendency of the "Left" to split.⁶

Five years before Tom Maguire's death he and Mattison had been instrumental in providing the logistical underpinning to the organisation of the Leeds gasworkers who were fighting against the Liberal-controlled City Council's attempt to reduce their pay and increase their working hours. Throughout his life Mattison invariably took on the secretarial duties - and those of election agent - rather than being a "front line" activist. He clearly recognised that this was his metier and it was certainly vital to the work and was respected by his colleagues.

The 1890 gasworkers strike was a seminal event in Leeds political history which dealt a blow to the Liberal party which was eventually to prove fatal to the chances of the Liberal party being able to retain its working class support. It also undermined the local Liberals' skilful agent and "fixer" John Shackleton Mathers who was remarkably influential in getting the Leeds Liberals to adopt Labour men as candidates and magistrates⁷. Hitherto the Liberal dominated Trades Council had inhibited unskilled workers' unions joining, but the success of the strike now made that virtually impossible and the complexion of the Leeds Trades Council became definitively different, although the Lib-Labs - chiefly William Marston, Owen Connellan and John Judge - fought a rearguard action against the outright socialists such as Walt Wood, Alf Mattison and others.



Arthur Shaw, a fellow engineer at the Hunslet Engine Company with Mattison and the first ever publicly elected Labour representative when he won an election to the Board of Guardians in 1895, wrote about his "conversion" to socialism:

Previous to 1890 I had worked with ardour and perseverance for the success of the Liberal Party in Leeds, believing them to be the

friends of the workers. We had just returned, for the South Ward of Leeds, a Liberal Councillor, a professed friend of Labour, when the gas-workers justly demanded an Eight Hours Day. To this demand my friends the Liberals opposed a strenuous resistance, as a proof of their friendship, and imported into the town the scum of labour from all parts of England. My particular friend of the South Ward [Cllr J Hunt] entertained them at the Town Hall with "Britons never shall be slaves". Other Liberals provided them with beer and tobacco, while at the same time the Leeds gas-workers were provided with military, as another mark of Liberal friendship. This decided me. I vowed I would never again assist either of the Political Parties, and every day I become more convinced that my course was right.⁸



Tom Maguire saw the strike not just as a fight for a just settlement for the workers but also as a struggle between the Liberals and Labour for the political and electoral adherence of the workers. He made this point directly to the workers:

They were gathered together to try to show the Leeds Gas Committee that the Leeds people were their masters if they (the Gas Committee) persisted in the course they had adopted nothing was more certain than that the LIBERAL PARTY OF THIS TOWN would get such a knockdown blow as they would never recover from.⁹

The gasworkers had suffered reverses before Leeds and it was vital for the union's future that the outcome in Leeds was different. Maguire chaired, and Mattison acted as secretary of the embryo union branch in Leeds and ensured that it was efficiently run. They were crucial, together with Tom Paylor, for ensuring solidarity and for balancing the tactics between militancy and retaining public sympathy, but it was the ineptitude of the Liberal council leaders - largely moribund after being in control of the municipality for fifty five years - that handed the workers an important success. The council backed down and the strikers were reinstated with their previous pay and conditions restored. Once again Mattison had been a key figure in the co-ordination and administration of a socialist campaign.

Mattison invited the London dockers' leader, Will Thorne, to come to Leeds to speak for the strikers. Alf Mattison went to the railway station to meet his London train but somehow missed him. Mattison went home to await the next train only to find that Thorne had made his own way there. Mattison's mother said to him, "There's a strange looking rough man

waiting for you in the sitting room. I can't tell a word he says. I don't know where you pick up your friends"! She was amazed to learn some years later that this "rough man" had been elected as an MP.

Meanwhile the battle was continuing between the two factions within the Leeds Trades Council - the pro-Liberal gradualists under William Marston, Owen Connellan and John Judge, versus the outright socialists with Walt Wood, Alf Mattison and others. Outside of this internal struggle, John Shackleton Mathers, with local MP Herbert Gladstone's help, was trying to seduce Labour worthies with Liberal nominations for council seats and for the magistracy. Mathers' efforts helped to stave off the first Labour success in Leeds until 1903 (compared to 1892 in Bradford) and Labour control of the council until 1928 (compared to 1919 in Bradford).

The young Alf Mattison's scholarly talents within the Labour Movement had been noted and he was regularly invited to spend time with a fascinating quartet of fairly rich middle-class intellectual socialists. If Tom Maguire was his inspiration, his guru was Edward Carpenter and his mentors were Isabella Ford, John Lister and Charles Oates. The latter four were all technically single people, though Carpenter had a long term partner, one George Merrill. Carpenter remained a lifelong friend and there is a largely unmined trove of correspondence between them. Lister and Oates clearly enjoyed Mattison's company and, from Mattison's diaries, this was reciprocated. All four of them had large houses, two of them in Leeds, one in the Peak District and the fourth on the outskirts of Halifax, and they all invited Mattison to stay with them. Both Lister and Oates also took Mattison on extended foreign tours.

In December 1898 John Lister took Alf to France and they were away together for ten weeks. They spent time in Paris of which Alf wrote:

We went to the Casino. Of this place I cannot say anything edifying. There were certainly a numerous throng of beautiful (?) Female tigers about! Saw what seemed to be a pitiable exhibition - something in the nature of what is called a "can-can" dance by slightly dressed women.¹⁰

For what it matters, there have been lingering views that Mattison was also homosexual, and it might be significant that he did not marry until he was aged 33, and remained childless, but this is merely circumstantial. There is no hint, even veiled, in his papers that he pondered this. Rather, a certain naïvety and gratitude towards his older and more middle-class benefactors is apparent.

A different but also highly respected socialist friend, although many miles away in South Africa, was Olive Schreiner whom he first met at Edward Carpenter's house at Millthorpe, where Mattison says that he and Olive spent a lot of time together and were very "chummy". Schreiner was a lifelong freethinker and socialist who bravely opposed the discrimination against South Africa's black population. Despite being married, she was a consistent and intimate correspondent of Alf's, calling him "Mattie".



After the 1890 gasworkers' action, the next crucial date was 1893 and the formation of the national Independent Labour Party (ILP). In 1892 Maguire, Mattison and Mahon had begun to form Leeds ILP branches and Leeds sent seven delegates - out of a total of 122 - to the inaugural ILP conference in Bradford a year later. Tom Maguire, John Lincoln Mahon and Alf Mattison remained well known, and a fourth, Frederick Marles crops up later, but the remaining three are - to me at least - unknown. Odd for individuals attending such a significant national conference. It is interesting that in a 1926 interview Mattison chooses his words carefully, saying that he was the only Leeds delegate, "still alive or active".¹¹ The first National Council of the ILP included Mattison's friend, John Lister, as Treasurer; no doubt his own resources were useful in keeping the party afloat.

Typically Mattison did not speak in the debates at Bradford; the Leeds delegates leaving this task mainly to Mahon, who, for once, kept largely to the consensus view agreed in Leeds. Mahon was a very complex man. He shifted his political position within the labour movement from left to right - and back again! He argued that the reason for this was his overriding aim of securing unity in the movement - which was strange coming from a man whose argumentative and fierce personality was highly divisive. He was put forward as the ILP candidate for a parliamentary by-election in South Leeds in 1892 but the Lord Mayor declared that his nomination papers were not in order and he was disqualified from standing.¹²

It is interesting that the modest circumstances of local ILP officers did not inhibit them from offering hospitality to ILP leaders and from it being accepted. Keir Hardie was just one ILP leader who visited Mattison's home and who thereafter always asked Mattison how his mother was whenever they met or corresponded.

Local ILP activities continued in Leeds and Mattison was involved in the candidature of his work mate and friend, Arthur Shaw, in the Leeds South constituency in 1895, although it was the poorest ILP result in Yorkshire. Mattison was also the hon. secretary of the local Fabian Society group and was involved with the Labour Church group in the city. Mattison records in his notebook that, "faithful Tom Duncan was the mainspring of the Labour church here." This is the same Tom Duncan, a manager in the Pygmalion department store, who was described by the Leeds suffragette activist, Mary Gawthorpe, as "our Keir Hardie"¹³ and who, in 1919, became Labour's first Lord Mayor. At one Labour Church meeting Mattison recalls that they sang a William Morris song which concludes "Tis the people marching on," but he comments, "but I'm afraid the people - other than ourselves - were very slow in joining the march"! It was at the Labour Church that he met his wife, Florence Foulds, and her sister Emily. Florrie was eleven years younger than Alf and always emphasised that she had been a member there since 1897 and that she was a socialist before she met Alf. She was a tailor's machinist by trade.

By the turn of the century, the ILP had become part of the wider alliance that made up the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and, although there were still elements of Lib-Labbery in the craft unions, the struggle for control within the Leeds Trades Council had been largely won by the development of the unions representing unskilled workers and their representation on the Trades Council. Also Mathers had died in 1899 and there was no Liberal successor as the "fixer" who saw the dangers so clearly and who had his organisational skills.

From 1900 the ILP was subsumed for electoral purposes in the Labour Representation Council (LRC) and Labour candidates began to be successful in Leeds from 1903 - significantly a decade later than in Bradford - and the Labour movement was at last basically united, with only occasional flurries from other groups, such as the SDF in Armley in 1909 when Bert Killip stood and, though polling only 168 votes, deprived the furious retiring Labour candidate, Owen Connellan, of his seat. By 1913 Labour had more elected city councillors than the Liberals, although the latter's over-representation in Aldermanic seats - indirectly elected for six years as opposed to the councillor's three - masked Labour's huge electoral improvement.

The debate on the rapid decline in the Liberal electoral performance between 1910 and 1922, and its replacement by the Labour party, has

been pursued since the mid-1930s but in looking at Leeds during Alf Mattison's early political life, one is struck by the very different social backgrounds of the two parties. Even though there were obvious exceptions in each of the two parties - ie some Quakers - and some key people who could intellectually accommodate the political developments, ie Frederick Spark, it is hard to imagine the party of Sir James Kitson, Sir Peter Fairburn and Sir John Barran being instinctively comfortable with the party of Tom Maguire, Walt Wood and Tom Duncan. The division on the Labour left between those who would pursue a "class war" and those who believed in socialism's intellectual superiority - with Maguire and Mattison amongst the latter - was self-perpetuating on both sides.

Parliamentary progress was slower and Labour's first general election success in Leeds - James O'Grady in East Leeds in 1906 - came in a straight fight, courtesy of the secret Macdonald-Gladstone pact, which engineered 52 such straight fights between Liberal or Labour candidates and the Conservatives, including O'Grady, and reciprocal straight fights for Liberals, such as Herbert Gladstone in Leeds. ¹⁴ Typically, Mattison's role was as the agent for Arthur Fox who finished second to the Liberal in South Leeds.

By this time Mattison's other great interest, local history, was taking an increasing amount of his time. This passion was evident as early as 1897 when he was giving talks in Hunslet, but it had developed rapidly and he records a total of thirty-five lectures in 1905. He still maintained his open affiliation to the ILP - he was a lifelong member, including after the



disaffiliation from the Labour party in 1932 - but he no longer took on official positions. In 1908 he published a book, *The Romance of Old Leeds*, with the journalist Walter Deakins, and with photographs by Mattison himself. He was in great demand as a lecturer and feature article writer and became a committee member of the prestigious local history group, the Thoresby Society, in 1908.

Given his interest in local history it is not surprising that Alf took a leading role in the campaign to erect a commemorative tablet to Phil May (1864-1903), the celebrated Leeds caricaturist, known from his work on *Punch* magazine as “the father of caricature.” May always had an affection for the poor and the underdog and many of his cartoons showed street urchins or working people - usually with them getting the better of the aristocracy. Mattison’s committee succeeded in raising the money for a tablet on his former home in Wallace Street, New Wortley, and, following the demolition of the street forty years later, it was placed in the Central Art Gallery.

In July 1917 there took place in the Coliseum in Leeds a remarkable Peace Convention called by a joint committee of the Labour party and the British Socialist Party to celebrate the first Russian revolution and to call for action to emulate it in Britain. Alf records that:

I just dropped in as Ramsay Macdonald was speaking. The place was packed and the atmosphere charged with the greatest enthusiasm. I went to the evening meeting. It was a gigantic affair - packed in every part - there would be close on 3,000 of an audience.¹⁵

Mattison regularly wrote and lectured on Leeds Labour history¹⁶ and was very jealous of his role in the formative years. When John Badlay, a somewhat theatrical early Labour Councillor, asserted that he had been involved “from the beginning”, Mattison quickly contradicted this, saying that Badlay had “only” been active from 1895. In addition to all his notebooks and press clipping files, Mattison did a great service to Labour historians by maintaining an archive of leaflets and flyers throughout his political career. In September 1929 Edward Brotherton bought the whole collection with a view it being housed in the Leeds University library that bears his name. It is a very valuable source of ILP and other Labour movement material today. Perhaps typically, Florence gave Alf’s diaries and remaining papers to the Leeds public library rather than to the University.

It is clear that Mattison maintained his contacts with his old friends, including Ramsay Macdonald (and Philip Snowden) even after the

formation of the National Government in 1931. He wrote in his diary that, “Though he was guilty he cannot question his integrity.”

He became increasingly deaf and his death came at the age of 76, on 9 September 1944, when he was knocked down by a tram in Chapeltown Road, on the approach into the centre of Leeds. From the evidence it seems that he did not hear the tram approaching and a witness stated that he was crossing the road, “in a somewhat absent minded manner not looking to right or left.”¹⁷

Alf Mattison was an unusual politician. He was a loyal and dedicated socialist but a reluctant activist. We know that he was immensely loyal and that he spoke on behalf of the cause in the local parks throughout his life but his great, and more congenially personal, contribution was as the movement’s “squirrel”, maintaining an invaluable record of the history of socialism in one major city. Alongside this he was an inveterate gatherer of photographs and material on Leeds generally. He was a Leeds man, not particularly interested in the national scene – his name appears just three times in the “Reformers’ Year Book” list of contacts¹⁸ – but he certainly deserves to be given flesh and blood rather than being consigned to reference footnotes in histories of the Labour movement.

Notes:

1 *Nourishing the Liberty Tree - Liberals and Labour in Leeds, 1880-1914*,

Tom Woodhouse, Keele University Press, 1996.

2 See *A veteran’s voice for peace*, Florence Mattison, Labour Monthly, August 1953

3 *Tom Maguire - A Remembrance*, Labour Press Society, 1895

4 Entry for 8 March 1895, The Mattison Papers, Special Collection, The Brotherton Library, Leeds

5 For Mahon see his entry in Volume 3 of *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, ed J O Baylen and N J Grossman, Harvester Press, 1988.

6 Tom Maguire *ibid*

7 See, for instance, his remarkable statement to local Liberal MP Herbert Gladstone shortly before the gasworkers’ action, quoted page 26 of *Nourishing the Liberty Tree, Liberals and Labour in Leeds, 1880-1914*, Tom Woodhouse, Keele University Press, 1986.

8 *Why I joined the Independent Labour Party*, ed Joseph Clayton, 1895.

9 *Leeds Evening Express*, 30 June 1890, emphasis in original. In the end Councillor Fred Spark, editor of the Express, was the only leading Liberal to support the workers.

- 10 From Alf Mattison's notebook, Brotherton Library, Special Collections, University of Leeds. (Unless otherwise noted, all such personal references are from the notebooks.)
- 11 "Rank and File Personalities, No 6", *The Socialist Review*, September 1926. (My emphasis)
- 12 There is a good biographical article by Susan K Nash and J O Baylen, on Mahon in *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals, Volume 3, 1870-1914*, ed Joseph O Baylen and Norbert J Gossman, 1988.
- 13 p179, *Up Hill to Holloway*, Mary Gawthorpe, Traversity Press, Penobscot, Maine, 1962.
- 14 *Labour and Politics, 1900-1906*, F. Bealey and H. Pelling, 1958
- 15 Notebook C, Alf Mattison Papers, Special Collections, Brotherton Liberal, University of Leeds; for a report on this remarkable event, see *British Labour and the Russian Revolution*, Documents on Socialist History: No 1, Spokesman Books, nd. The Leeds delegates were Bertha Quinn and D B Foster.
- 16 See for instance, the series of articles in *The Leeds Weekly Citizen* between 4 January and 26 April 1918.
- 17 *Yorkshire Post*, 11 September 1944.
- 18 *The Reformers' Year Book*, 1902, 1907 and 1908, ed. and published Joseph Edwards.

Michael Meadowcroft

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