

The Glasgow Study Circle

THE "Study Circle" was a well-known institution in Glasgow during the inter-war period, when it developed from a small group to a largely attended public meeting. It had close connections with Quakerism; its founder, Robert Shanks, became a convinced Friend; the last chairman, Thomas Taylor (now Lord Taylor), and other leading members joined the Society. Among the varied company of those who addressed it were many prominent Friends; it thus publicized the hitherto minute and little known local Meeting, and so contributed to its growth in numbers and activities. Its original basis accorded with Friends' peace testimony.

Robert Shanks was born in 1870 in the Camlachie district of east Glasgow, where he spent all his life. He married in 1911 Katherine Hovell, who long survived him, and became one of the best-known and most loved members of Glasgow Meeting. He entered in 1892 the employment of the Crown Fire Clay Works; when the owners retired from business in 1907, he became a partner. In December 1893 he became a member of Dennistoun Evangelical Union (Congregational) Church, and for many years was active in the Camlachie Institute, "the great centre of religious and philanthropic enterprise in the East End". He conducted a Bible class, and held office in the Y.M.C.A., Christian Endeavour Society, and Young Men's Reading Circle, to which he frequently gave addresses—e.g. on Buddha, Rousseau and Shelley (1902–3). He also conducted (c. 1904) an undenominational "Sabbath Noon Day Meeting", with which were associated lectures, a reading circle, rambles and the like. Extant manuscript notes of his talks—e.g. on "the Unknown God", "the Sermon on the Mount", "Spiritual Worship"—indicate that he was already thinking on Quaker lines.

He took a prominent part in Liberal politics, particularly in connection with the "Young Scots", who combined radicalism with Scottish nationalism, and in the Scottish League for the Taxation of Land Values. He was also actively associated with the Peace Society and the Scottish Temper-

ance League. In 1911 he was elected to Glasgow city council for Whitevale Ward, and in April 1914 was chosen as prospective liberal candidate for the Camlachie Division.

On the outbreak of war in August 1914, he immediately resigned his candidature, declaring his complete opposition to government policy. In consequence of this attitude, he lost his seat on the council at the municipal election in November. He was an early member of the Union of Democratic Control (U.D.C.) and of the No Conscription Fellowship (N.C.F.), and, though previously an avowed opponent in December 1917 joined the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) like several other anti-War Liberals.

The Young Scots suspended their activities at the beginning of the War, and Robert Shanks took the opportunity to deliver, in their meeting-place, the Liberal Rooms, Whitevale, on Tuesday evenings during the winter of 1914-15, a series of weekly addresses on "War and foreign policy". This developed next winter into the weekly meetings of a Study Circle on "Problems of the War and the Peace", which from February 1916 met on Sunday mornings, to discuss, after a brief devotional service, "Words of Jesus on War and Peace". This in September took the name of "the Eastern Study Circle", "for the discussion of the Principles and Problems of National and International Life in the Light of the Teaching of Jesus". It thus extended its scope beyond the war issue, and this profession of faith remained throughout its existence.

During the winter of 1916-17 it was addressed by several outside speakers, including H. N. Brailsford, C. R. Buxton, and George Lansbury, and the Friends Richard Field, George Macdonald (both of Glasgow), Robert J. Long and Herbert G. Tanner. A proposal to establish similar groups in other parts of the city was abandoned, and in April 1917 it migrated to the Central Halls, Bath Street, and finally to the Masonic Hall at 100 West Regent Street, and dropped the prefix "Eastern".

Between 1916 and 1921 it attracted audiences of up to 400, and speakers numbered about 130. It was administered by a committee, whose extant minutes commence in April 1919. The committee and office-bearers were appointed at a half-yearly business and social meeting. Robert Shanks was referred to as "Leader". William Donachie, a law clerk,

was secretary until his resignation on health grounds early in 1948; Jean Rowatt, a librarian, was treasurer during its active life. A "calendar" was issued regularly, including list of speakers for the next month or two, intimations, and "Thoughts for Quiet Moments",—apposite quotations (often from Quaker sources) supplied by members. The form of service comprised hymns from the *Fellowship Hymn Book*, an appropriate reading, an address, questions and discussion. The roll of members reached about 300 in 1921. Collections were regularly taken for "relief of distress at home and abroad", and much of the proceeds handed over to the Save the Children Fund and Friends' Relief Service. A Current Topics Club and a Rambling Club were formed, and a Literature stall set up. A Sunday school was started in March 1918.

Robert Shanks, along with his wife, was admitted to membership of Friends in February 1919. He died after a short illness on 16th July 1921. A short Memoir, compiled by his collaborator, George Aitken of the U.D.C., was published in October. It quotes a characteristic utterance: "I hate creeds which are fetters on the free thoughts of men", and, among his last words: "We must live for the Kingdom of God. . . . It is not enough to talk about Jesus: we must live his life."

After the lapse of nearly a year, William Niven, a commercial agent and former member of the United Free Church, who had been closely associated with Robert Shanks in his religious and political work, was appointed chairman; and Robert Mackay, a law clerk and I.L.P. member, became vice-chairman for the rest of his life. During the remainder of the inter-war period, the "Circle" became more of an open forum, with speakers of national as well as local repute, not by any means always in agreement with its avowed basis. The most varied doctrines were expounded, the most common factor being "heresy"—religious, political or social. Among public personalities who addressed it were Norman Angell, A. G. Gardiner, Ramsay MacDonald, Oswald Mosley (in his I.L.P. days), H. W. Nevinson, Robert Smillie and Charles Trevelyan, besides most of the "Clydesiders" group and other local socialist propagandists. Occasionally an avowed secularist, e.g. Guy Aldred the "anarchist", John S. Clarke, M.P., S. K. Ratcliffe,

was given the platform. There were unorthodox clergymen, such as the Unitarians Raymond Holt, Richard Lee and Sidney Spencer, and the pacifists James Barr, Seaward Beddow, Oliver Dryer, Patrick Figgis, Malcolm MacCallum, and Lewis Maclachlan. Several of Glasgow University staff gave their services, notably A. D. Lindsay, R. H. Thouless the psychologist and John McFadyen the biblical scholar. There were representatives of the Adult Education movement, including Ernest Greenhill of the Workers' Educational Association (later Lord Greenhill), D. M. Stewart of the Extra-Mural Committee, J. B. Payne of the Labour College, and A. G. Fraser of Newbattle Abbey. Visiting speakers from abroad included the Danish educationalist Peter Manniche, the Swede Michael Hoffman, Lootfy Levonian from Syria, Arabs, Chinese, Germans and Indians. There were advocates of various types of Scottish nationalism such as C. M. Grieve ("Hugh Macdiarmid"), Oliver Brown, John Kinloch and J. M. MacCormick; of total abstinence, e.g. Alex Lambert of the Scottish Temperance Alliance; of Food Reform and Nature Cure—e.g. Dugald Semple, James Swanson and James Hough (Vegetarian Society); of monetary reform, notably the Duke of Bedford. A few speakers dealt with literary topics, such as Matthew Arnold, Arnold Bennett, Thomas Carlyle, G. K. Chesterton, J. M. Synge.

Almost all "public" Friends then travelling in the ministry, addressed the Circle at least once, John W. Graham being the most frequent; the peak was in 1920, when there were 12. This declined in the later 'twenties and in the 'thirties; in at least four years there were none, though at one time arrangements were made with the War and Social Order Committee to supply speakers, and on others the visitor also addressed an evening meeting under Friends' auspices, or took part in a conference organized jointly by Friends and the Circle. Fuller contacts were resumed during and after the Second World War. Among names which appear are Anna Barlow, A. Barratt Brown, E. Vipont Brown, Percy Bartlett, Corder Catchpool, J. Percival Davies (Lord Darwen), Robert Davis, Stanley Farrar, John Fletcher, Henry Gillett, Carl Heath, Gerald Hibbert, Harrison Jackson, Ernest Ludlam, Francis Pollard, Roger Wilson, William E. Wilson and H. G. Wood.

An annual Peace Service was held until 1936 in St.

Andrews Hall on the Sunday before Christmas, and was addressed by leaders of various sections of the Peace Movement, including A. D. Belden, C. Delisle Burns, George Lansbury, E. D. Morel, Stuart Morris, Maude Royden and Alfred Salter. Memorial services were held for Robert Shanks and E. D. Morel. At least one wedding was celebrated in accordance with Scots law and similarly to Quaker usage, while two couples associated with the Circle were married in Friends' Meeting House. The "Circle Players" gave performances in the late 'thirties.

Internal strains were evident at this period. Discontinuance of religious observances was proposed, but rejected by the business meeting (1935). Particularly with regard to younger adherents difficulties arose. Tom Shanks, brother of the founder, for some years carried on work for adolescents, but retired in ill-health in 1929, and died in 1932. Some for a time were enrolled in the "Morel Kraft", founded after the death of E. D. Morel, and associated with the U.D.C. It provided talks on literature and art, plays, dancing and the like. A youth circle was formed in 1932, but after some disagreement the connection was severed in 1935. The Sunday school dwindled to half a dozen by 1937. Total membership was then about 150.

During and after the Second War, attendances declined, and several older members died, including Robert Mackay, the vice-chairman, and Mrs. Mary Cormack, a member of committee from 1920; both in 1944. William Niven, in failing health, resigned from the chair in February, 1947, and became the Hon. President; he died on 20th March, 1950, at the age of 73; a memorial service was held. His successor was Thomas Taylor, son of an I.L.P. pioneer, and brought up in the Circle as one of the younger generation. He stood as an anti-war candidate at a by-election in Edinburgh during the Second War. Associated all his life with the Cooperative movement, he is now Chairman of the Scottish Cooperative Wholesale Society (S.C.W.S.), and a member of Glasgow Meeting. Among others who joined Friends were the treasurer, Jean Rowatt, Henry Milligan, now the oldest member of Glasgow Meeting, and Robert Shanks junior.

At the end of 1948, it was decided to suspend regular Sunday meetings, though the Circle was retained in being. A Closing Service was held on Sunday, 6th February, 1949.

A series of Sunday evening meetings were held in the Grand Hotel, Charing Cross, during the winter of 1950–51, arranged by James Begg, who took over the secretaryship in April 1948. The Circle was never formally dissolved; annual reunions of members were held until a few years ago. Its last public activity was the holding of a Memorial Service for Hugh Robertson, founder and conductor of the Orpheus Choir, who had been closely connected with it throughout (21st December, 1952). This was addressed by Stuart Morris of the Peace Pledge Union (P.P.U.); the printed programme reproduced the "Declaration" of Friends' World Conference, held at Oxford that year, commencing "The Christian faith . . . is a revolutionary faith".

Among active members, most of whom addressed it more or less frequently were William S. Cormack, afterwards Principal of the Stow College of Engineering, (who held the record in that respect); Alexander Chisholm, a schoolmaster; George Chalk, a solicitor; Andrew Fleming, a veteran local socialist; Andrew Muir, lecturer at the Heriot-Watt College, Edinburgh (now University), and Findlay Watt, author of *Allanforth Commune*, a utopian romance.

In the 1920's, crowded audiences every Sunday evening during the winter months heard expositions of socialism from national or local speakers, in the large Metropole Theatre and in small halls such as that in the new housing scheme of Riddrie. It seemed for a time to revive in a secularized form, but with a dominant ethical note, the earlier Scottish enthusiasm for the Preaching and Hearing of the Word. It was to this "optimistic" phase that the Study Circle in its growth and decline belonged. The almost complete absence of such gatherings since the Second War is one of the most striking social contrasts between then and now.

It would seem that small voluntary groups such as the Study Circle are recurrent phenomena in periods of religious and social unrest, usually combining advocacy of religious heresy with that of a new social order. Rufus Jones and others have familiarized us with them, even in the Middle Ages, and still more in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More modern examples are the Chartist Churches of the early Victorian Age, and the Labour Churches towards its close. If they do not harden into self-centred institutions, they seem to fade out as the initial impulse weakens, perhaps

as the pressure of spiritual and social problems decline. It may be that if the Age of Affluence proves transient, and Ecumenicalism fails to achieve religious revival, some such movement will again emerge.

(This account is based on the archives of the Study Circle and the papers of Robert Shanks, kindly lent to me by Robert Shanks, nephew of its founder, and Jean and William Cormack, daughter and son-in-law of William Niven, long its chairman. These have been supplemented on some points by information from Henry Milligan and Thomas Taylor, and by my own recollections as a regular attender from 1920 to 1932, and subsequently as a visiting speaker.)

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