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# A Radical Historian's Pursuit of Rural History: The Political Career and Contribution of Reverend Dr. John Charles Cox, c. 1844 to 1919

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**Abstract** *How to Write the History of a Parish* (1905) by John Charles Cox is a famous early modern history of the parish-state. Yet its author had an eclectic and radical political career in Midlands' life long before he became famous as an historian of English rural life. Today, Cox's radical activities are in fact an important historical prism. His neglected career demonstrates how a strong personality could bring about genuine political change in agricultural life. Cox always focused on the need to fight for the socio-economic and political rights of the labouring poor. At the same time, he was committed to historical research and record collecting, especially that of the vestry in which the poor found a voice. In so doing, he personifies how the boundaries between private interest and public service, the domestic and the political, were sometimes navigated with personal intensity in rural England during the later nineteenth century.

## Introduction

Generations of scholars interested in the study of English rural history often start their research by reading *How to Write the History of a Parish*, originally published in 1905.<sup>1</sup> Penned by a cleric with antiquarian interests, it was an instant best seller and has been reprinted numerous times.<sup>2</sup> It thus is a key text in most early modern bibliographies, recognised as an innovative set book on its subject. What is less well known is that its author, Reverend Dr. John Charles Cox, had a fascinating career as a radical historian and politician in the Midlands during the later Victorian era.<sup>3</sup> In many respects Cox's historical work and political activities anticipated the 'history from below' approach in rural history.<sup>4</sup> As a life-long Liberal on the party's 'social radical' wing, he made a political commitment to fight for the democratic rights of the poor. Twice he stood for parliament on a ticket of educational reform and better social welfare provision for the vulnerable in society. Although unsuccessful on both occasions, he nonetheless won the loyalty and respect of many supporters in the Midlands, and Southeast rural England where he also championed agricultural trade unionism. It was Cox's passionate conviction that it was important not just to research the past and preserve its archives but that historical change should be a lived experience informing the present. A radical historian had a duty to be

at the vanguard of socio-economic reform and ought to be a proactive figure with eclectic political interests: Cox's leanings included, poor law reform, home rule for Ireland, church disestablishment, land nationalisation, local democracy and republicanism. For Cox, history was not a burden but an opportunity to understand, come to terms with and avoid repeating, past mistakes. This article thus retraces Cox's career in order to further our historical understanding of the importance and role of a leading individual in rural Victorian life. Cox's life, it will be argued, provides rural historians with an important historical prism. His career demonstrates how a strong personality located at the cusp of centre and periphery socio-economic debates could play a part in bringing about genuine political change in agricultural life to the benefit of the labouring poor. At the same time, he remained committed to historical research, record collecting, and retained an antiquarian interest in the history of the parish-state always emphasising its importance for those without a political voice in rural life. In so doing, he personifies the ways in which the boundaries between private interests and public service, the domestic and the political, were sometimes navigated with personal intensity in rural England during the later nineteenth century.

## I

*History – such as I have always understood it: not an inventory of dead people and dead things, but a key to life . . . Life in its fullness, life in all its shadings and aspects. Distance is her contribution to life . . . but without contact with the individual it can never be of much value.*<sup>5</sup>

John Charles Cox was born at Parwich in Derbyshire in 1844.<sup>6</sup> He was the second son of the Reverend Edward Cox, later rector of Lincombe in Somerset. Little is known of his early childhood, except that he was educated at Repton and Somerset College in Bath. In 1862, aged eighteen, he was matriculated at Queen's College, Oxford. He was a first-rate scholar but decided not to take his final degree examinations. Instead, at the end of the third year, he became a partner in the Wingerworth Colliery Company in Derbyshire. As a second son, it was imperative that he find a remunerative career and this opportunity was too good to miss. His early twenties were spent pursuing financial success. By all accounts, the colliery venture turned out to be very profitable. In 1867, he could afford to marry Miss Marian Smith, the daughter of a squire whose family seat was Tickton Hall in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Quickly settling down to married life, they had a large family of seven sons and three daughters over the next twenty years. Their first home was at Belper in Derbyshire. There, in 1868, Cox was appointed Justice of the Peace.<sup>7</sup> For the next eight years he served on the Quarter Sessions bench as a representative of local Whigs. He also chaired the Belper Union board of guardians and the Clay Cross school board. It was during this time that his active political career got underway, as he navigated the complexities of Liberal party policy-making at a local level.<sup>8</sup>

In 1870 the Liberal party was in crisis.<sup>9</sup> Although it seemed to personify political success, having won the 1868 general election, beneath a veneer of unity there lurked bitter policy divisions. The Irish church and land questions; the suffrage issue; the cool

reception of the Elementary Education Bill (1870); demands from the party's left-wing for more radical social welfare reform; concerns about the escalation of the Franco-Prussian war across Europe; were just some of the major policy issues confronting W.E. Gladstone, Prime Minister (1868–74, 1885–6, 1892–5). Above all, the party was concerned that its leader, Gladstone, had a very awkward relationship with Queen Victoria. It had enough internal disputes to resolve, without those being exacerbated by poor executive problems with the monarch. In widowhood Victoria had retreated from public life and developed an intense dislike of Gladstone. Their personality clash made his political life very uneasy. For example, she refused to open Parliament on the grounds that it was a health hazard: 'too cold outside, too hot inside'.<sup>10</sup> She despised his stance on Ireland, on the grounds that 'if we lose Ireland, we lose everything'. She was vociferous in her opposition to John Stuart Mill's revival of the Female Franchise Bill in 1870: 'the mad and utterly demoralizing movement of the present day to place women in the same professions – as *men*'. She had little faith in Gladstone's foreign policy, arguing that 'the French are a nation wh[ich], with but few exceptions seems to be entirely devoid of *truth*, & to live upon vanity, deception, amusement and self-glorification', so 'why are *we* making peace with *them*'? Gladstone, of course, responded with a 'masterful display of executive power', especially when 'convinced of his own rightness'.<sup>11</sup> What Victoria failed to appreciate, however, was how much her Prime Minister fended off popular criticisms of the monarchy. Gladstone lamented to political colleagues that she was 'impervious to the difficulties... he had to face on *her* behalf'. Above all, it was the rise of Republicanism, especially in 1871, which confronted Gladstone.<sup>12</sup> Not only did it hijack political life, it soon became an important political platform for more radical elements in the Liberal party. This new political talent seemed unstoppable. It was Sir Charles Dilke, one of the most gifted politicians of his generation, and a Liberal on the left-wing of the party, whom Gladstone watched with interest. In particular, Dilke's political activities and popularity in the provinces alarmed the more conservative element in the Liberal parliamentary party at Westminster. For Dilke recruited a number of gifted and assertive political activists. These included men like John Charles Cox, who first came to prominence in local political life and later got involved in some key national debates about the future direction of the Liberal party in the later Victorian era.

Dilke was a politician who courted controversy. He championed most radical Liberal causes.<sup>13</sup> He was President of the Land Tenure Reform Association, which lobbied against land enclosure and the loss of the poor's customary rights. He led the Reformers' Union that promoted female suffrage. He sat on the executive committees of the National Liberation Society, the National Education League and the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. Above all, he was renowned for leading the Republican Movement, which briefly alarmed late Victorian society.<sup>14</sup> Dilke believed in non-hereditary government, decentralisation and the political goal of full democratic representation. His political heroes were Jeremy Bentham, with whom he spent childhood family holidays at Forde Abbey in Dorset,<sup>15</sup> and John Stuart Mill. Essentially, as David Nicholls, his biographer, summarises, he was a 'social radical' who believed that a balance between local and state power could capture on a permanent basis the working-class

vote for Liberalism. Certainly leading socialists, like Keir Hardie, admired his political ambition and ethos. Indeed this was one of his great attributes, his political acumen and ability to attract forward-thinking men to Liberalism's rank and file.

Dilke first met John Charles Cox at political rallies promoting the Republican cause in the Midlands in the early 1870s.<sup>16</sup> They soon became firm friends and close political allies. Cox, for some time, had felt uneasy about his work as a Justice of the Peace on the county bench in Derbyshire. He was very critical of his Whig colleagues whom he despised for their conservative attitudes. Cox believed that they were often more reactionary than their Tory counterparts. In particular, he censured the way that local courts treated the labouring poor. Cox believed that crime was an environmental and economic problem, rather than a moral one. He was convinced that the Game Laws were iniquitous. Cox threw numerous poaching cases out of court on the grounds that nobody could blame a starving man for shooting a rabbit to feed his family.<sup>17</sup> He believed passionately that agricultural labourers should be allowed to form trade unions and that these would improve employee-employer relationships. It was for these reasons that the *Ripley Advertiser* described Cox as 'a remarkable man, how rare it is to find a man without class prejudice'.<sup>18</sup>

Cox's radical stance meant that he soon created enemies. In the early 1870s, his fellow magistrates tried to oust him from the county bench. This was the first time that he came to prominence in the local press for his political activities. His fellow magistrates were very angry that Cox asked Dilke to sponsor a bill to withdraw from Lord Lieutenants the discretionary powers to appoint and pay stipendiary allowances to Justices of the Peace.<sup>19</sup> Cox argued that this was a corrupt hereditary privilege, often abused by unscrupulous Whig magistrates. When Cox caused a local political furore over the issue, Dilke defended him and offered to speak at Derby on his behalf. Dilke described in his diary what happened:

Cox was a man of determination who did not mean to be beaten. He organised the meeting on this occasion with almost too much care, for I fancy he brought fighting friends from Nottingham and other bruising places to it. The Tory roughs appeared. . . . Before we were allowed to enter the room they were charged by means of battering rams, with such effect that their retrenchments were destroyed and they themselves were almost stunned and carried out one by one. No-one was dangerously hurt, nor were there very many broken heads. After this meeting was a government enquiry and removal of Cox from the county bench.<sup>20</sup>

Evidently political campaigning was a rough business in the Midlands in the early 1870s. Cox's magistrate opponents accused him of being a trade unionist, a republican and too radical. They complained to the Lord Chancellor that his political stance compromised his legal objectivity on the county bench. Cox replied that during the Derby meeting, after the fighting broke out, he asked to be arrested and was prepared to defend his actions in court. But the local constabulary refused to take him into custody. Instead one of his key supporters, 'a respectable householder', had been thrown in prison for one month. Cox and Dilke organised a 'fighting fund' for the man and he was given an undisclosed sum of money on release to compensate him so that he could start his life afresh overseas.<sup>21</sup> Questions were raised in Parliament about Cox's actions and despite his best efforts he was forced to resign as a magistrate.<sup>22</sup> Cox, like Dilke, became a lifelong critic of the

Whigs, abhorring their dominance in the parliamentary Liberal party. Both started to campaign vigorously for the Republican cause.

Dilke made an infamous speech at Newcastle in October 1871, entitled *The Cost and the Crown*, which set the Republican cause alight.<sup>23</sup> It reiterated the criticisms of the monarchy that G. O. Trevelyan (Dilke's close friend) had put forward in *What Does She Do With It?* The furore was ignited because in the summer of 1871, Gladstone had been placed in the unenviable position of having to 'defend a marriage dowry of £30,000 for Princess Louise and an annual allowance of £15,000 for Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught', which would be approximately £1.5 million and £750,000 at today's prices. Dilke questioned why the poor should pay for the Queen's 'brood' and asked why the monarchy was such bad value for public money. Her Majesty never appeared in public and yet lived at the taxpayer's expense. It was well-known that the Duke of Edinburgh, Victoria's second son, was courting one of Tsar Nicholas I's daughters. Dilke asked, 'was that too going to cost more tax revenue?' He also spoke around the country in the autumn of 1871. It was during this time that he asked Cox to support the Republican cause in the Midlands and in print.

Cox's earliest published political writings included letters to newspapers, political speeches and *The Marriage of the Duke of Edinburgh*, *The Cost of the Royal Household*.<sup>24</sup> Cox outlined that the Republican ideal was to make the monarchy pay its way. Moreover, Republicans must defend open spaces for the masses and challenge the hereditary principle. Republican virtues, such as 'the reduction of waste, the abolition of privilege, equal opportunity and a system of government based on merit' were needed to improve British political life. This was not an anarchistic or seditious creed. Its roots lay in English history, which taught 'the elective nature of Anglo-Saxon kingship, and the importance of the concept of folk moot'. Medieval English monarchs understood that authority was derived from the people, not vice versa. The Commonwealth, asserted Cox, was a time of *Arcadia* in English politics, when 'much may have gone wrong but much more went right'. Above all, the experience taught the English that a 'separate radical environment' was pivotal to a nation's healthy political life, in which social and political reform could flourish.

Later in his life, Cox elaborated on why Republicanism captured the political mood in the early 1870s. Cromwell was their hero because he blended 'Religion and Constitutionalism'.<sup>25</sup> He fought hand-in-hand for religious and civil freedoms that would protect the 'folk moot' against 'barbarous monarchical absolutism'. The Stuart court, like Victoria's, deserved to be overthrown. The former adopted 'illegal and unwonted methods to raise funds, by straining to the outmost prerogatives of absolute monarchism that rolled the Crown into dust'. Personal rule did not deserve to survive if it failed to balance its economic interests against the country's socio-economic needs. The civil list controversy was no different from the Stuart monarchy's determination to over tax ordinary people to pay for their privilege. In Victorian Britain, it was immoral to support the monarchy with tax handouts when central government was reforming the poor law system by withdrawing out-door relief doles from the poor who were sent to workhouses for basic parish care. If civil list allowances were paid from taxes, then the poor also deserved to receive generous publicly-funded welfare payments too. Many political commentators felt that Cox had a

point. However, events overtook the Republican Movement and it foundered as quickly as it had begun.

In the autumn of 1871 the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, caught typhoid at a visit to a country house near Scarborough.<sup>26</sup> For the first two weeks of December he was very ill and support for the monarchy rallied during the crisis. Regular newspaper bulletins were issued; there were prayers in church, and sympathy was expressed for Victoria. Her withdrawal from public life and the cost of the monarchy were forgotten during the six-week illness. Edward's recovery and the service of thanksgiving on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1872, a day of national celebration, undermined the momentum of the Republican Movement. Many thought that Dilke's career was ruined. But he was a skilful politician who simply realigned himself within the Liberal party. Up and coming men, like Joseph Chamberlain, became his firm political allies. Admittedly, Dilke had to devote time to rebuilding political alliances at Westminster. But he could afford to do this because he re-jigged his political commitments. Dilke asked Cox to act as his political substitute in the English provinces. With alacrity, Cox took on the role and entered the political arena full-time.

## II

*All I ever wanted to be is a trade unionist – it is a worthy cause for a radical.*<sup>27</sup>

Cox became a regular political activist and lecturer on the trade union circuit in the 1870s. Dilke and he agreed that this was an important way to build grass roots Liberal support. In a speech to miners in the market place at Ripley, Derbyshire on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1872, Cox outlined why he was committed to the trade union cause, arguing that the belief:

That there should be classes that exclusively labour, and others that exclusively enjoy, and have the privilege of unlimitedly expending the fruits of other men's labour, is opposed to reason, justice and Christianity.<sup>28</sup>

Cox believed that trade unions were a positive force, promoting social stability. He often cited the claim of Auberon Herbert, 'that this country has of late years been saved from active revolution, is chiefly due to the good influences of Trades Unions'. Cox argued that trade unions benefited the working classes in three ways. First, they provided a credit network for men struck down by illness and disability. Second, they lobbied for tighter regulations to protect men from industrial injury. Third, they promoted independence and self-help. Trade unions were a substitute for the 'makeshift' economies of the labouring poor. Membership gave contributors access to a labouring community's pooled resources that protected them during the life-cycle crises of accident, disability, illness, infirmity and so on. Cox gave short shrift to teetotalers who opposed the Nine Hours Movement to shorten the working day. Although reform would give working men more leisure time drinking in public-houses, he posed the question 'doesn't the professional man spend a larger proportion of his income on expensive wines than does the poor man on his beer?' Besides working-men who worked reasonable hours laboured more efficiently. In general Cox was very critical of the uneven distribution of wealth in late Victorian society:

I do not hold what are generally understood as Socialist views. I do not believe that there is any more prospect of all men possessing an equality of goods, than an equality of brains, or living an equal number of years, but I do feel very strongly that the present distribution of wealth, as it is in England, is gross and iniquitous, and I am sure that were the upper or middle classes wise in their generation, they would, if only in their own interests, do their best to effect some quiet alterations in the main spring of society; for all history teaches us that a disproportion so enormous, accompanied, as it of necessity is, with so much crime, of pauperism, of absolute misery, cannot go on forever, and will one day right itself – and remember, the jolt will be severe if it comes on us all at once.<sup>29</sup>

It was because of this firm anti-pauperism stance that Cox became Dilke's political substitute on the Executive Committee of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) in 1871–2. It was an ideal political vehicle with a popular focus at a time when rural society was entering a prolonged phase of agricultural crisis. The NALU under Joseph Arch's leadership welcomed Cox who promised to work tirelessly to highlight the problem of endemic poverty in the countryside. Cox believed that rural pauperism personified the political failings of the Liberal party. Few labourers could secure social justice to relieve abject poverty.

In 1872–3, in a series of sixteen articles published in the *Examiner*, a leading radical Liberal journal, Cox outlined why he supported the NALU cause.<sup>30</sup> He explained that he felt compelled on moral grounds to become one of Joseph Arch's closest political allies. Together throughout 1872–3 they travelled the length and breadth of England campaigning for better wages and supporting strikers in agricultural districts.<sup>31</sup> Cox claimed that guardians of the poor were responsible for the 'greatest dissatisfaction' amongst labourers 'by the partial manner in which they have distributed poor relief'. Withholding adequate out-door relief allowances from able-bodied claimants, the equivalent of a small dole around 2s. 6d. per week, forced labourers to strike for higher wages. Poor law unions were farmers' parliaments that failed to protect the rights of labourers. Agriculture had become a very profitable business in the High-farming era and farmer guardians had forgotten the plight of their employees who deserved 'a stake in the soil'. Cox was very critical of the landed interest and Anglican clergymen:

The country parson is rapidly losing the position of spiritual and temporal autocrat that he so often held in small villages: the squire, whether he be a *Parvenu* or descended from some *Norman Thief*, can no longer exhort as a matter of right, the servile scrape or the cringing curtsy. Independent manly thought is coming to the surface, for our hinds are daring to think for themselves. The wrongs of the Game Laws, the iniquity of class-made and class-administered justice, the need for education, and the lack of political power, are now being debated with energy in every village land and hedgerow.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout 1873, Cox had an opportunity to put these political convictions to practical use.

For some time Joseph Arch had been planning to launch an NALU campaign in Berkshire, a county renowned for opposing unionisation. Previous attempts to recruit labourers had resulted in magistrates banning NALU meetings on the pretext that union activity obstructed the highway. Lord Ernest Bruce, MP for Marlborough and Viscount Folkestone, informed Arch that he would be fined and chased out of the county.



Arch asked Cox to use his legal expertise, as an ex-magistrate, to outwit the Faringdon magistrate's bench. At a preliminary meeting Cox warned Berkshire justices that:

The fining of Joseph Arch and the strong possibility that he would exercise his option of preferring prison to a fine, for the crime in a county market-place of speaking to our poor country serfs, in a district where wages only just remove them from starvation, would be worth more to the Union than the cheque to a millionaire.<sup>33</sup>

A meeting did go ahead and although NALU opponents threw rotten eggs and stones into the crowd from surrounding houses in Faringdon, proceedings passed off peacefully. Cox's subsequent NALU activities in Dorset were to have a much greater impact.

The 1873 NALU campaign in Dorset was fought bitterly. There was a deep sense of injustice about the condition of low-paid impoverished agricultural labourers around the West Country. When Cox arrived with Arch he discovered that an old adversary from the Derbyshire county bench awaited them. Sir Richard Glynn (brother of the Whig chief whip) evicted all his tenants for unionisation in 1873. Cox was determined to oppose such high-handed actions. He attended numerous lock-out protests and spoke around the county in support of the NALU cause. The issue came to a head at the Town Hall, Blandford, in December 1873 when Cox mounted a legal challenge that forced Glynn either to re-employ his low-paid workers or to pay their poor relief costs out of his parish rates. Pragmatically Glynn calculated the second option would be more expensive than small wage increases, because he would have had to pay for whole families to enter the workhouse.<sup>34</sup> Cox held his nerve and as a result the NALU won a symbolic victory. The success of the Dorset campaign and the widespread grass roots support it generated amongst the labouring population on a national basis suggested to Dilke that his political instincts were correct, and that redressing social injustices in rural society could advance Liberalism. Dilke offered to sponsor Cox's parliamentary candidacy, maintaining that local politicians with radical credentials were needed to widen the party's appeal in the rural heartland. But Dilke soon discovered that Liberal party central office did not support his plan. They could not prevent Cox standing but withheld from him financial support and practical help to get elected. The broader significance and timing of election losses by candidates like Cox, seems to suggest that the Liberal party had lost its way in the later Victorian era.<sup>35</sup> Moreover Cox's campaigning experience explains the roots of that political failure in provincial life. It is necessary therefore to focus on Cox's involvement in the education controversy of 1874 when he became a pawn in a major national political debate.

### III

*Could this Education controversy get me elected to Parliament – I think so!*<sup>36</sup>

By the end of the Liberal party's first term of office in 1874 the bitter divisions within its ranks could no longer be disguised. The rank and file had split three ways. The Whigs were ultra-conservative determined to preserve hereditary peerages, especially their governing rights and privileges. Gladstone's supporters were keen Benthamites, admitting more social reform was needed, but they remained wary of far-reaching measures. They

distanced themselves from key policy changes, such as female suffrage or extensive welfare provision. Their creeds of *laissez-faire* economics, minimum government, and taxation retrenchment, made Advanced Liberals on the left of the party their natural enemies. Advanced Liberals argued that Whigs and Gladstonians were political dinosaurs, incapable of responding to popular pressure for full democracy and local government. These diverse political outlooks came to a head during the education controversy in 1874, when Cox found himself in the uncomfortable position of being at the political centre of a public row over the future direction of Liberalism.<sup>37</sup>

During the 1874 election campaign two issues dominated political debates, whether the disestablishment of the Irish Church should extend to the Church of England and whether the Anglican Church had the right to control elementary education. Cox was embroiled in both of these controversies. In *Church Property, National Property* he outlined why the Church of England ought to be disestablished.<sup>38</sup> He asserted that all church property, including glebe land, was the property of the state, not the church. Had it not benefited for generations from tithes, a form of indirect local taxation? The church had abused its financial privileges by withholding tithes and endowments from the poor. Its profits were owed to its parishioners, not vice versa. Cox ridiculed Anglicans who tried to justify their opposition to further Irish disestablishment. Their hostility was based on the simple calculation that having 'lost half its property valued at about £16 million in Ireland' it was never going to support further reform that might damage its financial interests elsewhere. Historically the church had been given too many taxation exemptions, which it abused. This allowed it to acquire property that belonged to its parishioners.

Following publication, prominent Whigs and Gladstonians became Cox's arch-enemies but this only delighted the Advanced Liberal wing of the party. Dilke, at the behest of Joseph Chamberlain, MP for Birmingham, arranged for Cox to be adopted as prospective parliamentary candidate at Bath in 1874. Advanced Liberals would pay his election expenses provided he agreed to break party etiquette by standing against Whigs and Gladstonians (and naturally any Tory candidate). For this reason the 1874 election campaign turned into one of the most bitter fights in Liberal party history. Before we look in detail at Cox's role during the controversy, we first need to examine briefly why the education issue threatened to split the Liberals.

The Advanced Liberal wing of the party was led by men, like Joseph Chamberlain, who were committed Nonconformists. This was a thorny problem for Gladstone, whose 1868 election victory relied on the Nonconformist vote. Nonconformists tended to support Advanced Liberal candidates and this forced both Whigs and Gladstonians to tolerate radicalism on the left of the party. But it was an uneasy alliance. Forster's Education Act (1870) exposed these deeper party divisions. For over half a century the Church of England had dominated elementary private schooling.<sup>39</sup> It controlled school boards, and many poor law unions, as well as highway and sanitary authorities because complex property qualifications stopped many Nonconformist voters being elected to local government office. When Forster's Education Act was proposed, Nonconformists thought that state elementary education would begin to dismantle the power of Anglicans in provincial life. Indeed the Liberal party manifesto of 1868 had promised a more egalitarian system of voting in local elections. Instead, as the controversy surrounding

the Bill's passage through parliament grew, it became apparent that the powerful Anglican lobby was using its influence to force the government to grant them a key concession. A caveat, dubbed 'Clause 25', was added to Forster's Education Act. It stipulated that if the Church of England had enough funds to run an elementary schooling system funded by ratepayers, then it could opt out of the bill and continue to elect local school board representatives under the old property qualification rules. This incensed many Nonconformist voters and those on the Advanced Liberal wing of the party. Men like Dilke and Chamberlain sensed that radical elements in the party had found a rallying issue to challenge the dominance of Whigs and Gladstonians. Now all they needed was the right electoral conditions to mount a formal challenge and a radical candidate with the right political pedigree. That person needed to be a renowned local politician popular in the provinces for his radical stance. Soon their chosen candidate was dubbed *Irreconcilable Cox* by the popular press<sup>40</sup> But the campaign still needed good organisation and so an Education League was established in Birmingham in March 1870, led by Joseph Chamberlain and Jesse Collings. It provided the political focus and electioneering prowess for Advanced Liberalism.

The Education League decided to put up *Irreconcilable* candidates in every constituency where the sitting Liberal member refused to support a repeal of Clause 25. A by-election at Bath, just before the general election in 1874, gave Advanced Liberals the perfect opportunity to test electoral opinion and expose Gladstone's political intransigence.<sup>41</sup> The sitting member at Bath, Captain Hayter, refused to support the National Education League. He informed Dilke that as a Whig he 'would not be threatened or bullied into submission'. A. J. Mundella, a moderate Liberal, tried to intervene but he was rebuffed. Mundella informed Gladstone that, 'Chamberlain and the fanatics have the mastery and means to gratify their vanity and magnify their importance by showing their power to do mischief'.<sup>42</sup> Cox was despatched to fight the by-election. It was a bitter contest.

On Cox's arrival at Bath, Captain Hayter's election agent met him. The agent tried to persuade Cox to withdraw and then threatened him with violence if he proceeded to muster votes. Cox of course relished a political fight. He organised a meeting at the Guildhall in the centre of Bath, which generated national publicity. As Cox rose to speak Hayter's supporters threw cayenne pepper into the crowd. In the commotion the mob grabbed Cox. He was then thrown out of a first floor open window. Fortunately the constabulary caught him below. Nonetheless, mob anger and the widespread bad publicity in the national and local press alarmed senior Liberal figures. The by-election turned into a political fiasco. Cox needed the support of leading Liberals in the town but they were deeply divided. At the last minute the Returning Officer could not let Cox stand. Hayter's election agent tricked Cox into getting two prominent Tories to sign his nomination papers. Naively Cox's lack of local political knowledge was his undoing. But the ruse also back-fired on Hayter because a local Tory candidate prised a safe Liberal seat from his hands: at the polls the Tory won by just fifty-one votes. This political comedy rebounded on all Liberals.

The general election of 1874 was a Liberal disaster. Admittedly, the causes of defeat were complex. Nonetheless voter apathy and the *Irreconcilable* debacle proved to be an

electoral liability.<sup>43</sup> Although Cox was depicted as a popular radical hero in the local press, he was also vilified in conservative national newspapers. He failed to get elected at the subsequent general election (he stood at Didsbury in Manchester). Cox informed Dilke that the national publicity had been a 'double-edged sword'. It gave him a very radical reputation but he could not make political capital out of it because Liberal party central office was unsupportive, disliking his radical credentials. The Bath election also had a detrimental impact on his health, which was 'temporarily broken by the veracity of the fight'. Dilke felt he owed him a political debt since Cox had been his willing pawn. Cox informed Dilke that he had set his sights on a new career plan. He would become an innovative local historian. And he would reinvent himself as a radical politician in local government, which was coming on-stream with the promise of county councils, poor law democracy and parish councils. Meanwhile he needed a more secure income. It was time to seek an alternative career in the Church.

#### IV

*Next to him sat a Roman Catholic Irish priest. Cox dresses like a priest and is slightly bald. After eyeing him for a while the Paddy padre said, 'Are you a priest?' To which Cox replied, 'I call myself one, but I fear you might not agree with me, for I have 10 children!'*<sup>44</sup>

In 1879 the Coxes left Derbyshire. They set up home in Staffordshire. Cox could now train as an Anglican priest at Lichfield Theological College.<sup>45</sup> Accused of betraying his disestablishment beliefs, Cox replied, 'that you could be radical from *within* too!' In 1880 he was ordained as a deacon and the following year he became an Anglican priest. He was attached to Lichfield cathedral (1880–3) before being awarded the livings of Enville in Staffordshire (1883–6), followed by Barton-le-Street at Malton in Yorkshire (1886–94). It was during this time that Cox developed his second career, as a radical local historian. His reputation grew quickly, as his obituary in *Who Was Who* attests:

Member of the Royal Archaeological Institute and British Archaeological Association; Council member of Canterbury and York Society and the British Numerismatic Society; Hon. Member of Derbyshire and East Riding Archaeological Societies; Former Editor of *Reliquary*, *Antiquary*, *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*; Editor series of *Antiquary* books, *Advisory and County Editor* for Victoria county histories of Derbyshire, Northamptonshire and writer therein; contributor to *English Historical Review*, the *Times*, the *Athenaeum*, *Country Life*, *Builder*, *Guardian* and *Church Times*. Writer of *How to Write the History of a Parish* and numerous books on English local history.<sup>46</sup>

It might seem curious, given their past political differences, but Gladstone took a keen interest in Cox's historical work. Likewise both men were enthusiastic supporters of the Oxford Movement. Cox often visited his *alma mater*, Queen's College, to debate High Church questions with his former provost and many leading Oxford secedents. Gladstone also admired Cox's work for the National Liberation Society in the 1880s.<sup>47</sup> Cox, like Gladstone, upheld the principle of religious freedom. It was sacrosanct. Cox argued that church and state business should be separate. The church should play an impartial role in civic and political life. Cox argued that in the past it had a positive

influence in the parish state. Vestry government, for example, was founded on egalitarian principles, since ‘in the church vestry *all* were equal and had an equal say’. For this reason, it was a valued forum for the labouring poor. Cox, long before modern historians recognised that the labouring poor had more extensive rights to poor relief under the old poor law, was researching the functions of the early modern parish state. He pointed out that grassroots local government gave communities the power to improve their lives materially in practical ways. They raised their welfare taxation from local rates. It was spent carefully after individual cases were investigated. Those in need had the right to appeal to local justices. In effect, the Church via the vestry system played a pivotal role in the governance and maintenance of a proactive parish state. Cox’s High-church background thus provided the motivation for his rediscovery of the importance of local history and its everyday politics.

Gladstone was so impressed by Cox’s innovative work that he sponsored the publication of his early local history research. Dilke kept in close contact too. Cox wrote many articles for the Dilke family-owned *Athenaeum*. Dilke explained in his diaries that one of the motivations for Cox’s historical research was that ‘being a man of active mind he found the care of small parishes of ritualistic tendencies insufficient to occupy his whole time’. In fact, he never gave up his radical political interests. Dilke often encountered him ‘sitting night after night . . . during the Home Rule debates *under the clock*’ in the House of Commons public gallery.<sup>48</sup> In 1884–5 Cox closely monitored the defeat of Gladstone’s Home Rule Bill and also Dilke’s untimely involvement in the Crawford divorce scandal, in which he was cited as co-respondent. However, he primarily concentrated on his historical work, believing that with Dilke in a permanent political wilderness and Gladstone bogged down with the Irish cause he would not have an opportunity to come to the political fore again. A final chance, however, came about in the 1890s when he stepped forward once more to fight the radical Liberal cause in rural England.

## V

*It is currently understood that a political offer has been made to Cox where Liberals think the agricultural labourers cannot secure Poor Law justice.*<sup>49</sup>

In January 1894 the Coxes moved to Holdenby village in Northamptonshire. Gladstone, as a reward for Cox’s innovative historical research, appointed him to a lucrative Crown living. It came with a substantial salary increase, a £500 annual stipend and a large rectory. Both were welcome. The Coxes had a large family of ten children to support. Fortunately, his new duties were not onerous. Holdenby parish was very small, with just fifteen residents. This gave Cox more time to devote to his historical work, for which he was becoming famed. Interestingly, contemporary accounts of his appointment hinted that Gladstone had an ulterior political motive for giving him the Holdenby living.<sup>50</sup>

In 1871 when the Poor Law Board merged with the Local Government Board (LGB) to create a new ministry of state, the Treasury put pressure on its poor law division to cut welfare expenditure.<sup>51</sup> Senior civil servants had expressed alarm that poor relief costs had risen by an unprecedented sixteen per cent in the previous decade, despite

workhouse capacity being increased under the new taxation raising powers of the Union Chargeability Act (1865). Three poor law reviews were undertaken in response to an LGB initiative to cut poor law costs: the Goschen Minute (1869); the Fleming Report (1871); and the Longley Strategy (1874). All stated that poor relief outside the workhouse should be eradicated. If a pauper were destitute he or she should be forced to enter the workhouse to receive minimal welfare care. The crusade against out-door relief, as contemporaries dubbed it, soon turned into 'a form of brutal dispauperisation'. Children, the disabled, the infirm, sick, widows, widowers and the aged were purged from Relieving Officers' out-door relief registers. Karel Williams has shown that at first the majority of the 650 or so poor law unions in England and Wales supported the crusading policy. In total out-door relief expenditure fell by £903,000 (twenty-five per cent) between 1871 and 1876. Thereafter, forty-one poor law unions, containing sixteen per cent of the total population of England and Wales, championed the new retrenchment guidelines, reducing costs by a further £390,000 by 1893.<sup>52</sup> What is intriguing about this poor law backdrop is that Cox moved to an area of Northamptonshire where the crusade against out-door relief had been rigorously enforced for over twenty years.<sup>53</sup> By the time he arrived in Holdenby parish in the Brixworth union in 1894 there was a bitter poor law battle in full swing. It was just the sort of radical cause that he had relished championing in the past, fighting for the labouring poor to obtain a poor law political voice.

The Brixworth Union comprised 57,055 acres of prime mixed-farming land in the Midlands. In mid-Northamptonshire, its thirty-three parishes (later increased to thirty-six), were combined in 1836.<sup>54</sup> Brixworth workhouse was completed the following year and the board of guardians, chaired by the Spencer family of Althorp Park, settled down to administer poor relief pragmatically. Guardians had a generous reputation in the mid-Victorian era. Small out-door relief doles of 2s. 6d. per week were given to paupers to fund sickness, burial requests, temporary unemployment and unexpected life crises. Central government however were critical of such generous provision, describing it 'as one of the worst unions, in almost the worst county in England' for poor relief abuses by the 1870s. Encouraged by civil servants to review procedures, the fifth Earl Spencer, a leading Whig magnate, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland 1868–74, 1882–85, and one of Gladstone's key political allies, conceded that generous out-door relief allowances had to stop. The high-farming era had been very profitable for farmers and labourers and poor relief bills should have fallen, whereas in practice they had increased substantially to nearly £6000 annually for a population of around 12,500 people, with one in twelve claiming out door poor relief. In 1873–4, Spencer agreed to review all out-door relief cases with Mr Albert Pell, Conservative Member of Parliament for South Leicestershire, 1868–1885, and Reverend William Bury, who chaired the board when Spencer was absent. Bury, Pell and Spencer cut out-door poor relief expenditure to £1,600 per year by 1880, with the numbers of out-door relief claimants decreasing from 2,017 to 494. They publicised their success in contemporary newspapers, at poor law conferences and in numerous Charity Organisation Society pamphlets. The LGB was pleased to have such a willing ally and it reported in its annual league tables that the Brixworth Union was one of the top ten performing boards of guardians in England and Wales. The poor, by contrast, did not agree with that assessment. In fact, they lobbied their MPs, county councillors, and

sympathetic guardians to do something about their plight. The deserving poor, during one of the severest agricultural recessions in the region in the 1880s, suffered deep hardship. This was exacerbated by the penny-pinching policies of the Brixworth Union.

Guardians implemented some very creative retrenchment strategies to keep costs low and make year-on-year taxation savings.<sup>55</sup> The children of elderly paupers were prosecuted for their parent's maintenance. Residents in almshouses were refused out-door relief because technically their housing status meant they were in receipt of charity. The cadavers of friendless paupers dying without means were sold to Cambridge anatomical teaching school to recover the cost of care in the community.<sup>56</sup> And medical care outside the workhouse was stopped altogether. For these reasons, the labouring poor resented the *crusading* ethos. Although a number of moderate Liberal farmers fought to overturn the retrenchment experiment, they had little success. Soon however the political climate in the district began to change following the Third Reform Act (1885), which gave agricultural labourers the right to vote in parliamentary elections. This promised to change the political complexion of rural life and it alerted the Liberal party to make its policies more attractive to a widening electorate often resentful of its traditional *laissez-faire* stance on social reform.

The Newcastle Programme (1891) outlined the New Liberal political vision for the coming decade.<sup>57</sup> It promised to overhaul local government by creating county councils, parish councils and democratising the poor law by abolishing much-resented property qualifications. For the first time, working men would be able to stand for, and vote in, local government elections. But this meant of course that the labouring poor, who resented the crusade against out door relief of the previous decades, could exploit their new voting rights to bring about social reform where they felt it was needed most in the poor law boardroom. This changing poor law political context was to revitalise John Charles Cox's career in local political life and once more he was able to key into radical debates about the need for better welfare provision for the needy and vulnerable in late Victorian society.

By the 1890s the LGB was forced to concede that the crusade against out-door relief was at variance with numerous social investigations into the causes of poverty. Publications, such as Charles Booth's *Life and Labour in London* and Henry George's *Poverty and Progress*, identified that the vagaries of an industrial economy, with its boom and bust trade cycles, caused unemployment. Paupers were not idle or work-shy but victims of financial constraints beyond their control. At the same time, civil servants calculated that compelling all poor law claimants to enter the workhouse was too expensive. It made more financial sense to pay a small dole to one pauper than to house their entire family in-doors. In any event, in many areas workhouses had turned into care homes for the aged by the 1890s.<sup>58</sup> The pension problem, not out-door relief, occupied central government policy-makers, as the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (1894) attested. Against this backdrop, even the most conservative members of the Liberal party sensed that the Home Rule crisis left them foundering. They needed some popular measures to get re-elected in 1892; otherwise they faced a long-term political wilderness. Threatened by the rise of 'popular Toryism' and the early stirring of Socialism, in the guise of the Fabian Society, Social Democratic Federation and the newly formed Independent Labour Party, widening the party's electoral appeal was essential. Perhaps, it was argued, supporting reform of the poor law might prove to be a popular measure at the polls. Rather than

granting welfare provision for everyone, and thus compromising *laissez-faire* tenets, why not steal the centre ground by democratising the poor law and handing local power to the electorate. This was bound to be a popular move. But in recognising what Jon Lawrence has termed the importance of ‘the politics of place’, Liberals also ran into a hedge of local interests that tended to expose rather than unify Liberalism’s party divisions in the provinces.<sup>59</sup> The bitter political wrangling over poor law reform in the Brixworth union exposed these deep fractures and brought the party a lot of unwelcome publicity in the Midlands. Once more Cox was at the centre of a national debate about the future direction of Liberalism but this time it was not of his making.

Cox’s obituary in the *Northampton Independent* explained what happened: ‘it was currently understood that the offer [of the Holdenby living] was made to introduce vigorous contention within the Brixworth district by Gladstone, where Liberals thought the agricultural labourers could not secure poor law justice’.<sup>60</sup> This claim was also repeated in contemporary regional newspapers and Sidney and Beatrice Webb’s *History of the Poor Laws*.<sup>61</sup> Regrettably no private letters from Gladstone to Cox on the subject have survived. Events, however, do seem to indicate that the rumour, as reported widely, was true. When the Holdenby Crown living became vacant many were interested in a small parish with few duties that came with a substantial rectory and valuable annual stipend of £500. Gladstone discussed the vacancy with Bishop Mandell Creighton of Peterborough, who was incidentally also the editor of the *English Historical Review* to which Cox contributed. Holdenby was within Creighton’s diocese. Creighton admired clergymen, like Cox, and he told him that he should stand for local government elections:

Even against his own personal inclination . . . nothing that makes for good should be unimportant in the eyes of God’s Minister . . . The Gospel has a message for everyman, how are you to bring it to him? Not by starting from any system, which is the goal to which you hope to lead him in the end, but from his life, his needs, his capacities.<sup>62</sup>

Poor law elections were an ‘ideal context’ to take the political lead. There is no doubt that Cox’s appointment was pushed through for this reason with some haste. The Crown living became vacant on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1893. Within just three weeks, by 24<sup>th</sup> January 1894, he had been short-listed, appointed and given his letters of presentation by Gladstone. Creighton urged him to move his large family quickly so that he would be able to use his new residency to qualify to stand as a guardian of the poor in the Brixworth Union elections at Easter. Cox cooperated fully.

In 1893 central government reduced the property qualification, from £25 to £5, in guardian elections. For the first time small ratepayers had the opportunity to be elected to boards of guardians and have a say in how their taxation was spent on welfare. The labouring poor in the Brixworth Union were political opportunists and they had been waiting for over twenty years for this franchise change. In March 1893 two hundred men and women attended a meeting at the Red Lion public house in Brixworth parish.<sup>63</sup> They responded to a series of adverts in local newspapers calling working people to unite and select candidates for election to the Brixworth Union board of guardians who would represent their interests. The Brixworth District Out-Door Relief Association was formed and members agreed to pay a subscription of 6d to create an election fund for the campaign. Village by village, throughout the district, the association’s membership grew.



By Easter 1894, a total 7,500 out of population of 12,500 had joined.<sup>64</sup> Now they needed a spokesman to publicise their cause more widely. John Charles Cox agreed to campaign on their behalf. He did not take an official position on the Executive Committee of the association because his political instinct told him that it should be run 'by labouring people for labouring people'. Instead he became one of their most loyal supporters campaigning alongside them. A clergy guardian reported to the fifth Earl Spencer, honorary Chairman of the board:

It is all about the 'Out-relief' question that the fighting arises – There is very strong feeling about it throughout the Union.

One of the worst features of the business is that the latest clerical imposition Dr. Cox of Holdenby is throwing himself headlong into the fray, as a resident's partisan of the 'Outs' and is spreading broad cash statements, which are misleading and grossly inaccurate – he is full of talk, but not of well-digested facts and aspires to be leader on a subject, which he has not taken pains to make himself master of. I am afraid he is well in running for the Chairmanship, which would be a most deplorable appointment as he is evidently without either knowledge or tact... You have no doubt seen the 'Out-Relief Association' circulars – the men say they vote 'not for the man, but for the principle'.<sup>65</sup>

Spencer was very concerned about the growing controversy because Cox also kept Sir Charles Dilke informed of his progress.<sup>66</sup> Although Dilke's political career foundered after the Crawford divorce scandal of 1884–5, he still had considerable influence in radical circles. By chance Spencer met Cox on the train to London and asked him to tone down his public remarks and criticism of his family's support for the Whig cause. Cox refused, being determined to fight for radical poor law change.

At the Easter 1894 guardian elections Cox was elected to office and the association candidates gained a forty-five per cent share of the seats. Every board meeting turned into a bitter political contest. When property qualifications were abolished in guardian elections under the Local Government Act (1894) the association increased the number of its candidates and won a major election victory, securing fifty-five per cent of the seats. Cox was elected Chairman of the board of guardians. One of his first actions was to introduce a motion to overturn the crusade against out-door relief and small pensions for aged paupers. In many respects, the bitter poor law contest in the Brixworth Union brought Cox's radical political career to fruition. When Cox retired after just four years on ill-health grounds, he recommended that the Chairmanship be handed over to a labourer, Sidney Ward. Ward was a founding member of the association to bring back full welfare provision. This was the final realisation of Cox's deeply held political belief that working men could and should govern themselves.

## VI

### *The Pursuit of Rural History – An Overview of Cox's Political Career*

If this article had examined only Cox's antiquarian output and mainstream journal articles from the early 1870s until his death in 1919, his achievements would be impressive. He published over fifty English local history books.<sup>67</sup> He always spoke about the historical notion of a 'parish state', which was remarkably post-modern. He believed passionately

that in the vestry everyone had a voice in their local community, however unequal. He avidly collected vestry minutes to prove this point later in life. This is why when newly created county councils came about in 1889, he felt they should be compelled to set up record office collections to preserve and further our understanding of regional life. Moreover, he was one of the founding members of the Victoria county history scheme. He pioneered the notion of ‘history from below’ and took a proactive role wherever he could in helping ordinary people to appreciate, participate in and challenge their governance. For Cox, historical research was not an antiquarian dead-end. It was a constant process of self-discovery. If those in the past championed customary rights and democratic participation, these were still important historical lessons for contemporaries. In this way, his High-church credentials convinced him of the need to rediscover local history and its everyday politics. Likewise, the past spoke to the present of the need to be vigilant about abject poverty, welfare injustices, and basic human needs. The rights of ordinary people to shape their political futures, in Cox’s opinion, could make a material difference to the lives of the labouring poor. Where there was a worthwhile cause, Cox hoped that he would get an opportunity to stand four-square fighting the corner of the disenfranchised, the marginalised and under-privileged in late Victorian rural England. Thus, in this short article, the private and public face of John Charles Cox has functioned as an important historical prism. Retracing his radical career in local politics and how it touched national debates has allowed us to test the limits of our historical knowledge in three ways.

It is self-evident that if you wanted to revisit the reasons for the success or failure of nineteenth century Liberalism in rural England, then a good starting-point would be a radical political figure in provincial life, like Cox. A man who climbed onto the hustings with Joseph Arch, who stood up against his fellow Whigs on the county bench, who fought at political meetings (often literally) to espouse the radical cause, seems to have a revisionist contribution to make to political history. After all, Cox was involved in the radical cause at a pivotal moment in the revival of nineteenth century Liberalism. His political acumen was correct. By the 1890s, Liberal policy-makers had to emphasise social democracy, poor law reform and pension rights, to make political headway. The political world was changing and Liberals needed to be seen to act in a pragmatic manner at a popular level. There has been considerable historical controversy about the timing of Liberalism’s decline before World War One.<sup>68</sup> Did the party fall into decline because it failed to listen to provincial politicians like Cox, who were its local touchstone? It is intriguing to speculate that an individual’s life, in Cox, might help modern political historians to solve a political conundrum about whether Liberalism was capable of appealing to both middle-class voters *and* radical working-class grass-roots support in key rural constituencies in the later Victorian era.

Certainly, Cox seems to have been in touch with the political aspirations of the centre ground and understood that with careful management these were not incompatible with Liberalism in British political life. The two could have been reconciled, provided Liberal doctrine responded to voters’ needs at a provincial level. For this reason, Cox always supported working-class candidates entering local government for the first time. His role was supportive. Above all, he did not dictate policy. He listened, observed, and studied local conditions. Only once he had firmly grasped policy issues and their wider

implications did he enter the political fray to represent his supporters' views. That he did so at a time when Liberal party doctrine was in considerable flux, attests to his political talents. Cox understood that political principles must go hand-in-hand with actual policy-making initiatives. Political rhetoric must have substance, if a party is to win its electorate's confidence. This radical stance came to fruition during the Brixworth Union poor law controversy. Cox's astute reading of deep-seated grievances and the need to bring about substantial welfare reform was the key to that pivotal election victory. Had men, like Cox, been able to make a broader political contribution to the Liberal party, perhaps it would not have experienced such a political wilderness after 1914.

A second significant theme of Cox's political life is that through him we can trace the origins and involvement of regional politicians in urban and agricultural trade unionism.<sup>69</sup> It is often very difficult historically to gauge the grass-roots level of support, and the interest of the labouring poor, in radical unionisation issues. Following the diverse political activities of a popular politician like Cox has been informative. Certainly Joseph Arch valued his contribution to the NALU cause. Likewise, his campaign to promote the Nine Hours working day won widespread support from the miners whom he employed. Later, poor law reform was welcomed at a time of stringent government welfare cut-backs. Wherever social democracy was being championed, Cox was at least close by, and, more often, involved. He seems to represent the type of new politician that political historians like Jon Lawrence highlight were active and contributed much to the 'politics of place' in the later Victorian era.<sup>70</sup>

A third insight that Cox's active political life affords us is that he can help to enlighten a neglected welfare topic from the poor's perspective, namely the radical and offensive nature of the late-Victorian poor law.<sup>71</sup> In addition, his close political affiliation with the labouring poor allows us to glimpse their social democratic aspirations and response to reform proposals in ways that welfare and political historians often overlook or misinterpret. For example, Brian Harrison has argued that there is no 'strong evidence of working class pressure for public welfare, which was a prominent election issue between 1885 and 1914 . . . Interventionist ideas were not prevalent in working class organisations' or local politics.<sup>72</sup> It is self-evident that in the Brixworth poor law union and in the Midlands' heartland the opposite was happening as a result of deeply impoverishing poor law measures. Unquestionably, further work is required on this aspect of Cox's life. Similar biographies of leading radicals in the English regions could add to our historical understanding of grass-roots poor law politics in ways that have not been researched deeply. They might indicate that more people were protesting about pauperism in late Victorian England as well.

In February 1919, Cox died at a nursing home on the outskirts of London aged seventy-one. Just before his death he converted to Roman Catholicism having always been a High-church Anglican. He was buried at Elmer's End following a Roman Catholic mass at the Church of Our Lady St. Phillip Neyri, Sydenham. It was a private funeral attended by his immediate family only. By all accounts it was a rather subdued affair, especially given his active political life. There was no eulogy or obituary in a national newspaper. The political world had changed forever. Liberalism was out of favour. Those who were active Independent Labour Party members would now build upon Cox's radical foundations.

Yet those who knew him well, like Bishop Mandell Creighton of Peterborough, admired him to the last. Creighton recalled that he was one of the few clerics who took time to ‘learn the actual facts of the occupations of those amongst whom he laboured’. The *Northampton Independent* did remember his significant contribution to Midlands’ politics, concluding that ‘Radical Cox was always a labourers’ politician’ because he was a man of ‘many compassions’ who fought ‘for the poor and distressed, the slaves of the soil’.<sup>73</sup> It was surely, the epitaph that this radical historian, pursuing the history of those without a political voice and helping them to remake it in their own terms to be heard, would have wanted. His life certainly exemplifies the intensely personal nature of radical political causes in the English provinces and the contribution that an individual could, and often did, make to rural history in later Victorian England.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

1. J. C. Cox, *How to Write the History of a Parish* (London, 1905).
2. R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London, 2004), establishes the importance of antiquary work for English social history.
3. Despite Cox’s scholarly reputation and radical Liberal career no biography of his life has been written. R. F. Wearmouth, *Some Working Class Movements of the Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1948), pp. 293–96, gives an overview of Cox’s career.
4. Rural ‘history from below’ has been pioneered in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London, 1963); R. Samuel, *Life and Labour* (London, 1977); K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change in Agrarian England, 1660–1990* (Cambridge, 1985); T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe, eds, *Chronicling Poverty. The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor* (Basingstoke, 1997); T. Sokoll, *Essex Paupers Letters, 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001).
5. P. Geyl, *Encounters in History* (London, 1967), p. 424, first suggested this in the late 1940s. We will see that Cox would have agreed with this quotation wholeheartedly.
6. J. C. Cox, *The Pedigree of Cox of Derbyshire* (London, 1889), traces Cox’s family tree back to Thomas Cox, a clerk to the Crown in the service of Elizabeth I.
7. Cox’s early life has been taken from contemporary obituaries: *Who Was Who, 1916–1928*; *Northampton Independent*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1919. A fellow guardian, Mr Smedley, recalled at the North Midland Poor Law Conference in 1899 that Cox, ‘shed a little light on the inhabitants of the town of Belper while he lived there’, *Poor Law Conference Report (1899–1900)*, p. 217; Derby Record Office, *Belper Union Minute Books*, ref. 4782.
8. *Midland Free Press*, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1873, lists Cox’s personal background and radical interests.
9. There is an extensive historiography that discusses Liberal political divisions by the 1870s. See for example: M. Bentley and J. Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain* (London, 1983); M. Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy, Great Britain, 1815–1914* (London,

- 1984); J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Oxford, 1986); M. Bentley, *The Climax of Liberal Politics: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice, 1868–1914* (London, 1987); E. F. Bagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865–1932* (Cambridge, 1996); A. Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776–1988* (London, 1997).
10. Jenkins, *Gladstone*, pp. 339–341.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
  12. Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 345.
  13. D. Nicolls, *The Lost Prime Minister: A Life of Sir Charles Dilke* (Oxford, 1995), chapter eight pp. 119–37, outlines his involvement in numerous radical causes.
  14. See for example, A. Taylor, ‘Republicanism Reappraised: Anti-Monarchism and the English Tradition, 1850–1872’, in J. Vernon, ed., *Re-reading the Constitution. New Narratives in the Political History of England’s Long Nineteenth Century* (London, 1996), pp. 154–78.
  15. M. Roper, *The History of Forde Abbey* (Taunton, 1996). There is a Bentham room in the abbey to commemorate his summer holidays there.
  16. British Library Manuscript Department, Dilke Diaries, *Dilke MS*, Volume LIX, 43932, (1873). The Dilke diaries are a very useful source but it is worth noting that Gertrude Tuckwell (the niece of his second wife) censored them in the early twentieth century. When writing the official two-volume account of Dilke’s life with Stephen Gwynn (published 1917) she removed all personal references to the Crawford divorce scandal that she thought might be incriminating. Dilke was cited as a co-respondent, accused of intimate relations with Mrs. Crawford and her daughter. Despite this, the diaries are still an invaluable source for radical political activities.
  17. J. C. Cox, ‘The Common Good and the Enclosure of the Commons’, *The Examiner*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1873.
  18. *Ripley Advertiser*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1872.
  19. J. C. Cox, ‘The Great Unpaid’, *The Examiner*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1872, recounts Cox’s campaign to end justices’ stipends and introduce elected magistrates.
  20. BLMD, Dilke Diaries, *Dilke MS*, Volume LIX (1873).
  21. *Ripley Post*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1873; *Midland Free Press*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1873.
  22. *Hansard* (3<sup>rd</sup> series), Volume 215, p. 100.
  23. Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 345; Nicholls, *Dilke*, pp. 119–37.
  24. B[ritish] L[ibrary] R[eading] R[oom], J. C. Cox, *The Duke of Edinburgh. The Cost of the Royal Household* (London, 1873).
  25. N[orthampton] R[ecord] O[ffice], J.C. Cox, *Cromwell and the Great Civil War* (Northampton, 1899), pp. 1–33.
  26. Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 348.
  27. J. C. Cox, ‘The Right of Public Meeting’, *The Examiner*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1873.
  28. B[ritish] L[ibrary] of P[olitical] S[cience], Pamphlet Collection, ref. P25129, J. C. Cox, *The Advantages of Trade Unions! A Lecture Delivered at Ripley by J C Cox FRHS of Hazelwood Belper on Thursday evening August 29<sup>th</sup> 1872 at the request of the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Miners’ Association* (Derby, 1872), pp. 1–27.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  30. BLRR, J. C. Cox and H. F. Cox, *The Rise of the Farm Labourer. A Series of Articles Reprinted from the “Examiner” 1872–3, Illustrative of Certain Political Aspects of the Agricultural Labour Movement* (London, 1874).
  31. For example, the *Dorset Telegram*, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1872, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1872, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1873; *North Wiltshire Herald*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 1873 and the *Birmingham Morning News*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1873 all recount Cox and Arch’s activities. Cox was also a regular *Times* correspondent on agricultural employment disputes. See, for example, J. C. Cox, ‘The Lock-Out Question’, *Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1874.

32. J.C. Cox and H. F. Cox, 'The Farm Labourer's Movement', *The Examiner*, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1873.
33. J. C. Cox and H. F. Cox, 'The Faringdon Labourer's meeting', *The Examiner*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1873.
34. Private letter from L. Machell Cox (grandson of J.C. Cox) to P. Riden (formerly editor of the Northamptonshire County History scheme) dated 26<sup>th</sup> November 1974, confirming Cox's activities in Dorset and his clash with prominent Whigs. L. M. Cox had a number of J. C. Cox's photographs of his NALU activities in Dorset, and a signed petition by labourers thanking him for his work. An ink-stand presented to Cox by the grateful labourers was sold in the 1950s. I am grateful for P. Riden for sharing his file on Cox with me.
35. See footnote 22 above.
36. *Bath Journal*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 1873.
37. Cox's role in the Education controversy has been reconstructed from the following sources – B[irmingham] U[niversity] L[ibrary] C[ollection], *Chamberlain MS*, Chamberlain to Morley, 19. 7. 1873, 10. 8. 1873, JC 5/54/3, JC 5/54/7; A. F. Taylor, 'Birmingham and the Movement for National Education, 1867–77' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leicester), 1960, pp. 214–16; P. C. Griffiths, 'Pressure Groups and Parties in Late-Victorian England: The National Education League', *Midland History*, III, 3, (1975) 1–19; P. Auspos, 'Radicalism, Pressure Groups and Party Politics: From the National Education League to the National Liberal Federation', *Journal of British Studies*, 20 (Fall, 1980), 181–204; R. Jay, *Joseph Chamberlain A Political Study* (London, 1981); P. T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain Entrepreneur in Politics* (London, 1994), pp. 55–6.
38. BLRR, J. C. Cox, *Church Property, National Property* (London, 1874).
39. See footnote 50 above.
40. BLRR, *National Education League – Verbatim Proceedings of a Deputation to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone PM on Wednesday March 9<sup>th</sup> 1870 printed for the National Education League Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1870).
41. *Bath Journal*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 1873; *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1873.
42. W. H. G. Armytage, *A. J. Mundella, 1825–1897* (London, 1951), p. 130.
43. J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, 1836–1885* (London, 1935), Chapter XIII, pp. 134–7 discusses the aftermath and political fall-out from the Bath by-election debacle.
44. BLMD, Dilke Diaries, *Dilke MS*, 43932, Volume LIX, (1873).
45. N[orthampton] T[own] L[ibrary] L[ocal] S[tudies] C[ollection], *The Third Council for Northamptonshire Elected 1895, No. 862 – A Record of Elections Reprinted from the Northampton Mercury, a resume of the political career of Rev. Dr. John Charles Cox*, (Northampton, 1895).
46. 'J. C. Cox – obituary 1919', *Who Was Who 1916–28* (London, 1930).
47. See for example, BLMD, *Gladstone MS*, Cox to W. E. Gladstone, Volume CCCC, ff. 75, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1884; ff. 203, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1884; Volume CCCXXIII, ff. 262, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1889. These discuss High Church matters, historical research and church matters; H. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, (Oxford, 1980), entries, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1876, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1889, confirm that Cox visited Hawarden Castle to discuss church matters and indicate Cox's delight that his youngest son, Cuthbert, was born on Gladstone's birthday.
48. BLMD, Dilke Diaries, *Dilke MS*, 43932, Volume LIX (1873) recalls Cox's later career. The diary entry was added around 1885–6.
49. Quoted in contemporary local newspapers in January 1894: *Northampton Mercury* and *Northampton Herald*; and later reiterated in S. and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History, Volume I, Part II – The Last One Hundred years* (London, 1929 edn.), p. 466, footnote 2.
50. NRO, ref. 172/9, J. C. Cox, *Presentation Papers for the Crown Living at Holdenby*, 24 Jan 1894; P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], C247/3 ref. 174, *Lord Chancellor's Office Records*, confirming Cox's appointment by Gladstone personally.

51. E. T. Hurren, *Protesting About Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England* (Woodbridge, 2007).
52. K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (Manchester, 1981), pp. 96–107.
53. M. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England, 1860–1900', in W. J. Mommsen and W. Mocks (eds.), *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain, 1850–1950* (Manchester, 1981), pp. 50–70; D. Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past, A Family or Community Responsibility?' in M. Pelling and R. Smith, eds., *Life, Death and the Elderly, Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 194–222.
54. E. T. Hurren, 'Agricultural Trade Unionism and the Crusade against Out-Door Relief: Poor Law Politics in the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1870–75', *Agricultural History Review*, 48, 2 (December 2000), 200–22; E. T. Hurren, 'Labourers are Revolting: Penalising the Poor and a Political Reaction in the Brixworth Union Northamptonshire, 1875–1885', *Rural History*, 2 (April 2000), 37–55.
55. Ibid.
56. E. T. Hurren, 'The Pauper Dead-House: The Expansion of Cambridge Anatomical Teaching School under the Late-Victorian Poor Law, 1870–1914', *Medical History* 48: 1, 69–94.
57. Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 581.
58. Thomson, 'Welfare of the Elderly', pp. 194–22, outlines the demography of workhouse residents.
59. J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).
60. *Northampton Independent*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1919.
61. See footnote 49 above.
62. G. Carnell, *The Bishops of Peterborough* (Peterborough, 1981), p. 82.
63. The history of the Brixworth District Outdoor Relief Association is outlined in BLPS, Pamphlet Collection, ref, HV/578, J.C. Cox, *Outdoor relief – The Heritage of the Poor – A Paper Read at the North Midlands Poor Law Conference at Grimsby on 13<sup>th</sup> September, 1899, with notes of a Lecture delivered at Oxford on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1900* (London, 1900), pp. 1–24.
64. BLRM, J. C. Cox, 'Outdoor Relief with Special Reference to Brixworth, Atcham and Whitechapel', in *Poor Law Conference Reports* (London, 1899–1900), pp. 193–215.
65. BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K345, Calverley to Spencer, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1894, quoted with original spelling, phrasing and emphasis.
66. BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K348, Cox to Spencer, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1895; Cox to Spencer, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1895.
67. A selection of Cox's publications on English local history include: *Churches of Derbyshire (1876–79) Four Volumes* (Derby, 1880); *Chronicles of All Saints Derby* (Derby, 1881); *How to Write the History of a Parish* (London, 1910, 5<sup>th</sup> edn.); *Lichfield Capitulary Monuments* (Stafford, 1886); *Three Centuries of Derbyshire Annals – Two Volumes* (Derby, 1888); *The Sober, Righteous and Godly Life* (London 1890); *The Gardens of Scripture* (London, 1893); *Northampton Borough Records* (Northampton, 1897); *Church of St. Sepulchre's Northampton* (Northampton, 1898); *Quarter Session Records of Derbyshire* (Derby, 1899); *Strutt's Sports and Past Times* (London, 1901); *Little Guide to Derbyshire* (Derby, 1902); *English Monasteries* (London, 1904); *Little Guide to Hants* (Hampshire, 1904); *Royal Forests of England* (London, 1905); *A History of Canterbury* (Canterbury, 1905); *Memorials of Old Derbyshire – English Church Furniture* (Derby, 1907); *The Cathedral Church and See of Essex* (Chelmsford, 1907); *Parish Registers of England* (London, 1909); *The Cathedral Guide to Surrey* (London, 1910); *Rambles in Surrey* (London, 1910); *Churches of Norfolk – 2 Volumes* (Norwich, 1910); *Churchwardens Accounts* (London, 1913); *Pulpits, Lecterns and Organs* (London, 1915); *Bench Ends of English Churches* (London, 1916).
68. There are two schools of thought about why Gladstone accepted Home Rule for Ireland and to what extent it led to the decline of Liberalism. Cooke and Vincent argue that Home Rule was a political tool to deflect attention from much-needed welfare reform; whereas, Parry,

Cowling and Bentley argue that Gladstone wanted both Home Rule and to stop the progress of Advanced Liberalism. He achieved neither and so Liberalism declined irrevocably from the mid-1880s. See footnote 9 above.

69. Hurren, 'Agricultural Trade Unionism', pp. 200–23, discusses this more fully.
70. See, footnote 59, above.
71. Williams, *Pauperism*; Rose, 'The Crisis'; Thomson, 'The Elderly'; Hurren, *Protesting*, which all argue that it is neglected.
72. B. Harrison, *The Transformation of British Politics, 1860–1995* (Harmondsworth, 1996), p. 71.
73. *Northampton Independent*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1919.