

“A God above the bias of sex”

by Kirk Willis

Chushichi Tsuzuki. *Edward Carpenter 1844–1929: Prophet of Human Fellowship*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980. Pp. x, 237. £15. US\$34.50.

THE LIFE OF a prophet is not an easy one. Enthusiasts commit excesses, zealots exaggerate and discredit, partisans defend too bitterly and violently, supporters fawn uncritically, dissidents complain and oppose, heretics splinter off and form rival sects, cynics charge self-interest and hypocrisy, critics carp and expose inconsistencies, enemies harass and threaten, and authorities persecute and imprison. Prophecy, then, is a difficult business. It is also a thankless one, for to be accepted as a prophet is to assume a vexing and tumultuous existence. Since the successful prophet is almost by definition a public figure, he is certain to spend his life at the centre of a maelstrom of controversy and to have his doctrines challenged, his motives questioned, and his actions scrutinized. The prophetic life is plainly not for the timid or the faint at heart. Nor is it for the self-important, for prophecy is also both a cyclical and a transient enterprise. Boom periods of prophetic enthusiasm, such as the seventeenth century in Britain, are usually succeeded by long stretches of quiescence which themselves, by way of contrast and reaction, inspire new spells of prophetic expansionism. Although this cyclical trend is striking, perhaps even more important to the individual prophet and his followers is the brutal evanescence of the prophetic life. There are fashions in prophets as in everything else, and a prophet is fortunate if his appeal endures for even a generation; it is a sad truism of intellectual history that nothing is as passé or pathetic as the prophets, intellectual trend-setters, and cultural czars of the previous generation. Truly, the life of a prophet is a hard one.

All of these considerable difficulties—the articulation of a coherent and persuasive message, the winning and then the bridling of converts, the survival of the wrath of enemies and the abuse of schismatics, the burden of a life of constant contention, and the cruel fickleness of public opinion—are plainly spelled out in Chushichi Tsuzuki’s informed and sympathetic biography of one of late-Victorian Britain’s most celebrated and influential prophets, Edward Carpenter.

That the young Carpenter would lead such a life seemed very unlikely, for he came from a setting not renowned for or conducive to the breeding

and nurturing of prophets: mid-Victorian Brighton. Indeed, he was born to and grew to maturity in a quintessentially middle-class, mid-Victorian home, complete with distant father, remote mother, indifferent brothers, adoring sisters, loyal servants, and a cloying atmosphere of pious religiosity, strident moralism, self-confident prosperity, and high-minded Liberalism. As a boy Carpenter was studious and devout and, in the autumn of 1864, went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, fully intending to pursue a quiet life of piety, scholarship, teaching, and service as a clerical don.

For Carpenter as for so many other earnest young Victorian gentlemen, however, Cambridge proved both a liberation and a transformation. It freed him from his family's restrictions and expectations, from his own fears of social and intellectual inadequacy, and, eventually and unexpectedly, from his faith; it transformed him to Radical politics and Christian Socialist theology, to sexual redefinition and reorientation, and to a life of writing, teaching, and labour outside of the university and the Church. In the short run, to be sure, Carpenter's career seemed to be a model of orthodoxy and achievement: first-class degree and clerical Fellowship at Trinity Hall in 1868, ordination and a curacy in Cambridge in 1870. Yet at every stage of his intellectual and religious advancement Carpenter found himself questioning his most cherished beliefs as well as his very purpose as a cleric and scholar. Much of that doubting and restlessness was a natural product of life at Trinity Hall itself, for in the 1860s that college enjoyed a much deserved reputation as the most politically Radical and intellectually unorthodox college in the university: Henry Fawcett and Leslie Stephen were senior Fellows, Charles Dilke—a fellow commoner two years senior to Carpenter—was President of the Union and the most admired undergraduate in the college, and F.D. Maurice used the college, with great success, as a recruiting ground for converts to his progressive, indeed heretical, Liberal Anglicanism and Christian Socialism. Carpenter was deeply influenced by both these facets of life at Trinity Hall; by the time he received his Fellowship he had already moved from Liberal to Radical political loyalties and from a traditional Anglican to an outspoken Christian Socialist theological position.

What finally completed this dual emancipation and metamorphosis and transformed Carpenter from a Radical Cambridge cleric into a Socialist prophet was his experience as a lecturer in the University Extension Scheme. Established in 1873 by James Stuart with the purpose of making Cambridge open to that “vast multitude of persons who cannot command continuous leisure”, the University Extension programme aimed at recruiting from Cambridge a number of talented and

dedicated “peripatetic lecturers” who would travel the country to teach those two great social groups hitherto excluded from the university: women and working men. Carpenter, serious about his calling as a teacher and eager for experience of life outside of Cambridge, answered Stuart's first appeal and set off in the winter of 1873 to lecture in the industrial midlands and north. This was a world wholly new to Carpenter, and the poverty, filth, cruelty, degradation, and immorality of industrial society appalled him. But the conditions also bewitched him; ugly as the spectacle was, he was nonetheless unable to avert his eyes from the squalid scenes he witnessed in places such as Leeds, Sheffield, and Nottingham. In particular, he found himself utterly unable to return to the pampered, cloistered, and elegant life he had been enjoying in comfortable Cambridge. By the end of his first circuit of lectures Carpenter knew it was there, in the industrial north of England, that his true ministry lay, and, therefore, in June 1874 he resigned both his Fellowship and his clerical appointment and moved to Sheffield to begin “my life's true work”.

For the remainder of his long life Carpenter lived in the rural environs of Sheffield and pursued a career of lecturing, organizing, and writing which would earn him an international reputation. Teaching continued to be his greatest passion, and he satisfied it fully—through lectures and evening classes at Mechanics' Institutes, working-men's colleges, trade union schools, I.L.P. courses, and Socialist Sunday Schools, many of which he took a leading role in establishing. It seems, indeed, that he never turned down an invitation to speak or to teach anywhere in Britain, and in the course of fifty years he travelled to nearly every corner of the island to spread his message to working men, trade union officials, socialist sectarians, and left-wing intellectuals of every sort. Impressive as that achievement was, however, it was through his prolific writings, most famously *Towards Democracy* (1883), *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* (1889), and *Love's Coming of Age* (1896), that Carpenter gained his widest audience. His sixty books and pamphlets and nearly 200 magazine and newspaper articles were immensely readable and popular and helped to establish him as a revered and respected prophet.

But a prophet of what? Scholars have variously labelled Carpenter as a prophet of “a Socialist millennium”, “the New Life”, “World Religion”, “Tolstoyism”, and “Homosexuality”. Mr. Tsuzuki describes Carpenter's prophetic vision as one of “human fellowship”, and the term, despite its vagueness, is an appropriate one and far preferable to all other characterizations of Carpenter's essential message. It is superior because it expresses both the goal and the means of his prophecy: personal salvation and collective redemption achieved through individual regen-

eration and social reform. In Carpenter's view there is an irreducible and indestructible core of "humanness" in every individual, a "humanness" which consists more or less of the attributes of prelapsarian man; at heart, that is, men and women are virtuous, honest, compassionate, loving, free, and happy. The tragedy of modern life is that that core has been hidden and neglected; men and women have come to acquire, consciously and unconsciously, a great many outer layers of prejudices, assumptions, expectations, habits, and fears which have cumulatively warped their personalities, concealed their potentialities, and alienated them both from each other and from their true selves. The genesis of this tragedy, the source of the secular Original Sin which has tainted all modern life, lies not in the formation of society itself, Carpenter argued, but in the development of industrial, capitalist society. It is the institution of wage labour, the concentration of capital and regimentation of the work-place, the growth of industrial cities, the enshrinement of the profit motive, and the elevation of individual competition over collective cooperation which have masked and distorted the true nature of human beings and have been responsible for the pervasive unhappiness and evil in modern life.

To alter the lamentable conditions in which they find themselves, Carpenter asserted, it is necessary for men and women to peel off the accumulated layers of capitalist culture, to slough off the skins of industrial civilization until they reach, both individually and collectively, their common "humanness". Such a paring is not, however, an easy task. Few individuals possess the necessary wisdom, courage, and resolve to identify, confront, and remake their moral values, social biases, political presuppositions, and intellectual assumptions. Moreover, Carpenter understood fully that individual action, no matter how well intentioned or purposeful, was severely constrained by social pressures, cultural prejudices, economic realities, and political institutions. Individuals can and ought to take the lead in freeing themselves from the restraints that have shackled their "true humanity", Carpenter concluded, but complete and permanent freedom and happiness can come about only as a result of thoroughgoing reform in every aspect of social, political, religious, and cultural life. Carpenter, therefore, was enough of a Christian to believe that heroic acts of individual free will could be efficacious and redemptive, but enough of a Marxist to realize that true grace was more likely to come through peaceful class struggle and gradual social reformism.

Because of his conviction that each and every aspect of human life impinged on every other and that all needed immediate reform, Carpenter concerned himself with a dizzying variety of causes, and it is one

of the strengths of Mr. Tsuzuki's book that he describes the remarkable range of Carpenter's work: in favour of working-class education, female suffrage, trade unionism, pacifism, vegetarianism, anti-vivisectionism, homosexual rights, the I.L.P., Socialist League, Social Democratic Federation and No-Conscription Fellowship, and the wearing of sandals instead of "leathern coffins". Freedom was the common aim of all these causes—freedom from legal injustice, economic exploitation, intellectual ignorance, cultural exclusion, social pressure, sexual stereotypes, and political oppression—and Carpenter believed that that emancipation would allow men and women to regain their "common humanity" and, therefore, to enjoy true happiness and virtue.

The breadth of Carpenter's interests and variety of his work explain his undoubted notoriety in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain; he seemed to be involved in or concerned with nearly every public issue and was therefore known to a broad spectrum of British opinion. But it was the nature of his remarkable personality, especially when expressed through his sensitive writing style, which accounted for the extraordinary reverence in which he was held by friends, allies, acquaintances, and readers alike. To those who met him, Carpenter personified his prophetic message. He was a kindly, generous, and loving man who lived a simple life, nearly free from possessions, in a plain agricultural labourer's cottage; he seemed to have rediscovered his human "core" and to be leading the life all men and women would share in a properly constituted, genuinely free society. To those who read him, Carpenter's emotional, affecting, and often sentimental prose style was equally infectious and inspirational. By his example as well as his teachings Carpenter became a hero to an entire generation of British socialists. Fenner Brockway, for instance, remembered that among his young comrades Carpenter was a beloved figure:

His *Towards Democracy* was our Bible. We read it aloud in the summer evenings when, tired by tramping or games, we rested awhile before returning from our rambles. We read it at those moments when we wanted to retire from the excitement of our Socialist work, and in quietude seek the calm and power that alone gives sustaining strength. We no longer believed in dogmatic theology. Edward Carpenter gave us the spiritual food we still needed.¹

Another admirer was the young Bertrand Russell. Russell came to know of Carpenter through the latter's writings on sexual matters, specifically his three short pamphlets, *Sex-Love, Woman, and Marriage*,

¹ Fenner Brockway, "A Memory of Edward Carpenter", *New Leader*, Lon., 5 July 1929.

all of which were printed by a small Labour press in 1894.² Russell was introduced to these works by his fellow Apostle, Lowes Dickinson, himself a close friend of Carpenter’s, and Russell found them to be insightful, intelligent, and moving. “Dickinson gave me a tiny book called *Sex Love* by Edward Carpenter”, he enthused to Alys Pearsall Smith. “It seems to me the only good thing I ever read on the subject” (7 Feb. 1894). *Woman* he judged to be “as good as the other, which is about as high praise as I could give it. Every word of it seemed to be true and useful, and it is written as impartially as if he were a God above the bias of sex... I have been seized with devout admiration for the man” (11 May 1894). About *Marriage* Russell’s attitude was more critical. “I have read Carpenter on Marriage,” he reported to Alys, “and it seems to be fairly good talk, but too indefinite ... even on the subject of divorce, nothing at all definite is said. He entirely omits (except for a brief allusion) the subject of children—perhaps he will write a separate pamphlet on that” (12 Sept. 1894).

Tellingly, Russell read these works while in the midst of his agonizing and rocky courtship of Alys, and what attracted him to Carpenter was the latter’s high-minded, intellectual, and ethereal attitude towards sexuality. Carpenter argued in his three pamphlets that sexual relationships, and especially marriage, should be as chaste, and therefore as non-exploitative, as possible. Such relationships ought to aspire towards a “mystical union of souls” rather than base “physical union”, and self-control and sublimation should replace the “child-bearing function of sex”. To Russell, inexperienced, self-righteous, and priggish, such views seemed liberating, timely, and wise. In his naïveté, however, he failed to read between the lines and therefore misconstrued the real purpose and meaning of Carpenter’s arguments. As Mr. Tsuzuki makes plain, Carpenter intended his pamphlets to be a defence of homosexual, or what he termed “homogenic”, love, rather than a manifesto for reform in heterosexual relationships. Writing at the very time when Oscar Wilde’s more public actions were earning him imprisonment, Carpenter had to be extremely circumspect in his arguments, and he therefore wrote in an allusive fashion intended to make his point but not to invite prosecution. Indeed, he found it difficult to get even these allusive works published. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that it was Dickinson, a member of Carpenter’s circle of homosexual friends, who first introduced Russell to his writings; nor was it an oversight that *Marriage* failed to discuss “the subject of children”. But even if he had misunderstood much of their

message, Russell had been deeply impressed by Carpenter’s pamphlets; his letters to Alys in 1894 are studded with references to Carpenter and his arguments, and those arguments helped to shape his attitudes in the months before his marriage when he was trying to sort out his sexual feelings and attempting to prepare for married life.

This was not the end of Russell’s connection with Carpenter, although it was by far the most direct link between the two men. Of Carpenter’s many other writings Russell was indifferent and therefore largely ignorant. The prophet’s socialism Russell found, although on what evidence is unclear, to be far too religious for his taste; indeed, he condemned it as little better than “mysticism”. To Carpenter’s celebrated charm he was largely, though not entirely, immune. Sharing as they did so many friends and political sympathies, it was natural that they would meet, which they did on at least two occasions. “The only time that I met him”, the aged Russell remembered mistakenly, “was at a conference on votes for women at Edinburgh.... I liked him.”³ They met again during the First World War when Carpenter, who opposed the war, visited Russell at the N.C.F. offices. As Russell reported to Lady Ottoline Morrell, “This morning Edward Carpenter turned up—he is likeable, rather the same type as Goldie. He sympathizes with Casement, partly on account of things [i.e. Casement’s homosexuality] which are supposed to alienate one’s sympathies” (no. 1409, ?Aug. 1916). Aside from a review by Russell of Carpenter’s *Pagan and Christian Creeds* (1920), this seems to have been the last contact between the two men.⁴

Edward Carpenter died a much beloved and honoured sage of socialism in June 1929. He had outlived all his close friends, nearly all his Victorian contemporaries, and many of his disciples. He had not, however, been forgotten; each year he received mountains of birthday messages from Labour Party leaders, cabinet ministers, trade-union officials, socialist intellectuals, and simple working men, and his home had become a cherished shrine for young socialist pilgrims. Even after his death his memory was revered, and up until the 1960s an annual memorial service was held to celebrate his life and achievements. And his accomplishments had been considerable. Some of the causes he had championed, such as female suffrage and the eight-hour work-day, had been achieved; others, such as homosexual rights, had been brought somewhat closer to attainment. But above all else, Carpenter had succeeded in helping to create a powerful British labour movement at least partially in

² The full titles of these works are *Sex-Love, and Its Place in a Free Society*; *Woman, and Her Place in a Free Society*; and *Marriage in Free Society*.

³ *Dear Bertrand Russell*, ed. Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 185.

⁴ *The Nation*, Lon., 27 (24 April 1920): 116, 118.

68 *Russell* winter 1982–83

his own image: reformist not revolutionary in means, Wesleyan not Leninist in inspiration, ethical not materialist in purpose. It was no small achievement.

Department of History
University of Georgia