INTRODUCTION

CARPENTER has been described as 'an eminent Victorian' who loathed his own age. 'He was homeless in the heyday of Victorian morality and hypocrisy and materialist science. He was an anti-puritan with a strong bent towards a kind of rational mysticism that had no Hebraism in it. He was the frankest of hedonists'.[1] As a young man he came to view with horror the hypocrisy of polite society and the alienation of the wealthy. He later looked back with sardonic distaste on 'the drawing-room table' which he remembered from his own Brighton household:

> The British drawing-room of last century was a centre from which many paralysing influences radiated. Here the British matron, surrounded by her virginal daughters, sat enthroned. The men – husbands, brothers, sons, and their friends – were to all appearances inferior creatures. They took their cue from the ladies, and studied only the convenience of the latter. They effaced themselves, and deliberately talked a kind of nonsense which was called conversation. They wore clothing of subdued and dark hue, which served as a foil to the feminine glory; they sat on the more uncomfortable chairs, and were careful to take their tea and their tea-cake after the others. It was touching.

The lady of the house shunned 'vulgar' topics such as manual labour, atheism, or the facts of sex. Yet her drawing-room was the rendezvous of politicians, clergymen and literary people. Carpenter felt that Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, and even Carlyle 'dared not flout the Drawing-room Table'.[2]

In London he was struck by the glaring contrast of wealth and

poverty displayed even in High Street, Kensington, where one of his sisters lived:

> On one side as you walk along the trottoir stands, in the gutter, a long row of the mere outcasts of humanity... Thin, starved, twisted with deceit and degradation, such faces infect one with their own despair... And then on the pavement, jostling each other, wrapped to the chin in furs, goes the highly respectable crowd, 'stiff with decency and starch', from which the outcasts are trying to extort a penny... Bred in luxury and ease, they have seldom been called on to make sacrifices for each other... the life of human toil and human fellowship has passed them by; their affectional natures have become dwarfed; their power of sympathy contracted within the four walls of a stuffy respectability... A brougham drives up and scatters the ragged ones. A footman obsequiously opens the door; and another leaden-eyed 'lady' wrapped in furs disappears into 'Barker's'.[3]

Carpenter's whole life presented an open revolt against this society; the two remedies he suggested were the commingling of 'classes and masses' and the adoption of the natural modes of life still prevalent, as he thought, among the latter. In pursuit of these aims he hit upon the ideas of community, democracy, and simplicity by throwing Whitman and Thoreau, Ruskin and Marx, and above all the *Bhagavad Gita* into the melting pot of his Socialism. Thus he felt that Communism, complex and human, and savagery, natural and free, were to overcome civilisation, the culmination of which was the Victorian society.

One of the Victorian orthodoxies was an optimistic belief in science and progress, and Carpenter revolted against inhumanities involved in this almost blind faith in man's mastery over nature. His revolt, however, was somewhat erratic: disillusioned with what he felt to be the shams of the Established Church, he threw religion overboard, but he soon found himself tormented by the callousness of modern science. An ex-curate and a former lecturer on scientific subjects, he at last endeavoured to reconcile religion and science. Tolstoy welcomed Carpenter's objections to experimental science as opportune; his reading of the latter's *Civilisation* led him to declare: 'I consider him a worthy heir of Carlyle and Ruskin'.[4]

Carpenter's 'whole-hearted' revolt against the Victorian orthodoxies, writes Edward Thompson, was 'expressed in an individual-

istic form'.[5] Perhaps it would be more accurate to call his revolt personal than individualistic. It originated from his sense of alienation, and took the form of an effort to conquer his own isolation and self-consciousness and to restore health and unity to his personality. Hence arose his strong desire for personal contacts, for friendship, fellowship, and comradeship, which was not only whole-hearted but 'whole-bodied'.

Towards Democracy, his major work, has been aptly described as 'a book which seeks less to establish a point of view than to find personal contacts'.[6] The kernel of such contacts was what he called 'the common life' in each man, the demos, or 'cosmic' consciousness. His idea of spiritual democracy and his concept of sublimated homosexuality had the same roots, the recognition of that 'common life' and the need for free expression of personality. Thus his hymn to democracy not only extolled its egalitarian basis but its instinctive and spontaneous features.

His Socialism was also intensely personal. It could not have long survived active work in the national movement which was fraught with sectarian struggles. He was willing to assist the Democratic Federation which was still undeveloped, but he was only marginally associated with the national Socialist bodies such as the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and the Socialist League, the Fabians and the Independent Labour Party. He felt happier in his work for a local Socialist society or for the ethical and humanitarian movements or even for Anarchists, in which the sense of brotherhood seemed to prevail.

It is perhaps wrong to say that Carpenter emphasised the 'personal' as against the political.[7] His was an approach to politics, and Sheila Rowbotham does justice to this when she writes of his 'personal politics', although what she calls 'sexual politics' was not yet possible.[8] His peculiarly personal approach was an example of politics by personal influence and persuasion, or to put it in a more idealistic way, a sort of direct democracy in action. As such it was feasible mainly in a local Socialist body or some such small community. This would at least partly explain his devotion to local politics in Sheffield.

Yet the number of the pilgrims to his hermitage at Millthorpe showed that his personal contacts went much further than the local community. Emma Goldman, the American Anarchist, came 'with

the accompaniment of a brace of detectives from Scotland Yard'.[9] Besides Cambridge dons and students, the Glasiers, the Salts, and Olive Schreiner, 'all the lunatics of the world seemed to come to see him'.[10] Carpenter's writings, too, were largely personal. He could not hide himself behind the letters, as he was always intent on establishing personal contacts with his readers. 'You are perfectly impartial and fair', he wrote to the author of *A Passage to India*, 'and do not take sides anywhere that I can discover – always drawing the life (as nearly as can be) *as it is*, and keeping yourself out of sight. *I* could not write (a novel) like that. (Should tend to be drawn into the fray!)'[11] He wrote numerous sketches of his friends – lovers and acquaintances – all revealing his involvement in their lives and affairs and his faith in the ultimate triumph of the common people.

Ancient religion lured him to the East, but it was not only his own *guru* but also a Singhalese peasant, a Bengali youth, and 'the native "proletariat"' in Bombay – post-office workers and railway clerks – that he remembered with affection. Later he was much esteemed as an advanced thinker by passive resisters like Gandhi.[12] He met Tagore in London and shared his view that the salvation of the people would come from the people.[13]

He endeavoured to obtain a measure of respect for homosexuality, but it remained a forbidden subject for many years in England. In the freer atmosphere of Berlin in the early 1930s, Christopher Isherwood saw a gallery of photographs including those of 'famous homosexual couples', Carpenter with George Merrill, Whitman with Peter Doyle, Oscar Wilde with Alfred Douglas, at a museum which belonged to Dr Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science. These were displayed together with fantasy pictures drawn by Dr Hirschfeld's patients and other curious products of sexual inversion.[14] Homosexuality was certainly not sublimated nor even honoured in this display. Carpenter himself held that sex, especially non-productive sex, was a natural, private affair not to be banned or regulated by the state nor to be encouraged or excited artificially.

His millennial vision has been described as a fit subject for psychoanalysis.[15] This may be true; but it was shared by many others at a time when the peace and prosperity of the first industrial nation were threatened and the 'dawn of a revolutionary epoch' was wildly proclaimed. He learned from experience, and in time his millen-

arianism became sober. He was said to be 'a complete believer in the Labour movement', though he did not belong to any of its sects.[16] After 1906 he more or less identified the Labour movement with the Labour party, while welcoming signs of new life in the movement such as Syndicalism and Guild Socialism. Towards the end of his life, he wrote to George Lansbury: 'England is *slowly slowly* (as her habit is) waking up. A day may come – in the far future, when she will be fully awake! May that day be soon!'[17] At his death his own hymn *England Arise!* rivalled *The Red Flag* in popularity in the British Labour movement.[18]

A great deal of the stuffiness of English society, to which he objected, has now disappeared. In this, at least, he was truly prophetic. A modern seer or prophet was often a trouble-maker and sometimes an outcast. But Carpenter caused surprisingly little trouble, perhaps because he eschewed the limelight of national politics and chose the life of a recluse, a voluntary exile from civilisation. 'The outcast of one age is the hero of another', wrote Carpenter. A. J. P. Taylor did not enjoy Carpenter's beard, homespun tweeds, vegetarianism, 'free love', and 'soft-headed ramblings' and called him 'individualism at its worst'. Yet he seems to have shared his view of the trouble-maker so far as foreign policy was concerned. He even echoed Carpenter when he wrote that 'England has risen all the same' after all the vicisistudes that marked her history.[19] Carpenter has been called a 'ringleader of the cranks and prigs', but the critic who said this hastened to add that by a crank he meant 'someone who is not numerically normal'.[20] Carpenter – a modern seer – was such a crank by definition.

The evolution of our 'prophet', our 'Noble Savage' as he was nicknamed by his critics, however, was only gradual. His revolt long remained personal both in its nature and its effects. For some time he was only dimly conscious of its symptoms. Perhaps he was slow to mature, or possibly he was handicapped by the peculiarities of his Brighton household which was overwhelmingly feminine. We shall now begin with an analysis of this household, an example of the 'British drawing-room table' of the nineteenth century, in order to appreciate the true nature of his revolt and challenge.

ONE A BRIGHTON CHILDHOOD

BRIGHTON, formerly the little seaside town of Brighthelmston, came into prominence early in the nineteenth century, owing to the appreciation of the hygienic value of its seawater. It also had the advantage of royal patronage bestowed on it by George, Prince of Wales, later Prince Regent, later still King George IV. Partly assisted by the opening of the railway in 1841, the town attained the zenith of its fame about the middle of the century, and attracted many great literary and political figures of the day as well as members of the nobility and other affluent people. It was into this charmed world of privilege, wealth and fashion that Edward Carpenter was born on 29 August 1844.

On that very day the *Brighton Gazette*, in addition to its usual 'fashionable chronicle' of the comings and goings of dukes and duchesses, earls and countesses, and their families and dependants, reported with a sigh of relief the defeat of the militant miners in Northumberland and Durham in their strike against the colliery-owner, the third Marquess of Londonderry. Indeed, the growth of fashionable Brighton coincided with the spread of unrest among the lower orders of the population in other parts of the country, especially in the industrial North and Midlands, where Luddism and Owenism, Radicalism and Chartism, in turn gave vent to various aspects of that growing unrest. Brighton itself was not immune from the popular upsurge: a co-operative association was formed in the town in 1827. It was perhaps an apt warning, though necessarily ineffectual, to the complacent society of nobility and gentility that

the term 'Socialist' was used for the first time in a magazine article dealing with the Brighton Association, which was published in the same year, at a time when the town was adding handsome squares and terraces to its fashionable quarters. Indeed, Carpenter was to be identified in his mature years with the cause of human brotherhood and co-operation, but his family, immersed as it was in what Carlyle had described as the 'human nexus of cash payment', took its full share of the respectability of Brighton society.

Carpenter in his autobiography has made a casual reference to his ancestors who lived at Launceston, Cornwall,[1] and among the Carpenters who flourished in and near that town it is possible to find John Carpenter, a divine of the sixteenth century, and his son Nathaniel, author and philosopher. Edward's own father, Charles, traced his pedigree to one Hugh Cressingham of Berkshire, an ingenious soldier, who secured the victory of his army in a war against the Welsh by devising a bridge which was severed in the middle but appeared sound till the enemy stepped on it: he earned the surname of Carpenter about 1274.[2] James Carpenter, Edward's grandfather, who was born in 1760, did much to establish the family tradition of naval service and distinction. He entered the navy in 1776, and was soon across the Atlantic sharing in skirmishes off the American coast. During the war against revolutionary France, he took part in an attack on Martinique and also assisted in 'reducing to submission the Caribs and negroes of St. Vincent, Grenada, and Dominica'.[3] He was on his last voyage in 1812 as Captain of the *Antelope* off Newfoundland. In that year he was made a Rear-Admiral; he became a Vice-Admiral in 1819 and a full Admiral in 1837. It seems that he spent his later years at St Leonards, Sussex, apparently as a wealthy rentier amidst an abundance of 'interest, dividends & annuities' which were prominent in his will. His wife Elizabeth died in May 1844 and he himself followed her less than a year later on 16 March 1845.

His eldest son, Charles Carpenter, who was born in 1797, took up his father's profession, entered the navy as a volunteer in 1810, and became midshipman on board the *Antelope* when his father was in command. After the Napoleonic War he was stationed in the East Indies and became a lieutenant in 1818, at a time when the navy

was being put back on a peacetime basis. His health was impaired by the bad climate of Trincomalee where he was stationed, and life in the navy became somewhat 'distasteful', so he found it opportune to go on half pay. After 1820 he was no longer on active service, but it was only in 1851 that he was formally placed on the reserved list.[4]

Charles lived in London and steeped himself in contemporary literature. He admired Samuel Taylor Coleridge and visited him on several occasions. He also read for the Bar, to which he was called in 1829, and practised for a while with some success. In 1833 he married Sophia Wilson, the daughter of Thomas Wilson, also an officer of the Royal Navy, who in his later years was engaged in shipbuilding. Wilson was a widower, and the newly-wedded pair had to live with the old man at his house at Marsh Street, Walthamstow, then an isolated village that lay between the Marshes and the Lea. Possibly the legal profession was not agreeable to his romantic cast of mind: he soon retired from the Bar.

Thereafter he had no settled occupation, but meanwhile his family began to grow. The eldest daughter, Sophia, was born in 1835, and the eldest son, Charles Wilson, two years later. Three more daughters followed, Eliza in 1838, Emily in 1839, and Ellen Maria probably in the following year. The second son, George, was born in March 1841. The death in the next month of Thomas Wilson, however, released his daughter and her husband from their filial ties to this rather uninviting district by enabling them to move to Brighton, not far from the place where Charles's father, Admiral Carpenter, was living. Yet Edward Carpenter recorded that his mother had often told him that this was 'the worst period of their married life'.[5] The main cause of their anxiety appears to have been pecuniary, aggravated no doubt by the rapid growth of the family and perhaps by the cost of respectability in fashionable Brighton.

The family fortune was mended when Admiral Carpenter died in the following year, leaving the substantial part of his estate and effects to his only son Charles. The family continued to increase in size: Edward was followed by two younger sisters, Alice Fanny and Julia Dora, the latter born in 1849, and one younger brother, Alfred, born (probably after Alice) in 1847. With the ample legacy from his father, Charles now settled permanently in Brighton, occupying a

large house at 45 Brunswick Square, and in his son's words, led 'the life of the respectable rentier'. A rentier with a difference, however, he proved to be, for he cultivated romantic mysticism under the influence of the German idealist philosophers, Kant, Fichte and Hegel. His philosophical and meditative turn of mind was apparently inherited by Edward who as a young man also shared much of the political opinion of his father who was 'a philosophical Radical of the Mill school'.[6]

'The Social life which encircled us at Brighton was artificial enough', wrote Edward, 'but it was the standard which we children had to live to. . . I never imagined, it never occurred to me, that there *was* any other life.' He was a sensitive, dreamy child, an introvert, and often felt himself to be a 'failure and an object of ridicule' among the philistines.[7] Thus in his early youth he was perhaps as much of a rebel as his father had been, something of a romantic rebel feeling uneasy about the 'artificiality' that surrounded him.

Edward's grandfather on his mother's side was Scottish, and his own mother suffered, as he thought, from 'a baneful parental influence – Scottish pride and puritanism'.[8] She rejected all expression of natural affection as bordering on sin, and her children learned to suppress and control all emotion. It was perhaps not so much the atmosphere of fashionable Brighton, with which the children apparently had little to do, as the pressure of the prudishness of his own mother, a 'firm, just and courageous' woman,[9] that caused young Edward to feel estranged and encouraged his early proclivity to solitude.

At any rate the family of ten active boys and girls had a world of their own, quite independent of their parents. They often overran the large garden of Brunswick Square to the despair of the gardener, kept a variety of pets in the back yard, and chased each other up and down the stairs in the spacious house. A house in this square usually had domestic offices in the basement, a hall and dining-room on the ground floor, with a double drawing-room above, and two floors of bedrooms, one for the family and the other for the servants. This was the house which Edward was to remember with mixed feelings of pleasure and frustration.

Edward learned a little Latin from Sophia before he began his formal education. At the age of ten he entered Brighton College,

where he was called 'Chips', an inevitable family nickname. His record in the school was good but not remarkable: he took about equal interest in classics and mathematics and gained some prizes. At school his brother Charles was a hero, easily first in everything he took a hand in. In 1857, when Charles left Brighton College to join the Indian Civil Service, the nine other children migrated with their parents and two servants to Versailles for a year's sojourn; Edward and Alfred had some experience of French education at the Lycée Impériale.

In 1860 a letter came from Charles who was then stationed at Futtenpore as assistant magistrate:

> My dear Teddy... When I left, you were rather a skinny sprat; now I suppose you are a lively young fish, I hope not a loose one. Formerly you used to suffer from a 'tearing' cough (or 'wearing' was it?). Now I suppose you are as strong & healthy as a young Bull of Bashan. Corresponding to these changes in your outer man... I suppose there are changes in the manners & customs of the creature. Euclid & Quadratic Equation & the Binominal Theorem form probably a sort of light repast for you now, while you take Trigonometry or Statics as your solid food. Cicero & Thucydides of course you keep under your pillow every night, & Latin & Greek prose slip off the end of your pen as easily as a piece of butter off a hot knife... French of course you speak like a native.

He advised Edward to play games which would 'make you accustomed to fatigue & add... several years to your life'.[10] Charles had acted as a guardian to his younger brothers, but now he could only send advice by post. Actually the other male members of the family were growing up and going their separate ways. Alfred left school in 1860 in order to join the navy; George entered the army about the same time.

Edward was now left alone at Brighton with his six sisters. He became their confidant, all the more so because of his own apparently feminine traits, for instance his interest in music which was then considered inappropriate for a boy. His attempts to learn the piano had been treated as an intrusion upon the female sanctuary. His mother, however, took pity on him and taught him the notes, and his piano practice, which soon advanced as far as Beethoven's Sonatas, became his greatest joy. Nevertheless, the presence of six sisters often with other girls visiting them was overwhelming and, he later