

The illustrious 'Little' Steve

IN 1868 a policeman patrolling along Chapel Street, Liverpool, saw a small boy near St. Nicholas's Church trying to shelter from the bitter January weather. He was poorly clad and when asked where he lived said that he did not know. The policeman took him in charge, carrying him on his shoulders, "... meanwhile", the boy was to write later, "chatting to me so merrily that I forgot my troubles and enjoyed the ride." The officer could hardly have been expected to know that he was carrying a future cabinet minister on his shoulders!

Stephen was first taken to the workhouse. The register gives his number as 9747. He was admitted to the Kirkdale Industrial School on 31 January 1868, his age being given as eight, his father dead and his being deserted by his mother "... who was not resident in a workhouse". He was happy there, and wrote later, "I was well cared for and, without straining imagination too far, I think I may say that I became a politician. The teachers used to be kind enough to lend me illustrated papers and I vividly remember being fascinated by a portrait of Mr. Gladstone. From that time on Mr. Gladstone was my hero and I followed his career with absorbed interest. In later years I forsook Liberalism but Mr. Gladstone was certainly one of the most potent influences on my early life."

Born with great gifts

Such was his progress at the school that he wished to stay on to become a teacher but the principal considered him to be too small to control the children. The Kirkdale Committee minutes of 10 December 1873 contain the following: "an application has been received from John Walsh of Downall Green, Ashton-in-Makerfield, for his brother Stephen". It is not known how John Walsh reached Downall Green from Liverpool and at 19 years of age would not be considered. However Stephen was discharged on 7 January 1874 "to friends". The 1881 census shows Stephen Walsh living at 43 Downall Green with Matthew Picton, a coal miner and his wife Anne, both aged 40. Stephen went to work in the pits, earning 1d an hour for a 60 hour week, "... less than a £1 a month to keep body and soul together". He had been born with great gifts and found that his education, elementary



King George V and Queen Mary with Mr. Stephen Walsh, Secretary of State for War in the first Socialist Government, 1924.

though it was, gave him a great advantage over his fellow miners, most of whom were illiterate.

From the age of 14 he passed through all the grades underground from haulage hand to coal-face worker. When he first became connected with mining trade unionism there was no county federation, only a number of local unions. In time he was elected check-weighman at Garswood Hall Collieries and when Sam Wood became the Member of Parliament for Ince in 1892, Walsh was his trusted lieutenant. In 1885 he married Annie Adamson, a "pit-brow lassie", at the colliery where he worked and they were to have ten children. In 1901 he became the miners' agent for Wigan, which meant leaving Downall Green and living in Swinley Road, Wigan, a condition of the appointment being that the successful candidate must reside in the area.

Caused a sensation in the House

In 1906, as a Labour Representation Committee candidate he won the Ince Division from Colonel Blundell, a local colliery owner, by a large majority. In all he was to win seven elections before retiring in 1929 and today,

over 90 years later, the seat - now the Makerfield Division - is the safest of the Labour strongholds. His maiden speech, delivered only days after taking his place in Parliament, was received with great approval on both sides of the House. In 1908, a private member's bill introduced by Walsh won for the miners, for the first time ever, an eight-hour day. In 1912 during a miners' strike for a minimum wage, Mr. Asquith, the Prime Minister, brought in a bill establishing the principle. Walsh fought hard to have amounts inserted but when his amendments failed he urged his colleagues to support the bill. He caused a sensation in the House saying, "I am a citizen before I am a trade unionist and if the national interests were in danger I would support the State".

During the 1914-18 war he campaigned vigorously on behalf of the war effort and served in the wartime coalition, first as Parliamentary Secretary of National Service from 1917-19 as Secretary to the Local Government Board. It was a bitter blow to the Walsh family when, in April 1917, Captain Arthur Walsh, M.C. their eldest son, was killed in France. When the Labour Government took office for the

first time in 1924, Mr. Walsh became Secretary of State for War with a seat in the Cabinet. There was something incongruous about this Minister, who was only five feet tall, giving orders to stiff, beribboned generals. However, his intelligence and personality quickly won over the Army chiefs. Although small in stature, mentally he was a giant. As a miners' agent it was said that if Stephen Walsh could not get a concession from the coal-owners there was no concession to be had. He was a Shakespearean scholar and could pick up any quotation given him and carry on until asked to stop.

Apt quotations and literary allusions

In the House of Commons, his speeches always contained apt quotations and literary allusions. It was said that Arthur (afterwards Lord) Balfour, the Tory Leader, listened intently to this man who was born in the slums of Liverpool, untrained in the Parliamentary arts, addressing the greatest assembly in the world in a manner equal and sometimes superior to many of those around him. His speeches may have been flavoured with classical allusions and quotations, but always the substance was the condition of the people and the urgent necessity for improvement.

Walsh died in March 1929. Telegrams were received from the King and Queen, the War Office, Lloyd George and countless others. When the cortege left Swinley Road, Wigan on its five-mile, one-and-a-half hours journey to Downall Green, long ranks of bare-headed miners who had left the coal face early to pay their last respects, lined the street. In an inspiring graveside address, Canon Raven, who represented the Bishop of Liverpool, said "living under conditions which existed in parts of this neighbourhood, with its wastage of human life, its tragedies, poverty, suffering and endurance and knowing how enormously complex were the causes of those evils, it was difficult not to despair. There were those who claimed that they could not turn poor stock into good and that nothing could be got out of a slum but a slum mind. Thank God Stephen Walsh stands as a witness that both of those statements are untrue."

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