Annie Taylor: The Socialist Years

Stephen Williams

Among the tasks facing editors of the correspondence and diaries of notable individuals whose papers merit publication, few can be as unenviable as identifying minor characters whose lives are not well known and who only make fleeting appearances. Editorial efforts to provide accurate and comprehensive references often run aground as sources dry up and one must make decisions about the value of spending a disproportionate number of hours digging in the archives to clear up seemingly minor details.

This is certainly the case when researching the lives of many branch activists of the Socialist League whose names crop up in newspaper reports – such activists are listed as speaking at meetings and leading demonstrations, and as correspondents. It is often difficult to piece together more than a flimsy biographical outline of the individuals involved. Even when they are referred to in autobiographies, biographies and correspondence of the leading League figures, it is usually only in passing with no indication given of the particularities – political stance, speaking style, physical description – of those concerned. E.P. Thompson’s study of Morris offers more than most in this regard and Florence Boos’s exemplary set of ‘Biographical Notes’, included as a guide to William Morris’s Socialist Diary, is the best we have, but there is still much that can be done.¹ Further biographical studies would tell us a good deal about the social class basis of the League’s membership, the nature of local political work undertaken and the affiliations of those involved in the years following the demise of the League, all subjects about which we know surprisingly little.² Of particular interest to readers of this Journal would be evidence of how former League members carried forward the ideas and example of Morris in the years after his death. Such studies would not necessarily be comprehensive in all cases, the source material sometimes being so thin that firm conclusions cannot be made, as with the subject of this essay.
Figure 1: This illustration accompanies Hubert Bland’s article in the Sunday Chronicle of 14 July 1895. We have no way of knowing how close a likeness it is to the real Annie Taylor as no photograph of her has been found. Courtesy of the British Library.
Both Norman Kelvin and Stanley Weintraub encountered the problem of identity when they almost simultaneously published, respectively, William Morris’s *Collected Letters* and Bernard Shaw’s *Diaries* for the 1880s, and tried to single out the socialist activist Annie Taylor, known to both Morris and Shaw. Weintraub, in particular, suffered agonies noting that during the 1880s Shaw knew ‘four Mrs. Taylor’s’, but hopelessly confused them and, at one point, referring to one of Shaw’s meetings on 12 July 1885, noted that ‘Mrs. Clementia Taylor of Westbourne Park, London, was a Socialist League member was later a participant in the “Bloody Sunday” demonstration in Trafalgar Square’. In fact, Clementia Taylor was a long-term radical, women’s rights advocate and one-time Kensington resident who had for a number of years lived in Brighton, but she was never a Socialist League member. The Mrs. Taylor whom Shaw actually met was Annie Taylor who lived in rooms at 9 Grideloton Road, St. Peter’s Park, a district made up of well-to-do houses north of Harrow Road in west London.

One of the earliest recruits to the Fabian Society when she joined in October 1884, Annie Taylor was a regular at their weekly discussion meetings where she came to know Fabian pioneers Hubert Bland, Frank Podmore, Edward Pease and, of course, Shaw, who had been admitted during the previous month. In February 1885 Taylor joined the Socialist League and was attached to the Bloomsbury Branch when it was established in March. It was on her travels to and from the League’s office in Farringdon that she was often accompanied by Shaw who, although not a member of the League, was a regular attendee and speaker at its public meetings. Shaw’s short diary entries record a number of journeys and conversations with Annie Taylor but he does not provide any colour to these brief sketches.

As a member of the League’s Hall Committee that organised lectures and concerts at the headquarters, it is likely Taylor contributed significantly to its arrangements of social events where she was a frequent performer as pianist and singer, on one occasion in September 1885 dueting with May Morris. An open-air speaker for the League in the period of its free speech fights, Taylor, along with David Nicol and James Allman, had her name taken by the police at a Harrow Road pitch in August 1886, earning Morris’s ire because he believed it to be ‘very stupid of them, as we agreed not to be there at the present’. Taylor was present again at Harrow Road the following week when League speakers from the Marylebone, Bloomsbury and North London branches attempted a marathon display from the platform in defiance of police interference. Reporting on this for *Commonweal*, Fred Henderson wrote that after Thomas Wardle’s hour-long speech: ‘Mrs. Taylor followed with a telling contribution for some time’.

Following a short period in the Clerkenwell branch of the League where she acted
as secretary in the summer of 1887, Taylor rejoined her Bloomsbury comrades following a move to 94 Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square. From there Taylor was caught up in the agitation opposing the decision of Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Charles Warren, to close Trafalgar Square to public meetings, and she became a noted participant in the events that became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’. With an estimated six thousand people who gathered at Clerkenwell Green at two o’clock on Sunday 13 November 1887, Taylor listened to speeches from a representative of the Home Rule Union and the Green’s own Patriotic Club condemning the imprisonment of Irish MP William O’Brien and ‘other Irish patriots’. Morris, Shaw, Edward Aveling and Annie Besant also spoke, challenging the closure of the Square to public meetings and asserting the right to free speech. The reporter for the Daily News intimated that Taylor also spoke from the wagon but this is not confirmed in other accounts.\(^{10}\)

At quarter past three the Clerkenwell procession, one of several approaching the Square from the various quarters of London, set off along Clerkenwell Road. Led by members of the local radical clubs who were instrumental in calling the protest, the demonstrators continued along Theobald’s Road, crossed New Oxford Street, Shaftesbury Avenue and into the streets of Seven Dials. As the front of the procession reached Long Acre they were met by a strong contingent of policemen who forbade any further progress towards the Square. When it became obvious that the protestors would not disassemble, the policemen charged the procession swinging batons and truncheons. Morris observed that the police attack at this point was premeditated, as it was ‘clearly the best place for it’. He continued:

> The divergence of the streets would confuse any procession which had lost its rallying point; the side streets and the width of the thoroughfare at this spot gave a good opportunity for a flank charge, and at our rear was [the] open space of Shaftesbury Avenue to allow a charge in that quarter to finish up after the attack on the front and the flank.\(^{11}\)

Annie Taylor and her Socialist League comrades were marching near the front of the procession as her fellow Bloomsbury branch member William Bartlett described in a note published in the Pall Mall Gazette the following evening:

> I was one of the standard bearers, and was marching in company with a lady, Mrs. Annie Taylor, and some others who, like myself, were members of the Socialist League, in the front ranks of the procession, and was at the top of Great St. Andrew Street, when an attack of the most brutal character was
made by the police upon some part of the procession a few yards to the rear of us. We halted to allow the disorganised body to reform, when some constables came up and made an unprovoked and dastardly assault upon us who were in front. The lady just mentioned, who was carrying a standard, was struck down first, by a ruffianly constable whose number I have taken. I held out my banner in front of the policeman who had knocked her down and I exclaimed ‘you cowardly ruffian,’ whereupon another constable gave me a terrific blow upon the head with his truncheon, which felled me to the ground and caused a terrible scalp wound upon my head, which bled profusely.\[^{12}\]

The presence of Annie Taylor and the treatment meted out to her by the police attracted some comment: Annie Besant, writing in her own publication *Our Corner*, noted how Mrs. Taylor had been struck on the side of her head; Walter Sichel, editor of *Time*, noted her participation and described her as the ‘Charlotte Corday of the insurrection’; and Shaw, in typically caustic tone, remarked to Morris how ‘[t]he police charged us the moment they saw Mrs. Taylor. But you should have seen that high hearted host run.’\[^{13}\]

It is almost certain Taylor supported Bloomsbury comrades Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling in their call at a delegate meeting at the Patriotic Club the Wednesday after ‘Bloody Sunday’ that they return to the Square the following Sunday. This, however, was defeated because the majority of delegates sent from the radical clubs believed this to be foolhardy and instead supported a protest in Hyde Park.

A more militant stance was taken by the Law and Liberty League, formed in the immediate aftermath of ‘Bloody Sunday’, to represent demonstrators appearing in court, support their families and campaign for the lifting of the banning order. Along with fellow Bloomsbury Leaguers Lena Wardle, her son Thomas, Sarah Gosling and Bartlett, Taylor played a full part in supporting attempts to establish local committees, known as Vigilance Circles, to mobilise a physical and ideological challenge to the Metropolitan Police.\[^{14}\] And when, during the summer of 1888, the Law and Liberty League endorsed the tactic devised by MP William Saunders, of ‘conversazione’ or ‘promenade meetings’ in the Square on Saturday afternoons, Taylor was there. This ingenious method of protest involved individuals moving around the Square and at four o’clock gathering together in small groups to vote on prepared resolutions, such as that put on 30 June that ‘the government of London, by proclamation, without the sanction of law, is an outrage upon liberty and a gross breach of trust on the part of the government’. As the clock of St. Martin’s in the Fields Church struck on the quarter of an hour further resolutions were read including opposition to British rule.
in Ireland, a denunciation of class privilege and support for MPs speaking out against the ban on meetings in the Square. Sir Charles Warren was disturbed by these gatherings and during July he pressed the Home Secretary to bring charges of incitement to riot against three MPs participating in the protests, Robert Cunninghame Graham, William Saunders and Charles Conybeare; for good measure, Warren added Rev. Stewart Headlam’s name to his list.15 Aware that Warren was spoiling for a fight – ‘the forbearance of the public has hitherto been stronger than the aggravation of the police’ – the Law and Liberty League issued clear guidance to those attending the ‘conversazione’ events: ‘[v]isitors to the Square should join not the largest group which they might see but the smallest. The police have no legal right to remove persons who are not obstructing traffic, or committing some other legal offence, and no person who is wise will afford the police grounds for attack.’16 In spite of this, skirmishes did occur when the police attempted to break up the informal gatherings and arrests were made. One such incident occurred on 30 June when Antonio Borgia, a Patriotic Club member and Vigilance Circle coordinator for Clerkenwell, alleged assault by a police constable on his person and, with the support of MP Charles Conybeare, took out a prosecution against the named officer. When the case was held at Bow Street Magistrates’ Court in July both William Bartlett and Annie Taylor testified to the manhandling of Borgia.
Unsurprisingly, the case was dismissed. Taylor, meanwhile, maintained her presence in the Square and was keen to tell Bartlett at the end of July that although she could not make the next protest she hoped he would do his best ‘not to allow any excitement to take place in the Square till I come back as it would grieve me to the heart’s core to be out of it’. Taylor’s enthusiasm for the struggle, physical bravery and willingness to speak in the open air for the League meant she received invitations and we find her on the platform with Morris in Victoria Park in June 1888 and then a month later at Walham Green for the Hammersmith branch. She also spoke regularly for her own Bloomsbury League branch and then the Bloomsbury Socialist Society when it seceded after the League’s fourth conference in May 1888. Although a supporter of the decision to break away from the League and establish an independent socialist society in Bloomsbury where she remained active until at least the summer of 1893, Taylor continued to offer her speaking and musical talents for League activities and made a notable appearance alongside Morris at the concert and ball at the Farringdon Road hall in June 1889.

In common with her Bloomsbury Socialist Society comrade Eleanor Marx Aveling, Taylor was inspired by the wave of struggles by ‘unskilled’ workers during 1888 and 1889, and in the first months of 1890 she was instrumental in establishing a new trade union for women workers, the Women’s Union, of which she became general secretary. Now living in two rooms at 2 Harrington Street, Regent’s Park, Taylor travelled daily across London to the Women’s Union city office in Aldersgate Street. By March the union was able to announce its arrival with a statement that it would work to ‘forward the interests of female workers in all trades. The alarming indifference shown towards the wrongs of our sex by the labour representatives of the legislature has compelled us to at last stand upon our defence. We have been too long the downtrodden of the world, therefore we ask all those who would see the sunny side of life to join us.’

Working with Edith Lupton and Gertrude Guillaume-Schack, both experienced campaigners and members of the Socialist League on its anarchist wing, Taylor helped to organise four hundred women envelope makers employed by the firm Fenner and Appleton of Clerkenwell, and at the end of April 1890 to bring them out on strike against wage cuts, the introduction of juvenile labour and insanitary working conditions. Hundreds of the women strikers participated in the Hyde Park gathering on 1 May organised by the National Federation of all Trades and Industries, and then the ‘monster’ demonstration on 5 May initiated by the Gas Workers’ Union and the Bloomsbury Socialist Society. At the second demonstration Taylor spoke for the Women’s Union from platform five, supporting the demand for the statutory eight-
hour working day as an incursion into the capitalist system which ‘was nothing but white slavery, and was a disgrace to Christianity, humanity and freedom’. Taylor made successive appearances on the platform at May Day demonstrations until 1893.

During the strike the envelope makers experienced some heavy handling by the police as they picketed the works and collected money on Clerkenwell Green. Lupton believed these to be deliberate acts of intimidation which she aired in the press and encouraged sympathetic MPs to do likewise in Parliament. The rough treatment probably strengthened the determination of the strikers who within two weeks had forced Fenner and Appleton to concede all the union’s demands. For the next three years the union attempted to broaden its membership base beyond the envelope makers with little success and by 1894 it had ceased to operate.

The passing of the Women’s Union coincided with the disappearance of Annie Taylor from reported socialist and trade union activity in London. Hubert Bland, who had known Taylor since 1884, wrote of her in one part of a series of articles for the Sunday Chronicle based on his memories of the early socialist movement. Bland avoided mentioning her name but Annie Taylor’s identity is unmistakable from his reference to the events of ‘Bloody Sunday’. According to Bland’s biographer, he was an ‘amusing, sharp-eyed, and pithy commentator of his times’, qualities well displayed in the paragraph on Annie Taylor which is worth quoting in full because it provides a vivid physical description of the woman of whom no known photograph survives. Bland wrote:

I remember very well one lady who was quite a feature of the meetings of the Socialist League and the Fabian society. I think I had better suppress her name, but she was just the last sort of person one would expect to meet in a movement of a quasi-political character. Her age was an unsolved problem: for, while her dress and manner said twenty-five at most, her features said twenty years more at least. She had quite an inordinate affection for face powder, with which she plastered her skin as thickly as does a clown at a circus. She was always gorgeously arrayed in silks, in furs, jewelled rings and broaches. Indeed, she gave the impression of an Indian idol, so thickly were gems of all sorts hung about her person. But the most wonderful thing of all was her boots, which on the moodiest of days were patent leather, and fitted like a glove—a tight glove. She was strong, too, in the matter of stockings, generally bright of hue with embroi dered clocks. These she exhibited with praiseworthy impartiality. She was mostly attended by a cavalier of about half her age, a towzled-haired, slouchy young man, whose means of subsistence were a mystery to his nearest and dearest. The lady’s husband was said to be in India.
This particular lady was a devoted adherent of revolutionary socialism. She distinguished herself a heroine on 'Bloody Sunday', when democratic London assaulted Trafalgar Square. At the head of the procession she carried a red flag, and fought a hand-to-hand contest with the mounted police for its possession. But alas, for the chivalry in uniformed officialdom. It is said the modern Joan of Arc was rolled over in the mud, and the cherished emblem of revolt was torn from her reluctant clutches. But she fought to the last gasp, and for one delirious and dramatic moment her pink silk stockings were the oriflam of war. The towzled-haired young man, I believe, had business elsewhere on the fateful day.26

Bland, a notorious libertine, who his daughter said was ‘absolutely irresistible to women he paid court to, not only before the event of capture but after’, was clearly interested in Annie Taylor’s physical appearance and apparel as well as her revolutionary socialism, and one detects a certain frisson in the writing.27 The passage is also interesting because it provides the firmest documentary lead in tracing Annie Taylor’s life before and after her London socialist years.

Bland’s reference to Taylor’s husband being in India makes it likely, although not absolutely certain, that Annie Taylor was Anne Cordelia Taylor (nee Philipps) who had married James Best Taylor, a captain in the Madras Staff Corps. Born in Edinburgh in November 1843, Anne Cordelia Philipps was the daughter of John and Ann Philipps. By 1850 Anne Cordelia’s father had become Commissioner to the Earl of Moray and was living in the large St. Colme House on the Earl’s estate. Anne Cordelia first met James in 1869 in Scotland and in March 1870 they were married in Marylebone, London. A few months later the couple moved to Madras where James resumed his army career. Between 1870 and 1878 the couple had five children, but only four survived beyond infancy. In 1878 Anne Cordelia returned to Scotland because of ill health, first to Dunfries, then Portobello and finally Edinburgh where a family house in Saxe-Coburg Place was taken for her and the four children. James travelled to Edinburgh on leave, arriving in March 1883 to discover that for some time Anne Cordelia had been having an affair with a twenty-six year-old tram driver, William Fyfe, and that together they had had a child, born in November 1882. Following this disclosure, Anne Cordelia left the family home to live with Fyfe and soon after the couple moved to Sunderland. It is likely the son, almost certainly named William like his father, lived with the Fyfe family in Duddingston, Edinburgh. James immediately sued for divorce on grounds of adultery, bringing the matter to public attention.

The divorce dragged through the Edinburgh courts in the summer of 1883 and
appeared to be reaching a conclusion in October when unexpectedly reconciliation was agreed and the case withdrawn from the legal system. No clear details are available of the settlement between the two parties but we know Anne Cordelia was in receipt of £102 per annum under the contract of marriage and it is possible she received more. While not wealthy, Anne Cordelia was for the rest of her life able to live without paid work and to describe herself as ‘living on her own means’.

Following the settlement James returned to India where he was promoted to the rank of colonel before retiring and settling in England with his children. He died in 1917. Anne Cordelia disappeared from public record for the decade after the settlement. However, in 1884 Mrs. Anne C. Taylor emerged in London and became active in the early socialist movement. Soon Mrs. Anne C. Taylor became more commonly known as Annie Taylor.

Anne Cordelia did not make an appearance in the 1891 Census, while an Annie Taylor, socialist, did. She is listed as residing at 2 Harrington Street, Regent’s Park, and ‘living on her own means’. If these women are one and the same, she continued the habit of misreporting her years begun in the 1881 Edinburgh census, telling the 1891 census enumerator that she was thirty-five years old and had been born in Hampshire. If we take Bland’s approximation of Annie Taylor’s age as credible, a birth date of 1856 seems unlikely and it is possible she was also covering her tracks by disguising Scottish origins. We will probably never be certain. Anne Cordelia resurfaced in 1900 living on a private income in Boston, Massachusetts, giving her age as forty-seven years, when, if she was Annie Taylor, she was most probably fifty-six years old. She returned to England in or around 1902 where, at her demise in Lyme Regis in October 1912, her death certificate recorded her age as sixty-two years, when she was really sixty-nine years old.

Doubtless readers will detect the irony in leaving Annie Taylor’s identity uncertain in an essay that began with a gentle rebuke for those who have been confused by the proliferation of ‘Mrs. Taylors’ in the orbits of William Morris and Bernard Shaw. Conclusive evidence to support the contention that Annie Taylor, depicted famously in a contemporary illustration bravely fighting to retain her grip on the red flag on ‘Bloody Sunday’, and Anne Cordelia Taylor, wife of an Indian Army officer, of independent means, and leading an independent life following her affair with a tram driver many years her junior, were one and the same person is tantalisingly absent. The best we can say is that it is likely on the basis of the evidence available.

Nevertheless, we can be sure that Annie Taylor of the Fabian Society, the Socialist League, the Bloomsbury Socialist Society and the Women’s Union laboured for nearly a decade in the socialist movement of London where she made her mark and was noticed. Bernard Shaw’s description of Annie Taylor as a ‘high hearted host’,
somewhat belittles the idealism and comradeship that socialists from all class backgrounds held to in the heady days of the movement’s revival during the 1880s. That she shared this idealism is undeniable and was well expressed in her sign-off in letters to friend William Bartlett: ‘Yours in the Cause, Annie Taylor’. 29

NOTES
6. Archive of the Socialist League, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 166.
7. The Archive of the Socialist League includes many handbills advertising social events featuring ‘Mrs. Taylor’, ‘Mrs. A.C. Taylor’ and ‘Annie Taylor’.
12. ‘Who Were the Peace Breakers yesterday?’. Pall Mall Gazette, 14 November 1887, pp. 5-6.
18. Annie Taylor to WW. Bartlett, 26 July 1888, University of Sussex Special Collections, WW. Bartlett Collection, Correspondence, 23.
21. ‘To the Women Workers of all Trades’. Pall Mall Gazette, 7 March 1890, p. 6; ‘A New Women’s Union’, The People’s Press, 22 March 1890, p. 8.
24. ‘Cards, Chromos & c’, *The Stationery Trades Journal*, 20 May 1890, p. 278.
28. This account is based on the file in the National Archive of Scotland, CS46/1883/12/14/1, the *Scottish Law Reporter* (Edinburgh: John Baxter, 1883–84), XXI, pp. 18–20, and reports from Edinburgh and Sunderland newspapers.