

Britain's National Secular Society: the first 150 years

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New publication presents the key movements and struggles for a secular society.

Like any organisation that has campaigned to make radical changes to the constitutional structure of our country, the National Secular Society has encountered much resistance, and this has been true throughout its 150 year history.

Founded in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh, a brilliant orator and self-taught lawyer and later to become a radical politician, the ambitions of the NSS have met with successes and defeats in almost equal measure. On the credit side, religion-based laws that for centuries forbade entry for non-believers into Parliament and had banned abortion, divorce, contraception, homosexuality, blasphemy — and even cremation — have been dismantled. Human rights and equality for minorities are now accepted and protected by law. In the struggles to bring about these reforms, the NSS has always played a prominent role and sometimes a decisive one.

On the debit side, the Anglican and Catholic Churches still have a disproportionate hold on our education system, and despite its diminishing size and reduced influence among the population, the Church of England remains established by law, a status that brings with it many unjustified privileges - including representation as of right in Parliament.

Bradlaugh, as you will see from the following pages, was denied a seat in Parliament — despite being repeatedly reelected — simply because he was an atheist. At that time, the swearing of a religious oath by parliamentarians was mandatory. Through dogged determination, Bradlaugh overcame religious objections and his Oaths Act made it possible for MPs to have a choice to affirm rather than take an oath.

Bradlaugh's attacks on religion, particularly on the outrageous privileges of the Established Church, were brilliant, scorching and necessary. More recently, though, as the Church of England and its influence has dramatically withered away, the NSS has changed its focus to one that is neutral but still firm...

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