

**U DX267                      Biographical album relating to Conrad Noel                      1946-1994**  
**and other Christian Socialists**

**Biographical Background:**

Conrad le Despenser Roden Noel was born on 12 July 1869 at Kew. His family was titled and in royal service: his grandfather was the earl of Gainsborough, his aunt was lady in waiting to the queen and his father, Roden Noel, was a groom of the privy chamber. Roden Noel was a poet (Collected Poems [1902]) and biographer of Lord Byron. His mother, Alice de Broe, was the daughter of a Swiss banker. Her health was poor and the Noels frequently 'wintered' in Italy, leaving Conrad with his grandmother, Lady Gainsborough. His mother was an evangelical and his grandmother a Calvinist, making his early religious background rather austere. He attended school at Winchester and Cheltenham, an experience he found unpleasant (he was bullied senselessly), and his later behaviour at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge was so outlandish that it ended with being sent down for a year and not taking his degree (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.276-7; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.11).

However, Conrad Noel took away from Cambridge his first meaningful and enduring conversion; reading J L Joynes's The Socialist Catechism and hearing a lecture by Annie Besant turned him into a convinced socialist. Back at home in Brighton private tuition by Herman Joynes was arranged prior to entry into Chichester Theological College in 1893. Noel was very attracted to Roman Catholicism, but emerged from this period of study converted for a second time, this time to high church Anglicanism. He was partly following in the footsteps of his father, whose political interests led him to write Christianity and social advance in 1894. Conrad Noel spent time working with Father Robert Dolling in the slums of Portsmouth, but his particular brand of Anglican Socialism won him no friends and he was initially refused ordination by the Bishop of Exeter, so setting back his career (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.276-7; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.11).

In 1894 Conrad Noel married Miriam Greenwood and was shortly afterward appointed curate to the vicar of Floweryfield in Cheshire where he gave Sunday lectures on socialism. He and his new wife joined the church socialist group called the Guild of St Matthew founded by Stewart Headlam in 1877. He was again refused ordination, this time by the Bishop of Chester, and was forced to resign his curacy. Until 1897 he and his family of wife and baby daughter, lived in near-poverty until a relative intervened and secured for him a curacy at Salford under Canon Hicks. He had continued his public speaking and joined the Social Democratic Federation, but was finally ordained in 1898 and in 1899 became assistant priest to the vicar of St Philip's in Newcastle (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.277-8; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.12).

In Newcastle, Noel was in good company: Moll was an Anglo-catholic socialist, as was another assistant priest, Percy Widdrington, and after two years Noel moved to London and joined A L Lilley, another Anglo-catholic with socialist sympathies, at Paddington Green in London. Here Noel worked again with the poor of the slums and he also served as honorary secretary of the Guild of St Matthew between 1903 and 1904. In late 1904 he became assistant priest to Percy Dearmer at Primrose Hill who was known for his revitalisation of catholic church ritual. In 1906 Noel, Widdrington, Moll and several others formed the Church Socialist League, which was overtly committed to the Labour Party and Noel published The Labour Party: what it is and what it wants. In 1907 he devoted himself for three years full-time to the work of the League, becoming its organising secretary and giving speeches, writing reviews and articles and producing Socialism and church tradition (1909), Socialism in

Hull History Centre: Biographical album relating to Conrad Noel and other Christian Socialists church history (1910) and Byways of belief (1912) (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.278-9; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.12).

In 1910 Noel finally got a living through the private patronage of Lady Warwick. Lady Warwick held the manor of Easton and the advowson of five churches including Thaxted where the Noel family settled for the next 35 years. His early years at Thaxted were characterised by energetic vicarial work in line with his ideas. He abolished separation of the choir from the congregation and upgraded church wallhangings and vestments. Noel ran evening lectures during which he engaged in debate with local nonconformist ministers and he organised a 'People's Procession' through the village; his wife ran country dancing classes and he revived the local tradition of plain song. Inevitably he created controversy and his activities were not well-received by all in the village. Crypto-popish shrines drove away the Church of England purists and the abolition of reserved pews drove away the churchwarden (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.280-1; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.12).

Noel continued to be involved in the Church Socialist League until 1918 when he left to form the Catholic Crusade, a move which reflected his growing belief that only catholic theology (rather than the Church of England per se) could be married successfully with economic socialism. This led to deteriorating relations with his bishop. He served for a while on the executive of the newly-formed British Socialist Party (formerly the Social Democratic Federation) and began making speeches in support of the Russian Revolution and Irish home rule. Thaxted church sported the Red Flag and the tricolour of Sinn Fein and these led to local demonstrations in 1919, a vast student demonstration in 1921 and finally, on Empire Day 1922, another large protest during which Thaxted was invaded by crowds parading the Union Jack. On 8 July 1922 Noel was officially asked by the Chancellor of the Diocese of Chelmsford to remove the offending flags from the church. The 'battle of the flags' marked the highpoint both of Noel's career as radical churchman and his impact on the local community. His Catholic Crusade, which had as one of its devotions 'The Red Mass', never had many followers and Noel's health and energy diminished with the progress of his diabetic medical condition (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.282-5; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.13).

Diabetes led to blindness in 1935 and the Catholic Crusade was brought to an end a year later. However, Thaxted remained a centre for Christian socialism and Noel continued to lend his support to various causes including protests against unemployment and campaigns against Italian and German fascism. He also continued to write and published *The life of Christ* in 1937. In the early 1940s he became ill with cancer and he died on 22 July 1942. His autobiography appeared posthumously in 1945. His daughter Barbara married Jack Putterill, who succeeded Noel at Thaxted.

**Custodial history:**

Donated by Desmond Heath, London, January 1994

**Description:**

A biographical album relating to Conrad Noel that features photocopies and extracts of poems, letters, illustrations and photographs interspersed with commentary by the author.

**Extent:** 1 volume & 1 file

**Related material:**

Papers of Rev. Conrad Noel [DNO]

Papers of Canon Stanley Evans [DEV]

Miscellaneous items relating to Conrad Noel and Stanley Evans at U DX264

**Access conditions:**

Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DX267/1	'Roden Noel: a wide angle: letters, pictures, poems' A biographical album featuring copies and extracts of poems, letters, illustrations and photographs interspersed with commentary by the author. It includes correspondence with Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, JA Symonds & others, plus reminiscences of Noel's son, Conrad, the 'rebel priest' of Thaxted, compiled and presented by Desmond Heath. (c.250pp., photocopied) 1 volume	Jan 1994
U DX267/2	Material relating to Roden Noel, Conrad Noel and Jack Putterill Photocopied material, possibly relating to the compilation of U DX267/1 including articles and an obituary for Conrad Noel written by Jack Putterill, Vicar of Thaxted (1946) 1 file	1946-1994