

## George Jacob Holyoake

We have a pretty good idea of what is meant by religious persecution. It usually involves someone whose conscience cannot allow them to accept the dictates of the “state religion”. It could be a Thomas More or a John Bunyan, the Cathars or the Bahai.

But what about the individual imprisoned for no beliefs at all, that is, for refusing to accept that religion can determine their life or values in any way ? His is a story we hear less often, perhaps not at all. The voice of disbelief is largely silent.

In a world full of theocracies, then, the story of George Jacob Holyoake deserves a hearing. In August 1842 at the Gloucester Assizes Holyoake was tried and found guilty for blasphemy and atheism, and sent to prison for six months. It was the last time that anyone was jailed for blasphemy in England.

1842 was a crowded year, a year of general strikes and Chartist agitation, the year when the country came perilously close to revolution. Perhaps, as a result, what happened to George Holyoake has been overshadowed by those great public upheavals elsewhere.

Born in Inge Street in Birmingham in 1817, George Holyoake was the son of a foundryman at the Eagle Foundry on Broad Street. George was largely self-taught, which may go some way to explaining his independence of thought. Initially a disciple of the great Congregationalist preacher, John Angell James, at Carrs Lane, Holyoake set out on his own personal voyage of faith, becoming an Owenite, a socialist and an atheist. It is to Holyoake that we owe the very word “secularism”.

Holyoake became a public speaker and agitator, a teacher at the Birmingham Mechanics’ Institute, editor of the anti-religious journal, *Oracle of Reason*, and general thorn in the side of law-abiding, God-fearing, England. What happened to him in 1842 was always on the cards.

Booked to address the Cheltenham Mechanics’ Institute in May on the merits of Robert Owen’s “self-supporting colonies”, George was asked a question about the absence of churches in these new model communities. He might have bit his tongue, but he did not. The burning issue of church rates, paid by all regardless of denomination, surfaced in his mind. “Are we not too poor to have a god ?” Holyoake politely asked his audience.

There were journalists at that meeting, and there were churchmen. By the time he got to Bristol, George Holyoake was a wanted man. And so followed the arrest and the trial. The jury took just a couple of minutes to find him guilty.

The story of Holyoake’s eventful year is told in a new book by Catherine Howe, *Holyoake’s Journey of 1842*, History into Print, Studley, £14.95. I picked the book up, purely by chance, one Sunday in August at the admirable Malvern Book Co-operative in St Anne’s Road. We met over a coffee in Birmingham a couple of weeks later to discuss it.

Like the hero of her book, Catherine has been something of a journey herself. By trade and calling she is a singer and songwriter, with several albums to her name, and an Ivor Novello Award on her shelf for one particular number. "The song was called Harry," she explains, "and I get collateral hits on the web whenever he takes his clothes off!"

Based in Malvern herself, Catherine and friends have a regular spot at the Tower of Song in Cotteridge, mixing together folk and jazz, guitar and violin. She is currently collaborating with a former Birmingham Post journalist, James Clayton, in writing musicals for schools.

Catherine arrived late at history writing, via an Open University degree (in History and Religious Studies), and was drawn to the turbulent war of ideas of the mid-19th Century. George Holyoake safely negotiated, Catherine is already engaged on her next book about Chartism in Halifax.

"It's my home town," Catherine adds, "but they don't seem to know much of their own history. If necessary, I'll simply stand outside the library and give copies away!"

It's Catherine's ability to tell a stirring tale, a craft no doubt honed in song-writing, that gives her book its force and sense of direction. The book recounts Holyoake's ill-fated journey in May 1842 from Birmingham to Bristol and back to Gloucester. He walked it; there was time to think, and no money for a coach.

It's neither a biography of Holyoake, nor simply a description of the court case at Gloucester, but an almost filmic account of GJH's walk from Birmingham to Bristol, interlaced with flashbacks to Holyoake's earlier life and friendships, many broken, a few mended. For the rest of 1842, and the first month or so of 1843, Holyoake's walks were confined to the prison yard at Gloucester Gaol.

Finally, there's room at the close to tie up the loose ends. Holyoake died in London in 1906, at the grand old age of 88, living long enough to see the beginnings of a new age of political emancipation. Holyoake's two volumes of autobiography, published in the 1890s - *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life* - is one of Catherine's key texts. The notoriety surrounding his trial fills a bookshelf on its own.

What are we to make of George Jacob Holyoake? He was driven and uncompromising, like many another prisoner of conscience, and undoubtedly not the easiest man to deal with. His journey of 1842 shows how far we have come, and how far we still have to go.