

Thomas Burt

by Roger Hawkins

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During the 1980's, Mr. Warren Thompson, an indefatigable antiquarian, rescued the bust of Thomas Burt from an obscure place of refuge in a library at Newcastle upon Tyne. It now stands in a place of honour at Morpeth Town Hall, where customarily the election of members of parliament used to be announced in the days when Morpeth was a parliamentary borough. Subject to a quibble over whether, by 1874, Thomas Burt was still a working man, and whether, if so, Alexander Macdonald (who was returned for another constituency at the same time) was another, Thomas Burt was the first working man to become an MP. The bust is a worthy memorial of a great historical event, but, unfortunately, not a very good portrait. It suggests introspection, the mouth scarcely visible for the beard, and the eyes neither seeing nor communicating. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even in photographs, Thomas Burt's eyes are alive with intelligence and humour, and his mouth eloquent.

He was born on November 12th 1837 at Murton Row, a pit village of only eighteen houses. The house was a single storeyed cottage, each cottage in the row consisting of one room with the door and window facing—except for a tiny front garden—directly onto a colliery waggonway. Murton Row (not the same as Murton) is marked on the 1st ed. Ordnance Survey as an L-shape on the east side of the waggonway, which ran from Backworth to Percy Main, part of a complex of lines running down to the Tyne and forming a sort of no-man's land between Wallsend and North Shields. It is now a cycle track, and Murton Row, which was demolished in 1938, stood about where the Coast Road, A1058, crosses the cycle track, or perhaps a little further north, grid ref. 326685.

His parents were Peter Burt, a coal-hewer who was also a Rechabite (tee-totaller) and Primitive Methodist preacher, and his wife Rebecca, née Weatherburn. His father moved job and house every few years, apparently for the change of scene as much as any other reason. Thomas remembered, as a very small child at Whitley, seeing a troop of cavalry during the Chartist disturbances of 1839-40. When he was seven, at Seghill, the family, with their neighbours, were turned out of their cottage during the long strike of 1844. Peter Burt was a 'sacrificed' man, and left soon after the strike ended to go into County Durham. Wherever the family went, Thomas spent a much of his time rambling about the fields and lanes, and, when they were living near the sea—as they were during the strike of 1844—along the shore. His schooling was brief and spread over three different schools, none of any pretension, but in them and in the Primitive Methodist Sunday Schools, he learnt the three R's. He became a trapper-boy at Haswell colliery on the day after his tenth birthday, and suffered badly at first from the appalling conditions in the mine and the long hours, but eventually came to like his work, particularly the two years he spent at the Sherburn House pit, where there were many occasions when the pit was laid off and he could go rambling. When he was thirteen he and his father worked for a time at Murton colliery, South Hetton, which was again appalling: 'Except pay Saturday, which was a holiday, all the hours were spent in work and sleep.' (Watson, p. 44.) The family returned to Northumberland, and in quick succession he worked at New Hartley, then Cramlington, and then, about the end of 1851, Seaton Delaval. After a spell of both putting (moving the coal underground in tubs) and hewing, he became a regular hewer when he was eighteen.

Thomas Burt's self-education began when he was about fourteen, with Pilgrim's Progress and Uncle Tom's Cabin. He began to save all of the money his mother gave him back out of his pay, and would walk 16 or 18 miles into Newcastle on pay Saturday to buy himself a book. His early purchases included various works of Milton, Cowper's poems, and Gibbon's Decline and Fall. He also taught himself French, Latin and Pitman's shorthand. In 1859 he and his two uncles were dismissed from Seaton Delaval, after a strike in which Burt had taken no part. They were taken on at Choppington on January 1st 1860, and shortly afterwards he married his cousin, Mary Weatherburn, at Bedlington church.

The conditions under which pitmen worked at that time were extremely harsh. Not only were the hours long and the work dangerous, but they suffered under a host of injustices that were supported

by the law. Boys of ten, Thomas Burt included, worked twelve-hour shifts as trappers. On one occasion he fell asleep, being quite alone and in the dark, and a train of tubs smashed through the trap. The trap-doors were actually a safety device for directing the currents of air to all parts of the mine, and the other thing a trapper could do wrong was to leave the door open, so that gas built up, putting the lives of all the men and boys in the pit at risk. Burt's own summary of a trapper's life, given before a select committee in 1865, was: 'He is imprisoned there just as if he were in a cell or a gaol.' (Watson, p. 103) Despite the passing of the Mines Regulation Act of 1860, which provided for proper ventilation in mines and for inspectors to enforce the law, ventilation was still very bad, especially at the coal-face. Burt also gave evidence about this, and, in answer to a question from the committee, as to why the men did not apply to the inspector, he said, 'To tell the truth, there are many men who are timid on that point. There are cases of men being 'sacrificed,' and losing their employment, in consequence of applying to the inspector.'

Although the miners' wages were theoretically quite good, they had to provide their own tools, candles and gunpowder, and—most resented of all—there was the 'laid out'. While the detail varied from pit to pit, the principle was the same: a miner was only paid for full tubs of round coals (large pieces) and if his tub came up less than full, or with more than a small amount of broken coal in it, it was laid out. Not only did he then lose his wage for that tub, but he was generally fined as well. The fact that the owners could still sell the round coal in the tub, that even the small coal had a value, that the round coals might have been shattered in the corves (baskets) or tubs on their way to the surface, that the weighing machines were never tested, and that there was no means of challenging the laid-out, were of no consequence. The bond (contract of employment) had for a long time been yearly, though a monthly bond had become common in Northumberland by this time. In either case, the terms were dictated by the owners, the pitmen being merely expected to sign, or make their mark. If the owners laid the pit off, the men lost their day's pay, but if the men did not go to work, they could be brought before the magistrates as criminals and sent to prison. Amazingly, with good will on the part of the managers, relations between men and management could be quite good, even under these conditions. Thomas Burt was on the whole satisfied with his lot at Seaton Delaval and was actually on terms of friendship with the manager at Choppington.

At Choppington, he became secretary of the District Temperance Society. There was also a School Committee, set up to manage the school provided by the owners, and he was made secretary of that as well. In 1864 he was made a delegate to a meeting at Newcastle of the Northumberland and Durham Miners' Association. He proposed that Northumberland secede from the union and set up the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, a movement satisfactory to the Durham men as well. The secretary of the new union was William Crawford, who resigned in 1865. Against his own inclinations—'A workman's lot,' he said, 'should be in itself satisfactory, and he should be in no necessity of changing his occupation in order to better his position.' (Watson, p. 79)—Burt allowed himself to be nominated, was appointed, and took up his duties on August 14th 1865.

Since mid-June there had been a strike in progress at Cramlington colliery, the largest in Northumberland. In October, after sixteen weeks, the evictions began, and were carried out with all the usual brutality by the candymen (bailiffs) accompanied by mounted police. The Cramlington men set on the candymen, and the police were helpless because the women beat on their bleazers (iron sheets used to make the fire draw) so that they could not control the horses. The success was, of course, short-lived, and the ring-leaders were soon after arrested and imprisoned for up to nine months with hard labour.

Burt's response to a situation not of his own making was two-fold; first, to raise money. There was just over £23 in hand when he took office. Some 600 men were on strike, there were twenty collieries in association, and 4,000 members. In a situation for which there were no precedents—or at least, such precedents as there were showed that the only result must be the collapse of the strike and the ruin of the union—he energetically set about fund-raising. The only positive feature of the situation was that the strike was at only one colliery, albeit a very large one. Watson says:

"What was possible for Mr. Burt under the circumstances was to take such measures as might mitigate a great calamity. Mr. Holyoake writes: "What journeys, meetings, committees, speeches, public letters, devices, negotiations it took on Mr. Burt's part to maintain the defiance of the men with

advantage it is easier to imagine than describe, and Mr. Burt would render no assistance in estimating it." ...

Though the bulk of the collieries in Northumberland were still outside the union, they responded most promptly and generously to the appeal for funds; and but for the aid of the miners who were not trade unionists the Union itself must have gone to pieces

Burt's other response was to make the men submit to the law. Meech says:

"At this point one can trace the assertion of the principle of Constitutional agitation, of which from the very first Mr. Burt was a sturdy advocate. A meeting of the delegates of the union was held, the proceedings of the men were severely censured, they were advised to maintain a peaceful attitude in future, to leave their doors open, and to meet any further movements of a similar character with passive resignation."

Soldiers were next brought over from Newcastle and Manchester, and the "candyman" once more appeared in Cramlington village. Acting on the advice of their leaders, the men left their cottages peacefully, and the houses were cleared without further incidents.

The owners brought in strike-breakers from Devon and Cornwall, and the strike ended after twenty weeks, in November. Burt had, however, raised £4,000 to support the men on strike, so that their needs had been met as well as possible, and there was over £600 in hand. He proposed that, contrary to the practice whereby this was returned to the subscribing collieries, it should be retained for future needs. The members trusted him, and agreed.

There was then a six-year period of consolidation, in which the membership doubled. Burt's salary was little more than he could earn as a hewer, there was an increasing amount of work, and he was subject to a great deal of back-biting and personal attacks at meetings. On April 3rd 1872 he issued a manifesto (Watson, p. 115-7) at his own expense, in which he candidly said that, for himself, he did not care for the position he held:

I came to you a free man, and I can only continue with you as such. I choose my own company. I shall correspond with whom I like. I claim to have, or that I ought to have, some little time to call my own, and this leisure I shall dispose of in my own way. I shall at all times claim the higher liberty of speaking as I think upon every question. I will never consent to become the mere tool and mouthpiece for any man, or any body of men.

Following this, his prestige rose even higher, his salary was increased, an assistant appointed, and proper offices found in Newcastle, with living accommodation attached. Up to that time, having quit his pit cottage, Burt had lived at Cowpen Quay and worked from home. Thomas Burt was not the first leader to try to discuss grievances amicably with the owners—Thomas Hepburn and Martin Jude would have been equally as willing, but, except on a few occasions when a third party intervened to act as an honest broker, their overtures to the owners were always ignored—but he was able, partly because a new breed of coal-owner had emerged in recent years, to avoid strikes and settle disputes by discussion. In February 1873 a Joint Committee, unique in the industry and perhaps in industry generally, was set up to settle all disagreements peaceably, consisting of representatives of the coal owners and the men. It would have been unimaginable a few years earlier. This, says Meech, was one of the great achievements of Thomas Burt's life. His salary was increased to £500 p.a., but was reduced to £400 in 1888, at a time when miners' wages were severely cut back.

Very few miners had the vote at this time. In 1868, Disraeli's reform bill had extended the franchise in the parliamentary boroughs from just the ten-pound male householders to all rate-paying householders. However, miners in pit cottages did not pay rates, and so did not have the vote. Against this it was contended that they were in a position analogous to tenants whose rates were paid by the landlord, who did have the vote. The point was gained in 1873, and the number of electors in the parliamentary borough of Morpeth almost doubled, from 2,661 to 4,916. Thomas Burt declared himself for Labour and Radical policies, but actually stood as Liberal, and was elected in February 1874. His maiden speech was on May 13th, on the county franchise, which was not so generous as

that for parliamentary boroughs: 'Two men may be working—and they frequently are working—in the same pit and at the same place as 'mates,' and one of these may have a vote and the other may not. Their position is in every respect identical. They are occupying the same sort of house, and they are in exactly the same positions, only that one lives beyond 'an imaginary line,' as the hon. member for the Border Burghs called it.' (Watson, p. 158-61) He was president of the Trades Union Congress at Newcastle in 1891. The acoustics of the hall were appalling, and large numbers of delegates were present for the first time from the new mass-membership unions of unskilled workers. Burt did a marvellous job of keeping order and preventing aggravation throughout, and in particular persuaded Conference not to eject the inexperienced Kier Hardie and his supporters after they had breached standing orders during an important vote. He attended international labour conferences at Berlin, Joliment (Belgium) and Paris, and is credited largely with the success of the international co-operation amongst mining unions.

Burt's performance as an MP was equally as impressive as it was in the trade union movement. A lesser man would by then have risen to what Professor Parkinson called the level of his own incompetence, but not so Thomas Burt. He had some years before, on April 3rd 1869, at Blyth, befriended Charles Bradlaugh, inviting him home to supper when—although Burt did not know it till later—no innkeeper or coffee house proprietor would supply the notorious Atheist with any kind of refreshment. Bradlaugh was returned for Northampton in 1880, but for five years was harassed and prevented from taking his seat on the grounds that an atheist could not take the oath; indeed, he was absolutely treated with discourtesy and brutality. Thomas Burt remained his staunch friend and ally throughout, maintaining that the electors had the right to choose whom they would. Burt was of course active in labour and social legislation, including the old-age pension. In 1892 he became a government minister, Secretary of the Board of Trade. He took a great interest in South Africa, and opposed the Boer War as being the most disgraceful war we had ever undertaken. This was an extremely unpopular position to take, but he held his seat in the 'khaki election' of October 1900, albeit with a majority of only 410. In 1905 he visited South Africa with Mrs. Burt, partly to see their two sons, but also to see labour conditions for himself. He strongly opposed the importation of Chinese labour under restrictive contracts for unskilled work, regarding it as a form of slavery.

In 1895, the new offices of the Northumberland Miners' Union were opened, and named Burt Hall. It was significant of the quiet revolution that Burt had accomplished that the opening ceremony was performed by the President of the Newcastle coal owners. In 1911 he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law of Durham University, the freedom of Newcastle, and the freedom of Morpeth. He retired in 1913, and died at home at Burdon Terrace, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Notes and references

An early Life of Thomas Burt was written by George Jacob Holyoake, a Radical journalist, secularist, and pioneer of the co-operative movement, but I have never seen a copy. It demonstrates Burt's great humanity and strength of character, that he should be able to introduce into his family circle—which, despite his own move away from its roots, was essentially a Primitive Methodist one—two such men as Bradlaugh and Holyoake. Burt also wrote his own autobiography, though the published version was finished by the hand of a friend.

These notes are taken from *A Great Labour Leader*, by Aaron Watson (Brown, Langham and Co., London, 1908) *From Mine to Ministry*, by Thomas Cox Meech, and *A Howky gan te Parliement*, by William Strachan and the Thomas Burt Project Group of Preston Grange County Primary School (Northumberland County Libraries, 1997). Aaron Watson was a northern newspaper editor. My copy was No. 4 in the library of the Bedlington Mechanics' Institute. It seems a pity that such a book should ever have left Bedlington, where Burt was married ('The best day's work I ever did,' he called it) and where he was first adopted as a parliamentary candidate. Meech's work is a popular one with advertisements—including one for Kompo, a temperance remedy for colds, complete with a ringing endorsement from Mr. Burt himself! My copy is rather damaged, the paper being of the kind that self-destructs in its first hundred years. I cannot tell either the publisher or the date, but it came out a little after Watson's, since it mentions the death of Campbell-Bannerman in April 1908. Burt became Father of the House after that, and developed something of a special relationship with the Royal Family in that role. *Howky gan te Parliement* was published to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth. It was originally a school project, and gives information not available in the other books, particularly about the Burt family. All three are well illustrated, and all contain at least one picture not

found in the other two. Watson gives a very circumstantial account of Thomas Burt's birthplace, identifying it as the cottage one from the end. Judging by that account, the photograph in "Howky gan te Parliement", stated to be of the birthplace (19, Murton Row) is actually the end cottage, no. 20.