
THE QUARRYMAN PROPAGANDIST

*Robert Dempster Was
Years Ahead of
His Time*

HIS VIEWS ON A WAGE-SLAVE SOCIETY

**MORE
LOWE
LIFE**

**Special
to
The
Evening
Times**

In my nature I have a tremendous reverence for the obscure, undesignated men and women who worked and died in the cause of the common people. I never had muckle broo of the ephemeral great, because, I knew that in the last urge in any vital national challenge the burden and battle would fall on the stairhead, the close, the pend, the country cottage, the bothy.

One day I received a letter from Joseph Duncan, general secretary of the Scottish Farm Servants Union, in which he said in a final paragraph :—

"I have always been going to call on you but never had the opportunity. I should like to know where could I could find more information about Dempster of Alyth, whom I knew shortly before his death, when he was working as a quarryman near Alva.

"I am trying to gather together what is known about the early attempts to organise farm workers, and should like to know more about Dempster's club.

Duncan has always been a sincere, conscientious, effective official of the rural workers in Scotland. So, this being a wild, windy, wet. and blustering March day, with bleak landscape and leaden sky, I remained indoors and recalled Robert Dempster.

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I first met Bob in 1889 and during the following four years we gathered practically every Saturday evening.

He had already issued in 1889, from his address at Morn Street, Alyth, under the auspices of the Ploughmen's Club and the Socialist Union, a two page occasional sheet called the "Labour Leaflet".

Think of it, think of it well — the efforts of a humble clodhopper! Six copies of the leaflet were sod for a penny. Bob announced that those willing to distribute the leaflets could have them sent to their address, but "as a sign of good faith annual subscriptions of one shilling might be forwarded.

In his first leaflet Bob came down hard on "the drones and slugs," and explained the cause lo poverty and the remedy.

In his second leaflet he dealt with the Irish question, and in the third, at 100 for 6d — containing the programme of the Ploughmen's Club, wherein the creation of an Agricultural Board was advocated — he advised a direct vote of the people to decide on peace or war.

The fourth number dealt with the Bible, the Land, and the People — a group of quotations from Scripture.

The fifth leaflet states "that few questions are so likely to bear directly on the practical problems of the coming time as the Compensation for the withdrawal of privileges."

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ACCORDING to Bob, special privileges may be regarded as "the power of living on the labour of others, as is most notably enjoyed by landlords, burglars, shareholders, pick-pockets, and States sinecurists.

He also added that "... in a wage slave society there are but three kinds of people—namely, workers, robbers, and beggars; and in that of the worker there are two kinds—first, Socialists; and second, cowards—the first wanting to abolish robbery and beggary, the second to continue them."

In leaflet No. 6 the duty of the workers was elaborated, and among other reforms he urged "— . . . a national system of money circulation— not borrowed, but State-supplied on labour value."

Bob, without party, without press, without notice, and with out financial help, was in 1888 more alive to core economic problems than the sitting doubtful brooders in the present parliamentary hen-house.

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These leaflets were extensively circulated in Perthshire and Forfarshire, and a weekly distribution was made every Saturday evening by Bob himself in the streets of Dundee.

He came into the city from Alyth for that special purpose, and very often he wound up his visit with an open-air address near the Greenmarket.

Fourteen years ago to the very month I sent those scarce leaflets— perhaps the only set in existence— to Duncan at Stirling, thinking that there could be no more appropriate repository than the archives of the Union of which Bob was a lonely individual precursor.

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When I sponsored James Macdonald in 1892 as first Labour candidate for Dundee Dempster stood by me. He walked from Alyth into the city, thinking of naught else but propaganda.

Barber shops he turned into Meccas of budding reformers: He sought out converts; he established others in the faith.

His pockets were bulged with papers and pamphlets, with copies of roughly written, quotable extracts from his own private correspondence.

These and a frank, manly manner were his ammunition. When he spoke at the lamps at the shore— Doric and School Board delightfully blended— he was ever courteous and inoffensive.

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Then, later, he and I wended our way homeward through High Street and Overgate, but it was Bob who collared likely young men, invited them to meetings, recommended papers, gifted and sold pamphlets, and asked in a general way of all he met if they were saved economically. Ah,— those days and the buoyant gamesomeness of them!

Bob was not a partisan; how could he be otherwise when at his beginning there was no party? He sought out the ploughmen in field and bothy; or men in the district he tracked to the smithy: To outdoor workers at meal hours he gave revolutionary ideas for dessert, and even editors opened surprise packets. ...

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ONE day in the autumn of 1899 a pure pleasure awaited me on reaching home. There, in my modest lodging in Catchword, in the cool shade of my room, sat Bob Dempster, quite unheralded, brown as a berry, and hearty as a hill breeze.

And herein lay the pleasure— he had come from Clackmannan for the sole purpose of seeing me. He had not come as a student of Glasgow's municipal enterprise, nor on business, nor to visit relatives, nor to make speeches; no, he had come because "he had a mind to see me once again."

Had a royal personage been my visitor I might have been more surprised, but not so well pleased, The beard of him, the strong voice, the steady eye! Once recognized, true men are ever memorable, and that is their harvest. I regarded his greying locks, his clean mind, his dauntless respect for truth, and thanked God for a revived faith in village Hampdens.

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So, having eaten salt together, stirring the glowing embers of the past, glimpsed each other after silence and darkness, we clasped good-bye. ...

Next day in some open quarry, seated on a big stone, he would eat his frugal meal with content, dreaming of a new time and old friends.

