



## A Memory of Chris Williams

Nick Matthews

Others will tell you what a great academic and historian Chris Williams was, I first came across Chris as a consequence of his editing (with Noel Thompson) the collection of essays *Robert Owen and his legacy* (Thompson & Williams, 2011). He struck me then as a very erudite historian who clearly not only knew but understood his stuff. He placed everything in its proper context. He was also charming and had a great sense of humour. In 2017, when it was the bicentenary of the birth of George Jacob Holyoake, I asked Chris if he would speak at an event we were doing in Newtown, Wales. During these discussions he mentioned the play.

Well, I thought about this, but had to go back to him. “What play?” I said. “*A subject of scandal and concern*”, he said. “What was that?” I said. “It was a BBC *Sunday Night Play* screened in 1960”, he said. It was written by John Osborne, the original angry young man, and directed by Tony Richardson (famous today for the film *the Loneliness of a long distance runner*, he won two Oscars) and starring none other than Richard Burton (Osborne & Richardson, 1960).

Unbeknown to me, at least at that time, and probably what he is most well-known for is that Chris had edited *The Richard Burton diaries* published by Yale University Press (Williams, 2012). For some reason I had not put together that this was the same Chris Williams.

“Well wow!” I thought. I tracked down the play published by Faber and Faber and persuaded the Leicester Secular Society to do a public reading of it. As a play it is quite dramatic, and I am surprised it is so little performed. The play is about the fact Holyoake was the last man to be tried in England for blasphemy.

Thanks to Chris’s efforts we managed to track down a copy of the play as broadcast. Unfortunately, I cannot now ask him what happened to it.

The cast of the TV play was astonishing. As well as Richard Burton as Holyoake, Rachel Roberts starred as his wife. The narrator was John Freeman who had been a post war Labour MP, became a presenter on *Panorama*, and later editor of the *New Statesman*. Other actors involved in an outstanding cast included Willoughby Goddard and Nigel Davenport.

Chris and I had great fun in considering who could play the parts today — who was as now as famous as Burton was then. The idea of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie being Mr and Mrs Holyoke gave us a fit of the giggles. Chris also made me smile when he told me that Burton had at 16 left

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school to work in his local Co-op. The idea of someone with Burton's voice sounding like Hamlet asking you for your divi number raised a further smile.

I had a lot of interaction with Chris when he was editing the special edition of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* on Robert Owen after his move to Ireland. But he always had time for a laugh and a joke despite the incredible work schedule he set himself.

I was really knocked for six when I heard that he had died. We had so many unfinished conversations. So many interwoven threads we had yet to find the end of.

## **The Author**

Nick Matthews has been involved in many types of co-operatives, from retail to housing, publishing to sport. He is a past chair of Co-operatives UK. Nick taught about co-operatives in the Business School at Coventry University. In his retirement, he is a director of Heart of England Co-operative Society and serves on the Council of the Co-operative Group.

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