Documents

Charles A. Beard on the Founding of Ruskin Hall

Edited by Burleigh Taylor Wilkins*

Through the courtesy of Ruskin College, Oxford, I have received permission to publish two manuscripts in which the historian Charles A. Beard recalled at the request of latter-day Ruskin College officials how in 1899 he had helped another American, Walter Vrooman of Kansas, found Ruskin Hall, a center for British workingmen's education.1

Beard had been graduated from DePauw University in 1898, and in the fall of that same year he arrived in Oxford to undertake graduate study in history. Aroused by Vrooman's plans for a labor "college," young Beard persuaded his advisor Frederick York Powell, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and several prominent trade unionists as well to lend support to the project. In fact, it appears that Beard was far more responsible for the actual success of Vrooman's plans than was Vrooman.

With the exception of a semester spent at Cornell University in the fall of 1899, Beard continued to live in Britain

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1 The name Ruskin Hall was changed to Ruskin College in 1907. Additional information concerning the origins of Ruskin Hall may be found in The Story of Ruskin College, 1839-1949 (Oxford, 1949); L. T. Dodd and J. A. Hall, "The Ruskin Hall Movement," Fortnightly Review (London, 1865- ), CCCXCVIII (1900), 325-335; and Harlan B. Phillips, "Charles Beard, Walter Vrooman, and the Founding of Ruskin Hall," South Atlantic Quarterly (Durham, N.C., 1902-), L (1951), 196-191.

Ruskin Hall was founded in the month of John Ruskin's eightieth birthday. Ruskin had been informed as to the proceedings: "His secretary wrote that the students' letter had been brought to Ruskin's attention (as my memory has it)—at all events the new labor college had his benediction." Charles A. Beard, "Ruskin and the Babble of Tongues," New Republic (New York, 1914- ), LXXXVII (1936), 372. Beard's memory had served him correctly: The London Times, March 4, 1899, contains the following letter from John Ruskin, Brantwood, Coniston Lake, to the students of Ruskin Hall, March 1, 1899. "Mr. Ruskin received with great pleasure on his eightieth birthday a photograph of Ruskin Hall, Oxford, and also a letter of congratulation, which has given him happiness and encouragement, and he desires to convey his most grateful thanks and best wishes for the success of Ruskin Hall and its students."
from 1898 to 1902, first in Oxford and later in Manchester. In addition to pursuing his graduate studies in history, young Beard taught at the newly established Ruskin Hall and spent two years giving classes for cooperative educational committees in England and Wales. Beard's labors for workers' and adult education did not cease with his departure from England, as his subsequent efforts in the United States on behalf of the Workers Education Bureau of America and the New School for Social Research well demonstrate. Beard's Ruskin Hall experiences are significant, therefore, not only for the history of British workingmen's education; they also reveal how in his early manhood Beard outlined a pattern of living he would follow always, a pattern combining historical scholarship and social consciousness.

The first manuscript was sent by Charles A. Beard from New Milford, Connecticut, to A. Barrett Brown, principal of Ruskin College.\(^2\)

In the Autumn of 1898, on the day that I entered Oxford to pursue advanced studies in English and European History, I met Mr. Walter Vrooman who had come to the University with a double purpose in mind—to study philosophy and to found a new type of labor movement. Our first meeting was followed by many long conversations about the political and social questions of the day. In the course of these discussions, Mr. Vrooman expressed the conviction that we were at the verge of a great political uprising on the part of labor throughout the western world and that it was the duty of "educated" persons [to] prepare for it. With respect to the several groups that claimed to speak for labor—socialists, individualists, and trade unionists—Mr. Vrooman could scarcely be called a partisan. He repeatedly said that capitalists and workingmen wasted more each year in strikes, lockouts, bickerings, and inefficient organization than the total amount of the surplus values over which they were presumably

\(^2\) A. Barrett Brown was principal of Ruskin College from 1926 to 1945. Although Beard's manuscript was dated only "July 7," F. Smith, longtime general secretary of Ruskin College, suggests that it was in 1940 that Brown requested Beard to write this account. Letter from F. Smith, Oxford, to Wilkins, October 8, 1956.
quarrelling. Co-operative intelligence, he thought, was "the need of the hour." Therefore, he planned to found, with the sympathetic support and financial assistance of his wife, a labor center in Oxford where labor interests could be brought together and the discussion of social questions promoted. It could not be said that he had in mind primarily a college. He was rather concerned with starting a moral and philosophical movement within the ranks of advancing labor. He chose Oxford on account of its strategic advantages, although it was celebrated as the home of lost causes.

Without any difficulty Mr. Vrooman enlisted my interest in the enterprise, for I had made a special study of labor and social problems in college and had spent a season in a social

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Vrooman, who was five years Beard's senior, had written Government Ownership in Production and Distribution (Baltimore, 1895) and The New Democracy (St. Louis, 1897). In the former he defined progress as the "rescuing [of] human affairs from the domain of chance and making them subservient to law." (p. 5). The competitive system of economics had, according to Vrooman, already been destroyed in recent times by the "principle of combination"; the real issue of the times lay between paternalism and democratic socialism. Although the "centralized money power" of modern capitalism had temporarily gained control of political institutions, Vrooman insisted that the "whole trend of our times is toward some form of fraternal socialism." (Ibid., 10).

"I believe," he wrote, "that there is now sufficient existing concrete socialism in the world to give a substantial foundation for the hope that the brotherhood of man, the true cooperative commonwealth shall one day be realized." (Ibid., 12).

Although Vrooman's influence upon Beard's social convictions has been exaggerated, it has not yet been noticed that Vrooman's view of history is essentially that which Beard would present in his Industrial Revolution (London, 1901). Both men patently disliked laissez-faire theories and monopolistic practices; both had the same optimism concerning the future effects of the "socializing forces" then emerging. The difference between Vrooman and Beard is that Vrooman's writings were explicitly socialistic while Beard's were not.

4 Vrooman left England soon after the founding of Ruskin Hall. His wife remained behind and became a member of the governing council of Ruskin Hall, serving alongside Keir Hardie and Frederick York Powell.
settlement in Chicago where I had come into first-hand contact with them. It was agreed that I should work particularly on the task of outlining an educational program, besides seeking supporters for the idea in various directions. The name Ruskin Hall was chosen by Mr. Vrooman on my suggestion, after many long debates. We were both students of that great moralist and, while we dissented from many of his opinions, we came to the conclusion that Ruskin had laid the best foundation for a humane labor program.

For many weeks Mr. Vrooman and I worked on plans. As a student of Professor F. York Powell, I took advantage of my privileges and discussed the scheme with him one day at the close of his lecture. To my delight he approved enthusiastically, gave me invaluable advice, and agreed to preside over the opening meeting. At Mr. Vrooman's request, I visited Mr. Dennis Hird at Kidlington, and secured his consent to act as warden of the new hall. It also fell to my portion to appear before the Oxford Trades and Labor

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*Beard is referring to Hull House.

*While an undergraduate at DePauw University, Beard had read Ruskin's Unto This Last. Also his Oxford teacher Frederick York Powell was an admirer of Ruskin. Perhaps J. A. Hobson's John Ruskin, Social Reformer, published in 1898, was the immediate occasion for Beard's suggesting that the new "college" be named Ruskin Hall. Beard did at some time read this book, for in 1936 he wrote movingly that the spirit of Ruskin still lives on, for instance, in Hobson's book. Beard, "Ruskin and the Babble of Tongues," New Republic, LXXXVII, 372.

*Frederick York Powell, 1850-1904, M.A., Oxford; member of Christ Church College, later professorial fellow of Oriel College. In 1894 he was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History, a position he occupied until his death. It was under Powell’s supervision that Beard began his study of the justice of the peace in medieval England, which was later to be the subject of his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. In historiography Beard’s Oxford teacher was a positivist and a Darwinian; in social philosophy he was a Tory and an outspoken Ruskinian. During his lifetime Powell was of assistance not only to Ruskin Hall but also to the newly established University College in Reading. See Oliver Elton, Frederick York Powell (2 vols., Oxford, 1906), I.

*Dennis Hird, 1850-1920, M.A., Oxford; college tutor, curate, secretary of the Church of England Temperance Society, London Police Court missionary, rector, member of the Social Democratic Federation. Hird broke away from the Church and wrote for the Rationalist Press Association. He served as principal of Ruskin Hall from 1899 to 1909 and later helped found the Central Labour College, after the Executive Committee of Ruskin College had called for his resignation. In An Easy Outline of Evolution (London, 1907), written while he was still principal of Ruskin, Hird described environment as "little short of an almighty power" (ibid., 122), thus presenting vividly one of the basic presuppositions of the founders of Ruskin Hall.
Charles A. Beard, Founding of Ruskin Hall

Council, explain our project, and obtain and [sic] official endorsement. In the meantime Mr. and Mrs. Vrooman were busy, in their way, enlisting recruits and preparing plans for the equipment of the hall. Almost daily the three of us held council on our problems and it would be difficult to say who among us contributed this or that idea to the common undertaking.

On surveying the ground early in the next year, we found that we had numerous endorsements from labor bodies and labor leaders, the good wishes of several Oxford professors, tutors, and students, and many promises of co-operation. By that time the program of studies had been outlined, the scheme of management completed, a project for a correspondence school formulated, a number of students enrolled, and a corps of teachers and lecturers engaged. At last on February 22, 1899, Ruskin Hall was formally opened. Since that time the history of its development appears in its records and achievements.

The second manuscript was sent by Charles Beard to Lionel Elvin, principal of Ruskin College, on December 18, 1945. Despite certain duplications of the first manuscript, it supplements Beard's first account of Ruskin Hall and describes more comprehensively his stay in Britain.

Late in August or early September, 1898, I arrived in Oxford for the purpose of pursuing "graduate studies" in English history, especially constitutional and political history. My ignorance was, as American movie magnates might say, "colossal," but my enthusiasm was high. From England my ancestors had gone to America long before, some in the seventeenth, others in the eighteenth century. From my immediate forebears I had acquired a deep interest in England and I was more than casually acquainted with the great classics in English history and letters. I wanted to learn more and was willing to pay the price of hard work.

Beard also enlisted the support of the Manchester Trade Union Council. James Sexton brought in the Liverpool dockworkers, and Ben Tillett the London dockworkers. Keir Hardie also figured prominently in the efforts to establish Ruskin Hall.
Professor F. York Powell, then Regius Professor of Modern History, received me cordially, talked with me about my backgrounds and interests, and helped me to plan my program of studies. Through his good offices I was soon elected a member of the Stubbs History Club and met several young Englishmen who made me feel at home. Within a few days, I had many acquaintances and was happily settled in my lodgings at 11 Grove Street, ready for work and intellectual adventures.

Very soon, on an occasion which I do not recall, I met an American who had come to study philosophy at Oxford, Walter Vrooman. I had known something about his family in the States and was acquainted slightly with his brother, Carl Vrooman, who later served under President Wilson in the Department of Agriculture; but this was my first meeting with Walter.

Mr. Vrooman and I had many interests in common, particularly economic theory and the labor movement in the Old World and the New. Strange to relate, he had an idea that in the coming years the Briton and the Slav would collide and that the United States would be forced to cooperate in turning back the Slavic tide! We often discussed that subject. Mr. Vrooman also believed that the labor movement would become increasingly powerful in England and the United States and that the labor leaders of the two countries should go beyond trade union interests and equip themselves for statesmanship. He was convinced that this cause could be aided by establishing a labor college in Oxford, with branches in various parts of Great Britain, and by establishing similar institutions in the States. Out of this undertaking, he thought, the workers of the two countries could be brought into a better understanding of their historic role.

Mr. Vrooman and his wife then lived on Banbury Road and they made a practice of having friends in for tea. At these teas, Mr. Vrooman's ideas were discussed and within a short time several persons expressed a willingness to cooperate in launching the project for a labor college (or "hall" as we called it then) in Oxford. After a tentative plan had been drawn up, I presented it to the Trades Union Council of Oxford, held a long discussion with members of the Council, and won their enthusiastic endorsement. Through
members of the Council I was invited to speak at several places in Oxford and explain the design for a labor college.

Alas, owing to my failing memory, I cannot recall the names of all the men and women who were early interested in the project. But I remember that before or soon after Ruskin Hall was opened in St. Giles, in February, 1899, the following friends had been gathered together in support of the project: H.B. Lees Smith, Mr. [A. J.] Hacking, Mr. Scott, Miss [Mary Payne] Giles, and Mr. Hird. Later, Mr. Wilson came to aid as secretary general (if my memory serves me well). Doubtless somewhere in the archives of the College may be found the names of the first teachers and the courses they offered.

Besides giving a course in English history, in which references were often made to American institutions, I took charge of organizing the correspondence school, with the heroic assistance of Miss Giles. It was our hope thereby not only to serve young labor people who could not come to Oxford but also to discover talents through correspondence, so to speak. Before the Spring of 1899 came, we had a number of men in residence, several night students from the city of Oxford, and hundreds of correspondence students. Ruskin Hall was well under weigh!

After a visit to my native land in 1899, I returned to Oxford early in 1900—with my young bride, Mary Beard. It was then decided that I should make my residence in Manchester, the heart of industrial England, offer lecture courses in Eng-

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11 On February 27, 1899, five days after the inaugural meeting had been held under the chairmanship of Frederick York Powell, Charles A. Beard gave the first lecture in Ruskin Hall, its subject: English constitutional history. (The Story of Ruskin College, 9).

12 Mrs. Beard was also a graduate of DePauw University, class of 1897. It was during this same visit to the United States that Charles Beard spent a semester studying under Professor Moses Coit Tyler at Cornell University. Tyler offered Beard a fellowship in a vain effort to keep him at Cornell, and wrote, “It is with extreme regret that I now yield him up to the superior claims and attractions of the mission which calls him to educational work in the United Kingdom.” Letter from Moses Coit Tyler, January 29, 1900, in the Department of History Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
lish economic history for coöperative societies, and encourage the establishment of correspondence classes. I engaged in this work for more than two years, while Mr. Hird and his colleagues conducted the Hall in Oxford.

The longer I remained in England, the warmer became my affections for the country and the people. My wife shared my sentiments in this respect. But in time we felt that we had to decide whether to fix our home for the rest of our days in England or return to our native land. At length and with great reluctance, we came to the conclusion in the Spring of 1902 that it was "now or never," that we "belonged" at home. So, in April or May of that year, we sailed on the Campania for the New World, wiser for our happy experiences in England, sadder for the necessity that broke precious ties. But it was well, for, after all, we had little to give Ruskin Hall and the British labor movement. Strong and able men and women in England were in charge of the Hall and prepared to carry on. It was right and proper that they should do this, without the interference of "cousins" from beyond the seas.