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Bob Holman, *Keir Hardie: Labour's Greatest Hero?* Lion Hudson, Oxford 2010 pp.244, paperback, £10.99, ISBN978-0-7459-5354-0

Keir Hardie was born in 1856 in a small village in Lanarkshire, the illegitimate son of a farm servant. Like the vast majority of the population at the time he had little opportunity to gain a formal education and by the time he was eight years old was forced through economic necessity to enter employment. Exposed to the social and economic inequalities inherent within British society Hardie would go on to tirelessly challenge the many variants of these in his role as trade unionist, journalist, and politician until his death in 1915. Several writers have presented biographies to explain why Hardie followed this path such as Iain McLean (1975), Kenneth Morgan (1975), Fred Reid (1978) and Caroline Benn (1992).¹ Each chose to emphasise what they thought were the most important influences and events that shaped and moulded Hardie's socialist politics and moral character. The latest person to do so is Bob Holman; retired professor of social policy, socialist, anti-poverty campaigner, Christian, and occasional columnist with the *Guardian*. Holman states two main reasons for writing *Keir Hardie: Labour's Greatest Hero?* First, he had a desire to introduce what he calls this 'forgotten leader' to a new audience (p.12). Second, he wanted to 'place more importance on [Hardie's] religious faith than most previous biographers' (p.11). Holman's decision to emphasise this particular aspect of Hardie's character lies in his assertion that religious faith was one of the 'main factors' in Hardie's 'personal and political life until the end' (p.11).

This most recent story of Hardie's life is presented chronologically with each chapter representing an important stage in his development. It is a carefully sourced book drawing on a variety of archive material held at the Baird Institute in Cumnock as well as newspapers, journals, and the work of other biographers, especially that of Caroline Benn (*Keir Hardie*, 1992 and 1997). The style of writing lends itself to quick and easy reading although at times some may find it overly evangelical in tone. Indeed, the book concludes with a brief epilogue wherein the author considers 'implications for the way in which Christians, Labour supporters and others may live today' (p.205). The book is priced within the range of most pockets and is therefore

aimed at a much larger and possibly less academic readership than previous biographies of Hardie. Given the fact that the 2001 Census reported that 72 per cent of Britons identified themselves as Christian it is perhaps well positioned to achieve one of its main aims - introducing the life and work of Keir Hardie to a new readership.²

Many authors freely acknowledge that many 'socialist pioneers' like Hardie drew inspiration from their Christian faith. Indeed within this book Morgan, Mclean, and Benn are all cited as having done so. It seems for Holman though that they didn't do this quite emphatically enough. Time and again the reader is presented with examples of Hardie calling upon his faith whilst criticising employers, the government, as well as church leaders and their members, whenever they failed to prevent or ameliorate injustice. However, perhaps in doing so the author loses sight of the fundamental issues which were at stake. For example, Holman argues that in January 1899 Hardie 'started taking breaks from his agitation with strikers and his vitally important negotiations with the TUC, in order to conduct a campaign in a Christian cause' (pp.100-107). The campaign referred to focussed on a group of chemical workers who had been on strike because their wages were pitifully low and their working conditions appalling. They were forced to return to work defeated but their trade union (National Labourers' Union) called on the great propagandist to help them. In essence, what Hardie proceeded to do was expose Lord Overtoun for paying low wages and failing to implement the Chemical Works Regulations introduced six years earlier.³ To view this particular campaign as a 'Christian cause' is not entirely relevant or convincing. Yes, the employer was a prominent Liberal and Presbyterian philanthropist called John Campbell White (Lord Overtoun). Yes, Hardie exposed the hypocrisy of Lord Overtoun and did so with a mixture of fact, rhetoric, and, as was his way, using biblical text. But does this amount to a Christian cause? Perhaps, at a more practical level, Hardie was simply attempting to gain the support of trade unions for the ILP? After all, this strike took place during a period when the ILP were attempting to consolidate links amongst the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. By 1899, the ILP were instrumental in forming the Labour Representative Committee and the following year Hardie was returned as an MP.

Nevertheless, this book is a worthwhile addition to the range of biographies on Hardie. Indeed, at a time when the behaviour of today's politicians is being scrutinised and ridiculed some may find inspiration in the way Keir Hardie conducted

himself in overcoming poverty, illiteracy, blacklisting, and derision to become a leading figure within the labour movement.

¹ I. McLean, *Keir Hardie*, Allen Lane, (London 1975), K. Morgan, *Keir Hardie, Radical and Socialist*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, (London 1984), F. Reid, *Keir Hardie, The Making of a Socialist*, Croom Helm, (London 1978), C. Benn, *Keir Hardie*, Richard Cohen Books, (London 1997)

² L. Woodhead, 'The Role of Christianity Today' p.100 in *Britain in 2010*, Annual Magazine of the Economic and Social Research Council, Swindon 2010

³ D. Walker, 'Working in it, through it, and among it all day: Chrome Dust at J & J White of Rutherglen, 1893-1967, pp. 50-69 in *Scottish Labour History Journal*, Vol 40, 2005, pp.56-57