

J. H. THOMAS AND THE RISE OF LABOUR IN DERBY, 1880-1945

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The debate about the rise of the British Labour party has been long and occasionally bloody. Few explanations of the phenomenon at national level have survived unscathed, however soberly researched and expounded.¹ Partly for this reason, historians have begun to look increasingly towards micro rather than macro explanations: and this shift, involving concentration on individual regions, cities and towns has produced much fascinating work, varying from fairly straight narratives of institutional development to such profound works of historical sociology as Savage's recent book on Preston.² Such work is beginning to answer some of the questions begged by nationally-based interpretations. However, the role of individual personalities in the development of local Labour movements has been neglected. Tom Shaw was one of Britain's leading trade unionists and a Labour cabinet minister in the 1920s, yet although he was also M.P. for Preston he only makes five appearances in Savage's book, the most substantial of which is when he comments on the merits of working-men's clubs.³ Insofar as this is a rejection of the 'great men of history' approach, it must be welcomed; no single politician could turn a place into a Labour stronghold regardless of the wider social, economic and political background. Yet it is in danger of being taken too far. Labour's development in favourable circumstances could be assisted significantly by the personality of its leading representative there.

A good example of a leading figure playing an important contributory role in the development of an area of potential Labour strength into a real stronghold was the relationship between James Henry Thomas and the east midlands town of Derby. Derby was an industrial town with strong trade union and radical credentials, and was, in many ways, promising territory for Labour from the outset. But that said, it became a Labour stronghold before many comparable places, the party controlling the borough council from 1928 to 1931 and again after 1934. In parliamentary elections, certainly, few towns have been able to match Derby's level of loyalty to Labour.

Clearly, there were strong social, economic and political grounds for this development, but the *extent* to which Labour took hold can be explained only by broadening the analysis to take account of the unique

Table 1. *Labour Tenure of Derby Parliamentary Seats, 1900-date**

<i>Both seats</i>	<i>One seat</i>	<i>No seats</i>
1923-4	1900-4	1904-10
1929-31	1910-23	1931-6
1945-83	1924-9	
	1936-45	
	1983-date	

* Derby was an undivided borough returning two M.P.s until 1945; since then there have been two separate constituencies, North and South.

character of Thomas. In particular, by his centrism and aspects of what might be termed 'tory socialism' he was able to appeal to both the middle classes and, more importantly, that section of the working classes that Labour often found hardest to win over — the patriotic, anti-temperance, sporting element, the 'rough' as opposed to the 'respectable' 'working man'.⁴ At the same time his achievements as a trade union leader and his status as a national leader of Labour protected him against a backlash from his more 'natural' supporters. This legacy was significant and one which survived even Thomas's defection from Labour to the National government in 1931.

II

Quite apart from Thomas, though, there were favourable objective conditions for the rise of a strong Labour movement in Derby. This point can be emphasized by analysis of the demographic, economic, social, religious and political aspects of the town's development. Relatively stable population helped. High birth and/or mortality rates could make the establishment of strong, permanent institutions very difficult. Chartism's grasp had often been weakest in rapidly-growing industrial cities, with high birth and mortality rates, and stronger in urban areas of more settled population. But in demographic terms Derby's progress in the years between 1880 and 1940 was spectacular only in terms of the bare figures. Population rose from 78,631 in 1881 to 142,403 in the last pre-war census year, 1931. Much of the increase was due simply to the incorporation of outlying areas, many of which were already parts of the town in all but name, into the borough. Thus while population increased, it was not at such a rate as to cause any institutional break-downs. Mortality rates were relatively low. Similarly, heavy migration could also disorganize working-class movements, partly for similar reasons but also because immigrants and the reaction to them could create and perpetuate sectarian divisions, as with the Irish in Liverpool and Glasgow. In Derby, migration patterns were unspectacular. Some workers did come in from outside, for example Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century and Irish labourers in the early 1920s. Smaller numbers of Belgian and Czech refugees arrived during the First World

War and the late 1930s respectively. But such groups were not seen as sufficient of a threat to warrant a fierce reaction, and the overall picture was one of relative stability and homogeneity. This in turn underpinned the development of moderate, independent Labour politics.⁵

The development of a strong Labour movement in Derby was also assisted by economic factors. It is a fallacy to argue that large-scale industry always led to worker alienation and hence radicalism. This could be the case: miners in the south Wales coalfield were more radical up to 1939 than workers in Birmingham who tended to be employed in small-scale workshops. Yet conversely, the small workshop employers of nineteenth-century Sheffield, the 'little mesters', were often radicals, whilst large-scale industry in Reading between the wars did not produce particularly vibrant Labour politics. Thus scale was not the only factor involved. Markets were also significant. Workers in exporting industries, even before 1914, were subject to repeated bouts of high and often prolonged unemployment. The domestic market, especially between the wars, was steadier, while railways and other 'sheltered' industries were still better insulated from the cold blasts of the world market. It was significant, then, that Derby's industry tended to be large-scale and either 'sheltered' or producing for the home market. The town had an old industrial tradition, based especially on silk, hosiery and brewing. From the 1840s, though, it was especially associated with the Midland Railway, whose headquarters and massive engineering works were established in the town. Large-scale production came to play a significant role in the town. By the inter-war period the railway, now amalgamated in the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (L.M.S.R.) employing around 10,000 workers, had been joined by the artificial textile manufacturer British Celanese (14,000 by 1928) and Rolls-Royce, whose workforce fell from 8,000 in 1919 to 3,000 in 1931 before reaching 12,500 in 1939. These, then, were very large-scale enterprises indeed. They also enjoyed a favourable position in relation to the market. The L.M.S.R. was in many ways sheltered and was in any case, particularly in its engineering operations, the most efficiently-run railway company between the wars. Celanese produced mainly for the domestic market. Rolls-Royce started out as a luxury car manufacturer, and while sales there fell off in times of economic recession, employment levels were bolstered by its position as one of only four companies designated to receive Air Ministry orders for most of the inter-war period. Thus it was able to expand even during the trough of the depression in 1932-3: an early example of *de facto* counter-cyclical government expenditure at work. Partly for this reason insured unemployment in the town fell from 11,487 to 7,077 between January 1931 and December 1932; nationally, the figure for the two months was virtually identical. This is not to argue that Derby was some kind of industrial shangri-la; unemployment could and did reach high levels at times, while Celanese did not pay a dividend on ordinary shares before the Second World War. But the latter, like the L.M.S.R., which also suffered financial difficulties, was fairly stable,

and so too was employment when compared with that in exporting and related industries like shipbuilding. Unemployment tended to be shorter rather than longer term; and that, combined with the region's tradition of high wages, meant Labour politics were unlikely to be driven in a revolutionary direction. The scale of industry meant unions were needed, and there was enough unemployment to prompt vigilance on the part of the working classes; but they could be generally optimistic about, although critical of aspects of, capitalism. The nature of industry in Derby fostered a moderate, defensive but self-confident Labourism, based on the realization that things could be a lot worse. In addition, there was a tradition of female employment in industry, and this continued, especially at Celanese. During the First World War they were dilutees in engineering and hosiery among other industries, although they were soon removed after the war. Finally, it is worth noting that the railway and engineering industries created working-class élites which helped to provide leadership, especially in the early years of the Labour movement.⁶

Industrial relations were also an important factor. In the east midlands generally, they have been characterized by paternalism and punctuated by outbursts of 'non-political' unionism. Although this has usually been associated with Nottinghamshire, there were strong elements of paternalism in Derby too. In the 1890s the local press was full of events such as the opening of an institute for employees of the Midland Railway, complete with library, reading rooms, billiard room and concert hall, or Sir Alfred and Lady Haslam entertaining their foundry employees at a garden party at Matlock Bath.⁷ After the First World War, Rolls-Royce set up a workers' share scheme. However, it was 'very largely stillborn', arousing great suspicion among workers increasingly wary of paternalism and looking instead to Labourism to defend their interests.⁸ Relations by that time were by no means bad, but Derby workers were not afraid to strike when necessary, supporting solidly national disputes such as the railway strikes of 1911 and 1919, the engineers' struggle of 1922, and the 1926 General Strike; while local disputes, for example at the Darley Abbey cotton mills in 1918 or at Rolls-Royce nineteen years later, were also solid.⁹ In other words, relations were not so bad as to create bloody-minded animosity, yet at the same time there was enough friction to ginger up the local Labour movement and keep workers generally on their guard.

Overall, then, Derby's industrial base — of relatively large-scale industry, generally regular but far from invulnerable employment and good pay for a workforce that included a substantial number of women — was likely to create independent, moderate Labourism. Certainly it created conditions in which trade unionism was both necessary and could thrive.

Trade unionism was nothing new; the 'Derby turn-outs' of 1833-4 had been closely involved with the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. In the 1870s the town's Liberal M.P., M. T. Bass, had helped

to found the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. By the turn of the century union membership was relatively high and the regularity of employment helped maintain it. This is not to say that there were no problems. Before 1911 the railway companies refused to negotiate with trade unions. In the later 1920s, at a time of furious cost-cutting, Celanese made numerous attempts to hinder the work of shop stewards and union officials at their plant. And naturally, union membership fluctuated with economic and other circumstances. In 1921 the Amalgamated Engineering Union (A.E.U.) had 3,085 members affiliated to Derby Labour party; in 1935 it had only 1,070. Particular groups of workers posed problems, the women at Celanese, in particular, causing hours of anguish to union organizers. Even so, the general picture was one of strength and relative stability.¹⁰

Qualitatively, it was impressive in two ways. Firstly, the burden of supporting the Labour movement was shared between three large unions. These were the railway unions (and especially the National Union of Railwaymen), based on workers employed by the L.M.S.R.; the A.E.U., based especially on workers at Rolls-Royce; and the Transport and General Workers' Union and its constituents, notably the Workers' Union, based largely on workers at British Celanese.

Table 2. *Proportion of Total Trade Union Membership of Derby Labour Party Provided by the Major Unions*¹¹

<i>Year</i>	<i>A.E.U.</i>	<i>Rail Unions</i>	<i>W.U.+T.G.W.U</i>	<i>Total</i>
1918	31.9%	17.2%	18.5%	67.6%
1924	19.9%	37.9%	13.7%	71.5%
1930	12.3%	36.7%	21.7%	70.7%
1936	9.2%	38.4%	15.4%	63.0%

This made a sound institutional underpinning for the local Labour movement in that the centre of gravity could shift if necessary between a number of reasonably strong unions. Local Labour parties dependent on a single union were in trouble if that union's industry entered difficult times resulting in falling membership and hence revenue, as parties throughout the south Wales coalfield found to their cost in the 1920s and 1930s. In Derby there was strong financial support for the Labour party, both in annual affiliation fees and in grants for elections and, in the case of the N.U.R., sponsorship of Thomas and his predecessor Richard Bell as Labour candidates. Secondly, the leadership of the unions was responsible and responsive. This does not mean leaders were supine: far from it. But while ready to press for wage increases when they seemed feasible, they were not, on the whole, so foolish as to expose themselves to employers' counter-attacks when the tide turned. Thus after five years of regular increases, the Workers' Union organizer R. Stokes soon caught the changed mood following the collapse of the post-war boom in the late summer of 1920:

. . . as far as he could see there would not be much chance to get an increase of wages as he had put in for an advance of wages in one Industry [sic] and the employers had put in for a 25% decrease. But he had been successful in getting it put off until [sic] January of next year.¹²

Advance where possible; damage limitation where necessary. Such leadership helped maintain the unions' position. In addition, union officials in Derby helped to inhibit the growth of Communist-led organization of the unemployed through the National Unemployed Workers' Movement by doing all they could to represent their jobless members before unemployment benefit courts of referees. The Communists had far more success where unions were less willing (or able) to act.¹³

Trade unionism in Derby could have been undermined, to some extent at least, by employers' hostility, yet on the whole, they were tolerant. Where, as with Celanese in the later 1920s, the company placed obstacles in the way, it occasioned considerable union comment. It is worth noting that, unlike firms in many places, Rolls-Royce allowed Labour candidates in parliamentary elections to address meetings in the works canteen, rather than at the factory gates. On the whole, then, employers were tolerant, or at least did not sustain anti-union efforts for any length of time. Even before 1914 trade unionism was well-established in Derby, and although the gains of wartime were largely lost during the 1920s, the continuing underlying strength of trade unionism based on a favourable industrial structure helped the rise of Labour in the town immensely.¹⁴

As important as work in defining an individual's politics were the conditions in which he or she lived. In Derby, these helped the development of Labour. They were neither so bad as to create despair and a 'slum mentality' on the one hand or revolt on the other, nor so good as to appear to render change unnecessary. The overall standard was relatively high. In 1908 85.3 per cent of the population lived in houses with five or more rooms, as opposed to a national average of 60.1 per cent and, for example, Leeds with 49.1 and Gateshead with only 19.0 per cent. Among all the sizeable towns in Britain, only Leicester (87.0 per cent) was in a better position. By 1936 only 1.0 per cent of dwellings were overcrowded, as against a national average for English and Welsh county boroughs of 4.2 per cent. But there were also slum areas: people could not afford to be too complacent. Nor was there the extensive intermingling of the classes which might have inhibited the development and growth of independent Labour politics. Suburbanization, which was boosted by the inauguration of an electric tramway service in 1904, meant that there was a considerable degree of social segregation in housing. In terms of public health, Derby also had a good record: in the 1880s, certainly, it vied with Brighton for the top spot in the U.K., and its infant mortality and death rates were significantly below both the national average and the figures for nearby Leicester and Nottingham. Derby's middle class was not exceptionally large, so the working classes must have been healthier than in most other towns, although, of course, it was still in the poorer areas that mortality rates were highest. Similarly,

in educational terms, Derby was one of the leading towns in the country: in 1866 its percentage of marks in marriages (made by people who could not write their own name in the register) was lower, at 18 per cent, than in any other industrial town and, with Shrewsbury, the lowest anywhere outside southern England. Extensive school building and a well-run school board later in the century meant that this trend continued.¹⁵

Again, it is important to stress that Derby was no utopia. As already mentioned, there were slum areas; compared with today, mortality rates were high. The point is that relative to similar towns at the time, Derby fared well. As suggested above, these conditions would not necessarily breed complacency among working people. On the contrary, they were just as likely to be highly assertive and to demand that their rising expectations be fulfilled: the converse of the apathy of the slum-dweller. However, this was usually expressed through moderate Labourism rather than resort to more radical measures such as the rent strikes that took place in Glasgow during the First World War.

A still more positive impetus towards Labour politics came from the existence of a strong and, by the 1920s, relatively politicized Co-operative movement. By 1914 the Derby society had 29,000 members, more than larger towns like Newcastle-upon-Tyne (27,000 members), Leicester (21,765), and Bristol (17,000). By 1920 there were over 36,000 and by 1939, 74,000. An active Co-operative Women's Guild and cinema group were also in operation. Certainly from the First World War onwards, active Co-operators generally looked to the Labour party to protect them from Conservative attacks and to advance their cause. The Conservatives — and Liberals, for that matter — supported the private enterprise shopkeeper, and the Tories occasionally passed anti-Co-operative legislation from the middle of the war into the 1930s. But in Derby there was more substantial support for Labour in that from 1918 the Co-operative party was the borough Labour party's largest single affiliate, subscribing on the basis of 5,000 members until 1932 and 10,000 thereafter.¹⁶ During the General Strike, when relations between strikers and Co-ops were, in the country as a whole, indifferent, Derby Co-op issued food vouchers to strikers 'on the guarantee of the respective trade unions'.¹⁷ Thus there was a level of material and moral support for Labour rarely seen elsewhere between the wars. While it would be naive to claim that all Co-operators were Labourites, Co-operation was a point of entry into Labour voting, especially for housewives, and the importance of that can hardly be exaggerated.

Religion was another important factor. The 'classic' nineteenth-century 'model' had the Conservatives allied with the established Anglican church and the Liberals tied to the nonconformists. Labour's rise was inhibited by religious considerations in areas where they split the working class on sectarian lines. Throughout north-western Britain, from the Mersey to the Clyde, and especially in Liverpool, Protestant workers often voted Conservative in opposition to the 'Catholic' Liberal or Labour parties up to the Second World War. Labour tended to fare best

where there was an overwhelmingly powerful non-Anglican denomination, or a tradition of 'ecumenicalism', mutual respect and an absence of deep sectarian divisions. Derby had a powerful nonconformist tradition, but one that was spread among the various denominations.

Table 3. *Chapels in Derby, 1895*¹⁸

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Baptist	6	3,280
Congregational	4	3,250
Methodist New Connexion	1	600
Primitive Methodist	8	3,350
United Methodist Free Church	2	1,250
Wesleyan Methodist	7	4,830
(Total Methodist)	(18)	(10,030)
Others	4	870

Thus it was an 'ecumenical' nonconformity which supported Derby Liberalism in the late nineteenth century, rather than a single denomination, which might have forged a tighter alliance. Hence there was little to prevent much of this support coming over to Labour, given the decline of urban nonconformity from around 1900 onwards and the waning of the issues — temperance, Church disestablishment and so on — which had bound nonconformists and Liberals together. For many, socialism was an acceptable substitute for evangelical Christianity. Of lesser numerical significance were the Catholics, but they too seem to have come over to Labour with the 'closing' of the Irish question and the salience of social policy issues in the 1920s. The Catholic presence was not seen as threatening enough to warrant a Protestant backlash, despite the efforts of a group like the Young Men's Protestant Union in the 1890s. Indeed, religious toleration was more characteristic of Derby. In 1901, for example, leaders of all denominations joined in presenting a long-serving priest and school board member, Mgr. McKenna, with £150. The Catholics, then, were not seen as a threat: a potential split in the working classes did not materialize. Indeed, what is perhaps still more interesting is that the Church of England shared this tolerant outlook. Derby was a town where the Church realized it had to tread warily to maintain its position, and it was never a firm bastion against radicalism or Labour. In 1868 an Anglican vicar was agitating for the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. From the early 1920s onwards the Labour movement's May Day celebrations included a service at St. Werburgh's, one of the largest Anglican churches; and protests within the Labour party that this should be abandoned in favour of a non-sectarian service were defeated. Overall, then, Derby's religious tradition was characterized by toleration and mutual respect, which in turn meant that there were few of the deep divisions which might have hindered the progress of Labour by dividing its potential supporters on sectarian lines. In addition, involvement in church or, more likely,

chapel helped to train some early Labour and trade union leaders in skills necessary to their political and industrial work.¹⁹

Nationally, Labour's rise was at the expense of the Liberals, and it advanced more rapidly, on the whole, in those areas where the Liberal tradition contained a significant 'Labour' twist, in terms of trade unionism or Chartism, for example. This was certainly the case in Derby, which had been a Liberal stronghold for most of the nineteenth century. The undivided borough had given the Liberals two seats almost without break since 1832. However, there had always been a significant 'Labour' twist to the town's political tradition. Chartism had been strong there. The Liberal M.P. Bass had, as already noted, been a keen sponsor of trade unionism in the 1870s. As early as 1892 'Labour' candidates were standing in municipal elections, and being elected to the school board. An Independent Labour party branch was formed soon after that party's foundation in 1893. This progress was not hindered by the Liberals; rather, they hoped to harness it. In 1895 they lost both seats to the Conservatives for the first time, and a way of reviving the Liberal appeal was needed. The means chosen up to 1914 was, not the revivification of Liberal policy or ideology, but the expedient of running a single candidate in harness with a Labour man. At first this succeeded. In 1900 Richard Bell, general secretary of the A.S.R.S., was elected along with the Liberal Thomas Roe. Bell was certainly no revolutionary; indeed, by 1904 he had resigned the Labour whip, and sat until 1910 as a Liberal. He then retired from politics, to be succeeded by a centrist Labour figure in J. H. Thomas, who like Bell was prepared to vote with the Liberal government in parliament. In the short term, then, the Liberals could be satisfied. But only in the short term. Beneath the surface, their support in Derby was slipping, as nonconformity declined, the size of industrial enterprises increased, trade unionism and Co-operation spread and social divisions in the town intensified; and at the national level, there was increasing pressure for an end to the Liberal-Labour 'deal'. By adopting an organizational convenience as a way round their post-1895 weakness, Derby Liberals sacrificed any attempt to update their appeal in a more substantial way: the Labour candidate could do that while the Liberal talked about more agreeably 'Liberal' issues. The problem would come, as after 1918, when a newly assertive Labour party wanted to fight both seats and when the Liberals were left with nothing but the empty slogans of a previous generation. The further resort to organizational convenience with municipal and, in 1922 and 1923, parliamentary election pacts with the Conservatives was self-defeating in all but the shortest of terms and served merely to confirm their eclipse. The rise of Labour in Derby was made possible by the broader factors outlined above; the Liberals' reaction to it, amounting virtually to acquiescence, made it all but inevitable.²⁰

Labour could have damaged itself while in municipal office, especially after it took control of the borough council in 1928. For example, the party lost control of Bethnal Green in the late 1920s after a series of

acts, such as naming a new housing development the Lenin estate, which seemed calculated to alienate many voters. But Derby Labour's municipal record was good, with moderate, responsible leadership working, unlike the party's national leaders, to well-defined strategies in improving housing, educational facilities and the condition of the town generally — with, for example, the erection of a new bus station in the mid-1930s. In addition, in extending the role of the local authority in housing and direct labour they increased the number of people directly dependent on a sympathetic (Labour) council, which further cemented the party's position. Continued attention to party organization was also vitally important if Labour's gains in the town were to be consolidated. Derby Labour movement, with a number of full-time officials, kept a close eye on its organization at all levels. Thus once it had gained its ascendancy over the Liberals, Labour never gave them a chance of coming back, as happened in Bethnal Green; and it has only been through Labour's perceived gross incompetence at national level that the Conservatives have been able to win parliamentary seats in Derby since the late 1920s.²¹

This was a considerable achievement by Labour. While the fact of it should not, given the factors outlined above, be surprising, the scale and timing of it were. Other towns with not dissimilar traditions and characteristics were not *as* pro-Labour. But other towns did not have as their Labour M.P. so unusual a figure as Jimmy Thomas.

III

James Henry Thomas became Derby's Labour M.P. in January 1910. He had risen from illegitimacy and a humble background, having started work at the age of nine and soon moving onto the railway. He had progressed to become a fireman and later an engine-turner, and by the 1900s was rising within the A.S.R.S., becoming its assistant general secretary in the same year as he was elected for Derby. When the National Union of Railwaymen was formed in 1913, he became its assistant general secretary, and its general secretary proper in 1917. He remained political general secretary of the union until after his break with Labour in 1931. He was a leading figure in the first national rail strike, in 1911, and eight years later led the union to a famous victory in a similar dispute. However, his reputation suffered somewhat in the 1920s, as he was blamed by many, particularly on the left, for the defeat of the unions on 'Black Friday' in 1921 and in the General Strike five years later. In the first Labour government (1924) he was Colonial Secretary, and in Ramsay MacDonald's second administration, formed in 1929, he was appointed Lord Privy Seal and Minister for Employment. He had in fact been MacDonald's first choice as Foreign Secretary, but the claims of Arthur Henderson were pressed and could not, in the event, be overlooked. Thomas failed in his appointed task, unable to prevent the rapid rise in unemployment which followed the world slump

of 1929, and in 1930 was transferred to the Dominions Office. He remained there until 1935 (when he became Colonial Secretary), having been one of the few Labour ministers to follow MacDonald into the Conservative-dominated National government in 1931. That year, and four years later, he retained his seat as a National Labour candidate. However, in 1936 he was forced to resign from the cabinet and retire from public life following a leak of budget secrets.

Thomas has often been seen as something of a joke, as the cartoonist David Low's portrayal of him as 'Lord Dress Suit' testifies. To others he was worse, foreign observers finding him particularly irritating. The German Egon Wertheimer regarded him as 'quite one of the queerest figures in the International Labour movement', while Trotsky described him as an 'absolutely unprecedented lackey'. Amusing anecdotes about him abound, and dominate, to the detriment of serious analysis, the only posthumous biography yet published. In particular, his — supposedly affected — 'working-class' manners, especially his careful dropping of aspirates, have been ridiculed by the sort of observers who believe, implausibly enough, that the 'Queen's English' is somehow an indication of intellectual prowess. Yet what is most significant is that this image was calculated by Thomas to draw sympathy and support not just (as Trotsky argued) from the upper and middle classes, but also — and more importantly — from those broader sections of the working classes usually put off by Labour and 'socialism'.²²

Having Thomas as its M.P. strengthened Derby Labour in two ways. Firstly, he was, certainly by the end of the First World War, a national celebrity: general secretary of the N.U.R., known to have been invited to join Lloyd George's government, and having travelled on a high-powered government mission to north America under the Foreign Secretary, A. J. Balfour. Thomas's own centrist politics, renouncing narrow partisanship and, indeed, any commitment to socialism, meant that 'all classes and creeds', as he later put it, could support him as a local celebrity. This was especially important given that Derby had, as a later Labour M.P. put it, 'a slight inferiority complex about its larger neighbour', Nottingham. Thomas could put Derby on the map. Thus the local Conservative press could be found praising him, while Sir Richard Luce, on being elected as the second M.P. in 1924, was fulsome in his praise:

[W]ith regard to Mr Thomas he was proud to serve with so great a man. . . . He (Sir Richard Luce) never had any hope that the town would turn out one who had done such service to the country in many ways, and he was quite sure that the friendship which had existed between the two of them would continue, and that they would work together for the good of the town.²³

But this was not the limit of Thomas's distinctive contribution: far from it. For he was also, because of his 'queerness', able to cultivate the support of the 'rough' working classes whom Labour often found it hardest to approach. They had a number of characteristics which

Thomas, unusually among Labour leaders, shared: 'heartiness', deference and imperialistic patriotism.

Derby was a town with strong drinking and sporting traditions. It had been a brewing centre since at least the seventeenth century, when one survey had recorded the scarcely credible 'fact' that 120 of the 684 houses in the town were alehouses. It remained famous for its brewing into the inter-war period. Although there were numerous temperance groups in Derby, many workers were not weaned from their beer; indeed, the unprecedented loss of both seats by the Liberals in 1895 was attributed widely to the fact that one of the M.P.s, Sir William Harcourt, had, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, increased beer duty dramatically. Similarly, many Derbyians liked sport and a bet, so much so that street football in the 1830s and '40s had proved notoriously difficult to eradicate; significantly, its suppression had only been generally accepted after horse racing had been introduced as a substitute. By the end of the nineteenth century racing was still flourishing, while professional soccer and cricket clubs had been established and were well-supported.²⁴

These were interests which Thomas himself was known to share. By the 1920s, certainly, he was known to like a drink, to such an extent that he was occasionally criticized by his own more 'respectable' supporters. Some writers have gone so far as to describe him as an alcoholic. Similarly, his affection for sport and gambling were well known and frequently expressed.²⁵ He was often to be found at Derby races. His autobiography later confirmed this passion:

Throughout my political life . . . I have interested myself in the sports of the people. After all, if one does not try to understand the pleasures of the people, the humble people, how can one hope to appraise their sorrows and trials. I am aware, too, that I have been criticized for my interest in sport, but I am not at all abashed. . . . I came from the people; I belong to the people; and I think I know what lies close to the heart of the British public — sport!²⁶

He went on to recount his various sporting experiences, and to argue that there was nothing wrong with gambling except that the odds were stacked in favour of the bookmaker.²⁷ He was, then, unusually well-placed to win over the 'hearty' vote.

He could also appeal to the 'rough' working classes by his deference, especially his monarchism. Derby had a strong monarchist strain, huge crowds cheering royal visitors. In addition, the kind of deference shown by workers to their employers at the turn of the century, such as presenting an eldest son with an expensive gift on his coming of age, or the respect shown to local notables like the Duke of Devonshire or Lord Curzon, did not die out overnight.²⁸ Such voters, who might have been repelled by a Labour candidate who sniped at monarchs and aristocrats, could be reassured by Thomas, at least after the passing of the 1909-11 House of Lords crisis. His autobiography contained fulsome references to George V — for whom his respect had 'border[ed] on reverence' — and Edward VIII in a chapter entitled 'Some Cherished Memories of

the Royal House'. This merely confirmed the view he had expressed when approaching the peak of his career:

In many respects the workers are even more conservative than the Conservatives, and in none are their views more steadfastly established than on this question of the head of State; and . . . no question of Republicanism as a serious proposition ever finds a place in Labour discussions.²⁹

His liking for aristocratic company was similarly well known: once again, then, Thomas could appeal to normally anti-Labour sections of the working classes.

His imperialistic patriotism and non-socialism also appealed in a town where such sentiments were rife. This could be seen in the patriotic ardour which greeted both the South African and the First World wars, and, more unusually, within the Labour movement itself. In 1918, at a time when many on the left were calling for a compromise peace, Derby trades council passed a resolution praising 'our heroic army for their glorious self-sacrifice & devotion in defending the honour & safety of our Empire & the Worlds [sic] civilization' and pledging themselves 'to assist them by giving every possible service at home in defeating & overthrowing the unscrupulous & barbarous enemy'. Later in the year it passed a resolution praising the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig.³⁰ Thomas was well able to exploit such feelings. He was firmly behind the war effort and, by the early 1920s if not earlier, an ardent imperialist. And insofar as the 'rough' working classes would have seen socialism as un-English, he was with them too, for in a court in 1921 he denied, on oath, that he was a socialist. Thus it was difficult to see Thomas as in any way unpatriotic, the stigma often attached to Labour candidates.³¹

All in all, then, Thomas was almost uniquely placed to garner the support of a type of voter who might have been all too easily repelled by many, perhaps most, Labour candidates. This is not to claim that he took all working-class Conservative votes: that would be patently absurd. But he was able to take enough to make a difference. For many people he was the bridge which brought them into the habit of Labour voting. Thomas was not a working-class Conservative, though. He kept the support of his own side, partly through the inherent loyalty of Labourites towards their leaders, but also and more importantly because he was an achiever. He won industrial disputes for the railwaymen; he won elections; he won cabinet office. He also cultivated close personal links with many of the leading individual members of a constituency party which, even before the new party constitution of 1918, had a strong individual membership section. He was never seen as simply a 'union man', but as a representative with whom the whole of the town's Labour movement could identify. Thus, so long as he was a Labour man, he could always rout critics within the Derby Labour movement, as he did, for example, in 1917 and 1926. On the latter occasion a meeting called with the aim of censuring him gave him a vote of confidence by 115 votes

to 21. It was only when he turned to the National government in August 1931 that the opposition within Derby Labour became strong enough to oust him; even then, though, very unusually among National Labour M.P.s, the party was fairly evenly divided at first. Overall, it seems clear that Thomas made a distinctive and important contribution to the rise of Labour in Derby.³²

IV

The critic could argue, though, that much of this was undone by Thomas's conduct in and after 1931. In August 1931, in the face of demands to reduce public expenditure and, in particular, unemployment benefits, the second Labour government split. Thomas and a couple of other ministers followed MacDonald into a Conservative-dominated National government which, two months later, won a sweeping majority at the polls. Thomas himself retained Derby; a Conservative was also elected. Thus for the first time since 1910 there was no Labour M.P.; indeed, if Bell is counted as such, it was the first time in the twentieth century. Thomas then retained his seat at the 1935 election before his resignation in disgrace in 1936. All that time he had been, not merely a National M.P., but a leading figure in the National cabinet fiercely opposed by the Labour party. So was not any distinctive contribution made by Thomas to Labour in Derby nullified by these actions?

Ostensibly there is much in this argument. In the short term, the impact on the Derby Labour party was little short of disastrous. Although most members remained loyal, three borough councillors, the largest N.U.R. branch and, most dramatically of all, the party's full-time secretary and agent, John Cobb, all defected to Thomas. After an at times bitter, and highly personalized, campaign, October's general election saw the Labour candidates (one of them, W. R. Raynes, a sitting M.P.) poll little over half the votes obtained by Thomas and Raynes in 1929, and a Conservative, W. A. Reid, elected with Thomas. This was followed by the November municipal elections, which resulted in Labour losing control of the borough council after three years. Municipal power was regained in 1934, but the following year's general election saw the return of Reid and Thomas, as mentioned above. Thus Labour's progress in Derby did take a serious blow.

Yet too much can be made of it. There were five basic reasons for Labour's defeat in Derby in 1931. One was certainly the personality of Thomas: with so charismatic a figure this was almost inevitable. It seems clear that many Labour voters defected and that many even voted for the Conservative on Thomas's advice. Yet there were other reasons for Labour's defeat. Firstly, the party had been discredited by the dismal performance of the second Labour government — unemployment in Derby had increased from 2,248 to 10,772 during its tenure — and the behaviour of its leaders between August and October 1931. Secondly, there was an apparent trade revival from mid-September 1931 which

seemed to suggest the National government could bring back prosperity and which further confirmed Labour's image as a party of depression. Thirdly the government's promise of tariff protection as a means of providing new jobs (clearly implied in the official government line that it was seeking a 'doctor's mandate' or 'free hand' to deal with the adverse trade balance as it saw fit) attracted voters who believed increasingly that free trade led to unemployment — a view Thomas himself shared. And finally, after years of political fluctuation at the national level, the very idea of a National government attracted many. Most of these factors applied nationally, but it could be argued that Thomas exacerbated Labour's difficulties in Derby.³³

The importance of Derby Labour's defeat in 1931 should not be exaggerated, however: it was not *that* serious a defeat. The Labour movement remained basically intact, and many of the 1931 factors were temporary. The novelty of a National government would wear off in time, as would memories of the second Labour government, for example. The basic trends outlined earlier were still tending to help Labour in Derby. And Thomas's distinctive contribution to Derby Labour survived despite his efforts in 1931-6. On his resignation, Philip Noel Baker was able to retrieve the seat for Labour; control of the council had been regained two years earlier. People who had become Labour voters, many of them because they liked and trusted Thomas, had defected in 1931 and 1935; but take away Thomas and the special circumstances of the early 'thirties and they became Labour voters again. The transformation of Derby to a Labour stronghold was all but complete.

V

A series of factors can be seen, in retrospect, to have made the transformation of Derby from a Liberal to a Labour stronghold likely after the 1880s. These factors included, firstly, a stable, homogeneous population; secondly, large-scale, relatively prosperous industry with reasonable industrial relations and a range of strong trade unions which, with a powerful Co-operative movement, formed a strong underpinning for the Labour party; thirdly, social conditions which encouraged the development of working-class self-assertiveness and independence; fourthly, strong nonconformity and also a Catholic presence to further underpin Labour's development, particularly once the issues that had tied those denominations to the Liberals had disappeared, but also a tradition of mutual toleration which meant there were no serious sectarian divisions to hinder the rise of Labour; and finally, a strong but, from the 1890s onwards, rapidly weakening Liberal tradition which meant that to shore up their position the local Liberals were forced to take the ultimately self-defeating step of encouraging the nascent Labour party. To some extent, all these factors rested on each other; it is as well to avoid the historical card trick of trying to decide which was the

most, and which the least, important. Taken together, at any rate, they suggested that Derby would become a Labour town.

Yet there was more to it than that. Thomas, the town's long-serving M.P., made a distinctive contribution which was not destroyed by his actions in and after 1931. He appealed to sections of the working classes which were not normally accessible to Labour politicians: the hearty, rather deferential, patriotic worker whose usual political home would have been, in many cases, the Conservative party. Of course, many such workers continued to vote Conservative. But the best explanation of the scale of Labour's hold over Derby is that this group was eaten into earlier in Derby than elsewhere. This suggests two further points. Firstly, Thomas was not the buffoon he has often been portrayed as being, but, rather, a shrewd and calculating politician. Secondly, he embraced at least some aspects of the 'tory socialism' characterized earlier by men like H. H. Champion and Robert Blatchford,³⁴ which in turn suggests that, given the right circumstances, such an appeal could be successful so long as the politician in question managed at the same time to retain the support of his more 'natural' supporters. Derby provides, then, not only new insights into the continuing vexed debates about the rise of Labour, but also suggestions as to how Labour might, in some areas of the country at least, have fared better than it did in Britain as a whole before the Second World War.

NOTES

¹ See e.g. H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968); R. I. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (London, 1974); C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment, 1922-29* (London, 1975); P. F. Clarke, 'The electoral position of the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910-14', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, XC (1975), 828-36; H. C. G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin and J. A. Kay, 'The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour party', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, XCI (1976), 723-52; M. Hart, 'The Liberals, the war and the franchise', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, XCVII (1982), 820-32; D. Tanner, 'The parliamentary electoral system, the "fourth" Reform Act and the rise of Labour in England and Wales', *Bull. Inst. Hist. Res.*, LVI (1983), 205-19; D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906* (Manchester, 1983); K. D. Brown (ed.), *The First Labour Party, 1906-1914* (London, 1985). I would like to thank the University of Exeter for financial support in researching this article, and my parents and, at an early stage, Ms Jayne Johnson for accommodation in the Derby area while on research trips. I would also like to thank the excellent staff of the Derby Local Studies Library for all their help, and colleagues at Exeter who commented on an earlier version of the paper at a departmental seminar in October 1988.

² P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the struggle for London, 1885-1914* (London, 1967); P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971); I. McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 1983); R. C. Whiting, *The View From Cowley: the impact of industrialization upon Oxford, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 1983); R. J. Waller, *The Dukeries Transformed: the social and political development of a twentieth century coalfield* (Oxford, 1985); P. Wyncoll, *The Nottingham Labour Movement, 1880-1939* (London, 1985); B. Lancaster, *Radicalism, Co-operation and Socialism: Leicester working-class politics, 1860-1906* (Leicester, 1987); M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: the Labour movement in Preston, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1987).

³ Savage, *Dynamics*, 131.

⁴ B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: the temperance question in England, 1815-1872* (London, 1971), 23.

⁵ A. Briggs, 'The local background of Chartism', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 3; 1881 and 1931 *Census Reports; Derbyshire Red Book, Almanack, Diary and Annual Register* (hereafter *D.R.B.*), 1888, 166; J. A. Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (London, 1938), 16; C. Holmes, *John Bull's Island: immigration and British society, 1871-1971* (London, 1988), 91; Derby Local Studies Library (hereafter *D.L.S.L.*), DL 79/3, fo. 277, Transport and General Workers' Union meeting, 14 Dec. 1940; E. H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973), 246.

⁶ K. O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales, 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1981), 7; D. Smith, *Conflict and Compromise: class formation in English society, 1830-1914, a comparative study of Birmingham and Sheffield* (London, 1982); Savage, *Dynamics*, 48; R. P. Hastings, 'The Birmingham Labour movement, 1918-1945', *Mid. Hist.*, V (1979-80), 86; J. M. Bonsall, 'The Derby borough development committee, 1906-1933' (University of Nottingham Ph.D. thesis, 1975), 413, 277, 236; J. W. Williamson, *A British Railway Behind the Scenes: a study in the science of industry* (London, 1933), 65-9; G. W. Crompton, '“Efficient and economical working”? The performance of the railway companies, 1923-33', *Business Hist.*, XXVII (1985), 234-5; D. C. Coleman, *Courtaulds: an economic and social history* (Oxford, 1969-80), II, 180, 183, 355; I. Lloyd, *Rolls-Royce: the years of endeavour* (London, 1978), 83, 247; *Ministry of Labour Gazette* (hereafter *M.L.G.*), XXXIX, Feb. 1931, and XXXXI, Jan. 1933; Coleman, *Courtaulds*, II, 262, 271, 356; Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, 27-8, 161; Leicestershire Record Office (hereafter *L.R.O.*), DE 165/6/2, Ilkeston and District Hosiery Union, conference with employers at Nottingham, 9 Dec. 1915.

⁷ For paternalism, see Waller, *Dukeries Transformed*, 74-107, 189-207; *D.R.B.*, 1894, 176-7; 1898, 180.

⁸ Lloyd, *Rolls-Royce*, 20-2.

⁹ *D.R.B.*, 1912, 246; P. S. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: the history of the National Union of Railwaymen* (London, 1963), 388; *D.L.S.L.*, DL 79/2, fo. 108, Workers' Union Derby and district committee, 4 Nov. 1922; E. Burns, *The General Strike May 1926: trades councils in action* (London, 1926), 121-2; *D.L.S.L.*, DL 79/1, unpaginated, Workers' Union Derby and district committee, 8 Sept., 13 Oct., 30 Nov., 8 Dec. 1917 and 12 Jan. 1918; Lloyd, *Rolls-Royce*, 166-8; *M.L.G.*, XXXXV, March 1937.

¹⁰ Bagwell, *Railwaymen*, 47, 55-6, 268-9; *D.L.S.L.*, DL 79/2, fos. 231, 297, Workers' Union Derby and district committee meetings, 17 July 1926, 19 May 1928; Coleman, *Courtaulds*, II, 355; *D.L.S.L.*, DL 116/18, Derby Labour party, annual report, 1922, 1936; DL 79/2, fos. 291-2, Workers' Union Derby and district committee meeting, 10 Mar. 1928.

¹¹ *D.L.S.L.*, DL 116/18, Derby Labour party, annual report 1918, 1925, 1931, 1937.

¹² *D.L.S.L.*, DL 79/2, fo. 44, Workers' Union Derby and district committee meeting, 13 Nov. 1920.

¹³ For the N.U.W.M., see R. Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence: a history of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, 1920-1946* (London, 1987), esp. 113-17, and H. J. P. Harmer, 'The failure of the Communists: the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, 1921-1939', in A. J. Thorpe (ed.), *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter, 1989); for the Derby area, see e.g. *L.R.O.*, DE 1655/6/3, I. S. Amatt at Ilkeston and District Hosiery Union, annual meeting, 5 Jan. 1929.

¹⁴ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 16, 22 Oct. 1931; cf. e.g. Greenwich, *Kentish Mercury*, 23 Oct. 1931.

¹⁵ J. Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* (Newton Abbot, 1978), 153; Ministry of Health, *Housing Act, 1935; report on the overcrowding survey in England and Wales, 1936* (London, 1936), 25-32; *D.R.B.*, 1887, 166; Bonsall, 'Derby borough development committee', 156-7, 23; W. B. Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society, 1830-1870: the geography of diversity in provincial England* (London, 1987), 35; *D.R.B.*, 1880s, 1890s, *passim*.

¹⁶ *Derby Co-operative Record*, April 1939; A. Bonner, *British Co-operation: the history, principles and organisation of the British Co-operative movement* (rev. edn., Manchester, 1970), 98; S. and B. Webb, *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement* (London, 1921), 78.

88; D.L.S.L., DL 116/18, Derby Labour party, annual report 1933; see also G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation* (London, 1944), 269; S. Pollard, 'The foundation of the Co-operative party', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923* (London, 1971), 185-210; T. Adams, 'The formation of the Co-operative party reconsidered', *Int. Rev. of Soc. Hist.*, XXXII (1987), 48-68.

¹⁷ Burns, *General Strike*, 55-60, 121.

¹⁸ *Kelly's Directory of Derbyshire, 1895* (London, 1895), 132.

¹⁹ *D.R.B.* 1896, 185; 1902, 195; 1911, 226; 1912, 242; G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832 to 1868* (Oxford, 1977), 378; D.L.S.L., DL 116/18, Derby Labour party, annual report, 1925; DL 116/3, fo. 11, Derby Labour party, quarterly meeting, 23 June 1925; see also P. J. Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism: a political and social history of Liverpool, 1868-1939* (Liverpool, 1981), *passim*; McLean, *Legend of Red Clydeside*, 182-201, 220-9, 241.

²⁰ D. Thompson, *The Chartist* (London, 1984), 11, 20, 309, 348; *D.R.B.*, 1893, 173-5; A. G. Smith, 'A history of adult education in Derby, 1769-1907' (University of Sheffield M.A. thesis, 1976), 232; *Derby Mercury* (hereafter *D.M.*), 5 Nov. 1920.

²¹ B. Donoughue and G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: portrait of a politician* (London, 1973), 102-3; D.L.S.L., DL 116/23, 'Photographs illustrating the Labour party's achievements, 1938'; Bonsall, 'Derby borough development committee', 157-73; W. R. Raynes, *Direct Labour Justified* (Derby, 1934); C. Howard, 'Expectations born to death: local Labour party expansion in the 1920s', in J. M. Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History: essays in honour of Henry Pelling* (Cambridge, 1983), 65-81.

²² E. Wertheimer, *Portrait of the Labour Party* (London, 1929), 178; L. D. Trotsky, *Where Is Britain Going?* (1926; New Park edn., London, 1978), 33; G. Blaxland, *J. H. Thomas: a life for unity* (London, 1964). A new biography is urgently required, despite the rather *de haut en bas* attitudes of certain publishers.

²³ J. H. Thomas, *My Story* (London, 1937), 7; P. Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the seventies* (London, 1985), 411; *D.M.*, 31 Oct. 1924.

²⁴ A. Everitt, 'The English urban inn, 1560-1760', in A. Everitt (ed.), *Perspectives in English Urban History* (Leicester, 1973), 94; F. Rodgers, *Derby, Old and New* (Wakefield, 1975), 13; A. G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt* (London, 1923), II, 369-70; A. Delves, 'Popular recreation and social conflict in Derby, 1800-1850', in E. and S. Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914: explorations in the history of labour and leisure* (Brighton, 1981), 89-116.

²⁵ Blaxland, *Thomas*, 212-3; R. W. D. Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads, 1919-1932; a study in politics, economics and international relations* (Cambridge, 1987), 260; *D.M.* 17 Oct. 1924, Thomas opening a Derby County Football Club bazaar.

²⁶ Thomas, *My Story*, 287-8, 290.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 291-2.

²⁸ *D.R.B.* 1889, 143; 1898, 173; 1907, 206; 1896, 179-80; 1899, 187.

²⁹ Thomas, *My Story*, 154; J. H. Thomas, *When Labour Rules* (London, 1920), 46.

³⁰ *D.R.B.* 1900, 179-80; 1916, 255; D.L.S.L., Acc. 17455, Derby and district trades council, meetings 10 Apr., 14 Aug. 1918.

³¹ Blaxland, *Thomas*, 170.

³² H. M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party* (London, 1979), 12-13; D.L.S.L., Acc. 17455, Derby and district trades council, meeting 14 Nov. 1917, and executive committee meeting, 9 Dec. 1917; DL 116/3, fo. 18, Derby Labour party, special general council, 20 Mar. 1926; *D.M.*, 26 Mar. 1926.

³³ A. J. Thorpe, 'The British general election of 1931' (University of Sheffield Ph.D. thesis, 1988), 567-84.

³⁴ For 'tory socialism' in the earlier period, see Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party*, 373-88.