

Thomas Mann - a revolutionary journey of faith.

Part 2: London, Australia and beyond. 1879 - 1941

By 1879 Thomas Mann was living in London. where he acquired various low paid unskilled jobs before securing an engineering post in 1881 which saw him become a member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Mann continued his self education in London when not working as an engineer, attending lectures on Shakespeare , Astrology and a brief fascination with The Malthusian League and population growth, There are also records of him teaching in the Sunday School of the Anglican St Stephens church school in Westminster.

Whilst his memoirs reflect very little of his faith during this period they make even less mention of his family ,

In 1879 he married Ellen Edwards, in a ceremony at the new Christian Church of the Swedenborgian in Camden. (This later went on to merge with the Unitarian Church) They went on to have four daughters over the following 5 years.

By 1884 Mann had thrown himself wholeheartedly into political life both in the UK and abroad. He became a founding member of the Socialist Democratic Federation, became a Union activist and published his pamphlet on the compulsory eight-hour day. He gained a reputation as a charismatic speaker who could attract thousands to a rally. He published numerous political pamphlets and had short spells as editor of two political newspapers.

It comes as no surprise that such a commitment, which saw him travelling the length of the country, put a strain on his marriage. Whilst the SDF championed women's suffrage the Labour and Trade Union Movement was overwhelmingly controlled by men whose activism was reliant on their wives taking sole responsibility for child care and domestic duties.

Whilst campaigning in Bolton Mann began an affair with Elsie Harker, daughter of congregational minister Rev Bailey Harker.

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12 years younger than Mann and 13 younger than his wife Ellen, Elsie was a Governess in a private school and had been educated at the Congregational Milton Mount College in Kent. Mann returned to London with Elsie, The couple would never marry but went on to have four children of their own in a loyal partnership that lasted until Mann's death.

There is evidence that he still retained communication with Ellen and contact with their children.

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The 1889 London Dock Strike was an event that was to define Mann's position in Labour and Trade Union history. The port of London was tangible evidence of the enormous wealth generated by world trade and a growing empire. It was reliant on an army of unskilled casual labour drawn from some of the most impoverished communities in Europe. In 1888 the employers announced a record £218,000 profit but also a cut in the pay of the 'Casuals'. The Strike was led by Ben Tillett who brought in Thomas Mann and to assist. Within a week it had extended to factories and workshops throughout the East End with up to 130,000 men on strike and the port at a standstill. Mann's experience was invaluable in organising 10,000 tickets free meal tickets for the strikers. He was adept at building on support from the churches and a very diverse local dockland community as well as political support from Liberals and the emerging Fabian movement as well as other trade unionists. Mann was central to a campaign and

a welfare model that was to be replicated by striking miners in 1984. The strike was finally settled in the unions favour by November , marked by a huge rally in Hyde Park. The London Dock strike is considered the stand out event in Tomas Mann's career and an historic milestone in the history of the Labour Movement . Ben Tillet later described Mann as working “ like a giant possessed; his negotiating capacity- taxed to the utmost, as well as his time and his great reserve of strength.”

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Pulpit or Politics

It was around this period that we can find references to Mann considering becoming an ordained minister in the Church of England. One of his biographers Dona Torr alludes to the pull of the church around this period “ His religious beliefs nevertheless remained and his thoughts sometimes even turn to the Church of England which, it momentarily seems, might be transformed from within by the right kind of parson so as to hasten (instead of hindering) the abolition of poverty

The London Daily Chronicle reported Manns address to a congregation of the Presbyterian Chapel of St Thomas in Hackney on 25th November 1993. He delivered a sharp rebuke to the established church for its defence of an oppressive regieme.

“ Captains of industry go to church and mumble the lords prayer on one day and then for six days violate every principle in it. “

Mann provides an unambiguous defence of both his religious position and his defence of religious rights.

’ Some people think I should apologise for being a religious man . I have no apology to make to any man or society , I would refuse to be identified with any party that was ashamed to admit religion to a place in its constitution “

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Sadly he later felt able to ignore the oppression of all religious beliefs during his tours of the Soviet Union which was pursuing state sponsored Atheism .

In 1896 Mann finally delivered his position on the role of the church in the class struggle.

A Socialist’s View of Religion and the Churches was initially a chapter in a collection of essays on religious and social issues entitled ‘Vox Clamantium’ A book initially aimed at a clerical readership made up of guest writers addressing ethical and social issues within the context of the Christian Church. Other chapters included *The Wrongfulness of Riches* by Grant Allen, *The Christian Church and the Problem of Poverty* Rev Professor Shuttleworth. Mann’s chapter was later reprinted as a pamphlet for a wider audience two years later.

Members of the British Tom Mann International Brigade unit in Barcelona in September 1936 during the Spanish Civil War.

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Mann's chapter was something of a polemic tirade to the religious establishment and we are left in no doubt that he saw them not only obstacles to social change but apologists for what he saw as the worst excesses of capitalism. Yet he delivers this with no less than four citations from the bible (and one from the Lords Prayer) as evidence that the established church had strayed from the true message of Christ as he saw it . He was not arguing for people to abandon the church , just to recognise that the economic and political system was inconsistent with the message of Christ.

“If we continue to support the present hellish system,—which the ordinary capitalist upholds, and is sanctioned in upholding by the average Church,—then we are violating every genuinely religious principle.”

At the time that Mann delivered this message there was a sizeable Christian Socialist movement that had developed from non orthodox churches in the United States , Scotland and Northern Ireland and the Chartist movement in England. Initially led by Frederick Denison Maurice , the movement produced journals , newspapers and sizeable public rallies.

This puts Manns views into context, he certainly would not have been alone in his insistence that the true spirit of christianity was entirely compatible with socialism.

“I am not condemning religion, but the lack of it. Religion to me consists of those ethical principles that serve as a guide in all matters of conduct—social, political, and industrial alike; and the essence of the whole thing is the choice between a life whose actuating motive shall be self, either in acquiring wealth, renown, prestige, or power, and a life which shall have primary regard for the well-being of the community as a whole. “

If it was assumed that Mann had abandoned his early faith in favour of Dialectical materialism and scientific Marxism , there is plenty of evidence here that Mann was arguing that economic and material changes were not enough .

“Do I think that all that is necessary is a perfected industrial machinery on Socialistic lines?” I say emphatically, “No! I don’t think that is all. But I know also that something more than good machinery is necessary, if really good results are to be obtained. I desire to see every person fired with a holy enthusiasm to put a stop to wrongdoing. . The baser sides of our nature must be beaten down that the higher and nobler side may develop

As a self professed ‘follower of Jesus ‘ as well as a socialist Mann berated those who were afraid to apply the principals of Christs gospel . There is a sense that these principals were always more ethical and moral than spiritual.

There was no acknowledgement of Jesus's divinity , or a commitment to God , and there is a marked absence of direct religious references in both his speeches, memoirs and correspondence from this point.

We have no further evidence of Mann's contemplation of a commitment to the church , but the vitriolic tone of this paper closed the door on any such decision if indeed it ever existed. Over the next decade Mann pursued a purely political career . He became Secretary of the newly formed Independent Labour Party, made three unsuccessful attempts to stand as a Labour MP . also made an unsuccessful bid to become Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers.

He also invested his energies in founding the International Transport Workers' Federation and also joined the Royal Commission on Labour

Whilst his commitment to the cause was never in doubt he began to acquire a reputation as something of a restless soul .There were suggestions of hostility to Mann from some in the Labour movement for his decision to abandon his wife and children in favour of Ellie .

After these set backs and fall outs with both the Fabian Beatrice Webb and Philip Snowden in the ILP Mann and Ellie made the decision in 1990 to emigrate initially to New Zealand and later Australia for a fresh start with their two sons Charley and Thomas , another son Robert and a daughter Elsie were later born in Australia

His partner Ellie had become an opera singer and was an active member of the ILP.

During his 9 years there he became an organiser for the Australian Labour Party , and later formed the Socialist Party of Australia. (VSP) .

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Here we can find further evidence of the strong influence of his early church days had over his politics. He contributed to the setting up of a Socialist Sunday School, A Ten Commandments of Socialism, a Socialist Choir and Brass Band and a co operative movement. His public educational lectures on Marx and Own also included : “Moses and the Prophets’ and ‘Jesus Christ the Communist”.

Whilst supporting Trade Unionists in Prahran Mann was arrested and served five weeks in prison .It was Mann’s first experience of custody but what ever hardships he faced it was not destined to be his last.

Thomas Mann Speaks during the Australian Broken Hill Mining Strike

After his return to Britain he was later imprisoned in Manchester for his infamous “Don’t Shoot ‘ message to soldiers brought in to curb striking workers in Liverpool. Found guilty of sedition and inciting mutiny he served six months in Strangeways prison. There were later arrests during similar campaigns in Belfast and Cardiff by which time he was in his seventies. He spoke passionately against the war in 1914, which did not prove an obstacle to his election as Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1919.

Manns accumulated membership of numerous political and trade union organisations did not deter him from adding to the list , and in 1920 he was part of a radical coalition that formed the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) . Mann later accepted invitations to visit the USSR on three occasions. Even the Communist Thomas Mann struggled to relinquish the influence of the gospel evidenced by biblical references in his 1923 pamphlet calling for a general strike . He cited the effective us of “ sabotage by the Israelites” in the face of slavery by an “arrogant Egyptian plutocracy “ .

“Let us show we can appreciate the sensible lesson from the bible and ourselves take pattern by it. “

Mann’s senior years never proved a barrier to his tireless campaigning for the causes so close to his heart. Between the ages of 65 and 82 he made speaking repeated visits to Russia, South Africa , Germany , China . USA , Canada ,Denmark ,Sweden France.

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In 1938 he suffered a serious blood clot to the brain and eventually died in March 1941 in the North Yorkshire village of Grassington accompanied his loving partner Ellie who had retired to her family roots to nurse him. You will struggle to find a reference to his funeral let alone a photograph.

He was cremated in Lawnswood Cemetery North Leeds. The modest plot was later marked by a memorial stone funded by the Engineering Union he was a member of for

most of his life. They also funded a plaque for the house where he was born.

An obituary in *The Times* described Mann as having “ a *tempestuous and untameable nature , possessing organising skills and qualities of leadership , of which courage was one.*”

The radical journalist and orator Bonar Thompson provided a stand out tribute to Thomas Mann, which again alludes to his church background.

“ I have never heard anyone like him. Fire, vehemence, passion, humour, drama and crashing excitement. There has never been anyone to equal him. His personality was like a human dynamo. He spoke with terrific rapidity, yet every word was as clear as a bell. It is difficult to believe that anyone interrupted him. He swept over the crowds like a whirlwind; his mastery of the art of oratory was superb."He never repeated an effect, never laboured; Nor, in spite of the vehemence of his manner, did he overstep the modesty of nature. Tom Mann is unique, among all the speakers of the revolutionary school in the fact.... that he will have nothing to do, either publicly or privately with personal abuse of anyone, friend or foe. ”

Benn Tillett described Mann as a “ consistent class conscious fighter for the various causes to which he has adhered; sound at heart, self-sacrificing and courageous, he has never deserted the flag, even if he has sometimes attempted to plant it in impossible places. “



Thomas Mann is renowned for his oratory and commitment to the class struggle , but to gauge his character we could do worse than examine his private correspondence with his partner Ellie.

Tom travelled to the Soviet Union for periods of no less than two months in 1921 , 1924 and a third trip in 1927 involved a 12 hour journey to Siberia and on to China in 1927 . The content of these letters invariably saw Tom sharing his thoughts and experiences of his travels with Ellie in scores of letters, which she replied to from their home in Brockley. She alerts him to news of her choirs and her health, he provides references to meetings with Lenin and Trotsky, along with the challenges of establishing the worlds first socialist society amidst civil war and famine. Mann still finds time to enquire after the children and progress in the

garden . Ellie was left fully informed of May Day Parades , state funerals and Toms concern for the Logan Berries and Snow Drops.

Here we have a Marxist revolutionary never too proud that he fails to send his regards to Aunt Sarah and his pride in the children's achievements.

Even at the age of 71 he charms Ellie with this request : "should I get another letter from you I shall be disappointed if it does not contain a photograph of yourself." and on another occasion sends funds towards a new bonnet. Whether discussing Russian leaders , fellow travellers to the USSR or comrades at home Mann never resorted to malicious gossip or personal attacks . He comes across as a genuine warm gregarious and flawed human being , who just wanted to advance world socialism and a new garden path.

As for his early faith and commitment to the true gospel , well it would be just like Tom to surprise us.

He is purported to have carried a book which accompanied him on his travels in later life. No not a bible , but The Light of Asia. Sir Edwin Arnolds 1879 poetic version of the story of the young Buddha 's travels in search of enlightenment and first-hand knowledge of the sufferings of mankind.

Purportedly given to him by Annie Besant , and treasured by Tom because it "enlarged his vision of social being" . Here is an extract in the final verse which suggests that Mann never gave up seeking a "higher road" .

*The clinging chains of sense--whose feet are weak
To tread the higher road--should order so
This life of flesh that all their hither days*

*Pass blameless in discharge of charities
And first true footfalls in the Eightfold Path*

I would also offer these two extracts from the the Ten Commandments from Mann's Australian Socialist Sunday School , which sit as easily in a church as they would do on a trade union banner.

- *Do not hate or speak evil of anyone, do not be revengeful, but stand up for your rights and resist oppression.*
- *Do not be cowardly. Be a friend to the weak, and love justice.*
- *Look forward to the day when all men will be free citizens of one fatherland, and live together as brothers in peace and righteousness*

Richard Edwards 2020

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