

OUR HISTORY - 63

Emily Townshend - Creative Socialism (1924)

Educated as one of the first cohort of students at Girton College, Cambridge, Emily Townshend was a member of the Fabian Society who lived in Earls Court, London. She had been married to an architect, a relative of George Bernard Shaw's wife; he died in 1897. Emily Townsend was active in education reform, running a journal, *The School Child* in 1911. She later qualified as a sanitary inspector. Together with her daughters she was active in the suffrage movement and was once imprisoned for a fortnight. One of her daughters, Mrs Keeling, became a Labour member of the London County Council. Emily Townsend wrote one Fabian pamphlet – on William Morris and communism, but resigned from the Society in 1915 on the basis that it 'had fallen out of the real line of advance'. She then helped to found the National Guilds League. She was a friend of G D H Cole, as well as of C P Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian. After the First World War, she developed an interest in Italian fascism, which she considered to be a form of militant socialism and translated the work of the Italian syndicalist and fascist Odon Por. In 1923, she published Por's two major works: *Guilds and Co-operatives in Italy* and *Fascism*, with Cole contributing an appendix to the first volume, both volumes published by the Labour Publishing Company. Townsend was also a friend of the French Cubist painters and a collector of modern art. She was 73 when she wrote *Creative Socialism*, which had originated as an essay on Por, but also served as a reflection on the Labour Party in government. In a memoir, published privately by her friends in 1936, she was described as 'plump, rosy-faced, talkative, argumentative'. In 1934 at the age of 85, she

was 'still enjoying, investigating, exploring, still making friends, still young'. Apparently she was converted from fascism to communism in her final years, convinced that only 'bloody revolution' could save civilisation.

"The Labour Party, fine as it is, is not doing, and cannot do, the work of Socialism. It is doing the work that would be done by an equally able and enlightened Liberal Party. It may be, and indeed is, work of vital importance, yet every such act of compromise not only tends to strengthen and consolidate the old system which we want to undermine, but tends also to destroy the creative impulse for the new.

It used to be believed that social democracy would lead to social revolution. Many socialists believe it still, but for those who look below the surface, it has been disproved all along the line, first in one European country, then in another. Social democracy, with its millions of voting adherents, dare not insist unconditionally on its ideal. It has not the power, and never will have power, to insist. Notwithstanding its legislative reforms and its able administration, nay, even in virtue of them, it is a menace to real progress if it deludes its followers with the idea that the work of revolution can be done for them, instead of by them....It is up to us to erect another ideal, an ideal of communal service and of the responsibilities, the privileges and the rights of service, an ideal of freedom – not merely political freedom, but economic freedom, the right to do the work of the world in our own way.... The creative passions of man must be enlisted for the coming battle. These alone have the power both to construct and to destroy, but the constructive impulse is the stronger: destruction is but an incident of creation."