

DO ESPLENDOR NA RELVA

ELITES E CULTURA COMUM
DE EXPRESSÃO INGLESA

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Joseph Livesey (1794-1884): a man of his time

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It is difficult for us at the end of the twentieth century, with our space exploration and information highways, to imagine the nineteenth – and yet despite the obvious differences there are many similarities. For example, both correspond to times of industrial/technological innovation, times of struggle and success but also of resistance to change and failure, times of blatant social injustice crying out for redress. I shall endeavour to show in this paper how the «Preston Pioneer» Joseph Livesey (1794-1884) was a product of his century, involved with all the leading movements of the time – education, social, sanitary, moral, political and temperance – a man forged by the difficult conditions of nineteenth-century life who took advantage of its opportunities. As his epitaph states, he died after «an honoured life of philanthropy and usefulness as author and worker, as the pioneer of Temperance, the advocate of moral and social reform and the helpful friend and counsellor of the poor».

Joseph Livesey is described by Thomas Walmsley as «a pleasant speaker» with «common sense» who used plain language «even a child could understand». He was a «great organiser», the «leading spirit», the «presiding genius», the «guiding, directing, controlling intelligence», someone of a «sympathetic nature» and «kindly manner»¹. In his *Autobiography*² Livesey describes how he was «always put upon and called soft» in his youth for not wishing to join the boys in their rough games, preferring the companionship of the girls. He was precocious and energetic, and liked to keep everything tidy and in good repair. He regarded himself as having been surrounded by «mental darkness and vice» during his youth, and came early to the conclusion that «self-reliance is far better than dependence on patronage and favour»³.

Livesey's early years bear recounting for the light they shed on his subsequent actions and attitudes. «I never regretted that poverty was my early lot, and that I was left to make my own way in the world. It was here, I believe, I learned to cultivate my own energies as the best means (in my case the only means) of self-advancement»⁴. Born to working class parents⁵, Livesey was orphaned at seven

years old and obliged to live with his grandparents and uncle. They took over his father's cotton-making business but, being inexperienced in the trade, eventually lost their life savings. Forced to work as hand loom weavers from their cellar, the family experienced great poverty. The damp cellar was Livesey's workplace for fourteen years, and left its physical mark on him. He suffered greatly from chronic rheumatism in the lower joints throughout his life. Ever resourceful and not one to waste time, he improved on the rudiments of learning he had picked up at his local dame's school by securing a «breast-beam» above the loom, which functioned as a support for his books and which allowed him to read whilst weaving. «Head, hands and feet, all busy at the same time!» These skills, along with his business acumen, stood him in good stead and enabled him to seize an opportunity in 1816 to set himself up in the cheese-retailing business. This was to be the mainstay of his successful business life, an enterprise which owed its success partly to the help he received from his children.

He said of his nine offspring: «They have all been active and industrious, [...] have all made themselves useful, and never, like many children, brought disgrace upon their parents, or entailed burdens upon us by their misconduct»⁶. All were a credit to him, the product of an upbringing which encouraged work at an early age – «Idleness, whether in young or old, nearly always leads to evil»⁷.

Livesey's strength of character was to be seriously tested in 1827 with the bankruptcy of a cotton concern in which he was a sleeping partner. He paid off all the debts after his partner absconded, and eventually re-established his life. At this time he had been making himself heard in the political arena for some time, especially in the fight for the repeal of the Corn Laws. His illustrated journal *The Struggle* (1841–47) («nearly 50,000 copies sold in its first year», according to Livesey) was highly praised by Cobden and others activists with whom he was proud to have shared a political platform. Corruption at parliamentary and municipal elections⁸, universal male suffrage, the abolition of the House of Lords, Oastler's factory movement, enclosure acts, and the tax system (especially taxes on knowledge and commodities of consumption), all received his critical attention throughout the years.

Livesey was converted to the radical notion of refusing any alcoholic drink whatsoever in 1831, after coming to the conclusion from personal observation in connection with his many philanthropic activities that alcohol abuse was the root cause of human misery. This conviction was the cornerstone of his life and one shared by his wife Jane, whom he married in 1815 after a short courtship⁹. Although «delicate», she proved a great boon to him throughout their fifty four years of married life. She was a hardworking, devoted wife and mother who had

been «respectably connected» and «accustomed to plenty» before marriage. Admirably matched, it was temperance which cemented their relationship but religion which initially brought them together, for both had been members of the same Scotch Baptists church in their youth.

Indeed, religion played an important part in Livesey's life and is essential to an understanding of the man. Christian principles underpinned his thoughts and actions and yet he was often misunderstood in his efforts to enlighten and elevate his fellow men. His ideas were frequently ahead of their time, yet at his funeral both established and dissenting churches vied to claim him as their own. Initially an enthusiastic church-goer¹⁰, he possessed an enquiring mind which led him to denounce doctrines and clerical modes of behaviour, hence his unpopularity in certain quarters¹¹. «Instead of bickering», he wrote, «churches should display their zeal by visiting daily the abodes of wretchedness, the haunts of vice, and, with a disinterested heart, sow the seeds of unity, peace, and concord in every place where man is found»¹².

He attributed most of the evils of Christianity to wealth, believing that the church had moved away from simplicity, from the spirit. He refused to pay church rates and Easter duties and all compulsory demands for religious purposes, actions which incurred notorious fines until the authorities eventually decided in 1834 it was counterproductive to pursue him, and chose to ignore him instead. Disillusioned with the Anglican church, after a time with the Baptists and Scotch Baptists, he eventually outgrew narrow, credal, sectarian religion and turned from the Christianity of the churches to that of Christ. In the April 1832 edition of his journal *The Moral Reformer* he wrote of his activities, showing the latitude of his interests and justifying his position towards religion: «I delivered three lectures in the Cockpit [Preston] to crowded audiences, on 'The Moral Condition of the People'; [and] two Discourses on 'Intemperance and Covetousness'; and on Sunday evening last I commenced a short course on Theological Subjects, which will be continued weekly. My great object in doing this is not to raise controversy but give candid statement to my opinions, to soften down the asperity of doctrinal fastidiousness, and to promote [...] the religion of the *heart and life*. I understand it has frequently been objected that I belong to *no party*; this has been no source of satisfaction to myself: *hirelingism* existing in almost every party, has been the chief cause of this»¹³.

He did not condemn the poor for any supposed lack of religiousness because of their absence from church, but on the contrary he showed his sympathy for them by trying to improve their terrible living conditions so that the spirit could flourish¹⁴.

Reducing the awful effects of another kind of spirit, alcohol, was in the forefront of his efforts to uplift both mind and body. An overall appreciation of Joseph Livesey's life must reveal that his fifty-four years of temperance work overshadow everything else. He spent his adult working life in efforts to eradicate intemperance from the population, especially the working classes with whom he identified.

The temperance movement in England has its origins with the free traders, influential in government circles, who tried to lessen spirit drinking and promote public welfare by lessening restrictions on the beer trade in 1830 and the wine trade in 1860¹⁵. By 1872 their remedy had largely been discredited, temperance reformers being partly responsible for pointing out the obvious: alcohol was more readily available and drunkenness had not diminished substantially. Joseph Livesey was one of those temperance reformers, the acknowledged father and founder of the total abstinence (Teetotal), movement¹⁶, one of the Seven Men of Preston who signed the original teetotal pledge. His evidence to the Parliamentary Committee on Intemperance, in 1834, included the following: «I find as the consequence [of intemperance] an almost total loss of domestic comfort; misery and wretchedness are seen in houses where families might be comfortable; there is no furniture, scarcely any bedding; their clothes are of the worst description, and often taken to the pawnbrokers; they are generally in difficulty, and very much in arrears in their rent and shop bills; husbands and wives, often in a state of contention, frequently separated, and the children altogether neglected.»

In his *Staunch Teetotaler* of January 1867 he wrote: «I know no class that are so badly used as the drunkards, and yet in my mind there is no class deserving of more commiseration.»

Livesey centred his efforts on the individual; no drinkers, no drink problem was the substance of his reasoning. He believed that all alcoholic drinks, even beer, notwithstanding the fact that they are taken in moderation, necessarily bring pernicious effects. He stated the reasons against moderation on more than one occasion¹⁷. His extremism can be seen from his refusal to attend his sons' wedding receptions «when the lady's parents or friends would have wine on the table», and all invitations to social events where wine drinking was sure to be prominent, (mayoral dinners, etc.) and where he could not «with propriety» object to it. He later mused whether this course of action had been the best for the temperance cause, for it had separated him from the wheels of power.

The early eighteen thirties was a time of missionary zeal when a small band of people led by Livesey made it their objective to convert the population to teetotalism. Under Livesey's leadership a small number of teetotalers travelled

hundreds of miles preaching their form of salvation, mainly to the poor. Using similar methods to the Methodists, and inspired by an evangelical spirit, they strove to save their fellow men from the demon drink.

Livesey's personal experience and his understanding of the problems of the destitute enabled him to offer edifying counter-attractions to the drink place, even though they were not always as successful as he hoped they would be. For example, he set up or helped in the creation of reading rooms for the «operative classes» in Preston. They were either free or had a very small charge, but the adherence was disappointing to him and they were usually eventually «taken over» by the middle classes. He realised that working men were not in a condition for reading after a day's work, but «regretted that they have stamina to attend the beer-shops and public-houses, showing that their love of liquor is far stronger than their love of mental improvement»¹⁸. You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink.

His endeavours to set up a Mechanics' Institution in Preston and its subsequent failure to attract the support of the operatives it was intended for is another illustration of the way Livesey's schemes sometimes missed their mark, to his bewilderment. He had laboured hard to set up the Mechanics' Institution. A meeting of influential Prestonians, called by him in September 1828, was rewarded with the presence of merely half a dozen people. Subscriptions were later collected in the town «with great effort» for the Institution's library and museum: «Many a long evening did we spend till a late hour, numbering and labelling the books, arranging the library, planning the museum, forming the classes, and providing for the lectures. The Institution soon secured the support of the town, but still not the support of the operatives to the extent we expected, much less that class technically called 'mechanics'. [...] A considerable sum was spent in purchasing first-class books in the arts and sciences, but few were ever asked for. At the present time but few of the working classes are members of this Institution»¹⁹.

The library boasted over 8,000 volumes in 1868. Livesey suffered a similar response from the «operatives» when the Working Men's Club he set up with the help of the Rev. R. Macnamara, curate of the Parish Church, did not attract the drinking men from the public house «as expected». Livesey contented himself with the knowledge that the «eating department» was successful and prevented large numbers going to «the public house for their victuals, where they would be expected to drink».

Livesey was more successful in other ventures. Among other amenities, he had eight drinking fountains built at his personal expense, and during one hard winter around 1826 he distributed, on his own account, 900 sacks of chaff to fill

the bed mattresses of the poor. He was elected one of the Councillors for St John's Ward in 1835 at the first election under the Municipal Reform Bill, and in this capacity he organised a cheap annual railway excursion to the seaside from 1845 (between 2,000 and 4,000 people took advantage of each trip), set up «The Bedding Charity» in 1858, helped create two public parks, and had pavements mended and roads improved²⁰. As Councillor he resisted the application of the New 1834 Poor Law for twenty years, believing it would have serious detrimental effects on the poor of Preston²¹. He was also instrumental in setting up the Preston Relief Fund in 1862 during the cotton famine which devastated this northern textile town.

He was not happy in municipal office, however, claiming that «My notions of personal duty, and of despatch, don't find much countenance in municipal bodies»²². He did not seek immediate re-election and was defeated years later when he stood again by «that mighty electioneering lever – cash and beer»²³.

Livesey's «Malt Liquor Lecture», first given in 1836, with its practical demonstration of burning alcohol and its step by step comparison of the food value of beer versus barley, was very successful and was copied by many teetotal lecturers. Livesey dispensed with any rights to the lecture and two million copies were printed for distribution. Although inaccurate in a few details, nevertheless it was never challenged by publicans, brewers or farmers, and provided enthralling instruction, almost entertainment, which was easily understood by his avid audience.

Livesey used the persuasive power of the written word in other ways. Hundreds of tracts, «letter linings» and articles for journals were written by him throughout his lifetime. He wrote and edited, among other journals, *The Moral Reformer and Protester against the Vices, Abuses, and Corruptions of the Age* (1831-33), *Moral Reformer* (1838-39), *The Struggle* (1841-46), and *The Staunch Teetotaller* (1867-68). He was wary of the trend from the 1840's onwards towards drunkards' tales – George Cuikshank's *The Bottle* (1847), and *The Drunkard's Children* (1848) are typical of the illustrated version of the tale – and advocated tracts incorporating a variety of approaches to the drink problem, directed at different target groups e.g. Saturday night drinkers, gentlemen, schoolmasters or young women. Many addresses were directed to the population in general²⁴, supplied at cost price to temperance societies for distribution, or sent free of charge to people's homes²⁵. He appealed to his countrymen's reason with shrewd arguments and plain words and illustrations.

Periodically afflicted by rheumatic fever, whilst his strength lasted he made personal visitation the cornerstone of his teetotal work, and never ceased to advocate it. When paid lecturers were later employed by temperance societies he

recognised their usefulness but insisted on the necessity of personal contact with drinkers, on personal example and personal knowledge. Temperance workers had to be «living lectures». Visiting for Livesey was better than giving pence and crusts to beggars, subscribing to hospitals and charities, or figuring on the lists of contributors to well-advertised schemes of benevolence. He accused the wealthy of passing through the world «as if in a trance». To satisfy his own thirst for the truth he would make it a point to visit the poorest parts of any city he was visiting (paying a down-and-out half a crown to show him such areas), proceeding to converse, advise, and listen to the needs and opinions of the people he met. His subsequent social reforms were thus framed in a context of personal knowledge.

Disappointment came to Livesey in the 1860's when the gradual loss of grass roots contact between drinkers and temperance workers, coupled with the fact that the churches began to lose their initial scepticism and set up their own temperance societies, brought the temperance movement back to a closer identification with its origins: based on middle and upper class patronage, run by people who often lacked first hand knowledge of deprivation, who were not «real workers». Livesey wrote scathingly against the putting aside of the reformed drunkards as speakers and their replacement by «some Lord or Reverend who neither abstains nor works in the cause. It is *work* and not *patronage* that we must depend upon for success»²⁶.

Livesey also clashed with the United Kingdom Alliance over their methods of achieving a drink-free paradise. The UKA was set up in 1853 with the aim of outlawing all trade in intoxicating drinks in England through legislative means. Its establishment eventually caused a rift in the temperance movement between «moral suasionists» (those who believed in converting the people through example and instruction – they include Temperance Executives of the churches, the Band of Hope, the Temperance Life Assurance Companies and Friendly Orders) and «legislative compulsionists» (those who held the publicans to blame for intemperance and wished to control the traffic of alcoholic drink through changes in licensing law). Livesey deeply regretted the resulting divisiveness. An early supporter of the Alliance, he came to regard its methods as defective and rejected the fact that a drink-free land could be created through legislative means without the backing of the people. He believed only after a change in people's attitudes to drink could any effective legislation be passed regulating its distribution, and this was only possible through contact with them. For Livesey, step-by-step legislative reform should be sought whilst improvement in personal habit and social usage was in progress. He was vindicated in 1895 when the Liberal Party, which had adopted the UKA-promoted «Prohibitory Veto»²⁷, was soundly beaten in the general election.

Livesey did not live to see the resolution of the drink problem. It was still in the forefront of the social problems of the country at the end of the nineteenth century, and awaits resolution today²⁸. We cannot judge whether the moderationists or the total abstiners, the «moral suasionists» or the «legislative compulsionists» were right. Too many factors affect people's drinking habits. What we can say is that Joseph Livesey gave over fifty years of his life to a campaign he believed to be of fundamental importance to his fellow men, and in doing so undoubtedly helped many to a better life.

William Axon writes of Joseph Livesey²⁹: «the story of his life reads like a chapter from 'Self-help' with this important difference, that he sought to help others as well as himself». I believe this sums him up in a nutshell. The circumstances of his age were such that those like Livesey who were born into poverty had to sink or swim. Livesey learned to swim well and threw many a life-saving raft to others. His story, like so many similar ones of the nineteenth century, has largely been forgotten. One hundred and sixteen years after he rode in temperance procession through the streets of Preston to the accolade of thousands of his fellow citizens, their grandchildren have no idea how much they owe the «Preston Pioneer».

- 1 T. Walmsley, «The Father of Teetotalism», reprinted in *Upward*, November 1884.
- 2 J. Pearce, ed., *The Life and Teachings of Joseph Livesey comprising his Autobiography*, p. 7. Future citations will read *Autobiography*.
- 3 *Autobiography*, p. 28.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 5 His father was one of the earliest cotton-makers in the Preston district. He died in 1801 of consumption, as did his mother. He had only one brother who «died early».
- 6 *Autobiography*, p. 57.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 8 He took an active interest in buying free-holds for voting qualifications, obtaining votes in five counties, in an attempt to counter election fraud.
- 9 He chose her for his wife without having met her, but because he had heard she was «an amiable, religious girl», in *Autobiography*, p. 12.
- 10 «With what delight did I use to go, in my clogs, to Preston, to the evening prayer meetings held in the vestry!», in *Autobiography*, p. 10.
- 11 He wrote a pamphlet in 1835, *Confirmation*, expressing his ideas and justifying the fact that, after taking classes, he had refused to take the sacrament because he believed it unscriptural and dangerous. He also studied theological controversies, for example disputed points between Calvinists and Arminians, Unitarians and Trinitarians, which he fancied he had «settled», later realising his mistake. He reproached himself for becoming the advocate of opinions rather than the promoter of charity.
- 12 *Moral Reformer*, vol. I, p. 365.

- 13 Quoted in *Autobiography*, p. xv.
- 14 The Sunday Schools he helped to set up and run in Preston are proof of his concern for the spiritual needs of the people.
- 15 The 1830 Beer Act alone was responsible for fifty thousand new beer shops in the subsequent thirty nine years, all free from magisterial control. Gladstone's 1860 experiment, whose object was to promote light foreign wines, was more limited in scale, but the «off» license system it created (licenses obtainable from the Excise without the consent of the Justices) encouraged women to drink by making wine easily available at the grocer's. The policy of free trade in beer was reversed in 1869, that of wine in 1902.
- 16 Adherents pledged total abstinence from *all* alcoholic beverages, not just spirits.
- 17 There are four reasons: «the injury it does to the individuals themselves; its tendency to lead to excess; its influence for evil upon others; the impediment it imposes in the way of doing ones duty», *The Staunch Teetotaller*, January 1867, p. 7.
- 18 *Autobiography*, p. 41.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 20 He also held the offices of Select-Vestry Man, Member of the Board of Guardians, and Commissioner for the Improvement of the Borough.
- 21 He believed that parliamentary legislation should remove causes of pauperism, not attenuate its relief.
- 22 *Autobiography*, p. 29.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 He wrote his *New Year's Address* for many years to the people of Preston, and delivered it, with the help of a few friends, free of charge to every home at the beginning of each year, until his death in 1884.
- 25 «Notwithstanding the glowing reports published by our societies, I cannot shut my eyes to the great amount of langour which many of them exhibit. I shall print at least 10,000 copies monthly, and if they are not sold they shall be distributed gratuitously», he said in prefatory remarks to his *The Staunch Teetotaller*, January 1867, p. 1.
- 26 *The Staunch Teetotaller*, February 1867, p. 20.
- 27 The «Direct Popular Veto» would have enabled residents to introduce local prohibition after a two-thirds majority vote in favour of such in a local referendum.
- 28 *The Times, Lifestyle: Health*, March 22nd 1998, «patients with alcohol problems [...] range across the whole social and economic spectrum. Nobody is immune from alcohol dependence. [...] We spend about £25,000 every minute of every day on alcohol, and 20% of the population drinks 80% of it».
- 29 W. F. A. Axon, *The Life and Labours of Joseph Livesey*, p. 11.

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