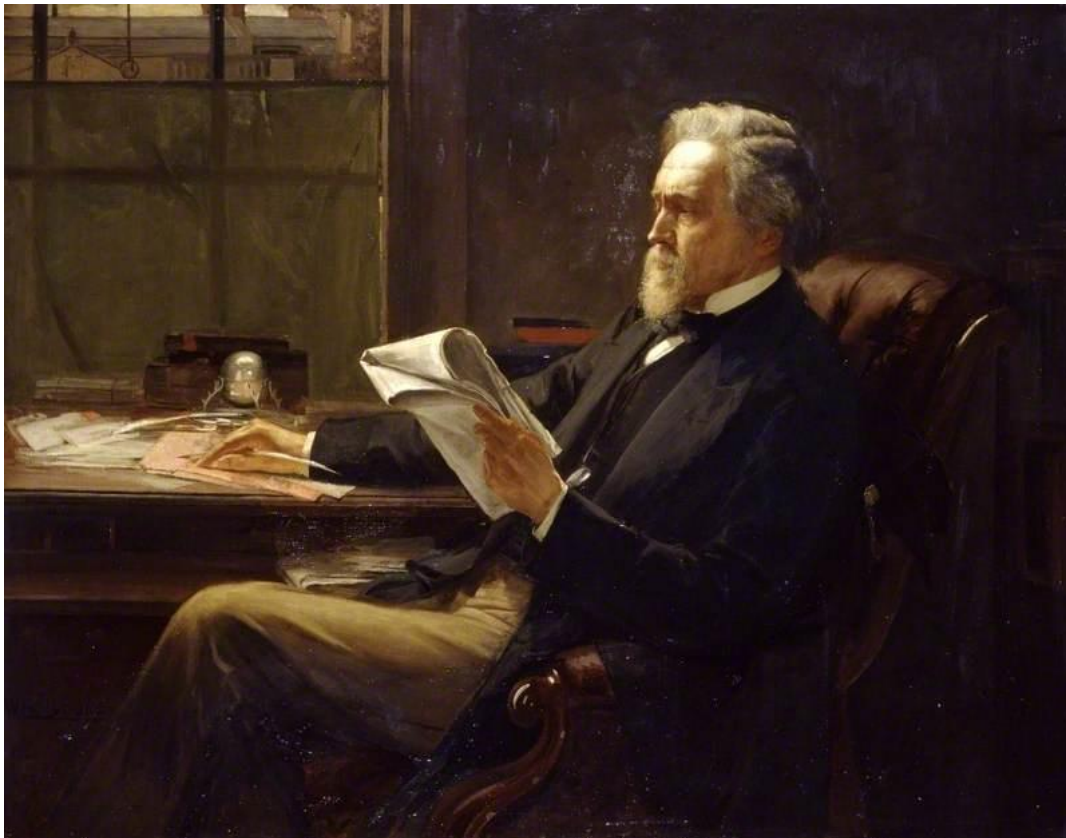


MARCHMONT

ASSOCIATION

Background information relating to the Marchmont Association's commemorative blue plaque for George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), who lived at 4, Woburn Walk (formerly 1, Woburn Buildings) from 1850 to 1861.
(Adapted from a paper by Richard Ekins, 22.2.2016)



Portrait of George Jacob Holyoake - Birmingham Museums Trust, bequeathed by GJH in 1906

George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) was born and raised in Birmingham but after his imprisonment for blasphemy in the early 1840s, he moved to London in 1843. He lived with his family at 1 Woburn Buildings (later renamed 4 Woburn Walk) in 1850-61. He is listed there in the 1851 census and again in 1861 (aged 43), together with his wife, Eleanor (41), daughter Helen (19) and three sons, Manfred (17), ? L (15) and Frank (6). He previously lived very briefly with his wife and three young children at 17 Woburn Buildings (later 7 Woburn Walk) in 1849, as evidenced in an article he wrote in the periodical he edited titled *The Reckoner*, in which he gives No. 17 as his address. However, "*He is turned out of his flat by the landlord for his shady reputation though the man politely alleges the noise of the children...*" (*Life & Letters of GJH, Vol I* by Joseph McCabe). They had one more child at 1

Woburn Buildings (Census 1851). George's good friend, Henry Merritt, picture restorer, art critic and novelist, lodged with the Holyoakes throughout their time here. This address has a particular significance in Woburn Walk because of its 'elegant canopy'. In the words of the Borough Engineer's Report on *The Restoration of 4 - 18 Woburn Walk*:

"Famous people have lived and entertained their friends there. George Jacob Holyoake 'the father of the Co-operative Movement' occupied what is now No. 4 Woburn Walk in 1858 and the elegant canopy which he erected over the first floor has been retained. It is said that from this window he addressed an audience in the street below."

Holyoake coined the term 'secularism' in 1851 and is a feted figure in the history of humanist thought. The British Humanist Association gives a flavour of Holyoake's contribution in this regard:

*"George Jacob Holyoake was mainly self-educated and a vigorous campaigner for secularism and freethought during the 19th century. He wrote 160 books and pamphlets and edited several magazines, including *The Movement* and *The Reasoner*. Holyoake was the last person in England to be imprisoned on a charge of atheism, for saying at a public lecture in Cheltenham in 1842 (at a time of economic hardship): 'If I could have my way, I would place the deity on half pay as the Government of this country did its subaltern officers.'*

...It was Holyoake who suggested the term 'secularism' and organised the early Secular Societies, becoming Vice-President of the National Secular Society . . . Some of the other causes Holyoake championed were a free press, the rights of women and the liberation of oppressed nationalities.

...In 1899 he presided at the inaugural meeting of the Rational Press Association which went on to publish books such as the cheap reprints of 'The History of Science' series and 'The Thinker's Library', in order to undermine religious superstition and help the spread of rational principles."

Holyoake coined the term 'jingoism' in 1878. Holyoake's most important contribution, however, is to British labour relations and labour history, in particular, as one of the founders of the Co-operative Movement. As *Spartacus Educational* put it:

"George Holyoake had been deeply influenced by the ideas of Robert Owen. This included Owen's views on co-operation. Holyoake had supported the co-operative movement in his journal 'The Reasoner' and in 1858 wrote 'Self-Help by the People, a book on the history of the Rochdale Pioneers'. Holyoake continued to campaign for the movement and in 1870 was one of the founders of the Co-operative Union. In 1877 Holyoake completed his two-volume 'The History of Co-operation in England'.

...In the late 1880s George Holyoake began work on his autobiography. The book 'Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life' (1892) was not only an account of Holyoake's life

but a history of radicalism in the 19th century. George Holyoake died in 1906. The Co-operative Union recognized the great contribution that he had made by erecting Holyoake House in Manchester, the main offices and library of the movement in England.”

Holyoake moved to 36, Camelford Street, Brighton, in 1881, where he remained until his death in 1906. At that address the Co-operative Union placed a blue plaque which celebrates Holyoake as a ‘Social Reformer and Co-operator’. There is no Holyoake English Heritage plaque at present.

Acknowledgements, references and sources: <http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1906P32>; British Humanist Society, <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/the-humanist-tradition/19th-century-freethinkers/holyoake/>; *Spartacus Educational*, <http://spartacus-educational.com/PRholyoak.htm>; David Hayes, Camden History Society; The Metropolitan Borough of St. Pancras Borough, *The Restoration of 4 - 18 Woburn Walk*, The Borough Engineer’s Report’; <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-478578-4-18-and-4a-18a-woburn-walk-greater-lond#.V2ptVKKuBdg>; <http://openplaques.org/plaques/1053>.