

# **HELEN MACFARLANE: a feminist, revolutionary journalist and philosopher in mid-nineteenth-century England**

**By David Black**

**Lexington Books, Maryland, USA, 2004  
ISBN 0 7391 0863 8(hdbk); 0 7391 0864 6 (pbk)**

*Helen Macfarlane* by Dave Black is an important and valuable book. Black's aim is to rescue Helen MacFarlane from obscurity – Helen Macfarlane being the first person to translate Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* into English.

Dave Black begins his book by referring to the Chartist Movement. One of the Chartist radicals, George Julian Harney, set up a number of journals, one of which was *Red Republican*. One of the most prolific contributors to his publications, and in particular to *Red Republican*, was someone that wrote under the name of 'Howard Morton' – and this person was Helen Macfarlane. Black says that:

*MacFarlane was of that generation of post-Napoleonic War "baby boomers", which included other original and radical women writers such as George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), and the Brontë sisters. Like these literary contemporaries, Helen Macfarlane had to use a male nom de plume to get her work into print; but for her, an avowed feminist and revolutionary, the obscurity inflicted on her by bourgeois male society – and its historians – was to be near total.*  
(p.2)

Thus, Macfarlane, like so many women in her day, had to pretend she was a man in order to get her writing, ideas and work taken seriously and published, which also, no doubt, played some part in explaining why she disappeared from the pages of history.

Black emphasises, though, that his book is more of a *Biography of an Idea*, because biographical material on Macfarlane is strictly limited. This was not helped by the fact that she 'disappeared' physically in 1851, on New Years Eve, never to be seen again. As Dave Black says, after 31<sup>st</sup> December 1851:

*Helen Macfarlane vanishes from history along with her alias, Howard Morton* (p. 120)

Altogether she published 12 essays, and Black draws on this material in the writing of his book.

Dave Black emphasises the fact that for Macfarlane, as for Hegel, the Idea of Freedom was identified with the Idea of History. Also, that Macfarlane was the first 'British Marxist', and the first British commentator on Hegel's philosophy and the first translator of his work into English.

The book begins with a philosophical look at Macfarlane's view of British history. Then, Black looks at the economic and political developments in England that helped Marx with his analysis of class struggle in the *Communist Manifesto*. From here, Black goes on to examine Hegel's Idea of Freedom. This is followed by a look at radical journalism at the time that Macfarlane was in England. Black concludes by assessing the significance of the historic encounter between Marx and the English

Chartists, and the crucial part that Helen Macfarlane played in regard to this. All this, then, helps to show the important role that Macfarlane played in regard to progressing Marxist ideas in England.

Dave Black discusses 'Red Republicanism' in Chapter 2 and begins by talking about 'Luddism'. As he says:

*Such was the distress caused by the introduction of labor-saving machinery and the import of cheap shoddy goods that workers smashed the machines in the factories and burned the "shoddies" at the dockside. (p.11)*

Then, female Chartists movements sprang up in the late 1830s and as Black said:

*Women argued that democracy, once established, would need a new generation imbued with democratic ideas by Chartist mothers as well as fathers. To impart such knowledge to their children, women would have to possess it themselves; to get it they would need the same access as men to political education. (p.14)*

Thus, feminism and various women's issues were starting to be moved forward at this time, and Macfarlane was obviously part of this general movement.

It was only in 1958 that it was discovered that Howard Morton, regular contributor to *Red Republican* was, in fact, Helen Macfarlane. It was discovered by A.R. Schoyen, a scholar from the United States. As Black says:

*Macfarlane, a supporter of the "Fraternal Democrats" in Lancashire and one of the most prolific of Harney's stable of writers, was forced to adopt a male pseudonym in order to get her writings into print. (p.18)*

Thus, it has taken about 100 years just to uncover the fact that this significant person in history, the person that made the *Communist Manifesto* accessible to English-speaking readers was a woman, and not a man.

Helen Macfarlane translated the *Communist Manifesto* in *Red Republican*, in 1850, in the four issues beginning November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1850. Two decades after that it was reprinted in New York in 1871, in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. After 1888, though, the Samuel Moore translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, undertaken with Engels, superseded Macfarlane's version in the English-speaking world.

The only other work of Macfarlane in her own name was a long 3-part essay that appeared in April, May and June 1850 issues of the *Democratic Review*, titled *Democracy: Remarks on the Times Apropos of Certain Passages in No. 1 of Thomas Carlyle's "Latter-Day" pamphlet*. After that, it was Morton's name that started appearing again, and Morton's style was uncannily like Macfarlane's – precisely, because it was, indeed, Helen Macfarlane!

In his final chapter, *The Legacy of Hegelian Marxism*, Dave Black emphasises how Helen Macfarlane's known work only spanned a short period in mid-nineteenth century England. Furthermore, that:

*...she never got to lead mass movements or write major theoretical works... (p. 131)*

So, she was not like some other women, such as Rosa Luxemburg, who did write theoretical material and this perhaps, also partly explains why she went so totally into obscurity. Instead, Macfarlane was of the opinion that ‘...theory had to be more than just a parade of theories...’ (Black, p.109). Furthermore:

*Macfarlane demands organizational responsibility from theoreticians: that they make themselves useful “without distracting the attention of the people” from the practical issues, and provide, as Marx claims in the Manifesto “critical insights into the conditions, the course, and the general results of real social movement. (p. 110)*

However, although effective organisation is obviously important, I would argue that that there is an urgent need to develop theory. Furthermore, that we cannot move on to really effective political action until we have this theoretical base much more firmly established. Indeed, this is the main thrust of my own work. My aim is to take Marxist theory and to make it applicable to the global capitalist world that we find ourselves in today (see, for example, R.Rikowski, 2005)

However, as Dave Black says:

*Helen Macfarlane was indeed a rare “original character”; her expression of “Hegelian-Marxism” - though undeveloped and cut short – seems to me still relevant and still resonant. In Hegel’s philosophy, the “cunning of reason” works through the development of human consciousness toward a full concept of Freedom. In Macfarlane’s interpretation, the “democratic idea” is the process by which twenty-five thousand years of struggle in thought and in life finally results in the “practical realization” of a “golden age”, “without poor, without classes...not only of free men but of free women”. (Referenced from Hegel, Science of Logic, 756)*

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Marx, in one of his letters, said that Macfarlane was ‘rare’ and ‘original’ (p.118) Thus, it is clear that Macfarlane’s interpretation of ‘Hegelian-Marxism’, particularly in regard to the concept of Freedom and the ‘democratic idea’, has played an important historical contribution to Marxist thinking in general, and this is another point that Dave Black seeks to highlight in his book.

I would very much recommend this book. It rescues Helen Macfarlane from obscurity, and restores her place in history. It also forwards the cause of both Marxism and Feminism in general – and, indeed, I am both a Marxist and a Feminist!

The book includes a useful index and 2 appendices. The first appendix is a list of the published writings of Helen MacFarlane. Her work (most of which was published under the name of Howard Morton), appeared in *Democratic Review*, *Red Republican* and *Friend of the People*. The second is Helen MacFarlane’s 1850 translation of the *Communist Manifesto*.

## Reference

Rikowski, Ruth (2005) *Globalisation, Information and Libraries: the implications of the World Trade Organisation’s GATS and TRIPS Agreements*, Chandos: Oxford