

Clarion call to Drama.

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Introduction.

In 1911 the Newcastle upon Tyne branch of the British Socialist Party was having problems with their cash flow. They had rooms in Leazes Park Rd. Newcastle, in a wedge shaped building that is now a Joke Shop and Theatrical Costumers. Funds were hard to come by and they had been reduced to running dances in the Leazes rooms, for both socialists and non-socialists, to make ends meet. This was regarded by some as sacrilege and so a higher, more socially uplifting, way to raise money was sort. Wilf Armstrong, a staunch socialist and a reciter of some local repute, took up the challenge by posting a notice asking for any members who were interested in the Drama as a possible way to solve the financial problem. A number of people took up his idea and began to run with it. So, on Friday 17th march a Clarion Drama Club was formed. (Veitch 1950, Goulding 1991, The Clarion 1911)

It is my intention here in to give an account of the progress of the Clarion Drama Clubs/Societies with reference to the growth of the Newcastle upon Tyne Club whose members had a strong influence upon the National Clarion Players. Groups tended to be a little cavalier about the use of the terms "Drama Club" and "Drama Society" therefore, throughout this work the two words are essentially interchangeable.

The Clarion Movement.



Robert Blatchford

One of the strands of socialism that was thriving in Newcastle, and who shared the Leazes Park Rooms, were sections of the Clarion movement. The main and most persistent strand of this movement are the Clarion Cycle Clubs (many of which, including one in Sunderland, still exist), however there were a range of other sports and arts clubs working under the Clarion banner. The Clarion movement began with the publication in 1891 by Robert Blatchford in Manchester of "The Clarion", a socialist weekly newspaper. "The Clarion" always carried a strong line for the Theatre. An extensive column called "STAGE LAND" produced by "Dangle" was part of the papers

content well into the 1920s. It gave a range of reviews and gossip about theatre from around the country. Blatchford believed that socialism need not be drab. He believed that the socialist movement took itself too seriously regarding the austere Puritanism of Keir Hardy as lacking colour. Indeed Blatchford and Hardy had a long standing animosity between them. As Paynn (1976) put it, Blatchford believed that by offering a friendly atmosphere in the Clarion Clubs a wider appeal could be won for socialism. From this developed the Cycle clubs already mentioned along with Swimming Clubs, Vocal Unions, Glee Clubs, Drama Clubs, Missionary Vans, handicrafts, holiday camps and Cinderella Clubs to entertain slum children. Regular reports of these groups would appear in "The Clarion." It therefore seemed obvious that the new drama club in Newcastle should be a Clarion Drama Club.

Clarion Drama Clubs/Societies and Clarion Players.

So it was that on July 11th 1911 the Clarion Drama Club of Newcastle upon Tyne mounted their first production, a double bill of two short plays. These reflected the Clubs socialist position in that they chose an adaptation of a section of Victor Hugo's "*Les Miserables*" by Norman McKinnell called "*The Bishops Candlesticks*" and a play by Gertrude Jennings called "*Pot Luck*." At around the same time Liverpool was also setting up its Clarion Drama Club (The Clarion 1911b). Reports of Clarion Drama Clubs began appearing in "The Clarion" on the 4th. May 1910 with mentions of groups in North and South London, Glasgow and Stockport.

The first Clarion Club to dabble with the drama as a mean of propaganda was set up in 1899 by members of the Manchester Club House. However, Birmingham claimed to be the first, in 1903, to form a Clarion Dramatic Society as an offshoot of its Cinderella Club. In 1910 the Clarion Players Union was formed (Pye 1995) by the ten clubs that then existed across the country. However, in the 1912 National Clarion Cycle Clubs year book (These Year Books acted as the Year Book for the wider clarion movement and the meets an outlet for their talents.) published for their 18th meet at Buxton, the groups report section on the Clarion Players stated:

Clarion Players; These are flowers in the bud, so to speak. Many amateurs and professionals have expressed themselves willing to help in such a scheme. But an organiser is wanted. Who will volunteer? Splendid scope for propaganda. (NCCC 1912)

In 1913 The Newcastle Clarion Drama Society performed a number of plays at the National Clarion Cycle Clubs annual meet at York. This included its fiftieth performance of Shaw's "*Major*

Barbara". The Programme and Year Book accompanying this meeting lists Clarion "Players" in Hyde, West Leeds, Stockport and of course Newcastle upon Tyne. The reports section is introduced with the following paragraph

Clarion Players; Have developed considerably during the last three years, and are ready to present the drama – from Shakespeare to G.B.S. – without any qualms of conscience. (NCCC 1913)

In the 1913 year book the entry for the Newcastle club, after a list of the



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undertaken since its inception in 1911 there is a hope expressed that their example would inspire others to tread the boards as had the Newcastle Clarion Drama Club. The entry ended with "The propaganda value of plays such as the above are very great indeed, as a great number of people reached to whom lectures and other methods of propaganda would not appeal." (NCCC 1913)

In his book *"The People's"* (1950) Norman Veitch describes the efforts of the "National organisation of Clarion Drama Clubs" to form a library of plays suitable for Clarion Clubs, but more importantly that deal with Labour and Socialist subjects. The library was to be funded by clubs giving ten percent of their takings to this central library. To this end the Newcastle Club's (and by inference other clubs around the country) 1913 season consisted of a range of one act plays from both established writers such as Shaw and new writers. This project allowed the clubs to acquire a number of plays of their own which were "under the control of the National Executive." Although a number of plays were produced under this scheme two were particularly popular, *"Recognition of the Union"* by Landon Ronald and *"Ashes"* by W. J. Priestley. Indeed *Ashes* was so popular that it sold out. The scheme was working well until world war one intervened.

By 1914 Norman Veitch, one of the founders of the Newcastle Clarion Drama Club, was National secretary of the Clarion Players Union. He laid out the ideals of the Union in the Newcastle section of the 1914 NCCC annual meet Programme and Year book (held at Shrewsbury) as follows:

"We realise that most good art is good propaganda, so that in an indirect manner we express, through the drama, the living truths of socialism to people who otherwise are never touched by the ordinary methods of street-come meetings and manifestos."

The NCCC 1914 Year Book and Programme listed seventeen clubs from around the country listed in table 1. The National Clarion Drama Societies (Players) were involved in the Meets of 1915 and 1916, however by this time World War I was taking its toll and no meets were held until 1919 when regular Meets were re-established. The National Clarion Drama Societies made use of these Meets to hold their own annual conferences along with entertaining those gathered. The final performance at these meets was at the 1927 York Meet when Newcastle Clarion Drama Society gave a performance. Unfortunately, no record of exactly what was performed seems to have survived.

Table 1. Clarion Drama Clubs in 1914

Club/Society	Year founded
Birmingham	1903
Nelson	1908
Glasgow	1909
Horsforth	1909
Stockport	1910
North London	1910
Hyde	1911
Liverpool	1911
Newcastle upon Tyne	1911
Accrington	1912
West Leeds Socialist	1912
Willesden Clarion (Black & White) Minstrels	1913
Nottingham	1913

Bristol	1913
Litherland (Liverpool)	1913
Handsworth	1914
West Ham	1914
NCCC Year book & Meet Programme 1914	

In the press release that announced the formation of the Newcastle upon Tyne Clarion Drama Club (Clarion 1911a) members of the Clarion Drama Clubs in other parts of the country were invited to visit. In 1921 the Newcastle Clarion Drama Society had Mr. Herbert Humphreys on loan from the Birmingham Clarion Dram Club for their production of Bernard Shaw's Man & Superman in April 1921. In his book, the People's, (1950) Norman Vietch discusses his friendship with Humphreys, a future Mayor of Birmingham, forged during Clarion Easter Meets and continued by post. Humphreys was also instrumental in introducing George Bernard Shaw to the Newcastle Association, a relationship that lead to the Clarion/People's Theatre performing a number of Northern and National premiers of his plays.

Throughout the 1920s Clarion Movement in general was changing. Performers were realising that there was more to the Theatre than just socialist propoganda and these "entertainment" for the sake of entertainment were just as fulfilling as the hard core socialist repertoire. In Newcastle the Association had already begun to use "The People's Theatre" above the Clarion name. This was thought to provide a wider embrace than just the Clarion name. There was also increased bickering between "The People's/Clarion Theatre" and the Socialist society, even though the Drama Club had bailed the Socialists out of numerous financial holes, so allowing it to continue.

In 1929 the Newcastle upon Tyne People's Theatre incorporating the Clarion Drama Association acquired its own premises. When it moved to its new theatre "The People's Theatre" left its Clarion banner behind it at the Royal Arcade. All around the country Clarion Drama Clubs were either converting or disbanding.

Conclusion.

The Clarion Drama Movement was not the only attempt to promote Socialism through the medium of the Drama. In 1906 the Northern Weekly newspaper reported the formation of the first "Daisy Amateur Dramatic Society" in Manchester with the object of producing two plays, "The Unemployed" and "An out-of-works reply" written by two of the papers contributors. In 1936 the "British

Workers Sports Association" formed a coral & Dramatic section stating:

It was realised that in the formation of the Choral and Dramatic Societies there were immense possibilities of linking the recreational activities with the propaganda work of the Labour movement. (1937)

Words that echo those published in the NCCC 1913 Year Book about the Clarion Drama Clubs.

The legacy of the Clarion Drama Movement is diverse. In Newcastle upon Tyne this legacy is highly apparent in the fact of the People's Theatre, a wholly amateur theatre company which has provided a wide repertoire of plays, including world premières from the likes of Shaw and O'Casey, to the people of Newcastle. In other places it may be a few unattributed photographs in the Local History Library. But for the twenty five years of its existence at the beginning of the twentieth century the Clarion Drama Movement helped to both entertain and educate the working people of Great Britain.

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There are many glaring gaps in our knowledge of the Clarion Drama Clubs/Societies. I would therefore like to hear from anyone who can help fill in the gaps. Questions such as where the minutes of the Annual General Meetings have gone? What exactly were the programmes of productions given at the NCCC meets? What the Clubs other than the one in Newcastle doing and where are their records now? If you can help with any of this please contact me and tell me all about it. My e-mail address is:

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Pictures, words anything to fill the gap would be most welcome.

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