

MATTHEW KEY

### **‘Through the Gains of Industry we promote Art’: George Dawson’s Civic Gospel and the architecture of the Improvement Scheme.**

This essay explores two artefacts from late Victorian Birmingham; a period in which the city went through remarkable transformation, culminating in one commentator describing it as ‘the best governed in the world’. The artefacts include George Dawson’s speech on the inauguration of Birmingham Reference Library (1866) and a drawing of Birmingham in 1886 by H.W. Brewer. These artefacts reveal how Unitarian preaching on civic morality was used to justify the hegemonic entrepreneurial politics of civic government during the period. However, what has been traditionally portrayed as a symbiosis of humanitarian progressivism, civic pride and business acumen, had less altruistic undertones.

---

I hope that Corporations generally will become much more expensive than they have been – not expensive in the sense of wasting money, but that there will be such nobleness and liberality amongst the people of our towns and cities as will lead them to give their Corporations power to expend more money on those things which, as public opinion advances, are found to be essential to the health and comfort and improvement of our people.

John Bright in a speech at Birmingham (January 1864)

It is doubtful that even John Bright, the legendary radical and Liberal statesman, was aware of the magnitude of change that the Civic Gospel, whose tenets he had alluded to in the above public address of the 26th January 1864, would have upon citizens of Birmingham. The history of Birmingham in the ensuing years of Joseph Chamberlain’s mayoralty (1873-6) is considered almost universally in the literature as one of ‘municipal revolution’; within these three years the ‘Town [had been] parked, paved, assized, marketed, gas-and-watered and improved’.<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain’s civic achievements transformed Birmingham, famously leading an American writer Julien Ralph to describe it as ‘the best-governed city in the world’.<sup>2</sup> But what basis did Ralph have for his description? More than fifty corporations had municipalised gas before Birmingham, even its largest provincial rival Manchester had achieved this feat as early as 1817, and an even greater number of taken

<sup>1</sup> Judd, D., *Radical Joe: A life of Joseph Chamberlain* (Cardiff, United Kingdom: University of Wales Press, 1993), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph, J., “The Best Governed City in the World” *Harper’s Magazine*, June. 1890.

control of their water supplies.<sup>3</sup> However, even if Birmingham was not the first to implement a municipalising agenda, it was the first to attribute a philosophical voice to such proceedings; elevating such policies ‘above sheer pragmatism and invest[ing] the dull business... with a profoundly ethical dimension’.<sup>4</sup> When Chamberlain’s mayoralty was over, and he entered national politics, he often reflected upon his civic achievements and implored his colleagues that ‘increased responsibilities bring with them a higher sense of the dignity and importance of municipal work’.<sup>5</sup> Yet this sense of ‘altruistic’ or ‘enlightened’ responsibility was learned not from Chamberlain’s political contemporaries, initially as a Liberal politician and later as a Unionist, but from the strong tradition of religious dissent which was uniquely prevalent within the society of Birmingham.<sup>6</sup> The examination of two artefacts, George Dawson’s speech on the inauguration of Birmingham Reference Library (1866) and the architecture of Joseph Chamberlain’s Improvement Scheme, as seen in a drawing of 1886 by H.W. Brewer for the *Graphic* magazine, enables us to understand the genesis of such ideas. Furthermore, the artefacts explain how the moral lessons and improving tenets associated with the Civic Gospel soon came to be used to justify and legitimise the increasingly entrepreneurial enterprises of civic reformers of the Chamberlain period.

To understand the culture of municipal politics in the Birmingham of the late Victorian period it is necessary to examine the preaching of George Dawson, the intellectual driving-force of the ‘Civic Gospel’ and its most recognised proponent. Dawson, who had received a secular and unorthodox education from Aberdeen and Glasgow universities, settled at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1844. He was initially regarded with scepticism from fellow Baptist ministers because of his divergent theology. They particularly viewed the emphasis he placed on the liberty of creed, and the ensuing theological constraints this placed upon his own adherence to the evangelical ‘scheme of salvation’, with deep suspicion. Dawson took his chance to break with Mount Zion completely in 1847 and, having become one of the most popular preachers in the area, his sermons adopting a more conversational tone than the ponderous rhetoric employed by his peers, established his own church: The Church of Saviour.<sup>7</sup> It was from his ‘preacher’s platform’, in place of a pulpit, that Dawson ‘inculcated great principles... needful to the people’s wellbeing’ amongst his diverse and large audiences.<sup>8</sup>

In his first sermon, ‘The Demands of the Age on the Church’,<sup>9</sup> Dawson set out his belief in the value of churchmen engaging with the world rather than retreating into narrow

<sup>3</sup> Falkus, M., ‘The development of municipal trading in the nineteenth century’, *Business History*, ii, 19 (1977), 134–161.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005) p. 338.

<sup>5</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 195.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>9</sup> Dawson, G., *The Demands of the Age Upon the Church*, delivered on the opening of his Church on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1847.

and quixotic theological debate. To Dawson, the value of an individual's confessional life lay not in a developed understanding of the esoteric complexities of theology but instead should be 'judged by its effects on practical conduct'.<sup>10</sup> The importance therefore placed on social interventionism and practical idealism was in contrast to those evangelicals who, Dawson considered, 'became perverted and enfeebled about what constituted 'worldliness' when they should have been involved in matters of importance to the world'.<sup>11</sup> Dawson consistently preached to his congregation an exalted vision of municipal government which empowered councillors and citizens to do God's work in elevating the populace. However, salvation would not merely be achieved by the meeting of the physiological needs of the people but through an emphasis on a heightened cultural and spiritual education for all. Furthermore, he identified that there had been a long-standing decay of public virtue throughout Britain, by which he meant there was a decline in 'that spirit which makes a man prefer, before his own prosperity and wellbeing, that of the town or country to which he belongs'.<sup>12</sup> Though, as a minister, Dawson was debarred from serving on Town Councils, he was committed to encouraging others to employ themselves in this manner. His influence on local governance and the elevation of the populace soon became evident. Remarkably, for 31 of its first 33 years of its establishment, the chairmanship of the Free Library Committee of the Town Council fell to a member of Dawson's congregation.<sup>13</sup> Dawson divined the vital importance of recruiting 'the able, the talented and the prosperous to the Town Council and its committee',<sup>14</sup> seeing that effective management by successful businessmen, many of whom attended his sermons, would 'channel entrepreneurial methods into municipal projects, to the benefit of all'.<sup>15</sup> Dawson's belief clearly came to fruition, more than fifty-five percent of Birmingham's sixty-four councillors, between 1860 and 1891, were businessmen and a strong majority identified as nonconformists; undoubtedly many would have come into contact with Dawson, who had quickly become the primary figure in the confessional life of dissenting Birmingham.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most famous of Dawson's orations was that given at the establishment of the Reference Library in Birmingham. The Reference Library (1865), aside from Hansom and Welch's Town Hall (1832),<sup>17</sup> was one of the few significant municipal projects of early Victorian Birmingham. The library was built by Edward Middleton Barry, son of Charles Barry, architect of the new Palace of Westminster (1840-70). Complete with a handsome classical façade it seemed to exemplify the achievements

<sup>10</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> Hennock, E.P., *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government (Study in Urban History)* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 157.

<sup>12</sup> Wright Wilson, W., *The Life of George Dawson* (Percival Jones, Birmingham, 1905), p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Hennock, E.P., *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government (Study in Urban History)* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973) pp. 80-93.

<sup>14</sup> Wright Wilson, W., *The Life of George Dawson* (Percival Jones, Birmingham, 1905), p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Jones, Linda J., 'Public pursuit of private profit? Liberal businessmen and municipal politics in Birmingham, 1865-1900', *Business History*, iii, 25 (1983), 240-259.

<sup>17</sup> The first Roman Revival building in England and modelled on the Temple of Castor and Pollux (495 BC) in the Roman Forum.

and spectacle of ancient Rome and Greece, manifesting such civic spectacles in the centre of industrial Birmingham. It was clearly a most fitting setting from which Dawson could preach a culturally progressive and civic-minded Gospel. A transcript of Dawson's speech can be found below:

A great library contains the diary of the human race; when the books of mankind are gathered together we can sit down and read the solemn story of Man's history. Here in this room are gathered together the great diaries of the human race, the record of its thoughts, its struggles, its doings. So that a library may be regarded as the solemn chamber in which man can take counsel with all that have been wise and great and good and glorious among the men that have gone before him. (*Cheers*)

Men are very apt to think that the universe inspired their little creed. When a man has worked himself into an unwise heat, a good place for him to go is a great library, and that will quiet him down admirably. The man who is fond of books is usually a man of lofty thought, of elevated opinion.

One of the greatest and happiest things about this Corporation Library [is that], supported as it is by rates and administered by the Corporation, it is the expression of a conviction on your part that a town exists for moral and intellectual purposes. A great town like this has not done all of its duty when it has put in action a set of ingenious contrivances for cleaning and lighting the streets, for breaking stones and for mending ways; and has not fulfilled its highest function even when it has given the people of the town the best system of drainage...

I had rather a great book or a great picture fell into the hands of the Corporation than into the hands of an individual – a great picture God never intended to be painted for the delight of but one noble family, which may be shut away through the whim of its owner. But the moment you put great works into the hands of the corporate body like this you secure permanence of guardianship in passionless keeping... what a noble thing it would be if the nobility should take to giving their precious collections to the Corporation... and then they would be open to the multitude. I hope in time that this Corporation will be as rich in pictures and works of art as it has already become in books, for I believe that one of the highest offices of civilisation is to determine how to give access to the masterpieces of art and of literature to the whole people. There is no object higher and nobler than that – to make Raphael common, to make Michelangelo intelligible, to the multitudes, to lay open to the workman and the peasant what heretofore only ranks and riches could command. And this freedom from payment is the glory of this library.

There are few places that I would rather haunt after my death than this room, and there are few things I would have my children remember more than this, that this man spoke the discourse at the opening of this glorious library, the first fruits of a clear understanding that a great town exists to discharge towards the people of that town the duties that a great nation exists to discharge towards the people of that nation – that a town exists by the Grace of God, that a great town is a solemn organism through which should flow, and in which should be shaped, all the highest, loftiest and truest ends of a man’s intellectual and moral nature. We are a Corporation who have undertaken the highest duty that is possible for us – we have made provision for our people – for all our people – and we have made a provision of God’s greatest and best gifts unto Man. (*Loud cheers*)<sup>18</sup>

Dawson’s speech is a model of Late-Victorian idealism. It is an exhortation to the Council to take up the ‘improving’ tenets of the Civic Gospel. The speech is laced with a sublime faith in the beneficial and improving impact of great art and literature and of the accumulated wisdom refined from centuries of Man’s history. At its emotional core is an ‘idea of community drawn [not from scripture but] from the works of Goethe, Schiller and other German romantics’.<sup>19</sup> These sentiments resonate with contemporary commentators and comparisons with Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) can be clearly made. Indeed, the Arnoldian emphasis on the promulgation of ‘sweetness and light’,<sup>20</sup> the conferring of not merely moral and material improvement but an attempt to address the aesthetic condition of the masses, is prominent in Dawson’s message that there is no ‘object higher and nobler than that – to make Raphael common, to make Michelangelo intelligible’. This trope of ‘feeding the mind’ was prominent in Dawson’s rhetoric, in a later sermon given at the Church of the Saviour Dawson concluded that,

when a man has his comfort, his health, his security, the mind and the spirit have needs of their own too, and those needs to be satisfied. This means that the city which really is a city must have parks as well as prisons, an art gallery as well as an asylum, books and libraries as well as baths and washhouses, schools as well as sewers. It must think of beauty and dignity no less than of order and of health.<sup>21</sup>

This was a creed of civic responsibility and a recognition of the equality of the citizens of Birmingham. The language of the speech clearly renders the city as the new corpus, a paternal and powerful organism with a duty to its inhabitants, not dissimilar

<sup>18</sup> Inaugural Address by George Dawson, MA, Borough of Birmingham, Opening of the Free Reference Library, 26 October 1866 (Birmingham, E.C. Osborne, 1866).

<sup>19</sup> Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005) p. 327.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold, M., *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Dale, A.W.W., ‘George Dawson’ in ed. Muirhead, J.H., *Nine Famous Birmingham Men – Lectures Delivered in the University of Birmingham* (Cornish Bros., Birmingham, 1909), p. 101.

to 'a Church in which there was no bond, nor text, nor articles – a large Church, one of the greatest institutions yet established'.<sup>22</sup> Dawson's view is clearly that it is the highest and most noble duty of the Corporation to act as the nave or spiritual focus of this new church.<sup>23</sup>

Dawson was not alone in preaching the Civic Gospel and his influence was felt upon many dissenting preachers across Birmingham. Robert Dale, Congregationalist Minister of Carrs Lane Church (1854-1895), had seen Dawson preach in his youth and was similarly bent on transforming the Town Council into a guiding force of a Christian polity, whose Councillors were able to practically effect the mission Civic Gospel. For Dale, perhaps similarly to Matthew Arnold, the imperative for political involvement in the Civic Gospel was not simply humanitarian. He feared that there lurked a spectre of anarchy and a nascent desire for insurrection amongst the subterranean working class and that it was, therefore, the prerogative of the 'prosperous people of a free nation' to intervene in alleviating their hardships, lest 'the political greatness and stability of their country [be] exposed to the most serious dangers'.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to Dale, H.W. Crosskey, Unitarian Minister of the Church of the Messiah, was pivotal in transferring such ideas to Birmingham's most influential families and giving them a new social sense. Unitarianism, of course, was a religion of the minority in Birmingham but its impact on Victorian politics was certainly disproportionate to its size. Crosskey's congregation included a triumvirate of Birmingham's elite business families: the Chamberlains, the Nettlefolds and the Martineaus, whose prestige and wealth enabled them to dominate local political and social life. As Dale concludes, 'the men that took part in the great and successful movement for reforming our administration... had learnt the principles on which they acted and caught the spirit by which they were inspired very largely in the Nonconformist churches of Birmingham'.<sup>25</sup> Such men, so distinct to the unenlightened, corrupt and retrenched Town Councillors of the old 'Economist' days, would be capable of

sweeping away streets in which it was not possible to live a healthy and decent life... of providing gardens and parks and a museum; that good water should be supplied without stint at the lowest possible prices; that the profits of the gas supply should relieve the pressure of the rates.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately it would be through the invocation and implementation of this Civic Gospel that Birmingham would undergo its 'civic renaissance' under this new generation of business magnates-cum-municipal reformers.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Hennock, E.P., *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government (Study in Urban History)* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005) p. 327.

<sup>24</sup> Hennock, E.P., *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government (Study in Urban History)* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973) quoting Dale, R.W., 'The Perils and Uses of Rich Men', *Week-Day Sermons*, pp. 175-6.

<sup>25</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206.

It is significant that the architecture of this ‘new Jerusalem’ would be a consummation of Dawson’s Civic Gospel; Birmingham would become an expression of ‘Hebraism built with Hellenic bricks’.<sup>27</sup> One need only observe the symbolic spaces manifested as part of Chamberlain’s ‘Improvement Scheme’ to appreciate the rhetorical and visual strategies employed to promote this message. Brewer’s *Birmingham City Centre from Mason College Roof* (Figure 1) speaks of a rebuilt Birmingham replete with civic monuments and splendid architectural developments. In the centre of his drawing stands Yeoville Thomason’s Council House (1874-9), the largest and grandest of all the architectural manifestations of the Civic Gospel.



Figure 1. Brewer, H.W., *Birmingham City Centre from Mason College Roof* (1886), drawing, The Graphic / British Library

Built as a complement to Joseph Chamberlain’s Improvement Scheme (1875), and as a permanent home for the town’s Council,<sup>28</sup> the Council House dominates the city’s central Victoria Square (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Council House. 2006. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 5. Feb. 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Gange, D, and Ledger-Lomas, M., *Cities of God: The Bible and Archaeology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Birmingham Town Hall was never envisaged as a political space and was always used as a public forum and concert venue.

At 150 feet long and 162 feet tall, complete with a Grand Dome and sumptuous portico relief, the Council House evokes a grandiose civic polis, reminding the observer instantly of Robert Dale's invocation of 'the glories of Florence' and the opulent civic palaces of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>29</sup> Although Thomason's building is largely in the Corinthian order - rather than adopting, and completely answering, the tight classicism of the neighbouring Town Hall - the Council House is lavishly decorated in an Italianate or ornate Renaissance manner and is replete with big projections which burst out near the corners with columns *in antis* and large segmental pediments. As Tristram Hunt has suggested, the building stands as 'a nineteenth-century Venetian palace with Victoria Square acting as St. Mark's... a bricks-and-mortar memorial to the municipal gospel'.<sup>30</sup> Elevated in a large niche in the central portico is a mosaic depicting Municipality enthroned in the centre and receiving the classically attired allegories of Science, Art, Liberty, Law, Commerce and Industry (Figure 3).

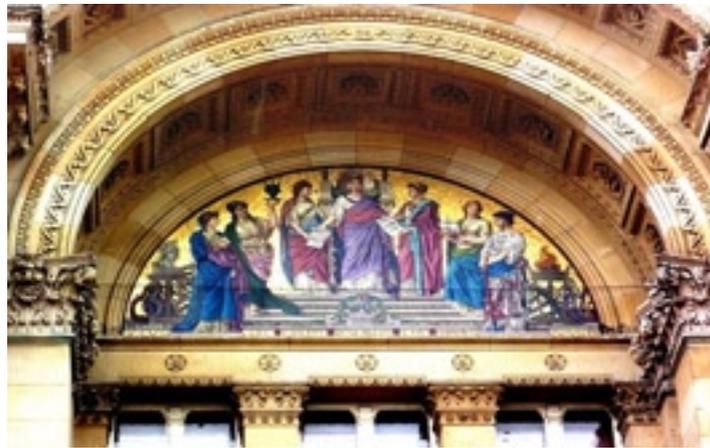


Figure 3. Council House Salviati Mosaics. 2012. *Victorian Web*. Web. 5. Feb. 2017.

Above the portico is the central pediment (Figure 4) which further reinforces the importance of the city, this time placing it directly in relation to the nation personified as Britannia, whose arms are outstretched to reward the manufacturers of Birmingham with laurel wreaths.



Figure 4. Council House Central Pediment. 2012. *Victorian Web*. Web. 5. Feb. 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Marquand, D., *Decline of the Public* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005) p. 356.

In 1881 the Council House was extended to include the City Museum and Art Gallery, on one corner stands the ‘Big Brum’ tower, a ‘doughty Venetian challenger (modelled on San Marco)’ to Westminster’s Big Ben and a symbol of secular civic pride.<sup>31</sup> Notably this extension was built on top of the offices of the municipal Gas Department, the proceeds from which had gone towards subsidising the £40,000 outlay from the council to build it and circumvented tight restrictions of the Public Libraries Act of 1850 which limited the use of public funds on arts.<sup>32</sup> This was a clear indication of the municipality as *patria*, with the very purpose and fabric of the building evoking Dawson’s earlier call for the city to play the leading role in elevating the artistic, aesthetic and moral sensibilities of its denizens.

Yeoville Thomason’s building is one which reinforces the dignity of municipal office whilst reminding the observer of the lofty and the exalted responsibilities of those tasked with executing and fulfilling the Civic Gospel. This civic responsibility is enmeshed within the architectural order of the building; the viewer cannot help but perceive that Britannia herself is supported not only by the physical architecture of the building but by the work of those that occupy it. If the centrality and importance of the Civic Gospel to local governance in Birmingham was not apparent enough in the architecture of its predominant municipal space, hidden behind a desk in the lobby has always hung a delicate 1879 oil painting, executed by local artist Edward Philips Thompson, depicting George Dawson and Friends congregated to discuss the affairs of the town and how they might fulfil their Civic Gospel. Furthermore, even at the laying of its foundation stone the message of Dawson, Dale and Crosskey, of the city as a ‘solemn organism’, found articulation in the words of Mayor Chamberlain who proclaimed his ‘faith in municipal institutions, an abiding sense of the value and importance of local self-government... [they] represent the authority of the people’.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, the Council House is monumental architecture in a triumphant style, honouring and heralding the improving virtue of the municipal ethic. It is a profoundly symbolic space celebrating the dominant narrative of urban liberalism, civic intervention and improvement.<sup>34</sup>

Returning to Brewer’s drawing, it is possible to discern the other large-scale projects undertaken during Chamberlain’s mayoralty. Other than the completion of the Council House, the construction of a ‘broad Parisian boulevard’,<sup>35</sup> seen in the right-hand corner of the drawing, was the crowning achievement of Chamberlain’s ‘Improvement Scheme’. Having already municipalised the gas and water supply of the town, Chamberlain sought to transform Birmingham into the ‘Metropolis of the Midlands’, an epicentre of enlightened civic culture. But civic pride, and particularly

<sup>31</sup> Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005) p. 354.

<sup>32</sup> Shackley, B., “H. R. Yeoville Thomason.” in Ballard, P., (Ed.) *Birmingham’s Victorian and Edwardian Architects* (Wetherby: Oblong Creative for the Victorian Society, Birmingham and West Midlands Group, 2009), pp. 123-152.

<sup>33</sup> Coleman, B., *The Idea of the City in Nineteenth Century Britain*, (London: Routledge Library Editions, 2006) p. 159.

<sup>34</sup> Gunn, S., ‘Ritual and civic culture in the English industrial city, c. 1835-1914’, in Morris, R.J. and Trainor, R.S. (eds.), *Urban Governance: Britain and beyond since 1750* (London: Ashgate, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 228.

bourgeois capital interests, were more conspicuous than the moralising and improving narrative of the Civic Gospel in this endeavour. Despite this, the arguments made by Chamberlain for the project were consistently figured in the humanitarian ethos and narrative of the Civic Gospel: at least half of the 93 acres of the area which occupied that earmarked for Improvement were a veritable quagmire, disfigured by noxious slums, inadequate back-to-back houses arranged in ill-ventilated and ill-drained courts. Streets such as Upper Priory, the Minorities and the Gullet made up St Mary's Ward, an area where zymotic diseases were so prevalent that the death rate reached twenty-six per thousand - double that of affluent suburban Edgbaston.<sup>36</sup>

Invoking the powers granted to local authorities by Richard Cross' Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, Chamberlain ordered the demolition of 653 houses in the area to make way for Corporation Street, the main thoroughfare of this newly 'improved' town. The fact that this new development, paid for by the local ratepayers, would eventually be lined with boutique shops housed in opulent buildings commanding high rents for the Council and investors, rather than improved artisan's dwellings, was obviously a matter of much controversy. Indeed, only 62 houses had been rebuilt as late as 1885, providing homes for a minority of the 9,000 inhabitants expelled.<sup>37</sup> To make matters worse, Chamberlain's Liberals in the Town Council had always made it clear that such housing would be replaced and used the language of the Civic Gospel to justify their arguments; during the elections of 1875 the *Birmingham Post* declared that the purpose of Chamberlain's Scheme was 'the clearing and remodelling of unhealthy areas, so as to improve the houses of artisans, and thus to raise vitality and lengthen the duration of life'.<sup>38</sup>

The real intention of the Improvement Scheme was becoming clear to Chamberlain's opponents who pilloried him and the endeavour. Many accused him of betraying the principles on which it had been marketed and for championing what was increasingly seen as a financially irresponsible investment racket whose beneficiaries would be limited to the entrepreneurial classes.<sup>39</sup> They were not unjustified in their criticism. The annual burden of 'improvement' on the rates came to double the £12,000 originally projected by Chamberlain and revenue from the scheme did not exceed expenditure until 1892.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in 1877, John Lowe, a former Conservative councillor of the 'Economist' sensibilities that men like Dawson had long castigated, highlighted Chamberlain's bullish and dissembling tendencies, 'greater men [than he had also been culpable of such vices] ... Look at Napoleon, where did he finish? In exile'.<sup>41</sup> The parallels between the two men could not be clearer. Just as Napoleon had preached a culture of meritocracy and liberty to justify his expansionist ambitions

<sup>36</sup> Briggs, A., *History of Birmingham*, vol. II 'Borough and City 1865-1938', (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p.78.

<sup>37</sup> Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005) p. 351

<sup>38</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 November 1875.

<sup>39</sup> Ward, R., *City-state and nation: Birmingham's political history c.1830-1940* (London, United Kingdom: Phillimore & Co, 2004), p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> Marsh, P., *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 229.

to the oppressed subjects of the *pays conquis*, Chamberlain's personal ambition had seemingly supplanted the humanitarian ends of the Civic Gospel. Indeed, the local satirical newspaper *The Dart* depicted Chamberlain as 'Turning the Screw' on local ratepayers and common citizens and chastised the lavish architecture of the prestigious 'Corporation Street', the centrepiece of the Improvement Scheme, rebranding it *Rue Chamberlain*. The Improvement Scheme, despite its pretensions to liberal progressivism and outwards portrayal as the manifestation of the Civic Gospel, became figured as a profligate endeavour designed only to propel the business and political interests of the mayor and his middle-class cronies.<sup>42</sup>

Even the Council House, an emblematic bastion of the moral and improving manifesto of the Civic Gospel, did not escape this criticism, with the *Dart* playing on its palatial Italianate architecture as evidence of it being little more than a *Palazzo Ducale*. The Council House was merely a 'Mayor's Palace', it was conspicuously the largest and grandest building of the Council's Improvement Scheme.<sup>43</sup> For all its outward projections of the sanctity of public office and the dignity of its officials who were charged with implementing the Civic Gospel, to many, its opulent marbled interior and ornate classical exterior started to become signifiers for exclusivity. This beacon of the Civic Gospel was as accessible as the luxury banquets it frequently hosted in honour of the achievements of Birmingham's bourgeois political elite. Chamberlain's complex relationship with the Civic Gospel, so understated in the 'official' literature of the period,<sup>44</sup> meant that by the end of Chamberlain's mayoralty Birmingham 'was adorned with expensive public buildings which had little to do with improving the welfare of poor slum dwellers'.<sup>45</sup>

Bright's exhortations for the Council to reject retrenchment and focus its energies on the elevation of the moral, aesthetic and physiological condition of its citizens seemingly did not fall on deaf ears. Yet the legacy of the Civic Gospel, as executed by Chamberlain, is much more difficult to reconcile with the humanitarian and 'improving' tenets on which it was built. On the one hand, the extent of these constructions and acquisitions made these decades the most dramatic in Birmingham's history, certainly down to the reconstruction of the 1960s. As Victor Skipp notes, 'to many Brummies... high Victorian Birmingham did bear some resemblance to the promised land, a holy city'.<sup>46</sup> Was he incorrect in his assessment? Brewer's drawing certainly proclaims a proud, distinguished and improved city to its viewer, replete with buildings which are clearly articulated in terms of the improving tenets on which the Civic Gospel was constructed. Surely the abundance of grand edifices depicted in the image: a new Council House (1879); Art Gallery (1885); a new Reference Library (1882); the

<sup>42</sup> Upton, C., *A history of Birmingham* (London, United Kingdom: Phillimore & Co, 1993), p. 155.

<sup>43</sup> Foster, A., *Birmingham: Pevsner city guide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Bunce, J.T., *History of the Corporation of Birmingham; with a sketch of the earlier government of the town*. 2 vols. (Birmingham, 1878-85).

<sup>45</sup> Pelling, H.M., *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain*, (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Skipp, V., *The Making of Victorian Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1983), p. 187.

Chamberlain Memorial Foundation (1880) must have instilled a degree of civic pride in the citizen of Victorian Birmingham.

In the final analysis, it is impossible to omit a brass relief which appears just as one enters the entrance to the Art Gallery extension of Yeoville Thomason's Council House, the building which occupies the prominent central position in Brewer's drawing. A motto inscribed below it simply reads: 'By the Gains of Industry We Promote Art'. A closer analysis of the impact of Chamberlain's Improvement Scheme, and indeed the contemporary criticism it attracted, arguably reveals that the Civic Gospel, however noble an idea in its genesis, swiftly became a populist rhetorical device used to legitimise local entrepreneurialism and the hegemony of business interests. Furthermore, a study of the architecture of the Improvement Plan depicts the Civic Gospel as a powerful symbolic tool, able to outwardly project the semblance of progressive, humanitarian 'improvement' whilst maintaining the reality of order and control. Birmingham's local governance would effectively remain in the hands of businessmen until the 'slow emergence of effective labour, unionist and socialist opposition' by 1914.<sup>47</sup> The improving ethos of the 'Civic Gospel' may well have given Birmingham its 'municipal revolution' but it did so on the terms of its most influential proponents.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary works cited

Arnold, M., *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

*Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 November 1875

Brewer, H.W., *Birmingham City Centre from Mason College Roof* (1886), drawing, "The Graphic" / British Library

Bunce, J.T., *History of the Corporation of Birmingham; with a sketch of the earlier government of the town*. 2 vols. (Birmingham, 1878-85)

Dawson, G., *The Demands of the Age Upon the Church*, delivered on the opening of his Church on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1847

<sup>47</sup> Jones, L., 'Public pursuit of private profit? Liberal businessmen and municipal politics in Birmingham, 1865-1900', *Business History*, iii, 25 (1983), 240-259, p. 255.

Inaugural Address by George Dawson, MA, Borough of Birmingham, Opening of the Free Reference Library, 26 October 1866 (Birmingham, E.C. Osborne, 1866)

Ralph, J., "The Best Governed City in the World" *Harper's Magazine*, June. 1890

### Secondary works cited

Briggs, A., *History of Birmingham, vol. II 'Borough and City 1865-1938'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952)

Briggs, A., *Victorian cities*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

Chinn, C and Dick, M., (eds.) *Birmingham The Workshop of the World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016)

Coleman, B., *The Idea of the City in Nineteenth Century Britain*, (London: Routledge Library Editions, 2006)

Falkus, M., 'The development of municipal trading in the nineteenth century', *Business History*, ii, 19 (1977)

Foster, A., *Birmingham: Pevsner city guide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

Gange, D, and Ledger-Lomas, M., *Cities of God: The Bible and Archaeology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Gunn, S., 'Ritual and civic culture in the English industrial city, c. 1835-1914', in Morris, R.J. and Trainor, R.S. (eds.), *Urban Governance: Britain and beyond since 1750* (London: Ashgate, 2000)

Hennock, E.P., *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government (Study in Urban History)* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973)

Hunt, T., *Building Jerusalem: The rise and fall of the Victorian city* (London: Phoenix, 2005)

Jones, L., 'Public pursuit of private profit? Liberal businessmen and municipal politics in Birmingham, 1865–1900', *Business History*, iii, 25 (1983), 240–259

Judd, D., *Radical Joe: A life of Joseph Chamberlain* (Cardiff, United Kingdom: University of Wales Press, 1993)

Marquand, D., *Decline of the Public* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004)

Marsh, P., *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994)

Muirhead, J.H., *Nine Famous Birmingham Men – Lectures Delivered in the University of Birmingham* (Cornish Bros., Birmingham, 1909)

Pelling, H.M., *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain*, (London: Macmillan, 1968)

Shackley, B., “H. R. Yeoville Thomason.” in Ballard, P., (Ed.) *Birmingham’s Victorian and Edwardian Architects* (Wetherby: Oblong Creative for the Victorian Society, Birmingham and West Midlands Group, 2009)

Skipp, V., *The Making of Victorian Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1983)

Upton, C., *A history of Birmingham* (London, United Kingdom: Phillimore & Co, 1993)

Ward, R., *City-state and nation: Birmingham’s political history c.1830-1940* (London, United Kingdom: Phillimore & Co, 2004)

Wright Wilson, W., *The Life of George Dawson* (Percival Jones, Birmingham, 1905)

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Brewer, H.W., *Birmingham City Centre from Mason College Roof* (1886), drawing, “The Graphic” / British Library, viewed 2 January 2017, <[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e5/Birmingham\\_centre\\_from\\_Mason\\_College\\_roof\\_1886\\_contrast.jpg/800px-Birmingham\\_centre\\_from\\_Mason\\_College\\_roof\\_1886\\_contrast.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e5/Birmingham_centre_from_Mason_College_roof_1886_contrast.jpg/800px-Birmingham_centre_from_Mason_College_roof_1886_contrast.jpg)>

Figure 2. Council House. 2006. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web, viewed 3 January 2017, <<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/15/BirminghamCouncilHouse.jpg/240px-BirminghamCouncilHouse.jpg>>

Figure 3. Council House Salvati Mosaics. 2012. *Victorian Web*. Web, viewed 4 February 2017, < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/thomason/1e.jpg>>

Figure 4. Council House Central Pediment. 2012. *Victorian Web*. Web. 5 February 2017, < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/thomason/1d.jpg>>