

The Malthusian League (1877?1927) ^[1]

By: Nunez-Eddy, Claudia Keywords: birth control ^[2] Eugenics ^[3]

The Malthusian League, founded in London, England, in 1877 promoted the use of [contraception](#) ^[4] to limit family size. Activists Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant established the Malthusian League after they were arrested and exonerated for publishing a pamphlet describing techniques to prevent [pregnancy](#) ^[5]. Founders based the league on the principles of Thomas Malthus, a British nineteenth century economist, who wrote on the perils of a population growing beyond the resources available to support it. The Malthusian League advocated for limiting family size voluntarily through [contraception](#) ^[4] to avoid the overpopulation and poverty cautioned in Malthus' work. After fifty years, the Malthusian League closed due to the increasing disapproval for Malthus's economic theories of population and poverty. However, the Malthusian League's activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to more tolerant views of [contraception](#) ^[4] and [family planning](#) ^[6] in Great Britain in the twentieth century.

In June 1877 Charles Bradlaugh, a political activist and journal editor, and Annie Besant, a women's rights activist, were tried for distributing material that was considered obscene through the Freethought Publishing Company. At the time, anti-obscenity laws prohibited the transmission of medicine or literature that discussed reproduction. The book that Bradlaugh and Besant published was called *Fruits of Philosophy*, written by a physician called Charles Knowlton, and detailing nineteenth century contraceptive techniques material. Though historians are unsure how Bradlaugh and Besant were reported, historian Rosanna Ledbetter suspects that the Society for the Suppression of Vice brought charges against the two. The Society for the Suppression of Vice sought to uphold the moral character of the population by preventing obscene material like *Fruits of Philosophy* from being available to the general public.

At the beginning of the trial, the chief justice who tried the case, Alexander Cockburn, noted that the British government was not prosecuting Bradlaugh and Besant. Rather, the justice stated that the law against public indecency banned this type of immoral behavior, and that *Fruits of Philosophy* was considered immoral and obscene. While the judge noted that Bradlaugh and Besant did not have corrupt motives in distributing the material and should be exonerated, he found Bradlaugh and Besant guilty of knowingly publishing an immoral book. Bradlaugh and Besant were each fined 200 pounds and sentenced to six months in prison for the crime. However, they appealed the conviction, and stated that the verdict was vague. Upon appeal, their sentences were dropped.

Lasting four days, the trial gained immense publicity. Newspaper writers began to discuss the role of [birth control](#) ^[7] in limiting family size, and book sales of *Fruits of Philosophy* increased from 1000 to 125,000. Bradlaugh and Besant capitalized on the trial's publicity and the public's apparent willingness to discuss [contraception](#) ^[4], and founded a new [organization](#) ^[8] to advocate for [contraception](#) ^[4] for the purpose of [family planning](#) ^[6].

In July of 1877, Besant proposed her and Bradlaugh's idea of creating the Malthusian League to several organizations, including the Dialectical Society, which criticized spiritualism, the National Secular Society, and the Bradlaugh-Besant defense committee, which included supporters and witnesses at the trial. The organizations met to consider the possibility of forming an [organization](#) [8] to spread the ideals of Malthus, and in July 1877 appointed a subcommittee to [launch](#) [9] the [organization](#) [8]. In addition to Bradlaugh and Besant, the subcommittee also included other sympathizers like Charles Drysdale and his wife Alice Vickery, who were both witnesses for the trial, radical publisher Edward Truelove, and Robert G. Hember the secretary for the London Dialectical Society. The subcommittee formally established the Malthusian League in late July 1877.

Many of the founders of the Malthusian League formed the initial council members, including Drysdale as president and Besant as secretary. By the end of 1877, the League had over 900 members, with chapters throughout England, including Deptford, Nottingham, Manchester and London. After the first meeting in July 1878, membership rates stabilized at around 1000 members, who came from a variety of disciplines including medicine, publishing, and political activists.

According to historian Ledbetter, the Drysdale family played a prominent role in leading the League throughout its fifty years. Drysdale, a physician and witness at the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, became the League's first president in 1877 until his death in 1907, after which his wife Vickery, also a physician, succeeded him as president. Throughout Drysdale and Vickery's terms, their son Charles Vickery-Drysdale was involved first as editor of the League's journal in 1907 and then as president in 1921 after his mother's resignation.

The Malthusian League was founded upon the economic principles of Malthus, who opposed the predominant view of economists at the time who saw an increase in population as a sign of wealth and prosperity. Malthus theorized instead that population growth was exponential and that people always reproduced beyond their means until poverty and disease limited population growth. He published his theories, including his recommendation to marry at a later age and practice celibacy, in his 1798 book *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. While the Malthusian League based their ideas on Malthus's economic theory, they proposed alternate suggestions for controlling population growth.

Members of the Malthusian League, who due to their economic views called themselves Neo-Malthusians, argued that late marriage and celibacy would lead to unhappiness and ultimately an increase in prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases in a population. Neo-Malthusians instead advocated for early marriage and small families, a concept that appeared to be paradoxical in the late 1800s. Individuals who married early often had larger families given their extended ability to reproduce and the lack of available contraceptive techniques. Therefore, the Malthusian League argued that the best way to achieve both early marriage and small families was through [family planning](#) [6] and [contraception](#) [4], which would limit the number of children and keep families small.

The Malthusian League also promoted [contraception](#) [4] as a means to eliminate poverty, which they argued was the result of overpopulation of the working class. By utilizing [contraception](#) [4], wages would increase due to the resulting shortage of workers. As overcrowding [4] and working class wages improved, Neo-Malthusians argued that maternal and child health would similarly improve, reducing the number of families living on public and

privacy charity.

To fulfill those stated goals, the League disseminated information on Malthus' population theories and its consequences for the human population. While initially publishing articles in political journals like *The National Reformer* and *The Republican*, Drysdale proposed starting a Malthusian League monthly journal to reach a wider audience. In February 1879, the League released its first issue of *The Malthusian*. However, the [organization](#) [8] soon fell into debt because the journal's publication and distribution fees were greater than the sales. Despite the debt they incurred, the Malthusian League continued to publish its monthly journal until the League's end in 1927.

In addition to journal articles, members of the Malthusian League spoke at conferences, lectures, and open-forums throughout Europe and published pamphlets for the public on the population growth issue. By 1911, Drysdale claimed to have League chapters in the United States, Brazil, Holland, France, Austria, Germany, Spain, and Algeria. According to the historian Ledbetter, though Drysdale's claims were likely an exaggeration, the League did influence [family planning](#) [6] organizations in Europe. In 1913, the Malthusian League published its first pamphlet on contraceptive techniques, "Hygienic Methods of Family Limitations," and made it available to married couples.

The Malthusian League also sought to influence the medical profession's views on [contraception](#) [4]. They urged physicians to provide [contraception](#) [4] information to couples who wanted to limit family size, or to those they saw as unfit to raise children, a concept which received attention in the early 1900s due to the [eugenics movement](#) [10]. Eugenists in nineteenth and twentieth century England sought to preserve the positive traits of a population by limiting the reproductive capacity of unfit populations, including people with hereditary diseases, mental illness, and those exhibiting what was considered immoral behavior. Conversely, eugenists encouraged the fittest individuals to have large families through selective marriages with other fit individuals. Despite the League's efforts to reach out to physicians, who also wanted to limit hereditary diseases, most were unwilling to discuss [contraception](#) [4] as a means of family limitation due to anti-obscenity laws.

Like eugenists, the Neo-Malthusians supported population growth control. However, organizations like the [Eugenics Education Society](#) [11] supported the idea of selective marriage and large families among what they considered the fittest individuals, whereas the League maintained that small families should prevail among all classes in order to prevent overpopulation and poverty. By mid-twentieth century, many [birth control](#) [7] advocates used the [eugenics](#) [12] movement's endorsement of [contraception](#) [4] as a way to add credibility and respectability to the [birth control movement](#) [13].

The social stigma and moral judgment surrounding sex and [contraception](#) [4] in nineteenth century England also proved to be a source of resistance against the Malthusian League, which faced resistance from both the medical profession and religious groups. As a physician, League president Drysdale continued to lecture at medical conferences in an attempt to gain the medical profession's support for [contraception](#) [4], though he was largely unsuccessful. According to historian Ledbetter, while some physicians did not publically support the League due to social constraints, many sided with the church's stance against [contraception](#) [4] on moral grounds. Ledbetter explains that while medical and religious experts disagreed with the birth control movement, they preferred to ignore the discussion rather than actively oppose it. In contrast, Socialists openly argued against Malthusian doctrine.

Rather than opposing birth control, Socialists disagreed with the Malthusian principles of unchecked population growth as the cause of poverty. Socialists argued that poverty was caused by an ineffective [organization](#) [8] of a society's infrastructure, and that it existed because society rewarded the wealthier class rather than focusing on assisting the working class. By the 1920s, Socialist ideas, in addition to the theories of evolutionary biologists [Charles Darwin](#) [14] and Herbert Spencer, began to prevail over Malthus' theories. Darwin noted that when a species reproduces beyond its means, the fittest traits that allow for survival become favorable through [natural selection](#) [15]. Despite the shifting predominant views, the Neo-Malthusians continued to promote the economic principles of Malthus.

Similar to the shifting beliefs, the 1920s was also marked by a greater tolerance towards the discussion of sex and [contraception](#) [4], but according to historian Ledbetter, resistance to Malthus's economic theory continued. In order to counter public opposition, the League changed their name to The New Generation in January 1922, which Ledbetter explains as an unsuccessful attempt to regain influence over the growing [birth control movement](#) [13]. Because the [organization](#) [8] retained all of its previous positions on Malthus's economic theory, the [organization](#) [8] soon returned back to the original name in 1925.

In December 1927, the Malthusian League suspended its official activities, and maintained an unofficial existence for the next thirty-four years. According to Ledbetter, in 1949 Drysdale's son, Vickery-Drysdale, noticed that post-World War II sentiments about poverty and world population issues could revive the [organization](#) [8]. However, he and former members of the League were unable to find enough people for membership, thus ending the attempt at reformation. The League split the remaining money amongst organizations with similar values and objectives, including Family Planning Association, [International Planned Parenthood Federation](#) [16], Abortion Law Reform League, and Simon Population Trust. Though the Malthusian League was ultimately unsuccessful in promoting Malthus' economic principles as the cause of population overgrowth, the [organization](#) [8] contributed to the shift towards an open discussion of reproduction, [contraception](#) [4] and poverty in early twentieth-century England.

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The Malthusian League, founded in London, England, in 1877 promoted the use of contraception to limit family size. Activists Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant established the Malthusian League after they were arrested and exonerated for publishing a pamphlet describing techniques to prevent pregnancy. Founders based the league on the principles of Thomas Malthus, a British nineteenth century economist, who wrote on the perils of a population growing beyond the resources available to support it. The Malthusian League advocated for limiting family size voluntarily through contraception to avoid the overpopulation and poverty cautioned in Malthus? work. After fifty years, the Malthusian League closed due to the increasing disapproval for Malthus?s economic theories of population and poverty. However, the Malthusian League?s activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to more tolerant views of contraception and family planning in Great Britain in the twentieth century.

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Publisher

Arizona State University. School of Life Sciences. Center for Biology and Society. Embryo Project Encyclopedia.

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Format

Articles ^[37]

Last Modified

Wednesday, July 4, 2018 - 04:40

DC Date Accessioned

Thursday, April 27, 2017 - 22:44

DC Date Available

Thursday, April 27, 2017 - 22:44

DC Date Created

2017-04-27

DC Date Created Standard

Thursday, April 27, 2017 - 07:00

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