

Thomas Hill Green, 1836-1882

Biograph by [Geoffrey Thomas](#)

<https://liberalhistory.org.uk/history/green-thomas-hill/>

Thomas Hill Green was that rare combination, a high-powered philosopher and political theorist who also contributed effectively to practical politics. His friend, the Cambridge philosopher, Henry Sidgwick, said that while he could hold his own with Green in metaphysics and epistemology, when it came to politics, 'I always felt the chances were that before long his superior grasp and insight would force me to retreat'.

Born at Birkin, a village in the West Riding of Yorkshire, on 7 April 1836, Green was the son of a clergyman. His mother died when he was only a year old. Ancestors on his father's side included Oliver Cromwell, to Green's great pride. Temperamentally a republican and opponent of hereditary privilege, Green admired the man who had overturned the monarchy and created the conditions for popular sovereignty, whatever the downside of the Commonwealth experiment.

Green was educated, first at home, then at Rugby School, the late domain of Dr Thomas Arnold. He proceeded to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1855; here he gained a second in classics, a first in Greats (philosophy and ancient history) and a third in modern history. Green was inclined to idleness in early life; even at Oxford, he was at first academically competent rather than intellectually distinguished. But the bracing mix of Balliol's power-house atmosphere and the focused attention of its Master, Benjamin Jowett (the arch Victorian talent-spotter), stimulated his mind and fed his analytical powers.

After graduation he wavered about his vocation between the priesthood, journalism, and academe. Academe won: he had a successful life at Oxford as fellow (1860), tutor (1866) and finally as White's professor of moral philosophy (1878). In the late 1870s the symptoms of heart disorder began to show; he died on 26 March 1882. In 1871 he married Charlotte Symonds, sister of his friend John Addington Symonds, the historian and essayist. There were no children.

Green's two main books were published posthumously: *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), to which he was making the final revisions when he died, and *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, collated from his lecture notes. The *Lectures* were first published by R. L. Nettleship in his edition of Green's *Works* (London, 1885-88) and soon were published separately. There is an excellent modern edition by Paul Harris and John Morrow (Cambridge, 1986). Green's pamphlet, *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract* (Oxford & London, 1881) was a landmark document in recognising that legal freedom of contract can conceal real, unjust inequalities in the

powers of the parties and that even voluntary contracts can work against the public interest where such inequalities prevail.

Green was a Christian – of a kind. Brought up in the evangelical tradition, he was nonetheless decisively influenced by German biblical criticism in the late 1850s and early 1860s. From then on, he could no longer accept the Bible as the immediate vehicle of the Word of God. One way of reading his later work is as a reworking in philosophical terms of what he took to be the picture-language of Christianity. This is a very Hegelian approach to both Christianity and philosophy. The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) looms, an immense figure, behind Green. But Green was never a disciple of Hegel; he borrowed, but kept his critical distance. He owed much, and no less, to Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Green was an idealist in the philosophical sense of stressing the role of mind in the construction of knowledge, as opposed to regarding the mind as a mere passive mirror of nature.

Alongside his academic career, Green ran a lively stream of political engagements. He supported pressure groups such as the Reform League (for extending the franchise), the National Education League, and the United Kingdom Alliance (for anti-drink legislation). In 1865-66 he was an assistant commissioner for the Taunton Commission on secondary education. His work was informed by the two principles that education should be diverse, with different types of school serving children of different aptitudes and inclinations; and that no child should be barred from higher education by parental poverty. This last did not automatically mean, though it did not exclude, state provision. Green was active in opening Oxford University scholarships to the needy.

Party politics also claimed him. He was an activist in the Oxford North Ward Liberal Association. In short succession in the mid-1870s he was elected to the Oxford School Board and to the Town Council – the first don to sit on the council by public election rather than university nomination. Prolegomena to Ethics was put on hold as he electioneered for the Liberals in the 1880 general election.

Useful books on Green include Melvin Richter's *The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and His Age* (London, 1964), which sets the intellectual and cultural background; and *The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green*, edited by Andrew Vincent (Aldershot, 1986). This explores topics and issues in Green's philosophy. Also on the philosophical side, A. J. M. Milne's chapter on Green in *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (London, 1962) contains a clear, informed, and able discussion. A. D. Lindsay's *T.H. Green and the Idealists*, printed as an introduction to *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (London 1941 et seq.) is a minor classic.