

Arnold Rowntree – an illustrated talk by Sarah Sheils

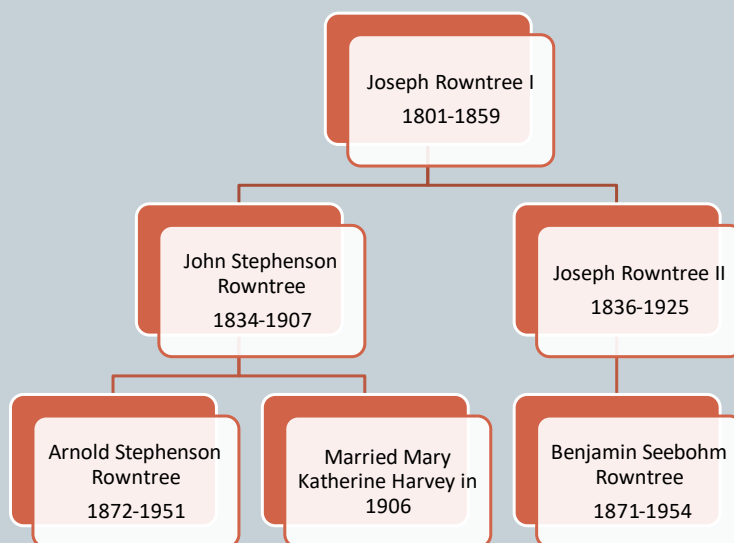
The title of our talks, “Why are the Rowntrees still relevant?” immediately begs the question “Are they?” The Rowntree Society, set up in 2001 by Steve Burkeman, was designed to try to ensure that the Rowntree name and legacy did not disappear. They are currently sponsoring research into aspects of the Rowntree story that have been overlooked in the past, and for example are facing some of the more uncomfortable aspects of the cocoa business.

In fact, the name of Joseph Rowntree does not seem to be in danger of being forgotten, as so much of the work of the Trusts set up by Joseph in 1904, and which bear his name, the Village trust, the Charitable Trust and the Social Service Trust, now known as the Reform Trust, continues to this day.

The purpose of our talks today about Arnold and Seebohm Rowntree, nephew and son of Joseph, is to try to trace the connections between the ideas that they put into practice and the current work of the three trusts, to see how much of what they worked for is still relevant today.

The lives of the two cousins, Seebohm and Arnold Rowntree, were almost coterminous, Seebohm 1871 -1954 and Arnold, 1872 -1951.

Rowntree Family Tree (Simplified)



Seebohm was the son, and Arnold the nephew of Joseph Rowntree 11. In many ways very different characters, their upbringing in the Society of Friends, or Quakers, their education at Bootham School in York and the influence of Joseph Rowntree on their early working lives meant that their future endeavours were built on shared foundations.

They did not always get on well, but generally worked towards the same ends. Seebohm was the intellectual, Arnold the practical man with a reputation for good cheer and bonhomie.

In a talk of this length there is not room to go into detailed biography, but I will tell you a bit about Arnold's early years to set the scene for his later character and achievements.



Joseph Rowntree II with his sons and nephew Arnold

Joseph Seebohm Rowntree (son), Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (son)
Joseph Rowntree II, Arnold Stephenson Rowntree (nephew) and Oscar
Frederick Rowntree (son)

Arnold was the seventh child of his parents, John Stephenson Rowntree and his wife Elizabeth Hotham, a Leeds Quaker. Arnold's father ran the family coffee and tea business on Pavement in York, later moving to live on the Mount in a large house overlooking the Knavesmire. Arnold was to live in the area for almost all of his life, settling at Chalfonts, a house now commemorated in name only, when he married May Harvey in 1906. They retired to Brook House in Thornton le Dale in 1939.

When Arnold was three and his younger sister Hilda, was a baby their mother was killed in an accident driving a pony and trap. The two youngest children were sent to their mother's sister and her husband, Joel Cadbury and they stayed in Birmingham until their father re-married some years later. This Cadbury connection lasted with Arnold for the rest of his life.

Both Arnold and his cousin Seebohm were sent to Bootham school in 1883. Seebohm was the more academic, Arnold the easier going. Arnold was known as a keen sportsman, a dogged footballer, a cricketer who never lost his love of the game and as popular with all. He was large and lovable boy and young man, whose sunny nature recommended him and this meant he was picked out by his Uncle Joseph in his early twenties to join the family cocoa business.

He was soon put in charge of advertising and overseeing the Company's travelling salesmen. This took him all over the country and strengthened his ties with other Quaker connections at the same time.



Arnold
Stephenson
Rowntree.
1872-1951

In a talk of this length there is only time to touch on a few aspects of his life. Apart from his work for the Rowntree business, which he kept up until he retired in 1939, Arnold was active on the Reform Trust, set up to undertake social investigations, which the Charitable Trust often financed. Arnold was on the board from the Trust's inception in 1904 until his death in 1951, and Chair from 1925 to 1938, when Seebohm succeeded him.

He became director of the Darlington based Northern Echo newspaper when his Uncle Joseph was persuaded by Charles Starmer to take it over as a Liberal newspaper to counter the Tory Press, such as the Daily Mail that had followed a jingoist line on the Boer War and in the 1930s was to back both Hitler and Mussolini. Under Arnold's leadership the Northern Echo eventually amalgamated with several other local papers to become the Westminster Press.

His interests were very wide ranging, and he led the Adult Schools movement for many years. eventually seeing Leeds acquire University status, with friends he founded the Holiday Fellowship and was involved in the Youth Hostels Association and the early days of the Ramblers, was a keen internationalist and supporter of the League of Nations movement between the wars, worked at the setting up of the Whitley council to agree pay settlements in the he and Clerk or Chair of the Governors of the joint York Friends Schools.

Unlike his father, who had been Lord Mayor of York, he did not get actively involved as a member of York City Council, but served as Sherrif when Alderman Wragge was Lord Mayor in 1931 and Mrs JB Morrell was Lady Mayoress. Arnold supported many initiatives in York with financial and other help, for example in the purchase of Askham Bog as a nature reserve in 1946 and the setting up of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

In the 1930s he tried all sorts of initiatives to help the unemployed and having seen at first hand the disruption in Vienna after the Anschluss and the take-over of the Austrian Government he and his brother- in- law Ted Harvey worked to assist political refugees arriving in Britain.

The areas of Arnold's work I am going to look at today are Adult Education, his work for Social Welfare in Parliament between 1909 and 1918, (primarily children's health and the introduction of National Insurance), as a newspaperman and during World War One, for Pacifism and freedom of conscience.

Adult Education.

Although no great scholar himself, Arnold had a real understanding and respect for the vital importance of education. For most of the population elementary schooling came in with Forster's education act in 1870 but was piecemeal to start with. The school leaving age was set at 11 years old in 1893, at 12 in 1899 and did not reach 14 until the end of the First World War in 1918.

He had grown up in the time when the Quaker's took it upon themselves to run both Adult and Sunday schools and just behind his father's shop on Pavement in Lady Peckitt's yard and he and his father and cousins all gave time to the classes there. The school leaving age was increased to eleven years old in 1899 and literacy immediately improved young people's chances of gaining better employment.

After he left school, he and his sister Gertrude went to live for a year in Leeman Road and teach there. This would have been a far cry from his own comfortable upbringing in the large family home on the Mount, and it helped him to gain a real understanding of the precarious lives of the poorer railway workers who lived in the houses that had been rapidly and badly built. (When he became Member of Parliament for York in 1909, he took on the cause of the railway workers when they went on strike at a time when and he campaigned for the nationalisation of the railways 35 years before it came about in 1948).

Arnold became Honorary Secretary of the National Adult school Union in 1905. His future brother-in-law and school friend, Ted Harvey, after graduating from Oxford, spent some time as warden of Toynbee Hall in the East End of London, living and teaching in the Settlement, and in 1909 Arnold, encouraged by his uncle Joseph, set up the York settlement in St. Mary's, close to Seebohm's house just off Bootham. At its opening Arnold expressed his belief that education should be about much more than pure functionality.

He said "*with the advance of education there is a greater demand for the teaching of literature, history and economics than for reading, writing and arithmetic..... the education required is not just bread and butter education which merely makes them more efficient wealth producers, but ... the time has come when men should take part in the education that is called liberal because it concerns life rather than livelihood*".



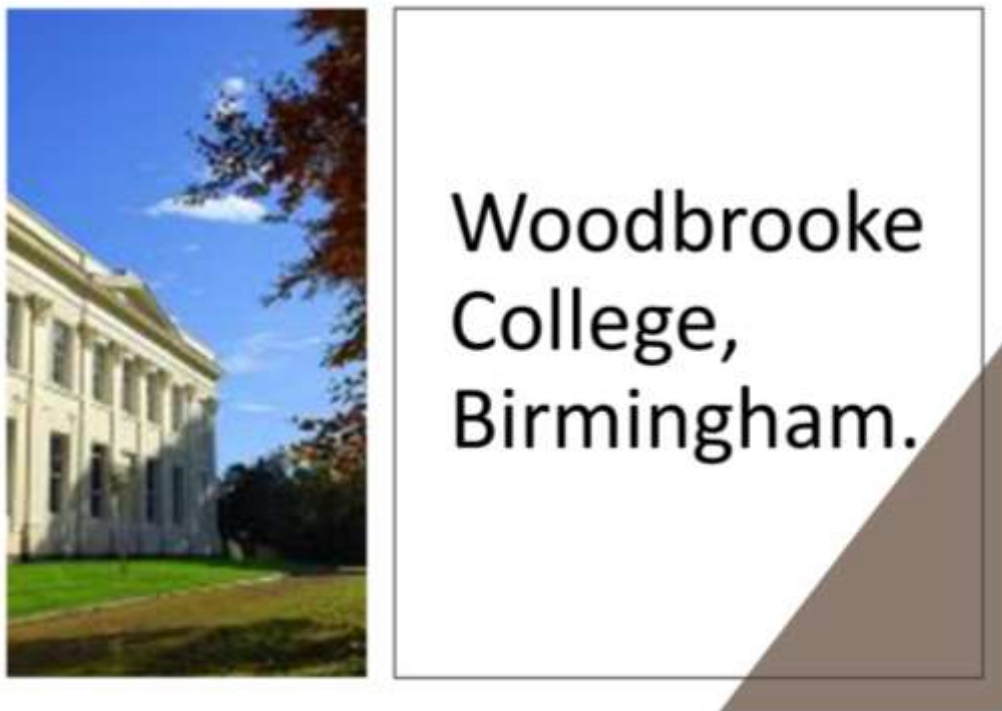
The Settlement continued until 2004, more recently at Holgate Hill, when it closed and gave a substantial grant to the University of York's Lifelong Learning department "so that the spirit of the York Educational Settlement could be kept alive and well in the heart of the city".

Arnold was also much involved in the transition of Leeds Adult College to its University status, and in the Cober Hill residential college near Scarborough, started by his cousin Wilhelm as a place for fruitful holidays combined with educational courses. Is still exists today, in a rather different form.



Arnold was determined his own six children should be truly educated in the widest sense of the word. His wife Mary Katherine Harvey had been an early graduate of Westfield College, University of London. In the interwar years the children were all sent to study in Germany for a while after school and before higher education, and internationalism was an important factor in preparing them for adult life.

As chair of the Governors of the 2 York Quaker schools Arnold tried to make such opportunities available to as many of the boys and girls as possible. In addition to more formal education, he was one of the founder members of the Holiday Fellowship and had much to do with the setting up of the Youth Hostels Association.



National reputation, The role of the Press.

Joseph Rowntree, like most of the rest of his family was a member of the Liberal party and ever since school days he had been very interested in liberal politics. In the years following the Boer war and the jingoism of the Daily Mail newspaper, then owned by Lord Rothermere of the Harmsworth family, drove Joseph Rowntree to feel that the liberal voice should have its own newspaper.

When the Joseph Rowntree Reform trust was set up in 1904 he was persuaded by Charles Starmer of the Darlington based Northern Echo newspaper to buy the paper and Arnold was put in charge of running the new North of England newspaper company. In conjunction with John Bowes Morrell and Ernest E Taylor, both former school friends. This eventually became the Westminster Press. (Arnold already had several years of experience writing for and helping to manage the Quaker newspaper, The Friend).

In an address to the Darlington town council in 1909, Arnold set out his hopes for the newspaper. *“Whatever developments there are, the press must be kept free.... Freedom must be combined with a true sense of responsibility, otherwise the power of the press might become a menace to national welfare”. He saw the main purpose of the press to be the assertion of truth, the unveiling of illusion, the dissipating of hateto set in motion the forces of instruction and imagination which change opinions.*

In the 1930s the Daily Mail supported both Hitler and Mussolini.

In 1907 Arnold, together with G.M Trevelyan and several Cambridge educated Christian Socialists, founded a weekly journal, The Nation. This continued until 1931. When it became the New Statesman, putting forward a Liberal viewpoint.



The question of the freedom of the press, and how far our newspapers and media channels should be privately owned, and by whom, is just as relevant as it was a century ago.

Social reform through Parliament.

When a Liberal government was elected by a landslide majority in 1906, it started to put a programme of social reforms into legislation; much of the preliminary work on which these reforms were based had been supported by the research work of Arnold's cousin Seebohm.

His publication of his survey, *Poverty: A study of town life*, published in 1901 and based in large part on his research in York had produced incontrovertible evidence that the state of Britain at the opening of the twentieth century was very far from the image portrayed by the ideas of Victorian Imperial power. In York the Liberal party was to become very much the province of the Quakers in the first decade of the new century, and they were successful in campaigning to get the York Tram companies taken over by the city corporation to make them more reliable and with a better fare structure. Arnold's wife, Mary Katherine was member of the York. Liberal women's group who were campaigning for the right to vote, and once he became MP she did not let him lose sight of the fact.

The Liberal party proposed the Children's Charter. (The Children's Charter allowed local authorities to provide free school meals, imposed severe punishments for the neglect or ill treatment of children, made the sale of tobacco to children illegal, and introduced Borstal reformatories instead of adult prisons for children.

In 1922 Arnold Rowntree found that over 11,000 young people under 21 were imprisoned and he campaigned for youth custody and education for them. His wife May, later a magistrate in York, used every means at her disposal to keep young people out of prison)

The then Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, introduced the Old Age Pension, and a proposed system of national Insurance to protect the working population from the evils of unemployment through sickness or injury

known as the People's Budget, based in part on the research of Seebohm Rowntree published in his study of the causes of poverty in 1901.

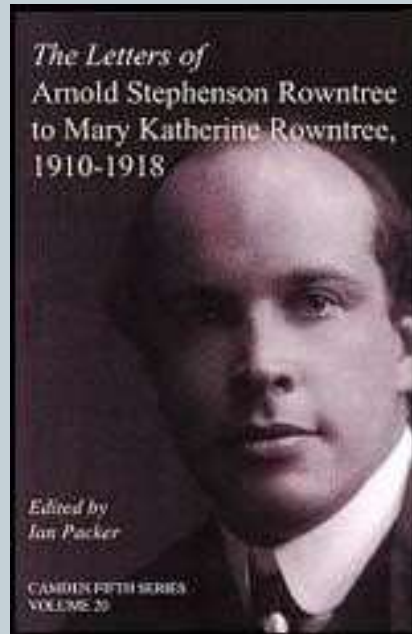
The Liberal government ran into confrontation with the House of Lords, who threatened to oppose the increase in taxation needed to pay for it and the proposed land tax. Stalemate was reached and a constitutional crisis ensued. Lloyd George described his budget as a War budget, designed to wage war on poverty and squalidness. A general Election was called, and Arnold decided he must stand for election to become one of York's 2 members of Parliament. He was duly elected, coming top of the poll. The other member was the Tory, J.G Butcher.

During his time as MP Arnold learned the frustrations of the Parliamentary system, but served York well, for example doing all in his power to explain the new National Insurance scheme to York people, by setting up information centres and public meetings to ensure that all participants knew what was involved and what they were eligible for.

As a back bench MP between 1910 and 1914 he did much to support Liberal policies and worked with the group within the party who considered themselves to be the most radical or progressive, even co-operating with some of the members of the infant Labour party on occasion.



Ian Packer's edition of Arnold Rowntree's letters to his wife 1910-1918



Freedom of Conscience and human rights.

The biggest challenge for the Quaker Liberal group in Parliament came when War was declared against Germany and her allies in August 1914. Initially a small group tried to set up an anti-war alliance, but this was soon clearly hopeless and when reports started to come in of German atrocities in Belgium even Arnold decided that the war was a necessary evil.

To help young men of military service age Arnold and another former Bootham boy, Phillip Baker, later Philip Noel Baker, discussed the setting up of the Friends Ambulance Unit. Soon six hundred young men had signed up and by late October 1914 many of them were already in France. Arnold supported them with finance, practical help and frequent visits, often a great personal danger to him, throughout the war.

Friends' Ambulance Unit Badge.



In the Second World War it was reconvened and two of Arnold's sons, Michael and Richard served in it, Michael alongside the Eighth Army in North Africa and Italy, Richard in Yugoslavia among the thousands of displaced persons and refugees there, and their sister Tessa set up the women's version and served throughout the war from 1940 onwards. (I was lucky enough to meet Michael and Richard's wives and write about them for the Rowntree society, and more research on Tessa is going ahead now).

During the First World War Arnold worked hard to get the status of Conscientious objection recognised and in 1916 he intervened to prevent the sixteen young men imprisoned in Richmond Castle, North Yorkshire, from being deported to France and shot as deserters as General Maxwell, veteran of the executions in Ireland after the Easter Rising, had planned.

The Richmond 16

This illustration comes from the little museum at Richmond castle in North Yorkshire . It commemorates the case of the Richmond Sixteen, Conscientious Objectors who were imprisoned in Richmond Castle in April/ May 1916 for refusing all war related work. They were to be taken to Boulogne in France where under military law they could be shot for refusing to obey orders. Arnold Rowntree was told of their plight and he and Ted Harvey went to Reginald McKenna , then Chancellor of the Exchequer , to get him to intercede for them with Lloyd George and Adjutant General Macready. " Contrary to all regulations Macready was persuaded to telegram to stop the deportations and executions.



Conclusion.

What I think about Arnold Rowntree was that as a man of principle, he had to constantly weigh up the conflicts between his role as a politician and as a Quaker. He was prepared to face a lot of opprobrium and never lost his faith in human nature. If optimism and a persistent belief in the possibility of improvement of the human condition are qualities we still need, then his example is still much needed.

The work of the Three Trusts continues, with the research work done on poverty and social justice still accepted as a benchmark for current social policy in Britain. What is still needed today are people with the will power to make sure that ideas and research are converted into practical and enduring action.

I would like to leave you with a quotation from Marina Hyde, Guardian journalist, that seems appropriate in our current circumstances, with war and political turmoil threatening world peace.

“In the years and decades after the second world war, many nations in Europe looked back on their actions came to the painful realisation that they could and should have done more in various ways, not least in accepting refugees. As images of exodus are now reminding us, history is never in the past. History is now. It will be to our enduring shame if we don’t try much harder to be on the right side of it”.

Marina Hyde, “What just happened. Dispatches from turbulent times”, Guardian Faber 2022.