

Standish Meacham — *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform 1880-1914: The Search for Community*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 211.

Toynbee Hall and Social Reform is a sophisticated study of a difficult topic that meets the high standards of research and scholarship typical of Standish Meacham, Professor of History at the University of Texas. Neither a history of Toynbee Hall nor a Biography of its founder, the book explores the unique reforming ethos based on community and individual connection, which was fostered at Oxbridge during the late-nineteenth century, and implemented at Toynbee Hall in response to the complex social problems produced by industrialization and urbanization.

In the first of seven chapters Meacham locates the roots of the ethos in Christian principles and public school and Oxbridge idealism; and he discusses its growth, particularly at Balliol college, Oxford, under the aegis of such people as T. H. Green, Benjamin Jowett, and Arnold Toynbee, whose philosophy of disinterested service instilled intellectual rigor into the "good works" of a generation of upper-middle-class young men. The latter became convinced of their duty to lead and to promote the common good. They became convinced too, that social disintegration was avoidable only if fundamental questions of social organization were addressed by high-minded individuals, who would live among the poor and teach them the virtues of self help, hard work, and the finer things in life, and thus how to realize their "best selves". Through such revitalized communities, they believed, social order would be restored, because individuals of high and low estate would be connected by a set of commonly shared goals and vertical relationships involving mutual obligations and responsibilities, and because authority would emanate from the top down.

This essentially hierarchical world view was put into practice by the Reverend Samuel Barnett, a Balliol product who was the founder and guiding spirit of Toynbee Hall, and whose background, aims, and convictions, along with the work of Hall during its first quarter of century, are the subjects of chapters two and three.

Toynbee Hall, the first settlement house in England or America, was established in 1884 in Whitechapel, one of the worst slums in the East End of London. Designed to bring recent male university graduates into communion with members of the working classes on a harmonious "one by one" basis, its buildings and lifestyle resembled those of an Oxbridge college, Barnett naively considering such an environment conducive to social and cultural enrichment. To facilitate close relationships between settlement workers and neighbourhood residents, the Hall created a vast educational network of lectures, classes, clubs, organizations, and projects — what Meacham calls "the working machinery of connection" — the more particular purposes of which were to liberate the human spirit and to reform the character of the masses by providing them with righteous role models and convincing them to respect tradition, order, and authority. Because Barnett was afraid of democracy and the potential power of the proletariat, he never wanted to see classes abolished, but rather the differences between them overcome by a revived sense of community and mutual dedication to the achievement of noble common ends.

For 15 years Toynbee Hall appeared to flourish. Its programs were heavily subscribed, and its ideals inspired a widespread settlement house movement. But by 1900 Barnett had to admit that East Enders were not in much closer connection with their leaders than they had been in 1884. Among a number of problems was that the Toynbee Hall world's artificiality in a slum area actually discouraged the sense of connection and fellowship it was intended to produce. Furthermore, the terms on which graduates met the urban poor were established wholly by the former, and involved a paternalistic attack on working-class cultural institutions as valueless impediments to the development of "best selves." The goals of liberating the human spirit and promoting connection frequently ended up being forsaken in favour of the authoritarian habits of hierarchy, which not surprisingly appealed little to East Enders who proved stubbornly devoted to their own "inferior" values and lifestyles.

By 1900 too the philosophical assumptions of the Toynbee Hall ethos were being challenged successfully by socialists, Christian socialists, centralizers, and scientifically-minded sociologists. These challenges and the ways in which Toynbee Hall responded are the focus of Meacham's middle chapters.

Barnett, the author explains, eventually realized that Toynbee Hall's ends were too ambitious to be achieved without assistance. He thus abandoned his self help position — although not his belief in the virtues of localism and connection — and accepted his challengers' view that only the state had the resources to deal effectively with the problems of poverty and unemployment and to provide the type of environment that would foster the growth of the human spirit. While Toynbee Hall continued to try to bring community to life in a particular place, it moved away from the principle of individual connection and the practice of educational enlightenment towards social investigation and amelioration. The result was the training of a new kind of elite, no longer intended to serve as exemplars to the local community, but to assume positions of leadership within the political sphere and expanding national bureaucracy. Whether the Hall lost its soul in the process, is one of the questions Meacham attempts to answer.

The final chapters of the book explore the early careers of two of the most distinguished of the so-called "new elite," William Beveridge and his brother-in-law, R.H. Tawney.

Beveridge, the father of the post-1945 welfare state, was a Balliol and Toynbee Hall product who came to believe himself an enlightened citizenship in its highest form. Despite major departures from the Toynbee Hall ethos, his goal remained the community; and this along his abiding compulsion to get at the big problems of society in a directly useful way, was a testament to his East End apprenticeship, Meacham argues.

Tawney, another Balliol-Toynbee Hall graduate, made his mark as a great economic historian and educator of the working class. Arguably the most sympathetic character in the book and portrayed by Meacham with particular sensitivity, Tawney, unlike most Hall products, believed completely in the innate equality of human beings and in a kind of democratic fraternity that transcended class. He thus rejected the Toynbee Hall dogma of cultural hierarchy and disinterested elitism, but he accepted the ideal of service and belief that people needed to be free in order to fulfill the highest potential. By perceiving a role for the privileged as facilitators who could bring men and women of different classes together to develop common purposes, Tawney was restating the sense of obligation that had brought Toynbee Hall into being.

Meacham concludes that while Toynbee Hall was able to sustain neither the ideals nor the resulting spirit of personal connection and local community, in a transfigured form its perceptions and goals imparted a potent legacy to twentieth-century England. Certainly the Beveridge/Tawney concern about the well-being of a community that was more than the sum of its individual members, link the nineteenth century with the assumptions of modern British welfare state — or at least its pre-Thatcher incarnation.

Toynbee Hall and Social Reform deals with an ethos that was founded and challenged on intellectual bases connected to the fundamental relationships between human beings and between them and their society; it deals too with such critical issues as the purposes of social thought and social reform. These subjects do not make easy reading. But an analysis of their place in the settlement house movement, Meacham proves convincingly, is essential to a better understanding of social reform developments during the past one hundred years. At times one regrets the author's decision to approach his subject from the top down — rather like Toynbee Hall approached the residents of Whitechapel — and thus not to provide information on the reactions of East enders to the Hall's efforts to help themselves. On the whole, however, one can only admire Meacham's perceptive treatment of an important and complicated subject.

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