**OCTOBER 2015, Bridget Morris**

**Who was Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree?**

ABSTRACT

B. S. Rowntree is a shadowy figure in modern British history, but by his work in linking Poverty, Social Policy, and Business Efficiency, and working at the heart of government through two World Wars, he has come to be regarded as one of the major pioneers in the shaping of modern Britain.  A Quaker scion of the Rowntree confectionery company in York, he famously burnt his private papers before he moved to live in Buckinghamshire.  But the titles of his many published works are a sure sign of the continued relevance of many of the social questions still being debated today. For example: *We can Conquer Unemployment*, *The Human Factor in Business,* *Mixed Farming and Muddled Thinking*, *How shall we think of Society and Human Relations?*, *The Present State of the Housing Problem*, *A Survey on the Problems of Ageing and the Care of Old People.*

The Rowntree Society, a small heritage-based charity working in York, has recently acquired (with the help of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund) a collection of Rowntree's writings that includes an autographed letter written on 10 Downing St notepaper concerning the Minimum Wage. The Society is using this collection as a means of reappraising the extent of B.S. Rowntree's influence in the early decades of the 20th century. In her talk Bridget Morris will provide an introductory survey of Rowntree’s life and work, including his experiment with scientific business management at the famous Rowntree & Co confectionery company in York.

**IMAGE – lecture title**

I would like to start by saying a few words about the work of the Rowntree Society, then also to outline what we’re doing with the Seebohm Rowntree Exhibition and our intentions in doing so, and how this project all came about. Then in my talk I want to give a brief overview of SR’s work, in the perhaps slightly ambitious hope that it will be a small contribution towards a re-evaluation of his Seebohm’s contribution to 20th history, not just to social reform but also in scientific management studies – possibly these two branches of academic study are too segmented to enable his legacy to be seen as a whole? That’s my plan in any case.

**IMAGE – RS homepage**

The Rowntree Society

The Rowntree Society was set up 2004 at time when there was a real possibility of the name Rowntree disappearing altogether, certainly in York’s richly layered history. Following the sale of the Rowntree Macintosh company to the Swiss confectionery giant Nestle in 1988 there was no longer anywhere to find out about the Rowntree legacy across the city, or no channel for the rich wealth of living memories held by the thousands of people who were once connected with the Rowntree company. We set ourselves up as an independent registered charity to fill that gap, and have now become a place for people to go for authoritative guidance on any aspect of Rowntree history. Let me say at once that we should be distinguished from the Joseph Rowntree trusts (JRF, JRHT, JRCT, JRRT). Their work (in helping shape social policy at national level, housing, social justice, peace, electoral reform) is about the present and the future, whereas ours is about the legacy and using the past as a prism and a means of highlighting contemporary issues.

What I do regularly in my job as the Director of the RS is that I work with any or all levels of audience, from universities to schools, the media, family historians, other similar heritage organisations, and I help with putting people in contact with each other, so facilitating others to get big projects to get off the ground. As I just said, the aim is to bring the history alive to different groups of people in the community and to show that there’s still a message for today from the Rowntree story – a kalaiedescope of stories indeed, from which variations of that vibrant message keep emerging – that’s the exciting thing about my job, you don’t know what message is going to emerge next.

Today, it’s more than 10 years after our establishment. We’ve created a new website that contains a lot of information about the legacy, we’ve commissioned a new biography of JR, and we’ve just completed a major Oral History project (=YRR) funded by HLF. This project has created the largest publically accessible archive of confectionery manufacturing Oral Hisotry memories dating between 1937 and 1990, mapped onto a unique interactive virtual web-map, which combines audio recordings.

Our attention has now turned to Seebohm Rowntree, and not just his work on poverty studies. (In fact, when recently there was a discussion with the York Civic Trust about how to encapusulate his work in just a few words, this led to enormous discussions about how and where to place the focus – But his name and dates might have done as well, maybe! It was so difficult. Why should we say he was a Quaker? Etc etc. And even his name is problematic, it’s Seebohm a family name from the German branch of the family……) We finished with: *Birthplace of Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954). Quaker, innovator in business management, pioneering social scientist and author of ‘Poverty, a Study of Town Life’ (1901), which influenced the founders of the welfare state.*

**Image - of collection**

On the background to this current project: we were offered a collection of his works by a specialist bookdealer who was about to sell the collection to one of his customers in Japan – where there is a clear interest in him as a business management guru. These included about 40 items, many of them signed by Rowntree, and including a number of rare pamphlets in obscure journals, and at the heart of this collection is a letter on the minimum wage written from Downing Street (which I’ll come back to shortly) – some signed, and there’s a catalogue. We spent some time fundraising for this collection and were surprised by the response and the way in which people saw so quickly how the titles of Rowntree’s works, written 100 years ago, still resonate so much today. HLF then supplemented the funds with a Sharing Heritage grant, to enable some small exhibitions to be created and national networks set up. I’m delighted that this Oxford one is the first.

**IMAGE – Board meeting/ + Memo**

To get on with my subject of who Seebohm was, I’ll start with something of the wider family itself.

The key members of the family are:

Born in Scarborough, Joseph Rowntree [Senior] (*1801*-59)moved to York on his 21st birthday to establish a prosperous grocery business in a shop on Pavement. He made contributions to problems of insanitary housing and sewage disposal, he established a soup kitchen in 1846, and he pioneered schools for boys and classes for adults.

His son, Joseph Rowntree (1837-1925) transformed his brother’s business into a major confectionery manufacturer and a household name. But he also had a major influence on our understanding of poverty and the movement for social reform. He founded three major trusts, dedicated to achieving social justice and to provide housing for workers and their families. Those trusts continue their work today. Rowntree also founded the York Adult School, gave lifelong service to The Retreat, a pioneering mental hospital and helped to create York's city library. Rowntree was an active campaigner on a number of issues, including temperance, House of Lords reform, for example. = Seebohm’s father.

**IMAGE “John Wilhelm Rowntree, once asked which Rowntree are you?” answered “the brother of Poverty and the son of Drink”.**

As a tightly knit family, with extensive roots and with its origins in North Yorkshire, the Rowntrees passed on their core values down the generations, thus maximising its impact towards social change over the course of the twentieth century*.* Other family members, such as Arnold Rowntree, (Liberal MP for York during the years of WWI and dedicated advocate for the voices of the conscientious objectors, then a major player in Newspaper groups representing ‘liberal’ politics), Oscar Rowntree, Joshua Rowntree (Mayor of Scarborough and Liberal MP), and Kenneth Rowntree (artist, who captured the essential spirit of the country between the wars in the “Recording Britain” project), were part of a wider Rowntree network that had an impact on the region in the early 20th century. Rowntrees were involved in the creation of international aid charity Oxfam and organisations working for refugees – Michael Rowntree has a long connection with the Oxford Mail, as you may know.

**The Quaker Rowntrees**

**Image Friends House York**

And of course, we’re talking about a Quaker tradition. The Rowntrees’ life and work was constantly informed by their Quaker faith, which emphasised quiet service, public responsibility, civic pride, pragmatism, and trustworthiness. I probably don’t need to develop the arguments about Quakerism to this audience here, but perhaps suffice to say the Rowntrees espoused a liberal form of Quakerism – JR Senior had contributed to the end of the ban on ‘marrying out’ and his grandson John Wilhelm, became a leading figure in the development of Quaker thought, determining to make Quakerism relevant to the world and its problems. In an important essay, he wrote, “the grinding poverty of a third of the population becomes an evil too heavy to be borne.” He believed that action to deal with this “arises naturally from the teaching of Jesus to the individual and the state.” He died young, but even so, he became one of the great names in Quaker history of the 20th century, as a less evangelical, bible-based form of Quakerism emerged.

**Image BSR**

**Seebohm’s life in brief**

He was born in 1871, the second of the four sons of Joseph Rowntree and Emma Antoinette Rowntree. He was educated by governesses at home, then at the Quaker Bootham School, and at Owen’s College, Manchester (where he studied chemistry for one year). At the age of 18 he entered the family cocoa and chocolate business, where in 1889 he immediately put his Manchester experience to good use and established a research and testing laboratory. When the firm became a limited liability company in 1897, Seebohm became a director, taking responsibility that year for the labour department.

By 1941, when Seebohm Rowntree retired from the chairmanship he had held since 1923, the firm ‘had established itself as the second largest chocolate and confectionery firm in the United Kingdom … and the third largest business of its kind in the world’. As chairman he had steered a sometimes reluctant board to accept the harsh implications of stark facts. While, for example, sales between 1918 and 1920 had risen by an encouraging 70 per cent, manufacturing wages had risen by nearly 300 per cent.

Seebohm moved from York in 1936, with his wife Lydia to Hughenden, to live near High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, first at ‘North Dean’ and then, after her death, at Hughenden Manor (formerly the home of Benjamin Disraeli). Though he appears to have remained largely aloof from local Quaker concerns, his passionately held private Quaker convictions remained as a strong influence on his work. He died at Hughenden in 1954.

**Image: pubs in York**

**The use of statistics**

Now, one of the characteristics that runs through the Rowntree history, and continues today in the work of JRF, is the use of statistics and collection of data to prove and demonstrate the need for change in society. Seebohm inherited from his father and grandfather a statistical acumen which he put to good effect in his ground-breaking work, written at the age of 28, *Poverty: a study in town life* (1900). By his statistically well-supported demonstration of the causal link between poverty and the low wages paid to working men, and the insecurity of their employment, he was able to challenge the general assumption that poverty was merely the result of drink and fecklessness. His study was based on a survey of all working class households in York – so excluding those individuals who were able to afford to employ a domestic servant. His team – one paid interviewer and a number of part-time volunteers, visited 11,560 households containing 46,754 people in 388 streets – 2/3 of York’s inhabitants, The interviewers asked questions about rent, the number of residents in each household, access to a water tap, diet and other personal details. What he showed with this research was that just uder 10% were in primary poverty (insufficient earnings for the necessities of life) and a further 18% were in secondary poverty (where some portion was spent in other expenditure or wasted – e.g. drink, betting or gambling). Over half those living in primary poverty were in reguar work, but their wages too low to maintain their family. He also defined what we now know as the cycle of poverty – importantly helping to demolish the idea that poverty was the fault of the poor.

This was truly a block-buster, seminal work, classic, whatever word you choose for it (still acclaimed as a marker for the welfare state, foundation of sociology, Churchill quote, “made my hair stand on end” “flush its sewers” etc. Lloyd George took note, it led to welfare reforms etc).

With this work on poverty there is a direct link to all of his other later work, including industrial management, nationally (e.g. work for Lloyd George) and experiments in new management systems put into practice at the Rowntree factory in York – it was a sort of laboratory. As a factory owner the Rowntrees saw that compassionate leadership and informed managerial organisation was the only way that underpaid working people could be more productive, achieve better wages, and rise above the poverty line. There was thus a direct link between his views on poverty and social policy on the one hand and his views on business efficiency on the other – a point on his breadth in his legacy that I indicated at the beginning.

**Image: Workers welfare**

**Pioneers in Industrial welfare**

Fair treatment and service also helped fulfil Quaker ideals of service to employees and consumers: Employees should ‘never merely be regarded as cogs in an industrial machine, but rather as fellow workers in a great industry.’ (as Seebohm’s father Joseph Rowntree said).

Seebohm Rowntree went further, writing that ‘the present industrial organisation of the country is unsound’ and wanted to use the Rowntrees firm to ‘minimise the evils’ of the capitalist system. As an industrialist, he believed it was a Quaker duty to nurture the ‘guiding light’ of each member of his staff – thus bringing the Quaker ‘ethic’ or ideal into the industrial setting.

As the company's first Labour Director, Seebohm believed that improving the welfare of workers would not only be a moral good, but would also promote industrial efficiency. Among the very many innovations he introduced – too many to go into here – there was an eight-hour day in 1896, a pension scheme in 1906, a five-day (44-hour) working week, works councils in 1919, and a profit-sharing scheme for employees in 1923. In 1904 a doctor was employed to offer free advice to all employees followed by a dental department with a resident dentist.

Seebohm also believed that low wages were bad for the "nation's economy and humanity" and from his position as an adviser in Lloyd George’s wartime government, he argued strongly for a National Minimum Wage in England, which would also be “a liveable wage.” He urged the Prime Minister to ensure that wages after the war would equate with wages before it.

**Image: letter**

This is a fascinating letter, that demonstrates that he was given a role at the heart of government… (see description in the exhibition…)

He also put down his management philosophy in a number of books, the most influential of which was the ‘*Human Factor in Business’*, (Longmans 1921), which became a key text in the development of management theory. In this, not only did he advocate a more scientific approach to the business of business, such as cost accounting and research, he also laid down the following principles which needed to be present for the welfare of workers in any efficient enterprise.

**IMAGE**

**1. Earnings sufficient to maintain a reasonable standard of comfort.**

**2. Reasonable hours of work.**

**3. Reasonable economic security during the whole working life and in old age.**

**4. Good working conditions.**

**5. A status for the workers suitable to men in a free country in the twentieth century.**

Seebohm wrote that every man should be entitled to a basic wage that enabled him to ‘marry, live in a decent house and provide the necessities of physical efficiency for a normal family’. He added if a business could not afford to pay such a wage they should limit what the managers paid themselves while making the company more efficient.

It should be pointed out that although the Rowntrees were anxious to deal fairly with employees, they were initially sceptical about the role of trade unions in representing the interests of working people. Nor did the profitsharing scheme, introduced in 1923, prove very useful in practice. The scheme delivered very few payouts due to Rowntrees’ poor profits during much of this period.

It might also be added that his Quaker principles were not always helpful in his dealings with his employees. On one occasion, addressing the workers about the company policy of not allowing people time off for York races (gambling was anathema to Quakers) he was barracked for his pains.

**Image: Children playing Morrees board**

**Scientific management**

One perennial problem for Seebohm Rowntree was management. He found the question of personal relationships in industry an absorbing one, as demonstrated in his *The human needs of labour* (1919; revised and enlarged 1937), *The human factor in business* (1921, 3rd ed. revised, 1938) and *Industrial unrest* (1922). To back up his philosophy, Seebohm, ever the scientist, created an [industrial psychology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_psychology) department in 1922 which pioneered the use of [psychological](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological) recruitment tests to assist in the selection and training of workers. (Morrees board)

He also helped to set up the [National Institute of Industrial Psychology](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=National_Institute_of_Industrial_Psychology&action=edit&redlink=1) and the [British Institute of Management](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chartered_Management_Institute). Oliver Sheldon, who was recruited from Oxford and who became Seebohm Rowntree’s personal assistant, wrote *The Philosophy of Management* , which combined social ethics with scientific management ideas. It became one of the most influential management primers of the early 20th century.

In his introduction to the book, Seebohm wrote:

“The author recognises that business has a soul, it is not a mechanical thing but a living and worthy part of the social organism. It is not an end in itself, but a means to an end and that end is the well-being of the whole community.”

Seebohm loaned Sheldon out to help start up the UK’s first professional management institute and his successor as Rowntree’s Labour Director, Clarence Northcott, also became a founding member of Institute of Personnel Management and wrote another influential book on *The Moral Duty of Management.*

Seebohm formed, in 1927, the first Industrial Management Research Association in this country, an organisation for the exchange of views on higher management between non-competing firms. Again, this valuable movement continues.

Rowntree was not a socialist (his strongest party political affiliation was with the Liberal party) and was a passionate advocate of the capitalist system. Capitalism, according to Seebohm, had its limitations and he once wrote that the state should be able “to over-ride the immediate interests of the employer by imposing on him obligations which are to the advantage of the nation rather than his own.”

**Image: Black Magic**

A further interest of the company was marketing. The board inherited a Quaker belief that if the quality of a product was good this should be sufficient to persuade people to buy it. [Joseph Rowntree](http://www.rowntreesociety.org.uk/joseph-rowntree-1836-1925/) had opposed advertising because he saw so many false claims made by so many advertisers. Slowly, the board came to terms with the fact that (for example) packaging and easily-remembered brand names were essential as marketing techniques. Seebohm was never a hands-on chairman in the way that his father had been; the steering of the firm through the 1931 national crisis and into a prosperous 1930s may have owed much to the perspective he brought as well as to his analytical mind.

His contention that a cooperative work-force could be achieved only if each worker had ‘a reasonable share with the employer in determining the conditions of work, and an interest in the prosperity of the industry in which he is engaged’ (*Industrial Unrest*, p. 12) made him a suspect figure in the eyes of many industrialists; recognition of this, combined with a distaste for being in the limelight, made him prefer to work through others rather than adopt the role of a campaigner.

**Conclusion**

Even for people who live outside York (at least people of a certain age, maybe) many of us will remember the name Rowntree with affection. For most of the last century (together with Cadburys and Frys) it was one of the great names in confectionery history. Fruit Gums, KitKat, Black Magic, Smarties and Polos remain much-loved household names.  But the family that gave its name to the confectionery brand has also had a huge impact in many other fields, from social reform and the understanding of poverty to enlightened business practices and the minimum wage, education and housing – so it’s an enormous spectrum of interest.

As a man who remained largely in the shadows, a man with huge energy and administrative organisational ability, and as a man of vision and daring within the company, Seebohm Rowntree helped to lay down the foundations of very many aspects of our modern country today. He was perhaps the nadir in the collective work of the Rowntree family and he drove forward well into the 20th century the continuity in the activities of the three trusts which continue to bear the family name.

It is clear that, more than 100 years later, many of the original ideas which motivated the Rowntree family continue to resonate today.

 Low pay and the Living Wage are still a matter of important political debate.

 The importance of business and its place in communities continues to frame much discussion on the role of industry in a modern democracy.

 The impact of poverty and its moral context is a subject of fiercely contested arguments.

 Education as a process of ‘lifelong learning’ particularly in a fast moving age when skills need to be continually updated, remains a live issue. The importance of ‘citizenship’ education in a democracy based on universal suffrage is also much debated.

 The supremacy of the brand and brand identity is now a commonplace in discussion of the success of businesses. Indeed, the relationship between brand and reputation is regularly tested in the analysis of ethics and modern business practice.

 Democratic reform, the devolution of power, the funding of political parties are all still the subject of much discussion today.

 The need for housing and its continual improvement to meet the demands of modern-day living has not disappeared.

 The lack of diversity in the press is still an issue for many people.

All of these difficult and absorbing questions still form part of the warp and weft of political debate. The Rowntree legacy embodies social values, philanthropic principles, better management of enterprise, and a vision for the long term. All of these areas are as vital today as they were in Seebohm’s time, as the titles of our book collection demonstrate so well. The religious terminology, the paternalism, the emphasis on family may no longer resonate to modern ears but ideas of fairness, equality, community, and change still retain their power.

Which is not to say that things have not changed for the better since Seebohm Rowntree’s time. Many of the improvements originally suggested by the Rowntrees have indeed come about. Rowntrees were leaders in innovation, but their Quaker modesty and caution kept them out of the limelight, making it easy for us to forget their role in turning the innovations of yesterday into the commonplaces of today.

In conclusion, Rowntree & Co established itself as a trusted employer and brand name, as well as a force for social good throughout the 20th century. As the association of the Rowntree name as a chocolate manufacturer is now gradually fading in the public mind, what remains a distinctive ‘brand’ for the 21st century, one that is identified not with KitKat or Polo but with a set of widely understood core values, such as fairness, equality, community, and reform. The application of those core values is the living embodiment of the Rowntree legacy.