

Seebohm Rowntree and Trebitsch

Lincoln: the tale of a brilliant con-man

This piece is extracted from articles written for The Northern Echo, by its

Deputy Editor, Chris Lloyd – see <http://bit.ly/eejOFx>



In 1897, 18-year-old Trebitsch Lincoln had fled his native Hungary where police were asking awkward questions about stolen gold watches. His wealthy father had lost a fortune in a shares deal, causing Trebitsch to drop out of school, steal gold watches and disappear. Homeless, he toured the world, inveigling money from trusting people. He converted to Christianity from the Orthodox Jewish religion and ran a mission in Montreal before that scheme crumbled into a dust of debt.

On a train, he met Seebohm Rowntree. Trebitsch became a key researcher for Rowntree and he spent much time in Europe researching social conditions there. After a couple of years of embarrassing and expensive incidents involving British ambassadors and foreign governments, the book was complete. Rowntree was so impressed with his work that that he loaned Trebitsch £10,000 (nearly £900,000 today) and helped him be selected as the Liberal Parliamentary Candidate for Darlington, where the Rowntree family co-owned a powerful Liberal newspaper called *The Northern Echo*.

Darlington, though, was a Pease seat. The Quaker Peases had been Liberal in the distant past, but for the past decade they had been Conservative – the girls at the mill reputedly wore red knickers on election day as that was the local Tory colour.

Even in the great Liberal landslide of 1906, Herbert Pike Pease had held Darlington.

Trebitsch Lincoln had a thick foreign accent and dark, foreign skin that even the adoption of an English-sounding surname could not conceal. The people of Darlington disliked the way this outsider had been dumped upon them and they tried to drown him out with rhythmic shouts of “cocoa, cocoa” as a reminder of his chocolate roots. But somehow he gained the seat, winning by just 29 votes, curiously close to his own prediction that he would win by 30 votes. MPs in those days were unpaid, so the spendthrift Darlington MP was unable to repay his borrowings.

He made a speech in the House of Commons that so enraged the Austrian government that it leaked details of his dubious past. Police forces in

Hungary, Romania and Germany also wanted words with him, and the Rowntrees discovered they were missing a fortune.

The January 1910 parliament was the second shortest of the century. It collapsed in the November. Once more, Trebitsch Lincoln put his name before the people of Darlington but, with scandal and debt engulfing him and pressure from Vienna, Budapest and York overwhelming him, he was forced to withdraw a week before polling day.

The link between Seebohm Rowntree, Trebitch Lincoln, and Top House

It is through Seebohm's connections with Trebitch Lincoln that we know that Seebohm used this house as his correspondence address, while involved in his sociological research. He valued the research skills of Lincoln enormously, that is, until he realised that Lincoln was taking him for a ride.

Passing through Paris in 1909, Trebitch Lincoln managed to persuade the ambassador to send some research materials back through the diplomatic bag to this address – presumably he was exploiting the fact that Seebohm was a friend of Lloyd George. This event caused something of a stir even in Downing Street.