

John Wilhelm Rowntree (1868-1905)

Director 1904-1905



John Wilhelm Rowntree had a profound influence on many Quakers of his generation. He was at the centre of what has been called the Quaker Renaissance which took place at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

John was the oldest son of Joseph Rowntree and after attending the Quaker school Bootham, he entered the developing cocoa business in 1886. Joseph was very much in need of help since his brother Henry Isaac had died three years earlier, and the business was under-going rapid expansion. The number of employees more than quadrupled in the eight years after John joined and continued to grow rapidly after that. John's early notebooks show his detailed involvement in the development of factory products.

Like his father, brothers and cousins John taught at adult schools in York as soon as he was old enough and carried on through out his life. Adult schools started as literacy classes for the working classes and turned into broader educational meeting places for working people with intellectual interests.

John Wilhelm's philosophy was based on the idea that only through education could individuals achieve religious fulfilment and only through understanding modern ideas and social needs could Quakerism become relevant to people's lives.

It was at the London Yearly Meeting of 1893 that John Wilhelm made his first plea to the Society of Friends to move from the evangelical certainties of the mid nineteenth century to a more open, liberal outlook. John Wilhelm believed Quakers should reject reliance on the Bible as the cornerstone of their faith and return to the early tradition of the divine "Inner Light" within all people as the source of religious inspiration. This would make the faith less dogmatic and allow Quakers to take their place in the modern world.

John Wilhelm believed that religion should be relevant to society's needs. He spoke for many Friends when he argued that Quakers should pursue vigorously their peace mission and join wider non conformist campaigns on issues such as temperance and social reform.

John Wilhelm worked closely with the American Quaker, Rufus Jones, in pursuing these ideas. He planned to write a Quaker history with Rufus Jones which would illustrate the link between early Quakers and the new ideas. John Wilhelm also played a leading role in organising summer schools which inspired the Quaker study centre, Woodbrooke College in Birmingham.

John Wilhelm suffered very poor health from childhood, and by the time he died, aged thirty six, he was almost blind. Despite these difficulties and the seriousness of his work, John Wilhelm was known for his wit and sense of humour. The history of Quakerism was completed by Rufus Jones and W.C.Braithwaite, and the movement John Wilhelm inspired continued after his death – perhaps culminating in the establishment and development of Woodbrooke College.