

# Ambrose Appelbe 1903-1999



Ambrose Appelbe. Courtesy of Felix Appelbe

## The eccentric, high-flying lawyer with charitable roots at Toynbee Hall

East London, 1931. Two lawyers meet. One is the internationally renowned champion of Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi. The other is a young Toynbee Hall resident named Ambrose Appelbe, whose father was a friend of Gandhi. They discussed law and reminisced about Appelbe's father.

Ambrose Appelbe founded an eponymous law firm, notorious for representing the movie star Ingrid Bergman, murderer John Christie, and Mandy Rice-Davies, a showgirl embroiled in the 'Profumo affair'. However, Appelbe was also a principled philanthropist who had a life-long relationship with Toynbee Hall.

From birth, Appelbe's life was extraordinary. He was born in 1903 in British Bechuanaland, now Botswana, to Christian missionary Dr. Reverend Robert Appelbe and his second wife, for his first was murdered by the tribesmen they attempted to convert. Demonstrating a stubbornness that Ambrose inherited, he returned to Africa with his new wife. Ambrose recalled his childhood fondly; his father teaching him classics by the fireside, the trio of African servants whom he treated as brothers, and the visits of a certain young Indian.

Aged 12, Ambrose was sent to England to attend Kingswood in Bath, a school for the children of missionaries. Conditions were appalling. Starving pupils resorted to stealing from local bakeries. When flu killed several pupils, Ambrose and his schoolmates plundered their mattresses and blankets to keep themselves warm. Around this time, his parents moved to Liverpool and established a 'down and outs' house there. Due to his parents' charity, experiences in Africa, and impoverished schooling, Appelbe developed a strong sense of compassion and philanthropic duty from a young age. The First World War reinforced this. Perhaps more eager to escape Kingswood than to serve, Appelbe and four classmates joined the army. He only served for a few months, becoming a pacifist and a Quaker after witnessing the death of two friends in battle. He went on to defend conscientious objectors in the Second World War and reportedly left rooms when war-time propaganda was screened.

After the war, Appelbe drifted as a concertina player before obtaining a scholarship to read law at Cambridge in 1923. Upon graduation, he began working for a law practice involved in evictions, where he was told to show no mercy for evictees. This conflicted with Appelbe's values. In a fit of compassion, he found himself at the doors of Toynbee Hall, where he became a residential volunteer.

One of Toynbee Hall's services was – and remains - the 'Poor Man's Lawyer', now known as the Free Legal Advice Service. Established in 1898, it provides vital free legal services for local people. It was here where Appelbe honed his legal acumen, volunteering from 1926 until the early 1930s, dealing with people 'seeking escape from their

partners; tenants and landlords... workmen's compensation, hire-system, and money lending cases'. At that time, Poor Man's Lawyers were considered peacemakers who provided legal aid with 'common sense and friendliness'.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, they could be bullish in court. This suited Appelbe's compassionate and deviant traits; fighting legal battles for the poor was his natural creed. Alongside legal duties, Appelbe was a member of Toynbee Hall's residential 'family'; those living in accommodation managed by the Settlement who helped-out where possible. For example, Appelbe once laboriously carted Toynbee Hall's grand piano to the Whitechapel Art Gallery for a concert.

Appelbe remained a member of this 'family' even when he married, moving out to live in rooms in Booth House on the Toynbee estate. His new wife was a noteworthy figure; Carrie Morrison. She had become Britain's first female solicitor in 1922, reportedly by winning a race down London's Chancery Lane, outstripping three women who had passed the law society's exams simultaneously. Morrison gave legal advice alongside Appelbe, later becoming a solicitor at Appelbe's firm. Carrie Morrison shared her philanthropic urge with fellow student Mary Elizabeth Pickup, who gave legal advice in Birmingham.<sup>2</sup>

The 1920s were a time of industrial strife and Toynbee Hall was a hub for unionism. Appelbe would have encountered dockers and railwaymen as they attended Toynbee Hall during the General Strike. Simultaneously, he met Toynbee Hall's esteemed guests; Edward VIII, then the Prince of Wales, regularly had supper with Toynbee Hall residents. Edward also visited impoverished East End homes and sat in on Poor Man's Lawyer sessions.<sup>3</sup> The breadth of Appelbe's experiences - from striking workmen and

shunting pianos, to mixing with royalty and high court defences - is indicative of Toynbee Hall's vibrant interwar variety; a place where politicians, unionists, and impoverished East Enders were all welcomed.



Booth House, where Carrie Morrison and Appelbe lived. Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Transfer from the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Social Museum Collection

Appelbe left Toynbee Hall in the early 1930s to establish his law firm. Nevertheless, he remained involved, serving on Toynbee Hall's Council from 1952 until retiring aged 82 in 1985. In recognition of his service, Appelbe was elected as a Vice President of the Council, and remained its Honorary Solicitor into the 1990s. Over these years, Ambrose worked closely with many Toynbee Hall icons, including William Beveridge, Clement Attlee,

John Profumo and influential warden James 'Jimmy' Mallon. Taken with Mallon's character and impressive work as warden, or perhaps to indulge his own interest in the arts, Appelbe assisted the commissioning of Jacob Epstein's bust of Mallon.

This bust remains in Toynbee Hall as a lasting monument to Mallon, but it is also a nod to Ambrose Appelbe, a remarkable man whose involvement with Toynbee Hall is widely forgotten - Asa Briggs's exhaustive history of Toynbee Hall does not mention him once - overshadowed by his later legal career.<sup>4</sup>

## Further Reading

Toynbee Hall thanks Felix Appelbe for much of this information.

'Obituary: Ambrose Appelbe', Daily Telegraph, [London, 20th March 1999], <http://pccmail.co.uk/AmbroseAppelbe.htm>

<sup>1</sup> *Annual Report 1926* [Toynbee Hall archives, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London], 10  
*Annual Report 1927-1928* [Toynbee Hall archives, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London], 2

<sup>2</sup> E. Cruickshank, *The First 100 Years Projects*  
<https://first100years.org.uk/carrie-morrison-2/>  
<https://first100years.org.uk/mary-elizabeth-pickup/>

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Report 1927-28*, 2

<sup>4</sup> A. Briggs & A. Macartney, *Toynbee Hall; the First 100 Years*, [London: Routledge & Paul, 1984]