

John Alfred Spender 1862-1942

One of the first men of Toynbee Hall reveals the appeal of the Settlement to early volunteers

John Alfred Spender was in many ways an archetypal early Toynbeeite. After graduating from Oxford, he became one of Toynbee Hall's first residents in 1885. His younger brother, Harold along with many others, would replicate this route from Oxford to the Settlement. This is not to say John Alfred Spender was unremarkable; his life is a fascinating insight into why Toynbee Hall appealed to Oxford's young men and how it functioned in its early years.

Of all Oxford's colleges, Balliol was closest to Toynbee Hall due to the influence of economist Arnold Toynbee, after whom Barnett named his settlement, and philosopher T. H. Green, who gave its students a firm belief that individual philanthropy could resolve social problems. Although, Green and Toynbee both suffered untimely deaths whilst Spender was at Balliol, he and his peers continued to apply their ideas to the political, religious, and social questions of the day. Therefore, even before Samuel Barnett started visiting Oxford to find volunteers, the men of Balliol already saw Toynbee Hall as a perfect setting in which to enact Toynbee and Green's liberalism.



J. A. Spender with Balliol College Brackenbury Society, 1898. Courtesy of The Master and Fellows, Balliol College.

Spender did not plan to go to Toynbee Hall. His family expected him to become a barrister or

clergyman. However, lacking passion for either and inhibited by his second-class degree, Spender pursued a career in journalism. Ambitious to succeed in his chosen vocation, Spender spoke defiantly of 'storming London' instead of 'working the provinces to learn his trade' as was the norm. This decision led him to London, and Toynbee

Hall, in 1885.¹ Struggling to find work, Toynbee Hall founder Samuel Barnett reached out to Spender and took him to Toynbee Hall, where Spender met future wife a fellow social worker named Mary Rowlinson. Shortly after, Barnett helped him secure a reporting job.

His life had been transformed. Spender promoted the work and ethos of Toynbee Hall through his journalism, reporting on the East End and the issues the Settlement was striving to combat. Simultaneously, he captured the lively atmosphere of his new home in his autobiography; Toynbee Hall was a place of haphazard creativity, residents free to implement their initiatives without fearing repercussions or the weight of expectation.

‘What Barnett was to young men setting out in life can never be told. He never grudged you his time. Never seemed to be bored, tired, or condescending. He gave you the whole of his wise, subtle, and original mind. He was as shrewd and wise about a politics as

‘We were running about the allotted task of relieving the unemployed with a cheerful doubt whether we should not ourselves be subjects for relief in a few weeks’.²

Spender was torn away from this revellous setting after less than a year when his employment turned sour. Unable to find work, he reluctantly left for ‘the provinces’, working four arduous years in Hull. Nevertheless, he retained links with Mary Rowlinson and the Barnetts, whom he frequently visited before returning in January 1892. Spender became a notable advocate of state pensions, a radical notion in 1892, giving public lectures and

publishing a book on it whilst at Toynbee Hall.

In summer, he married his beloved. At around the same time, again with Barnett’s aid, Spender became assistant-editor at *Pall Mall Gazette*. Married and quickly becoming a successful journalist, Spender left Toynbee Hall for good.

If Barnett was a maker of men, then Spender is a fine example. Twice Toynbee Hall served as a refuge and a springboard in tough times and Barnett inspired Spender with his strength of character and altruism.

However, unlike Barnett, Spender was not a staunch Christian. This was problematic. Educated men of Spender’s generation mostly had religious

upbringings, and a late-19th Century Oxford education was explicitly spiritual. Therefore, graduates often felt guilty about their religious apathy. Spender recalled, ‘I heard everybody talking of “atheists” as being beyond the pale, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that I might be in this outer darkness’.³ Nevertheless, Spender and his peers heeded their elders’ message that it was their duty, as educated men, to engage in charity work and aid the poor through institutions such as Toynbee Hall.

Why so? Toynbee Hall resolved Spender’s inner religious conflict. Despite Barnett’s faith, Spender recalled ‘all he said about religion was “to be without God in the world” was the greatest

¹ J. A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics*, vol. 1 [London: Cassell & Company], 28-29

² *Ibid.*, 30-32

³ *Ibid.*

calamity'. Spender agreed. Toynbee Hall allowed him to locate God in his own world. Following the idealism of Oxford teachers Green and Toynbee, Spender took faith as his eternal guide; 'the need of the world for the mediator between the flesh and the spirit, between the temporal and the eternal values, will not pass away'.⁴ By performing practical, first-hand social work at Toynbee Hall, Spender and his peers could become this mediator, acting virtuously and implementing faith in response to the social issues of their age.

“We were not what our elders supposed. We were scarcely at all interested in Church or theology; our trouble was to get an idea of God which had any meaning or reality”⁵

Spender's early life shows how a combination of generational tensions, intellectual influences, and the power of personalities led young men such as Spender to Toynbee Hall in its early years.

Further Reading

E. Abel, 'Toynbee Hall, 1884-1914', *Social Service Review*, 53:4 (1979), 606-632

W. Harris, *J. A. Spender*, [London: 1946]

A. J. Morris, 'J. A. Spender', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, [2004] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36213>

J. A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics*, [London: 1927]

⁴ *Ibid.*, 200-201

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 198