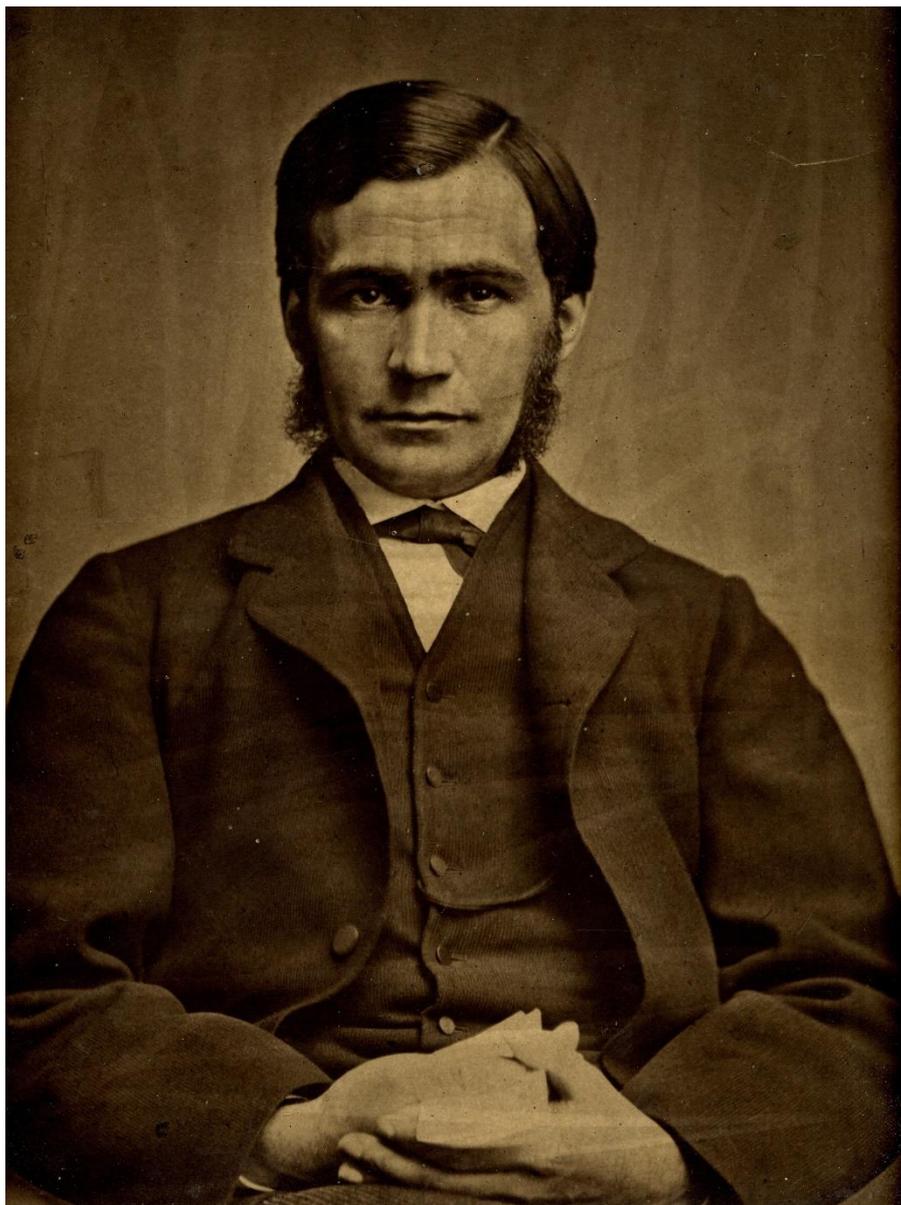


Thomas Hill Green 1836-1882

Toynbee Hall's intellectual founding father

Much is known about the relationship between Toynbee Hall's founders, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, and economist Arnold Toynbee, after whom it is named. His legacy established a profound connection between Oxford University's Balliol College, where Toynbee studied and taught, and Barnett's settlement. The path between them became well trodden by graduates who identified the settlement as hub for social work and a catalyst their for political careers. Prior to Toynbee Hall's establishment in 1884, Balliol philosopher Thomas Hill Green laid its theoretical foundations. Alongside Arnold Toynbee, Green is cited as an inspiration by notable Toynbee residents including writer J. A. Spender and architect C. R. Ashbee.

A proud descendent of Oliver Cromwell, Green's clergyman father raised him into a gifted student. Green duly enrolled at Balliol College, becoming a teaching fellow in 1860 and professor from 1878 to his death in 1882.



TH Green ©Balliol College Archives

Green was a pioneer of 'Social Liberalism', a form of political thought emerging around 1880 when industrialisation was rampant and the living standards of factory workers were plummeting. A strong philanthropist himself, Green wanted more working class students at Oxford and an expanded right to vote. This strong moral compass led Green to feel his fellow academics were wrong to justify the negative effects of industrialisation with theories of political economy and modernity. Likewise, economic aid, from either charities or the state, was deemed an insufficient remedy for the strife of the workers. Green prioritised practical action and social good over sweeping policy reforms.

Green was also reacting to Christianity's declining academic influence due to the rise of Darwinism and Atheism. Green, however, was not ready to abandon the power of faith. He accepted religious dogma may be outdated, but still believed that the moral teachings of Christianity were valuable. He maintained everyone was 'morally culpable' for their choices, therefore, it was immoral to pursue selfish personal gains to the detriment



'We are influenced by the idea of the universal brotherhood of men, of mankind as forming one society with a common good of which may determine the action of its members. By freely fulfilling some function in the social organism, we do very little to enable other people to realise themselves... we leave it to chance whether he shall contribute anything to the common good' TH Green, Date unknown

of society.¹ Instead, individuals could manifest the spirit of God through charity work. This philosophy gave individuals the ability to solve social problems through their own actions.

“Common good dwells in cooperative social life in which we all have a fair share. An ever-widening social union, in which the claims of all are acknowledged by the loyal citizen as the masses of what he may claim for himself”²

In those days, Oxford retained a religious atmosphere and was full of students with a desire to act upon social injustices. However, as Samuel Barnett noted, this was a generation sceptical of class based 'revolutionary



Balliol College, Green's home at Oxford



solutions', yet desirous of something more immediate, practical, and exciting than 'stale dole-giving'.³ Green's

ideas appealed. He and his Balliol students had many informal discussions about politics and religion, in which Green's belief that charitable actions could mitigate society's problems proved enticing. Toynbee Hall offered Oxford graduates the perfect opportunity to act on this conviction. Without Green's influence, it is unlikely Balliol's graduates would have followed Samuel Barnett with such conviction.

“We must inspire others with our ideas. Create a bond on the perfect equality of friendship, with common work and common ideals” [Anonymous volunteer, 1886]

It could be said Green's philosophy emerged in the perfect institution at the perfect time, and subsequently attracted Balliol graduates to Toynbee Hall in its early years. Green passed away in 1882, as did Arnold Toynbee less than a year later. However, their legacy stayed with the first generation of Toynbee residents. Arnold Toynbee's influence is forever enshrined in Toynbee Hall's name. Nevertheless, the role of Thomas Hill Green should not be underestimated. He was a bright light in the early years of Toynbee Hall, encouraging men to follow Samuel Barnett into the relatively unknown pursuit of social work.

Further Reading

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M. Dimova-Cockson, *T. H. Green's Moral and Political Philosophy* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001]

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¹ M. Carter, *T. H. Green and the Development of Ethical Socialism* [Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003], 22-23

² T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. A. Bradley [Oxford, 1883], 283

³ S. Barnett, *Practicable Socialism* [London: Longmans, 1888], 193

