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‘Creating local elites: the University Settlement movement, national elites and citizenship in London, 1884 – 1940’

The ‘Great Wen’, as William Cobbett described London, was by the end of the nineteenth century a growing metropolis, rapidly expanding in all directions into the surrounding countryside. London, as the seat of the English and later British monarchs, had always been important as the central point from which politics, governance and trade in the British Isles were conducted. By the end of the nineteenth century, London was the focal point also of an empire that stretched around the globe, bringing in not only immense wealth but also prestige to the city.¹ At this time, London was also the home of an array of elites. These elites ranged from the historical governing bodies of the City of London, including the Lord Mayor, the Freemen and the Worshipful Companies, to the ‘Society’, aristocratic circles of the West End, to bankers and financiers, to politicians, both in Westminster and within the local communities.² These elites often operated independently, particularly where their particular activity – business or local governance – had a geographical or temporal nature, but with some of the elites being based on particular class experiences, there was rich potential for overlap, and both co-operation and conflict.³ London was, and remains, a city in which the local, national and increasingly the international intersect.

But the city and its elites were not as comfortable as this initial picture may suggest. The London elites were part of the city’s increasingly complex social structure. In particular, the numbers of the poor were rising. In 1884, the leader of the Social Democratic

¹ R. Porter, ‘London’ <http://www.oup.com/us/pdf/enlightenment/london.pdf>, also R. Porter, *London: A Social History*

² Various studies have been carried out into the histories of the various elites in London, particularly the City Freeman, Companies and Mayors. See M. Davies and A. Saunders, *The History of the Merchant Taylors’ Company*

³ Other studies of interest include P. Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class*, especially ‘Civic Life’, pp. 240 – 268. For an account of the changing governance of London, see I. Doolittle, *The City of London and its Livery Companies*

Federation, H.M. Hyndman claimed that a survey of theirs had found that a quarter of Londoners lived in poverty.⁴ Whether or not Charles Booth, the shipping magnate and social statistician, was prompted to undertake his own extensive survey of London poverty to disprove Hyndman's figures is a moot point,⁵ as his figures found the incidence of poverty to be higher, at around 30%.⁶ By the 1880s, poverty was not just a significant problem, it had come to epitomise fears about the dangers and degeneration of the urban environment.

The very nature of London as a wealthy city had brought many seeking employment there. A combination of changes in British agriculture and industry brought displaced workers from the land to the industrial towns and cities in search of employment. London was also a port, and hence was an arrival point for many seeking refuge from abroad. This was true of Jews from Eastern Europe, who fled in large numbers to the East End of London before their migration was limited by the Aliens Act of 1905.⁷ London's growing economy provided many opportunities for employment, although these were not necessarily well paid or secure. For example, the Port of London was a major employer of casual and unskilled labourers on the docks, as were the numerous street markets. Factory work was also relatively easy to obtain, with opportunities to work in large scale operations such as Tate's sugar cube factory (1878) and Lyle's sugar refinery (1883), both on the banks of the Thames, or the small sweatshops favoured by the tailoring industries.

⁴ H.M. Hyndman, *Record of an Adventurous Life*, p. 331

⁵ See D. Englander and R. O'Day, *Mr Charles Booth's Inquiry*

⁶ I. Shepherd, 'Charles Booth's Poverty Map',

http://mubs.mdx.ac.uk/Staff/Personal_pages/Ifan1/Booth/index.htm

⁷ See D. Feldman, 'The Importance of Being English', in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones, *Metropolis London*, pp. 56-84

The growth of industrial urban poverty in a relatively short space of time, especially but not exclusively in London, became of increasing concern to the British middle and upper classes. A number of popular works had drawn attention to the increasing divide between the rich and the industrial poor, as seen in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845). To nineteenth century observers, the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation had occurred at such a rate that whilst British technological and productive capabilities were world-leaders, the social side had not kept pace. Clustered around centres of trade and industry were areas of working class housing, often with extremely poor standards of construction and sanitation, shoddily and quickly built. Urban working class areas were often seen to lack the institutions that characterised the rural community – churches and chapels. Without these focal points to act as a way of binding and monitoring the community, the urban working classes were often believed to be in danger of corruption by the degenerate urban environment. On the other hand, the public house was a centre for at least the males of the urban community. The pub had been a major part of life in East London for many years. For example, in 1888 Whitechapel High Street was lined with public houses. The public house was more than a drinking den – it was also the place where one could join a friendly society, meet friends or fellow trade unionists.⁸

Working class communities were not without a robust moral system – but their mores, by being different, attracted concern from more affluent or ‘proper’ groups. Extreme poverty was connected with lawlessness, crime and degeneracy, as rookeries such as Flower and Dean Street in Whitechapel seemed to be evidence of.⁹ Anxiety grew also about the ways in which poverty was interspersed throughout the city. Booth's maps of

⁸ W Fishman, *East End 1888*, p. 303. B Harrison, ‘Pubs’, in *The Victorian City, Images and Realities*, ed. HJ Dyos and M. Wolff, pp. 161 – 170.

⁹ See for example, J. White, *Rothschild Buildings*

1889 onwards demonstrated the belief that behind rows of prosperous housing lay streets of poverty. From the 1860s onwards, increasing numbers of middle and upper class volunteers, especially women, were straying into these impoverished hinterlands to try to alleviate conditions.¹⁰ Attention was also paid to the efficacy of this work, through the formation of the Charity Organisation Society in 1869. But despite these valiant efforts, the social problems of the city were not going away. In 1883, the Reverend Andrew J. Mearns anonymously published a damning exposé of poverty in the capital, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. This pamphlet was no detailed account of the social problem, but it called for urgent action. Industrial problems and a harsh winter added piquancy to Mearns' call for action, as did the death of a young Oxford academic, Arnold Toynbee.

Toynbee, who was renowned for his work on the Industrial Revolution, a phrase he coined, believed that studying economic relations should be accompanied by working to improve the lives of the industrial poor. This led Toynbee to the slums of East London, where his strenuous programme of vacation work led to his demise. Toynbee's example had already prompted a curate, Samuel Barnett, to think out new solutions to the problems of the East End. One of these was the university settlement movement, which began in 1884, as a direct response to this call to action. Barnett brought the young graduates of the Oxbridge colleges to East London to establish a new form of community work.¹¹ These young men would not only undertake voluntary work for the benefit of the poor, but by living in these poor communities, the graduates would learn something of life for the less fortunate. The benefits the young graduates enjoyed, such as academic or professional training, were to be transferred to the local population through classes, or later, through free legal advice, for example. The settlements were attempting to provide their residents with as authentic an introduction to the problems of poverty as possible:

¹⁰ F. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England*

¹¹ See A. Briggs and A. Macartney, *Toynbee Hall* and JAR Pimlott, *Toynbee Hall* for fuller accounts

Barnett believed that those who sought to help the poor should understand them, and ultimately be neighbours to them.¹²

This first settlement, the Universities' Settlement in East London, later Toynbee Hall in memory of Arnold, was to welcome resident volunteers of all religious and political persuasions (and indeed those of none). The experiment generated great publicity and attracted visitors from around the world, as well as imitators both in East London and further away. At the time, it was a radical departure in British voluntarism.

Firstly, the settlements were an innovation in parish-based welfare. In England and Wales, the parish – an area presided over by a local church – had been the basic unit of local administration since the Reformation. Changing demographic structures in urban and industrial areas necessitated developments in the function of the Church, but the parish remained the unit of administration. The parish in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adopted a number of quasi-secular functions, notably the administration of the Poor Law and the registering of births, marriages and deaths. But the Church was also a locus for voluntary work. Whilst the parish church was run by a vicar or rector, assisted by other male clergy or laymen, it also provided many opportunities for middle and upper class women to volunteer with such tasks as visiting the poor, the elderly and the sick.¹³

The parish was also where power in the village or district resided, with the parish priest being included in an elite often comprising the local landowner, professionals and local businessmen. As the Webbs pointed out in their 1902 study of the English parish, these

¹² H. Barnett, *Canon Barnett* p. 307. Also *The Universities Settlement in East London, First Annual Report 1885*

¹³ See A. Towatari, 'A wide field of action: religion, gender and old age welfare in England, c.1820-c.1880'.

units of organisation had the potential to become oligarchic, if they only drew upon a small pool of leaders, to whom the rest of the community were indebted through taxation or bonds of employment.¹⁴ Although Whitechapel and the other ‘hamlets’ around the Tower of London had long since been absorbed into the city, elements of the parish system remained in the power of existing elites – the Vestry, the Board of Guardians and, from 1884, elected borough councillors. Barnett himself was part of this elite through being a curate himself. Not all members of the East End elite were necessarily opposed to change, but the settlements posed a particular kind of threat. To a point, the existing system was run by people with connections to the area, either through birth or trade, and parish-based welfare was part of the status quo. Yet, these forms of power and control were already in the process of being eroded, through changes in the franchise, and in 1884, the rearrangement of local government in London.

The settlement residents were a challenge to existing elites through their educational welfare work and through their insistence on attempting to effect social change through the parish and the borough council, not to mention the new London County Council. Toynbee Hall residents were often resented. Settlement residents were inevitably part of the local community, but not entirely. The residents lived in relative comfort, effectively continuing the collegiate lifestyle that they had enjoyed in Oxford or Cambridge. They were also, inevitably, part of other communities. They were graduates of the universities, their childhood homes were in more affluent areas of London or the Home Counties, and they were also members of professional communities as well. These had the potential to set the residents at odds with the local community, who had little to no experience of these other worlds or truck with the settlers’ values. Although the settlements aimed to promulgate their views on the best practice of welfare through existing local government

¹⁴ S. Webb and B. Webb, ‘What Happened to the English Parish?’ p. 232

structures, they ran the risk of offending those other elites through their experiences of other communities and more fortunate backgrounds. An example of this in the East End was the history of George Lansbury's relationship with Toynbee Hall. Lansbury was suspicious, often contemptuous, of the Barnetts and their settlement residents, believing that they misunderstood the working classes and the problems they faced.¹⁵ On the other hand, by the 1930s, Lansbury was a firm supporter of the settlement, along with many other members of the Labour Party, drawn to the settlement during the Wardenship of James Joseph 'Jimmy' Mallon.¹⁶ A series of letters between settlement residents and members of the council were published in the various East London newspapers in which the Toynbee Hall men were labelled prigs, and the work of the settlement criticised.¹⁷

So what did the settlement volunteers do to incur the wrath of those with whom they might be normally expected to have an affinity? The settlement residents were involved in a range of activities. Many were involved in organising university extension classes, bringing an education in the liberal arts and humanities. Others were involved with the work of the Whitechapel branch of the Charity Organisation Society. Others again were concerned with the specific needs of the local community. Harry Lewis was well-known amongst the local Jewish community for being someone that new arrivals could rely upon for friendly advice and help. Lewis later went onto be a rabbi in New York, but in his Toynbee days his role as an advocate for those who had literally arrived off the boat was well known in Eastern Europe. Lewis helped to prevent new immigrants, dazed or

¹⁵ J. Shepard, *George Lansbury*

¹⁶ Mallon (1874 – 1961) had begun his working life as a jeweller's apprentice, before going onto work alongside Mary Macarthur as a trades union campaigner. Mallon was a member of the Labour Party, standing for election twice.

¹⁷ See Barnett Research Centre, TOY/SPE/3/24 Newspaper Clippings c.1888 – 1907, examples include 'Toynbee Hall is evidently not the success...', *Home and Abroad*, 29 October 1889 'Some of its critics – among them many well-known East End clergymen – complain that the young men to be found there are mostly prigs'; 'Hear, Say and See Written, Notes by a Parson's Pen', *East End News*, 30 September 1890; Letter WM Catmur to the Editor, 'Canon Barnett and Toynbee Hall', *Daily News*, 20 September 1904

bewildered by the city, from falling into the hands of exploitative people. From 1898, those with legal training offered their advice to the local community for free.

Others focussed on local government. A number of settlement residents stood for election to sanitary committees, school boards and the council. In 1891, both Cyril Jackson and G.L. Bruce were elected to the Tower Hamlets School Board.¹⁸ Clement Attlee, who was a resident in 1909 – 1910 as well as shortly after the First World War, used his second residency as a time for launching his career in politics, firstly by standing as a borough councillor and rising through the ranks of the Labour Party.¹⁹ But despite a large number of residents being keen to join the ranks of local government, there was still a great deal of antagonism between the council and the residents, even as late as the First World War. For example, Christmas 1909 saw the premiere of *Ali Baba and the Forty Borough Councillors*, which included Clement Attlee as ‘Guava Djelli’ as a ‘leading Borough Councillor, along with such other representations of local government officers as ‘Curri Chutnee’ and ‘Tutti Frutti’. Ali Baba, played by Frank Wise, later a Labour MP himself, was described as a ‘poor but liberal free trader of Bagdad’ [sic].²⁰ Doubtless the distribution of this play bill around the borough of Stepney did not endear the Toynbee Hall residents to the council.

Some of the criticisms of the settlement centred upon the types of work the charities undertook within the community. Youth clubs were seen as attempts to inculcate working class youth with the values and behaviours of the middle classes, whilst classes in liberal arts were either of no practical use to workers or challenges to existing working class cultures. The settlements did not succeed, however, in destroying or supplanting

¹⁸ Barnett Research Centre, TOY/SPE/3/24, Tower Hamlets School Board Elections 1891.

¹⁹ Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*

²⁰ Barnett Research Centre, GB 2912 TOY/DEP/2/16/1, ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Borough Councillors’

existing cultures. What they did in social and cultural terms was to allow those who wished to engage with the humanities or to attend a youth club or drama class the opportunity to do so. Furthermore, the settlements helped to create structures and facilities which created additional, non-institutional opportunities. The Whitechapel Library, founded in 1892 following a campaign by Toynbee Hall, rapidly became the epicentre of informal learning of all varieties by the local Jewish community. This 'University of the Ghetto' is usually portrayed as a centre for radicalism and experiment, without reference to its roots in the so-called establishment.

The settlements after 1918 demonstrate more clearly the development of this relationship within and without the local community. By the interwar years, Toynbee Hall had greatly benefited from having one foot in the East End, and the other in the West End. A number of Toynbee Hall alumni had gone on to prominence within the Civil Service and government, and were able to implement their early experiences into their practice as policy makers. One example was William Braithwaite, a resident of the 1890s and 1900s, who drew upon his experience of running savings clubs and insurance co-operatives at a Toynbee Hall men's club when helping to draft the 1911 National Insurance Act.²¹ Braithwaite for many years ran the highly successful Northey Street Club in Limehouse. The Old Northeyites' Club was founded in 1891 by Cyril Jackson, but was run from 1898 by Braithwaite after Jackson went to Australia. Braithwaite moved to Toynbee Hall when he began work at the Inland Revenue in 1898, but was soon keen to get closer to the local community. In 1903 he moved with two other Toynbee Hall residents, E. J. Urwick and JG Cloete to Poplar to achieve this.²² Braithwaite had by then developed a reputation for considerable expertise in youth

²¹ See WJ. Braithwaite, *Lloyd George's Ambulance Wagon*

²² JAR Pimlott, *Toynbee Hall* p. 100

clubs,²³ not to mention having become a prominent civil servant. By 1910, he was the Assistant Secretary to the Board of the Inland Revenue, and Personal Assistant to Lloyd George whilst he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Braithwaite therefore had a major role in the formulation of the National Insurance Act 1911.²⁴ Between 1898 and 1902, he set about rejuvenating the Northey Street Club, and attracted new members so successfully that he divided the group into a junior and senior section. In 1902, he set up a men's club, which was still in existence in 1938. Braithwaite raised the considerable sum of £1,000 from his own pocket and through fundraising amongst his friends to purchase the lease of a house in Three Colt Street for the men's club.²⁵ He also used his financial expertise to set up a co-operative bank, savings club and approved society²⁶ for his club members. In addition to his other commitments, both to family as well as to his day job, Braithwaite continued to work at the Northey Street Club until shortly before his death.²⁷

Another way of seeing Braithwaite's work in Limehouse was as a case study or laboratory for the kinds of ideas and practices that were being debated in social policy circles at the time. Doubtless Braithwaite achieved a great deal of satisfaction from being able to help the people of Limehouse in concrete, practical ways, and the length of time he worked with the Northey Street Club would have meant that he had long-standing friendships and connections with the local people. The co-operative bank and approved society that he set up were not unusual in youth clubs, especially those run by the settlement movement but they appear also to reflect a desire on Braithwaite's part to ensure that the local people participated in the kinds of financial activities that the

²³ F.E. Douglas, 'William John Braithwaite', *The Toynbee Outlook*, (May 1938)p. 11

²⁴ Detailed fully in Braithwaite

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12

²⁶ Approved societies were a form of private sector social insurance club, and formed the basis for the provision of sickness and unemployment insurance following the 1911 National Insurance Act

²⁷ Pimlott, p. 45

governments of the time were trying to encourage. In 1924, the savings club paid out £4,000 to members, and a similar amount was deposited with the Co-operative Bank²⁸ - demonstrating phenomenal performance not only for its time, but even more so for the disadvantaged community in Limehouse.

Braithwaite, along with other Toynbee Hall alumni William Beveridge and Hubert Llewellyn Smith, was an administrator with strongly held views from his residential days that the state should take a more interventionist role in British welfare policy. The view that the voluntary sector could not effectively cope with widespread poverty as a result of structural economic problems had taken hold from the 1890s, and by the interwar years, had become a relatively common viewpoint amongst politicians, civil servants and charity workers, being heightened by the extreme poverty of the Depression. At the same time, the demographics of settlement residents changed. Residents came from different backgrounds, and often stayed in settlements whilst starting out in the Civil Service, training for social work or to complement research they were undertaking through the universities. These young men were part of the professionalisation of the voluntary sector, and the development of the mixed economy of welfare before the Second World War. Settlements were for the earlier generations a way for male graduates to enter 'female' social work as young men, paving the way for respectable careers in the growing social sector of the Civil Service or the research departments of the universities.

Toynbee Hall's warden between 1918 and 1954 was James Joseph ('Jimmy') Mallon. Mallon left school at 14 to become a jeweller's apprentice in order to support his family following the death of his father. Mallon attended night classes and debates at the

²⁸ *Toynbee Hall Annual Report 1925* p. 20

Ancoats Settlement in Manchester. This introduced him to both the potential of settlements, and to trade unionism. He joined the campaign to establish Trades Boards in 1906, soon becoming a well-liked and well-respected trade unionist. Although Mallon's appointment as Warden in 1919 was viewed with some suspicion by the more right-wing national press, he turned out to be a superb warden in many respects. Mallon was extremely charismatic, able to work his charm upon everyone from small children to the most powerful politicians. It was this quality that set him apart from the Barnetts. Although the Barnetts were not without their connections and influence, Mallon was superlative. He had the trust of the Labour Party, with major Labourites such as Margaret Bondfield, GDH Cole, Harold Laski and George Lansbury being regular visitors to the settlement. He equally won the trust of the Establishment, having a notable friendship with Viscount Astor, a Conservative Member of the House of Lords. Mallon was well-respected in the arts. In addition to his appointment as a Governor of the BBC, Mallon had a long-standing friendship with George Bernard Shaw, and also succeeded in one occasion in obtaining the services of the famous Old Vic/Sadler's Wells Company for a Royal Gala fundraising evening.²⁹ He was also renowned for being sympathetic to those whose lives were not as fortunate, from the young people he dealt with in his role as a magistrate at the East London Juvenile Court, then sitting at Toynbee Hall, to those who individually petitioned him for aid during the Depression.

Mallon as a personality was a significant force in integrating Toynbee Hall within the local community, and furthering its links and those of the settlement movement as a whole within British society. By Mallon's time, the settlements' welfare services were no longer viewed with suspicion by local communities, and they were often an integral part of the area. Youth clubs were particularly salient examples of this. The boys' club

²⁹ See Bradley, chapters two and four.

at Mansfield House University Settlement in West Ham allowed boys as young as ten to become involved in managing their clubs, from choosing which activity to run on each club evening to organising dances to raise funds.³⁰ The boys also gained experience of running meetings and committees. For those who wished to enter trade unionism or politics, these were fantastic opportunities, but for all, it was a great boost to their confidence. It also gave the boys as a whole a sense of ownership of the clubs. The address books of the clubs at Mansfield House provide evidence that settlement club membership operated horizontally – gangs of boys from the same street joining together – and vertically, with younger siblings following older siblings to the clubs, and in time, joining their fathers, uncles and colleagues in the men’s clubs.³¹ Similar patterns emerged at the Northey Street club in Limehouse, a Toynbee Hall club that was run for many years by William Braithwaite. Membership of a club came in time to have social significance within the community. By the 1950s, the Mansfield House clubs in West Ham were renowned for being places where ‘nice’ men went.³²

The girls’ clubs at Canning Town Women’s Settlement, the sister settlement of Mansfield House, had long run a programme of encouraging East London girls to engage with political issues in addition to the more traditional girls’ club fare of cookery and dancing classes. The girls had opportunities like the boys to take responsibility for their clubs, as well as to meet women who were successful in their fields. This policy bore fruit in two of the club alumni entering local politics. One, Eleanor Bock, was the first female councillor in West Ham, whilst another, Daisy Parsons, was the first female Mayor of West Ham (1936 – 7).³³

³⁰ See Newham Local Studies and Archives, Aston-Mansfield Collection, Mansfield House University Settlement Papers, Fairbairn Boys’ Club, Minutes of the Sports and Finance Committee 1921-2

³¹ Mansfield House papers, 1910 Address Book

³² Personal information supplied to the author

³³ Newham Local Studies and Archives, Daisy Parsons Papers

Toynbee Hall was less involved in clubs than Mansfield House and Canning Town Women's Settlement, although it nonetheless ran a number. It was, however, more concerned with adult education. Such classes had the potential to be more transient than clubs, with participation dependent upon attendance on a course that could last a few weeks. On the other hand, classes had great potential to allow opportunities for people to meet others with similar interests. Like clubs, classes allowed working people to develop interests and build up their skills and confidence, at a time when 98% of the population of England and Wales had no access to higher education.³⁴ Such classes and related activities, such as the Toynbee Hall theatre, allowed the people of East London the chance to acquire the knowledge and skills which could lead to new or different opportunities for work or play. These activities were the foundations from which new elites could be built over the generations, and were a vital tool in East Londoners' self-determination.

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century Toynbee Hall and other settlements challenged existing local elites through transplanting ambitious and energetic young men – and in the case of settlements like Canning Town Women's Settlement – young men into impoverished areas. Although residents could live at the settlements or continue to volunteer for many years, the settlements were organisations for young people. They allowed young men from existing elites to take on elite roles in other areas. They also provided ways for these young graduates to establish themselves in positions of authority. These efforts were often met with opposition and antagonism by the existing local elites. This did not dissipate over the years, although the reputation of charismatic Wardens, like Jimmy Mallon at Toynbee Hall, or the presence of local politicians like Daisy Parsons who had been encouraged by the settlements, did much to lessen hostility.

³⁴ R McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 265

By the interwar years the settlements' purpose was less to create 'artificial' elites of those from the universities than to provide East Londoners with the tools, through clubs, education and welfare activities, to assert themselves. This was partly a result of the growing connections between the settlements and the Labour movement, as well as the increasing demand for the state to take a greater role in welfare matters, both from within the voluntary sector and from society more broadly. It was also a part of a general discussion, following the extension of the vote to all men over the age of 21 and certain groups of women in 1918, of what it meant to be a citizen and to play a part in a rapidly changing Britain. These innovations of the interwar years were successful at the time in enabling such development; and many of the settlements' policies, such as providing opportunities for further and higher education, were later enshrined in the welfare state of the 1940s onwards. As youth work and adult education were run by the state from the 1940s, so the relations between settlements and their local communities changed in response to this and the new challenges posed by the welfare state. The early desire of the settlements to provide leadership and to challenge or even replace existing local elites could bring them into conflict with these communities, but without these earlier efforts, their role in providing the tools and mechanisms for local people to take on different responsibilities may not have been possible. What the settlements provided throughout the period was an opportunity for those of the elite to learn something of what it was like to be less fortunate – and how the elite could pass on some of the things they enjoyed to these communities.

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