

In what ways did Seebohm Rowntree's first social investigation into poverty challenge attitudes towards the poor in Britain?

Podcast Script

By the mid 1850s, the population of Britain was growing fast, industry and trade were creating vast new wealth and the new railways spreading throughout the country brought increased mobility. But the new industries, which brought wealth to some, also brought intolerable working conditions, bad housing and poverty to others. But the common view of the poor was that they were responsible for their own sorry conditions.

In the 1880s, poverty became more a matter of public concern than it had been in the previous two decades. Rioting in the West End of London meant educated and wealthy Britons repeatedly found their attention drawn to the existence of poverty. This was aided by an increasing number of books, pamphlets and newspaper articles reporting on the extent of poverty in London. The press in particular provided a wide coverage, ensuring the issue was publicised across the rest of the country.

Perhaps the most noticeable consequence of this new found awareness of poverty was the enthusiasm it provoked towards social enquiries such as those by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree.

While electioneering in Liverpool in 1865, Charles Booth's personal contact with the poor convinced him that 'poverty...of the quality and quantity he encountered...was an evil for which there could be no possible justification.' After moving to London in the 1880s, Charles Booth returned to his interest in social problems, quickly realising that all previous studies on poverty had been prepared without any regard to the facts about how the poor really lived. Therefore, Booth began a personal door-to-door investigation into the nature and extent of poverty in London. From this he was able to construct a poverty map of London, showing that a shocking 30.7% of Londoners lived in poverty.

Both troubled and inspired by the work of Charles Booth, in 1899 Seebohm Rowntree carried out his first investigation into the living conditions of the poor in York.

Rowntree chose to base his investigations in York because, apart from the fact the city was his home and he knew its problems first hand, Rowntree was keen to prove that if there was a thick layer of poverty in an ancient town like York, then it would be a far more impressive demonstration of the extent of Britain's social problems than an investigation of industrial Manchester or Birmingham. Furthermore, it would challenge those critics of Charles Booth who believed that severe poverty was limited to London.

Rowntree said, "You cannot live in a town like York, with its poverty...without a sense of responsibility from time to time borne upon you. What part are you going to play as a citizen? Will you be one whose selfishness prevents them from understanding the problems that are to be faced...shall the causes of Education, Sanitary Dwellings and Healthy recreation be of no concern to you? Remember this chain of indifference, not far removed from selfishness, will be a heavy one to bear."

Rowntree approached the task in a similarly personal and methodical way to Booth, asking questions about income, the cost of rent, clothing, fuel, lighting and household items according to family size. Unlike any investigator before him, Rowntree also used scientific methods to assess whether or not a family was living in poverty. For example, he consulted nutritionists to discover the minimum calorific intake and nutritional balance necessary before a person became ill or lost weight. He also surveyed the prices of food in York to discover what the cheapest prices in the area for the food needed for a minimum diet were.

Using the information he had gathered, as well as information from York employers including his father Joseph Rowntree, Seebohm devised his own poverty line, based on the minimum income a family needed to survive. It was set at 21 shillings and 8 pence for an average family of five, the equivalent of £2.60 in

today's money. Any family that was discovered to earn below this amount was deemed to be in 'primary poverty' - in other words, lacking the means to ensure their physical wellbeing. Rowntree found that approximately 9.9% of people living in York lived in primary poverty, mainly in the areas of Walmgate, Fossgate, Peaseholm Green and Waters Lane.

In addition to this, Rowntree sent a visitor to every working class household in York to gather further information on living conditions and life-style. He came to the conclusion that a further 17.93% of the population were living in secondary poverty, meaning that a family's household income would have been enough to support them, had not some of their earnings been spent on non-essential items such as alcohol and tobacco.

In analysing his results, he also found that people moved in and out of poverty at certain stages of their lives. For example, those in old age and early childhood were more likely to live below the poverty line. From this he formulated the idea of a 'poverty cycle' in which people moved in and out of poverty during their life time.

What was important to Rowntree was not the identification of poverty, but the causes. That's why Rowntree's efforts did not go into defining poverty, but into a detailed study and the line separating those whose income was too low however they spent their money.

Rowntree and Booth's investigations helped change attitudes towards the causes of poverty. Booth carried out extensive research into the poor living conditions and poverty experienced in London, whilst Rowntree made a social investigation into the problems experienced by the poor in York. These investigations provided statistical evidence for genuine moral concern for the poor. This challenged common views of the poor by stating that illness and old age were greater causes of poverty than idleness and moral weakness.

After befriending future Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, Rowntree's findings went on to influence the liberal government of the time. Indeed, after winning a landslide victory in the 1906 General Election, the British Liberal Party began making dramatic welfare reforms that laid the foundations of the modern welfare state.

In his own chocolate business as well, Rowntree broke new ground in terms of industrial relations, welfare and management. His Quaker religion and social conscience impacted hugely on his business practices and he believed that the existence of companies that paid low wages was bad for the nation's economy and humanity. With his father, Joseph Rowntree, Rowntree employees benefitted from wage increases, a pension scheme, access to health care and an eight hour day.

Now pause the podcast and go to No. Walmgate. Listen to the experiences of the people who lived there.

NUMBER 2 - MALE

"I was pleased to find this house, because the rent is cheaper compared to the others on this street. That's because there's a lot of smoke coming from the candle-makers behind us, which gets into our rooms and makes it very dark and hard to see (and breathe). Still, it means we have got four rooms for only 3 shillings - normally that would cost me 5 shillings. I've got to save money, because my eyesight is bad and so I am paid less than the others at work."

NUMBER 35 - FEMALE, CHILD

"Since my mum got pulled up in front of the Education Board for not sending us to school, we can't get away with not going! It used to be easy to skip school, because our father died so there was no one to tell

us what to do. Living with Mum in that tiny house is definitely worse than school. We only have one water tap between 22 houses, and one toilet between 3. It's horrible here."

NUMBER 37 - MALE

"I've got seven kids under the age of 13 and we all live in these four small rooms. The house stinks because there's open drains all around us. I'm a labourer by trade, but recently work's dried up and I don't have enough money to feed my children."

NUMBER 38 - FEMALE

"Every time I walk out of the front door of my house, I'm surrounded by the stench of raw meat and pig's blood, because I live in between two slaughterhouses! Since my husband died, it's been impossible to make ends meet, especially with five children to bring up on my own, crammed into this tiny house."

NUMBER 49 - FEMALE

"We get by with donations from the church because my husband is crippled and can't work. We have two little girls, but one is suffering from consumption and will not last long. Our house doesn't help - it's miserable, badly ventilated, and damp. We have to share one toilet with six other houses, and our water tap with three others."

NUMBER 58 - FEMALE

"Whenever I find out that I'm pregnant, I immediately start putting aside money to pay for a nurse to help me when I am having the baby. But this means I don't have enough money left for food, and so I can only eat bread and tea after I've had the baby. It's no wonder that two of my babies died when they were very young. How can I feed them if I can't even feed myself?"

Adapted from Rowntree's study (p33-37):

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7TMs6krLnpgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=rowntree+study+of+york&hl=en&sa=X&ei=sG2SUPu6Cqet0QXA0oCABg&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAA>