

Authority or Experience

John Wilhelm Rowntree and the Dilemma of 19th Century British Quakerism

THE nature of authority, the meaning and testing of spiritual experience as the guide in life and thought and action, are perennial problems to the Quaker. It is my purpose in this lecture to discuss those problems in terms of three significant movements of nineteenth-century Quaker thought in this country.

Of the first, the Evangelical, I can say little here, important as it is. From the latter years of the eighteenth century, and more specifically after the crowded and stormy sessions of the Yearly Meeting of 1836, increasing emphasis was being laid upon the Bible as the ultimate authority in all matters of faith. The Epistle of that Yearly Meeting makes it abundantly clear that the Society then accepted the Bible as the final arbiter from which there could be no appeal and that it is held to reveal the whole mind and purpose of God. Concurrently and implicitly ran the conviction that true spiritual life can only be attained by those who correctly realize and accept the meaning of Christ's death upon the cross as the propitiation for the sins of men; who see that death as the punishment exacted by the iron justice of God borne in Christ's body for all. "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin." We must always remember that the Evangelical movement itself, in its impact upon the Society of Friends, comes as a rising tide of new life and hope and outreaching, sweeping an inert Quakerism from its still backwaters into the mainstream of social concern and endeavour, bringing a fresh realization of the importance of the individual, of the drama and significance of personal salvation. But by the mid-century the fire and vision of Joseph John Gurney and his immediate followers had cooled and died, and there was left a harsh and rigid scoria of credal thought which none must be allowed to challenge. So far had the reaction swung against the early teaching of Friends, that even the re-publication of Barclay's *Apology* by the Meeting

for Sufferings was strongly opposed, and in the Yearly Meeting of 1861 Isaac Brown could suggest "that it was time for us to discontinue the use of the term 'Inward Light', as it had been grievously misinterpreted out of the Society and was not found in Scripture". The preaching given Sunday by Sunday from the Ministers' gallery dwelt mainly upon the wrath and vengeance of God; "it is a hard gospel, not one of love" complained a Manchester Friend in the 'seventies.

Thus, at the outset, I want to stress how much Quakerism in this country had become an authoritarian faith, demanding an unquestioning obedience to the outward mandate of the Bible, conceived in the thought of the day as literally the record of the Divine utterances, uniformly inspired and infallible throughout its pages. The Ministers, Elders and Overseers of the Society exercised a rigid control of the Meetings for worship and for discipline, to maintain this doctrine, overriding if need be the judgment of the body of Friends as a whole in the Monthly Meeting.

Apart from the minority of conservative Friends, who clung to Fox and Barclay and the quietist mysticism of the eighteenth century, withdrawn from the teeming world of thought and discovery and outward change, the first valiant effort to break through the crust of evangelical doctrine (in its narrow sense), and reach back to the springs of spiritual life, arose in Manchester in the 'sixties. This movement has been largely forgotten, perhaps because it led to a minor secession, always a bugbear to Friends and more particularly since the split of the Hicksite controversy. There is no mention of it in Rufus Jones' *Later Periods*, nor in any of the standard histories, save for a brief paragraph in Edward Grubb's little book on the Quaker separations.¹ Yet so significant was it in the thought of John Wilhelm Rowntree that in the outline he has left for his projected history of Quakerism, there is a heading for one of the nineteenth century chapters—"The Rise of 'Modern Thought'—the Lancashire trouble." This is not the occasion to dwell for long upon the Manchester group of young men and women, the source of that "trouble", in their eager, relentless quest for truth, a truth that should be alive and real to themselves, in their passionate sincerity, and in the tragic outcome of their

¹ Edward Grubb, *Separations, their causes and effects: studies in nineteenth century Quakerism* (1914), pp. 124, 125.

revolt. All that I can do here is to indicate the first, crude statement of a religion of experience flung out as a challenge to the authoritarianism of the Evangelicals, breaking the ground for the later movement at the end of the century, which we generally recognize as marking the rise of modern Quakerism, and which is stamped indelibly with the impress of John Wilhelm Rowntree's thought and character.

In the year 1858 the Friends' Institute at Manchester was founded "as a place where young men could get what was needful and useful without leading them into temptation".¹ This is an oblique reference to the regrettable fact that after the Crewdson separation 25 years earlier, the young men Friends involved were in the habit of frequenting various public houses to carry on their discussions, and that those taverns became known in consequence as "Friends' Meeting Houses". By the early 'sixties a group of some 50 to 80 young men connected with Mount Street were meeting regularly at the Manchester Institute, listening to lectures on a variety of topics, including some of the burning and controversial questions of religious faith, talking, talking, questioning, arguing with one another and with the speakers by the hour together. It is sometimes my lot, as a member of Lancashire and Cheshire Quarterly Meeting, to visit the Institute, now an empty place of echoing corridors and high-ceilinged committee rooms and meeting rooms. But to me it is always filled with those enthusiastic and excited young people, thronging the corridors to continue their wordy battles, loud-voiced in their eagerness (surely the young of every generation have tended to shout in the heat of an argument), fiercely dogmatic in statement while decrying all dogma, showing little sign of subjection to their elders, as some older Friends bitterly complained.² Their leader was one David Duncan, who had joined the Society from the Presbyterian church shortly after his marriage to a Quaker. He was a thoughtful, widely-read man, a strong advocate of social reform, of universal education, of large, and all-embracing views of humanity rather than of loyalty to a sect, class or creed, republican, that is left-wing, in his political views. Ideas poured impetuously from his active mind, so that the orthodox who entered into argument

¹ Friends House Library, MS. Box 9.5.

² *Ibid.*, MS. Box 9.4(3).

with him, found themselves borne down beneath the flow of his words and were no match for him in intellect. Duncan was a man of some 35 years of age when he came into prominence in the Society by a lecture given at the Manchester Institute in 1861 on the famous volume of *Essays and Reviews* published in the previous year, which had set the orthodox religious world in a ferment of denunciation of the "Seven against Christendom" who had contributed to the book. (The three most famous names amongst them were Frederick Temple, then Headmaster of Rugby, later Archbishop of Canterbury and the father of William Temple; Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford; and Benjamin Jowett, later Master of Balliol and the translator of Plato.) The authors were tackling such questions as the light thrown upon the Scriptures by the Biblical researches of German scholars, the nature of their interpretation and of their inspiration, the relevance and credibility of miracles. David Duncan, in his quite penetrating address, suggested that:

There is one feature common to all the Essays—the recognition of an inward light—and it is curious to remember that the attacks with which early Friends were assailed, were characterised by the same reckless assertions of impiety and heresy.¹

A shocked and startled Society of Friends found itself, by this lecture, "the only section of the Christian Church which has furnished an advocate" for the detested book.²

To the young Friends of Manchester Meeting, David Duncan was both a fearless leader and a personal friend, ready to discuss their doubts and difficulties without surprise or scandalized feelings, always ready to open up or to pursue new avenues of thought, and, above all, one who, like themselves, was ever seeking for truth from whatever source it might spring. "Truth itself is greater than any form into which it has been fashioned", he proclaimed; life involves thought and the freedom to think boldly; "the spirit of fear is unworthy of a profession of the Gospel".³

¹ David Duncan, "*Essays and Reviews*": a lecture, delivered at the Manchester Friends' Institute, on the 13th of 4th month, 1861. (Manchester, 1861), p. 27.

² *Observations on a lecture delivered at the Manchester Friends' Institute, by David Duncan, entitled "Essays and Reviews."* By a Friend. [Anon.]. (London, 1861), pp. 28, 29.

³ David Duncan, "*Essays and Reviews*", p. 14, 15.

The position taken up at present by the so-called "Evangelical" friends of the Bible, is fatal to all spiritual life, and all faith in God and truth; it reduces men to slavery of mind and spirit; it openly preaches that God may have revealed Himself to the writers of the Old and New Testament, but that we cannot, and do not, expect such a revelation. This is to shut out God from the world.¹

Charles Thompson, a close friend of David Duncan, though some years his senior, was a prominent member of the Institute, who maintained that men "were not to stand still" in spiritual things, "for there was as large, *or even a larger, amount of divine authority* and outpouring of the Spirit *now* than there was in the days when the Scriptures were written".² Joseph Brady Forster was another who played a leading role in the group, acting as secretary of the Institute Committee. He was likewise a champion for unrestricted liberty of thought and expression in religious matters, for approaching the Scriptures with the tools of reason and not in blind acceptance of all that was contained therein, and for a freshness of mind that was ready to change its ideas with growing experience. It was said of him by one of his critics that he appeared to change his views week by week and expected that they would thus go on changing throughout this life and the next.³

Their young followers often ran to extremes in this unwonted atmosphere of an almost reckless freedom. The group as a whole was woefully lacking in any historical sense, and therefore inevitably was weak in an understanding of the incarnation. The one guide they would acknowledge was a disembodied inward light, which they felt was sufficient to lead them into all truth. If each one followed his own light, they held, he could not go far astray; if he did err he would feel it in himself, and would be as careful not to repeat that action as the man, who has burnt his fingers, will avoid the fire in future. They sought to discover truth for themselves independently of any outward teaching; early Friends were not to be followed blindly any more than were the Scriptures; by turning to the light to which they had called us we should

¹ David Duncan, *Can an outward revelation be perfect? Reflections upon the claim of Biblical infallibility*, 2nd edition (1871), p. 25. The Advertisement to the 2nd edition is dated 5th month 1871. First published in 1863.

² Frederick Cooper, *The crisis in Manchester meeting. With a review of the pamphlets of David Duncan and Joseph B. Forster*. Not published. (Manchester, 1871), p. 6.

³ Friends House Library, MS. Box 9.6.

advance beyond them. Some of them claimed an immediate approach to God and saw no need for Christ at all, and felt that to worship him was a direct denial of the First Commandment.¹ (When one remembers that this statement was made to a Yearly Meeting Committee of considerable weight, which included Joseph Bevan Braithwaite the elder among its members, one can but admire the courage of the daring youth who made this statement, but I think he was an attender and not actually in membership.)

David Duncan himself deprecated these more extreme views, but to the stiff Evangelicals all were tarred with the same brush. The division created in Mount Street between the orthodox Evangelicals and the bubbling heterodoxy of the Institute group led to such tension and high feeling that a Yearly Meeting Committee was eventually appointed in 1870 to enquire into the difficulties. With a steady, quiet ruthlessness this Committee proceeded to root out what had come to be known as the Manchester heresy; David Duncan was disowned in 1871, and died, a year later, at the age of 47. Eleven members, including some of the most hopeful and intelligent of the younger men and women, resigned in protest, and two others a little later. Despite the loneliness and sense of desolation which beset them on the death of their leader (and which moved even one member of the Yearly Meeting committee to compassion), these seceders, together with many still retaining their membership in the Society, held together, joining in a separate meeting for worship, followed by a period of discussion, and in 1872 started a monthly paper, called *The Manchester Friend*, under the editorship of Joseph Brady Forster. Its purpose was to represent the liberal party within the Society, and, in sympathy with the Broad Church party everywhere, to stand for perfect liberty of thought and expression.² *The British Friend* was very sore at the appearance of the new paper, and accused its editor of trying to "palm" off the periodical as "identified with the Society of Friends", whereas in reality it and its advocates belong to "the Synagogue of Satan."³ The Manchester group replies, quietly but confidently, "We think

¹ Friends House Library, MS. Box 9.5(1).

² *The Manchester Friend*, January 15th, 1872, p. 18.

³ *Ibid.* For *The British Friend's* editorial comment, see the issue for 1.1.1872, pp. 14, 15.

that our little movement in the nineteenth century, is identical *in aim*, with that of Fox, Barclay, and Penn, in the seventeenth; but we do not regard either the one or the other as finalities."¹ *The Manchester Friend* was laid down after running for two years, because the group felt that its work was ended; a seed had been sown that was already firmly rooted and would yield a golden harvest even if none of them lived to see it.

Thus the Quakerism, which had passed from its early freedom into a religion of strict authority, dependent on the outward letter of Scripture, was first challenged by a handful of young rebels, conscious of themselves as a movement, openly in revolt, desperately sincere, with no very clear idea of where they were heading, save that it was to the open roads of untrammelled thought and inward leading. "I would die for the truth," said Duncan in his last interview with the Yearly Meeting Committee, and in a sense he undoubtedly did so. This early movement ended then in disgrace, and apparent failure and tragedy. But the ground had been broken, however roughly. Twelve years later came the publication of *A Reasonable Faith*² (1884), written by three men who were likewise searching for a faith that could meet the demands of the intellect as well as of the emotions, and this was followed shortly after by the far more scholarly work of Edward Worsdell (1852-1908), still a comparatively young man. *The Gospel of Divine Help* (1886) brought a storm of criticism upon a particularly sensitive nature, and Edward Worsdell was refused a post in the Friends' school at Lancaster because he was held to be unsound on the doctrine of the atonement. In the eighties also there was still stirring a tradition of revolt in Manchester against usages which a younger generation felt had served their purpose, including the recording of ministers. Vipont Brown,³ and the slightly older John William Graham (1859-1932), are to the forefront here. And then, in the opening years of the last decade of the nineteenth century, a new and deeper note began to sound.

I do not think that John Wilhelm Rowntree was ever consciously a revolutionary, or that he set out to found a

¹ *The Manchester Friend*, January 15th, 1872, p. 18.

² By Francis Frith (1822-98), William Pollard (1828-93) and William Edward Turner (1836-1911).

³ Edward Vipont Brown (1863-1955).

movement or to assume of set purpose the role of leadership that he acquired because he was so obviously a born leader of men. Yet, to any group he entered, it was as though a keen wind from the moors blew suddenly through the stuffy chambers of conventional piety, of cramped and lazy thought, sweeping his companions onward to new and undreamed-of energy of mind and spirit, to a clearer vision of the possibilities that lay before the individual who would risk the sacrifice of dedicated effort.

He was born in 1868, the eldest son and child of Joseph and Antoinette Rowntree of York. From his mother, who was of German birth, a Seebohm of Hamburg, he inherited I think his intense love of beauty, his penetrative understanding of the work of the Renaissance artists, particularly of Dürer, his sensitive insight into the condition and needs of those he encountered day by day, his own artistic gifts, which found particular outlet in his lifelong love of acting. (As a schoolboy, he dressed up as a middle-aged Friend and interviewed the headmistress of The Mount for some considerable time on the possibility of sending his daughter to her school, carrying the whole interview through triumphantly and undiscovered.) It was from his father, one of those stalwart Quaker pioneers in the fields of commerce and industry, that he drew the steady strength of purpose, the inflexible will that carried his handicapped body to triumphant achievement in many fields of thought and action—from his father came also the relentless honesty that must find the truth for itself, and never run out in words beyond experience.

There are two aspects of his life and character which are often forgotten, and that I want, therefore, to emphasize.

First, from the age of 17, when he left Bootham, till the age of 31, when declining health forced him to retire to a quieter mode of life, John Wilhelm Rowntree was actively engaged in the cocoa and chocolate factory, then housed in a haphazard collection of buildings in Tanner's Moat, York, and employing some 200 to 300 people. It must have been a severe test to a sensitive schoolboy, already handicapped by deafness, to be thrust straight from the schoolroom to the factory floor, learning the business the hard way, by working through the various departments without privilege. His flashing wit, his courage and his kindness quickly won the affection and regard of his fellow workers. Within a few years

his younger brother, Seebohm, and his cousin, Arnold Rowntree, also entered the firm, and these three young men, working closely together as they assumed more responsible positions, formed a lively, adventurous and critical group. They were given a large measure of freedom to try out new methods for themselves, to make their own mistakes and learn from them. While ready to adopt what seemed good to them in Joseph Rowntree's ideas, they had no hesitation in casting aside what did not. Before he was 19 John Wilhelm had begun to re-organize the cocoa and chocolate-making departments, and at the age of 21 he was made a director. Thus, from his very young manhood he was, day by day encountering the responsibilities, the disciplines, the anxieties and achievements of an active business life. He was kept closely in touch with the stubborn facts, the hard, down-to-earth questions arising constantly in any industrial concern, and was experimenting in those difficult and delicate adjustments of human relationships involved in any attempt at management.

At the same time, almost immediately after leaving Bootham, John Wilhelm Rowntree was plunged into the work of the Adult School, first in the city of York, later in the School which he himself built up in the suburb of Acomb. Here he met working men of varying age and outlook at a different level, and in the cut and thrust of discussion, in the keen and often crude questioning of his class members, in trying to meet their personal problems and crises, the young man was tested in a different way, but just as searchingly. Like ourselves, he lived in an age of rapid scientific discovery and industrial development, of constantly expanding horizons, of the questioning of all accepted standards, of rude challenges to faith in any form. "A general doubt is coming up like a thunderstorm against the wind, and blackening the sky", wrote the historian Froude¹ in 1863.

Joseph Rowntree compared the revolution in thought, which took place in the last 35 years of the century (especially after 1859, when the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* cut the great divide through human thought), with the upheaval which swept over Europe at the time of the

¹ J. A. Froude, "A plea for the free discussion of theological difficulties", in *Fraser's Magazine*, 1863; reprinted in his *Short studies on great subjects* (New ed., 1891, i, 237).

Renaissance and the Reformation. The years of doubt and searching which beset the young John Wilhelm Rowntree are well known to us, when his childhood faith slipped away, and for a period he was left alone in the grey mists of agnosticism. He himself has told us:

I have known what it was almost to give up belief in God; I have certainly known what it was not to believe God in my heart, but only to believe in Him with my head. I have known what it is to believe that there was no reality in the Bible—certainly no reality in Jesus Christ.

There was no sudden, and dramatic conversion, but gradually a change was wrought. "These things have come back again to me along unexpected paths," he tells us.

The Bible has come back to me, through difficulty, in modern theology. Jesus Christ has come back to me in ways which I cannot express in speech. This I do know—even that light from out of darkness comes at times—a heavenly light.¹

It was because he had known these shaking and ultimate doubts that he could speak to the young men and women of his day with a fresh reality, could go with them into their own shadows of bewilderment and questioning.

The second point that I wish to stress is that, in our admiration for his life and work, I think we have been in danger of forcing his vivid personality into the mould of a plaster saint which ill befits it. The heroism of John Wilhelm Rowntree's life to me lies not so much in the courage with which he faced those major blows of a growing deafness and a threatened loss of sight, but in the persistent battle with his own difficulties of temperament and his mastery of them. He was naturally impatient, critical, hot-tempered and beset by the temptation of selfishness—a malady to which the young intellectual is particularly vulnerable. As a child he once bit a friend of his mother's so deeply in a burst of passion that she bore the scar for the rest of her days; at school he was noted for his quizzical criticism. He realized keenly the difficulty of discerning whether his thronging ideas and desires were merely the expression of his own active mind and will, ultimately therefore self-centred and loved because they were the children of his brain, or whether they were in

¹ From "To rise again—a sermon", 27.x.1901, Fourth and Green Streets, Philadelphia. Printed in *John Wilhelm Rowntree: Essays and addresses* (1905), p. 262.

truth part of a larger purpose, beyond the self—the promptings and intimations and leadings of the divine. He could write of the hell, the real hell, of selfishness.¹

“Oh, doom beyond the saddest guess,
As the long years of God unroll,
To make our dreary selfishness
The prison of a soul.”²

(The quotation is his.)

He could ask: “How far is our love of God merely the love with all our heart and mind and soul of our own social comfort, of our position in society, our reputation and our character?” “Can we really truthfully say that we love our neighbour as ourself? I for one have not attained unto it”.³ In the words of Gerald Gould:

“The big things are the enemies we know,
The little things the traitors.”⁴

It is part of the measure of his stature that neither did he succumb to that betrayal nor falter before the major challenges that life threw down before him.

Again, the ready wit, the quick jest, are often forgotten where the weighty utterance is remembered, but as Anne Vernon, the recent biographer of Joseph Rowntree, has written of John Wilhelm, “To be a man dedicated to God, and at the same time an asset at any social gathering, is an unusual combination.”⁵

In the spring of 1889, Dr. Richard Thomas of Baltimore, then a man in early middle life, visited London Yearly Meeting with a special concern to speak to the young men of that gathering, and it was almost certainly then that John Wilhelm met him and came under his influence. Richard Thomas was enabled to help the troubled and seeking young man to break out of the shadows towards his own vision of God. Very shortly after this visit, John Wilhelm Rowntree began to hold meetings among the young men of the Society

¹ *Palestine notes, and other papers* (1906), p. 100.

² Also in *Essays and addresses*, p. 409 (from *Present Day papers*, vol. 5 (1902), p. 92).

³ *Palestine notes, and other papers*, pp. 117, 118.

⁴ Gerald Gould, *The Journey* (1920), Sonnet xlvii (p. 91).

⁵ Anne Vernon, *A Quaker business man, the life of Joseph Rowntree, 1836-1925* (1958), p. 151.

in the north of England, to discuss religious problems and to share his own experience with them. He was often accompanied on these visits by Edward Grubb, then teaching in the north, and their concern was particularly for those who were indifferent or hostile to the prevailing beliefs in the Society, and who were sitting very loosely to their faith. "What chiefly influenced those who met" John Wilhelm Rowntree, wrote Edward Grubb many years later, "was the unfamiliar spectacle of a young man of his intellectual ability and artistic taste throwing himself heart and soul into work for the spiritual good of others".¹

So electric currents of hope and expectation, of stronger thought and a new eagerness, began to run through the younger generation of Friends, a spark flashing from one to another. Thoughtful and imaginative men and women of an older generation, already mature in experience and established in life, were likewise stirred and enlivened by these fresh impulses, and turned both with sympathy and expectancy to John Wilhelm Rowntree and his friends. When he and William Charles Braithwaite spoke in the Yearly Meeting of 1893, to plead for a more vital and practical ministry couched in terms which were the current coin of the rising generation, and so to meet the needs of the younger thinkers within the Society, they met with a ready hearing, and there was a sense of the blending of the thought and desire of younger and older which alone made possible the Manchester Conference of 1895, and the Summer School movement in the succeeding years.

In the months following this Yearly Meeting, John Wilhelm Rowntree learned from a specialist that nothing could be done for his fading eyesight, but that he must expect the onset of total blindness before middle life. That news brought one of his deepest experiences of the enfolding love of God, and from this time there is a new depth and reach in his ministry and writings.

The Manchester Conference is one of the great turning-points in the history of the Society. It was there that the seeking, thinking, restive individuals from all parts of the country found one another, and in the sessions heard the voicing of many of their ideas and difficulties. From this time the "modern" Quaker movement becomes conscious of

¹ Edward Grubb in *The British Friend*, April 1905, N.S. xiv, p. 95.

itself as a group activity. In that conference, called by the Home Mission Committee, with the support of London Yearly Meeting, in November 1895, the two schools of thought, Evangelical and forward-looking, stand out in sharp contrast, but not with the old bitterness in the recognized division. It was the first time that the Society had made an effort to assess its position in the light of modern thought, and to attempt to meet the intellectual as well as the spiritual needs of its members, particularly of the young. The mystical, practical and experimental nature of Quakerism was once more clearly pronounced, after nearly eighty years of neglect, or lip-service, or open aversion. With this fresh realization many Friends understood that they could accept the new conclusions of scientific and historical research, without any loss of faith, that they could advance unafraid along the paths opened to modern thought and criticism. Most significant also was the dawning of a fresh realization of group responsibility for re-vitalizing the meetings for worship and discipline; of the need for members to share in the tasks of a teaching ministry that would help them build up together a richer mental and spiritual life.

Two years after the Conference, John Wilhelm Rowntree, on holiday in Switzerland, first met Rufus Jones, and after a day of climbing and talking together, both realized that a friendship of unusual depth and quality had taken root. Rufus Jones had just begun his study of European mysticism, in the mainstream of which he saw the early Quaker movement as an important current. John Wilhelm Rowntree, on his part, was delving into the records of the first generation of Friends, was visualizing the modern Quaker movement as an evolution from those tempestuous days of the fresh outpouring of the Spirit, an unfolding and development, carrying on from those creative years into the present and the future in as yet untried ways of faith and practice. Both saw at once how their work fitted together, and from 1897 till his death in 1905, John Wilhelm Rowntree and Rufus Jones met every year, in England or the United States, at Summer Schools and in private visits, to strike out the white-hot metal of their thought together, each to find inspiration, new avenues to explore, from the suggestions of the other. It was to John Wilhelm Rowntree that Rufus Jones turned for criticism and advice on his written work, or whose comfort

he sought at a moment of discouragement. When *The Friend*,¹ reviewing Rufus Jones' *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, somewhat tactlessly and unkindly suggested that so good a title provided a subject for "a competent expounder of the theme" to pursue in the future, John Wilhelm Rowntree wrote at once to Rufus Jones: "With regard to the review of your book in *The Friend*, I would not for one moment allow it to trouble you. Nobody worth talking about takes *The Friend* seriously on this side of the water!" It was John Wilhelm Rowntree who collected and sent over to the States a valuable library of mystical literature for the use of his friend; it still forms the heart of the Rufus Jones collection at Haverford, and many of the volumes came from John Wilhelm Rowntree's own bookshelves. To both men this gift of friendship was one of the greatest riches that life brought.

Meanwhile, in England, a growing circle was gathering about John Wilhelm Rowntree, and looking to him for leadership in the way forward. They were very diverse in personality, in age and in ideas. Edward Grubb, at this time strongly attracted by the Unitarian position, but already gripped by the interest and importance of theological study; Vipont Brown and John William Graham, those valiant "crusaders of the spirit", well away on the left wing of both social and religious thought, and much given to shocking their elders; Joan Mary Fry and Frances Thompson of Birkenhead, gripped by the early teaching of the Children of the Light and by their young leader's re-interpretation of it; William Charles Braithwaite, the scholarly young lawyer, six years older than John Wilhelm, but a close personal friend after the Yearly Meeting of 1893, studying the examples of spiritual guidance in the Society's history; Ernest Taylor, just embarking on his life-work in Quaker journalism, who found in John Wilhelm's address at the Manchester Conference a call to devote himself to the new movement of Quaker thought; T. Edmund Harvey, with his keen perception of the important social and political questions of the day, his scholarly approach, his deep inner experience; Henry Bryan Binns, quiet, many-sided, a figure with no silhouette, as he has been described, who led his companions so unobtrusively from one field of beauty to another that they were almost unconscious of their guide; Elsie Wright,

¹ 16.xii.1904, xliv, p. 829.

who is still with us, and then as a very young woman must have been a most lively, attractive and stimulating member of any group discussion, with a capacity for asking pertinent and awkward questions; Silvanus Thompson the scientist, the scrupulously careful and honest thinker, with his roots deep in the things of the spirit—these are a few whose names spring at once to mind as companions in thought to John Wilhelm Rowntree, strengthening, following, questioning, steadying him, as they plunged together, and often in his wake, into uncharted waters of mind and spirit.

The concern of John Wilhelm Rowntree, the focusing points of the new movement, lie in four main directions.

First, the need to think anew of the meaning and significance in the modern world of the Society's central experience and doctrine of the Inner Light.

"We stopped thinking in the seventeenth century", John Wilhelm Rowntree declared.

The thought-stuff of Fox, Penington and Barclay was never properly worked out. We never understood the Inward Light.

This throws us back on the Inward Voice as the ultimate arbiter even of the Bible. Is this to mean, as Lecky drily suggests, 'the deification of a strong internal persuasion'? . . . The question is not one to be hastily handled. The difficulties of the doctrine of Inward Guidance are . . . serious and practical. I would suggest that the solution lies in a deeper interpretation of the person and message of Jesus Christ.¹

Note here the difference between John Wilhelm Rowntree and the Manchester group. He realises a problem of which they were not even aware, and the perils that arise if the inward light of the Spirit is not securely linked with the historical fact of the incarnation.

Secondly, he was concerned, throughout his life, with the acute and difficult problem of maintaining a living, yet free ministry. Consecration to him included the disciplined training of the mind,

the combined potency of prayer and thought . . . To be spiritual is not to be slipshod . . . We want the imagination which springs from sympathy, and the freshness which springs from thought . . . To deal in the obvious because thinking is too much trouble is to offer unconsecrated ministry.²

¹ *Essays and addresses*, pp. 243-244 (from *Friends' quarterly examiner*, xxxix (1905), pp. 116, 117).

² "On lay ministry" in *Palestine notes, and other papers*, pp. 110, 112.

To meet this need he, with Rendel Harris, initiated the Summer Schools for Biblical, religious and social study, Schools which ran for several weeks in the summer of each year, starting with one at Scarborough in 1897. It is difficult for us to imagine what these gatherings meant to the Friends of the late nineteenth century. There was the intellectual stimulus of Bible study, using the apparatus of the modern, critical method and the greater understanding brought by recent anthropological studies and explorations of primitive religion; there was a more fundamental appreciation of the problems of practical, social life; there was the deepening of faith, and the vivid fellowship of those who are seeking and finding together. There was an exciting sense of opening doors, of keen eddies of thought blowing, of the recovery of the deeper truths of religion as real and personal to the young men and women of that day. Later came the idea of Woodbrooke as a permanent centre of such studies, with the hope that the Friends who shared in them might become in time the new type of minister, informed, thoughtful, more deeply spiritual in their approach to life, whom John Wilhelm Rowntree longed to see arising in the dead meetings up and down the country. He has left us his first idea of Woodbrooke as: "a small, residential reading party", from which other enterprises would develop—correspondence classes, evening lectures open to Birmingham Friends, social, experimental work in the way of practical study. The problem, as he saw it, was "How to train and equip without imparting a professional spirit and flavour, or exalting the intellect above the spirit."¹ So strongly did he feel on this subject that he believed the continuing life of the Society depended on the growth of such a ministry, which would be closely in touch with the needs, the discoveries, the changing thought of the day and so able to speak, in terms which they understood, to the men and women of the early twentieth century.

Thirdly, he realized the need for a knowledge and understanding of the history of Quakerism throughout the centuries of its existence. This he saw as vital to the fulfilment of the two concerns already mentioned. Only as Friends knew of the creative upsurging of spiritual life from which Quakerism sprang, could they realize their history as an evolution, could they see where the true unfolding and development lay, and

¹ Letter of May 1902 to Rufus Jones (Rufus Jones Collection, Haverford).

which were the blind alleys they had strayed into from time to time, and were still opening temptingly about them in the present. The history he had outlined would have been very much a study of the developing thought, the conflicting ideas, which had arisen since the days of Fox and Barclay.

Fourthly, he was sensitively alert to the weight of the social problem laid upon his contemporaries, and the need for all Christians to seek a fresh and constructive approach to these baffling questions. He was clear that philanthropy, so often the mere fashionable craze of the day, even among members of the Society, was not enough, and might be a very real danger. Like his father and his brother Seebohm, he demanded research into the causes of poverty, a different attitude to men of all classes. ". . . there is a notable stirring of the social conscience," he wrote.

Poverty in its hideous shape is regarded not as a fixed institution but as a social disease, an evil too great to be borne. That the many should suffer a stunted life while a few enjoy the freedom of wealth and leisure is a contradiction of brotherhood that cannot be glozed over by the application of a few stock platitudes. So it comes about that the old party lines break down, and time-honoured political beliefs are seething in the melting-pot. In all this there is a great hope and a great peril.¹

This then, in brief outline, was the message and programme of the modern Quaker movement. It was proclaimed in lectures and discussion groups, in the periodical which John Wilhelm Rowntree started and edited and which ran from 1898 to 1902 under the title of *Present Day Papers*, where religious and social questions were once more freely discussed; it was heard in the ministry of the meetings for worship. If at first sight there does not seem to be anything very revolutionary in it, more careful thought, I think, will reveal that it goes to the root of our existence as a religious Society, and the problems it faces are still with us. John Wilhelm was not a mere rebel, with a desire to destroy ruthlessly; he had far too keen an historical sense to seek the fashioning of all things anew like the Manchester group at the beginning of the unbroken trail. For all his rediscovery of the meaning of the Inner Light, he had no easy belief in the natural goodness of man. He stated clearly: "After all, we need what, to use an old phrase, is called conviction of sin."²

¹ *Essays and addresses*, p. 242 (from *F.Q.E.*, xxxix (1905), p. 115).

² *Palestine notes, and other papers*, p. 117.

He could pierce the dead husks of Evangelical teaching to the living kernel of truth enfolded within, which many of the Evangelical Friends of his own day had forgotten.

Evangelicalism can neither be disproved nor dispensed with—for it expresses that which is of the essence of the spiritual life. The personal hold on God, the personal sense of His love and power, the personal call to His service, and the personal sense of sin,—this is Evangelicalism.¹

The incarnation, the cross, personal salvation, the atonement, were not old superstitions to be flung away, but were to be realized deeply and passionately as living truths of experience which each generation must win to for themselves. Thus, in his thought, the dilemma of authority or experience is largely solved. For if the Spirit alone can reveal to us the truth, yet that truth is not a mere fact of inward feeling and knowledge but exists in history, objectively and outside ourselves, the revelation of God, the meeting of God and man, in Jesus of Nazareth. The ultimate test must be not only, Are we following the light we have? but, Is that carrying us to a growing recognition of the historic reality of Christ's life and teaching and of the meaning of the Cross?

The death of John Wilhelm Rowntree in 1905, at the age of 37, shook the Society of Friends in this country as nothing had done since the death of Edward Burrough in Newgate gaol in 1662. But the effect of that death upon his contemporaries is one of the most amazing witnesses to the creative power of John Wilhelm Rowntree's dedicated life. To all who have left a record of this time, it came as a challenge and a spur to increased effort, that the things for which he had cared and worked should be carried forward, and not die with him.

"His death, so unexpected and so moving, carried me farther perhaps than his continued life could have done," wrote Rufus Jones. "I felt at once that I had to live and work for both of us and no longer as one person. I felt his concerns laid upon me as though they were mine by birth."² "It rests with us to do what is in our power to further the work which he had at heart, and to keep alive the ideals and enthusiasms of 'One who never turned his back but marched breast forward', " said Lawrence Richardson.³

¹ *Palestine notes, and other papers*, p. 248.

² R. M. Jones, *The trail of life in college*, (1929), p. 198.

³ *The British Friend*, April 1905, N.S. xiv, p. 94.

“Seebohm is perfectly wonderful, he thinks all the time of how John’s work is to be carried on, and is full of plans for holding meetings to put the necessity before the younger Friends who are in sympathy with it,” wrote Edward Grubb.¹

“His sudden death has drawn us all together who knew him, and to many of us it has brought deep heart-searchings and aspirations after the higher ways,” wrote Henry Bryan Binns.²

“His memory and life seemed not . . . to cast a bewildering gloom on everyone, but just the reverse; it seemed to stimulate and energize everyone,” wrote Herbert Standing.³

His ideas were carried forward to flowering and fruition in the Quaker histories written by William Charles Braithwaite and Rufus Jones; in the growing Woodbrooke and its service; in the rise of the Young Friends’ movement after 1905, culminating in its first phase in the Swanwick Conference of 1911; in the formation of the Yorkshire 1905 Committee for fostering thought and teaching and ministry, with Ernest Taylor as its first secretary; in the deepening vision of those first pre-war years of the message and purpose of the Society. Individuals were profoundly changed by that death; Rowntree Gillett,⁴ to give one notable example, the gay, attractive, young man about town, was turned from those happy and careless vanities to a life of resolute purpose in the service of God; others have told me of the profound change in thought and direction brought by their contact with John Wilhelm Rowntree and his sudden passing from them. In our own day, the new interest arising among younger Friends for a serious and informed study of the Bible and other matters of the Christian faith, the concern appearing among Friends of all ages for a deeper understanding of the Inward Light and its relation to historic Christianity, the vital, thought-filled ministry heard sometimes in unexpected places in our Meetings for Worship, all I believe are witnesses that the work which John Wilhelm Rowntree began is still living, still puts forth new shoots of hope and promise.

The religion of authority, based on a Holy Book, has passed from us. Authoritarianism comes to us in different

¹ Letter of 21.iii.1905. Rufus Jones Collection (Haverford).

² Letter of April 16th, 1905. Rufus Jones Collection (Haverford).

³ Letter of 21st May, 1905. Rufus Jones Collection (Haverford).

⁴ Joseph Rowntree Gillett (1874-1940).

and perhaps more dangerous and subtle forms. The other trend, represented in the Manchester group of the "sixties", is with us still in little changed guise. There are still among us the followers of an unfocused inward light, conceived as an ineradicable part of the equipment of human beings—a bold, humanitarian faith. Perhaps the Society of Friends must be large enough in sympathy and imagination to contain them. Let us pray that the day of heresy-hunting is past. The rebellious, challenging, restlessly-seeking young will always tend to find an appeal in the brave claims of a divine humanity, with its unlimited possibilities of a growth into perfection; have not many of us passed that way? But the answer to the question, authority or experience, and what is their nature, is given ultimately, I think, in John Wilhelm Rowntree's words, as reported by Silvanus Thompson.¹ The two had taken a long walk together over the Yorkshire moors in the summer of 1904, and Silvanus Thompson has left a record of their conversation, which ranged from Balfour's recent address to the British Association at Cambridge, and the new concept of the impermanent nature of matter, to the Lancashire trouble of the 'sixties and 'seventies.

"He also spoke on his own views, as to which he said that he had of late seen somewhat more clearly", Silvanus Thompson continues.

The central thought was that the Quakerism that is to progress must first realize the main Quaker position of the Divine illumination of the soul, and understand that there is neither infallible Church, nor Pope, nor Book; that it must then carry on the progress of the religious idea by outlining the relation of the indwelling God, on the one hand, to sin as a fact of human experience, and, on the other, to the other revelations of God. Abandonment of all external authority as authority, which this position involved, brought about the prime necessity of ascertaining, so far as we can ascertain, the nature of the contact which is felt between the human and the Divine. This in turn involved a clearer understanding of the terms "human" and "Divine". If with that clearer understanding we then perceive that Jesus Christ furnishes us (within the limits of human consciousness) with an identification or meeting-point between humanity and Divinity, between a perfectly human soul and the Eternal and Divine Spirit, we have a foundation for faith independent of external authority; and this is the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. It will be a Gospel not written in books, but in the collective illuminated conscience of the followers of

¹ *Friends' quarterly examiner*, xxxix (1905), pp. 258-268.

Christ, and it will necessarily and of itself guide men in conduct, while quickening them in every activity for their fellow-men.

I scarcely dare to set down more, lest I should distort the impression which his words left upon me. He seemed to see, as with a great power of inward vision, the gathering thought of the Quakerism of the future.¹

It is to the realization of that vision, and its translation into reality, that we are called today.

RICHENDA C. SCOTT

¹ *Friends' quarterly examiner*, xxxix (1905), pp. 266-267.