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Quaker Extension c.1905-1930: The Yorkshire 1905 Committee

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Abbreviations

AR	Annual Report
BL SS	Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, Special Collections Department
FHL	Friends' Meeting House Library, Euston Road, London
JRCT	Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
MM	Monthly Meeting
(Y)QM	(Yorkshire) Quarterly Meeting

Quaker extension c.1905-1930: The Yorkshire 1905 Committee

The Yorkshire 1905 Committee, established in 1905 and renamed the Yorkshire Friends Service Committee in 1928, was the 'extension committee' of Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting. It was a significant feature of the 'Quaker renaissance' of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and carried forward many of the ideas of John Wilhelm Rowntree, one of the leaders of the Quaker renaissance, after whose death in 1905 the Committee was established.¹ This paper aims to place the 1905 Committee's activities in context, relating them to developments in the Society of Friends, and in adult education more generally. Many of its activities were concerned with adult education which had for many decades been an important activity among Quakers, especially in Yorkshire.² The Committee was active in the production and distribution of Friends' literature, the support of adult schools, the organisation of summer schools, study circles and 'Quaker tramps', the establishment of educational settlements, and various other initiatives that fell into the category of 'Quaker extension'. These were intended to improve the vocal ministry in Quaker Meetings, to extend the influence of Friends in their local communities, and to enhance the social and cultural life of the Society in Yorkshire. Although the 1905 Committee had some notable successes, particularly in the field of literature and in the initiation of permanent adult educational institutions, its overall impact on the strength of Yorkshire Quakerism was limited, and it failed to have the transformative impact that it had hoped for on the quality of Friends' religious life. However, some of its pioneering activities inspired other social movements and survived beyond the relatively narrow confines of the Society of Friends.

The Quaker renaissance

The 1890s and 1900s were a period of rapid social and political change. Politically, the emergence of the 'new Liberalism' challenged the Victorian dominance of *laissez-faire* in social policy, and ushered in an age of unprecedented state intervention. Mass membership of trade unions, the creation of the Labour Party in 1906, and the electoral triumph of the Liberals

in 1906 altered the political and social landscape. As Ian Packer has emphasised, the Nonconformist churches – and particularly the Society of Friends – played a significant role in the development of ‘new Liberalism’, because of theological changes in the late nineteenth century which modified the Nonconformist social and political outlook.³ This role stemmed from the Quaker renaissance of the 1890s and 1900s which is widely discussed in the historiography of the Society of Friends.⁴ Under the guidance of a generation of young leaders, a more liberal version of Quakerism came to the fore in contrast to the evangelicalism that had dominated the Society for much of the nineteenth century. Most historians point to the pivotal importance of a special conference at Manchester, held in 1895, which was addressed by several prominent reformers, including John Wilhelm Rowntree (1868-1905), and which inspired many young Friends to shape what has been called the ‘new Quakerism’.⁵ One result of the ‘new Quakerism’ was an intensified involvement among Friends in social and political activity beyond the Society. For example, although Quakers had long been associated with adult education, this period saw a ‘second wave’ of Quaker adult schools. Other developments included the establishment of the Friends Social Union in 1902 to further the study of social problems, chaired by John Wilhelm’s brother Seebohm Rowntree. The period also witnessed the establishment of charitable trusts by wealthy Quaker philanthropists such as George Cadbury and Joseph Rowntree.⁶ One of these, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT), established in 1904, became a significant financial supporter of the Yorkshire 1905 Committee. It also supported the most significant institutional manifestation of the Quaker renaissance: Woodbrooke, a Quaker ‘settlement’ or college in Birmingham, which was established by George Cadbury, under John Wilhelm Rowntree’s influence, in 1903.⁷

This wider social engagement was not unique to the Society of Friends: other denominations were also participating in a greater range of voluntary social activities, motivated by what Beatrice Webb called a ‘consciousness of sin’ that arose in the 1880s.⁸ One important result of the ‘consciousness of sin’ was the establishment of university settlements: small communities of university-educated men, and in many cases women, initially in the east end of London but also in other large British cities. This movement, as Pam Lunn has emphasised, involved several prominent Quakers.⁹ The universities were also looking outwards: in the 1870s Cambridge, London and Oxford Universities, in that order, began ‘university extension’ classes which brought

many men and women in industrial towns, particularly in the north of England, in contact with university-level education.¹⁰ There was a parallel, although less successful, extension movement in the Scottish universities.¹¹ As Lunn has argued, Quaker educational initiatives need to be seen in this wider context.¹² However, perhaps even more important to Friends during the Quaker renaissance was the quality of the vocal ministry in Friends' meetings for worship. One prominent Friend, Neave Brayshaw, later remembered that John Wilhelm Rowntree's 'chief concern was for the strengthening of the ministry and of our meetings for worship in general'.¹³ Many of the greatest Quaker efforts of this period were dedicated to the furtherance of this end.

Rowntree's complaints about the quality of ministry found many echoes in the Society of Friends. In this period, the Quaker weekly magazine *The Friend* repeatedly published correspondence on the subject.¹⁴ The issue was officially recognised by the Society of Friends in 1903 when London Yearly Meeting – the national governing body of the Society – appointed a Committee on Ministry and Oversight, 'to give help and counsel with regard to the ministry' throughout the country. This committee was reappointed in 1905 with 34 members, including a number of prominent Yorkshire Friends.¹⁵ Also in 1905, the Central Education Committee of the Society called for Friends to undertake 'the serious consideration of the educational needs of the Society' at a series of conferences in Monthly and Quarterly Meetings.¹⁶ In the same year, *The Friend* published an article by William Cadbury entitled 'The Wider Fellowship', which emphasised the importance of groups that were closely associated with Friends, especially adult scholars, who often formed the bulk of the audience at Quaker meetings held on Sunday evenings, and yet who rarely wanted to join the Society or to attend Sunday morning meetings for worship.¹⁷

Similar concerns were being expressed in Yorkshire. The Quarterly Meetings (QMs) of the Society of Friends represented a level of church government below the Yearly Meeting. Yorkshire QM had responsibility for the management of a number of Quaker schools in the county, for tabulating the members and registered attenders of the Society in Yorkshire, and for the general oversight of Friends' church organisation and wider activity. There were five Monthly Meetings (MMs) in Yorkshire: Balby; York; Pontefract; Pickering and Hull; and Brighouse, the county's largest MM in terms of membership, which included Leeds. Friends in Yorkshire shared many of the concerns regarding the life of their Society that were being aired in *The Friend*.

For example, at a symposium in Bradford in March 1905, a meeting of the 'Essay and Discussion Society' addressed the issue of 'the stationary condition of the Society of Friends in Yorkshire during the past fifty years, and the relatively small attendance at our Sunday morning meetings for worship'. This meeting heard that the vocal ministry at worship was weak, using 'meaningless' archaic phraseology, and lacking 'vitality', a feeling that had also been expressed by John Wilhelm Rowntree.¹⁸ Partly as a result of poor ministry, the Yorkshire 1905 Committee noted that, '[i]n many Meetings, a sense of heaviness and constraint is sometimes present ... In almost every congregation a certain proportion of the membership is, to outward seeming, unattached to the Society, and often is not in anything like regular attendance.'¹⁹ One of the problems, according to middle-class Quaker commentators, lay in the social class of some Meetings: in 1905, Joseph Rowntree, in a wide-ranging memorandum, regretted the lack of 'wise leadership' in Quaker meetings, arguing that this absence resulted in them being 'marked by crudity of religious thought'. In particular, working-class meetings for worship had often 'attracted cranks'.²⁰ In 1907, the 1905 Committee received a description of the Meeting at Keighley, within Brighouse MM. The tone of this anonymous account was scathing: Keighley was a 'one-man Meeting [with little,] if any, Quaker feeling ... It is difficult where [the] bulk of people concerned are uneducated ... The Meeting would benefit if rather a different class of visitor went sometimes.'²¹

It was to improve the life of Quaker Meetings like this that the idea of Quaker 'extension' emerged in or around 1900. Essentially, extension aimed at what the 1905 Committee later called 'developing the missionary spirit of Quakerism'.²² According to Ernest Taylor, who was one of its pioneers, extension involved the provision of education through lectures and other activities, particularly for younger Friends, with the aim of 'equipping men and women for leadership', especially in Quaker Meetings and adult schools. As a result, the vocal ministry in the Society of Friends would be strengthened.²³ Extension was a development of the idea of the home mission, which emerged in the Society at around the same time as the university settlement movement. Yearly Meeting established a Home Mission Committee in 1882: its objective was to support Friends who had 'a gift in the Ministry' to work full-time as Quaker evangelists. This aroused some opposition, as it was seen to infringe the Quaker prohibition of a paid ministry, but it did draw some new recruits to the Society.²⁴ Extension represented a broadening of this idea: as *The Friend* announced, the 'narrow' work of the home mission was a separate branch of church activity, but extension was a broader activity and should be an integral