

**The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd  
Director's Biography**

Prepared Jun 2005 to celebrate the Trust's Centenary

## **Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954) Director 1904-1954**



Alongside his father, Seebohm remains the most famous of the Rowntree family. His studies of poverty and his writings on industrial relations made a significant impact in his time and are remembered as pioneer works.

He was the third child of Joseph Rowntree and his second wife, Antoinette – born at just the time when Joseph and his brother, Henry Isaac were starting to build up the cocoa works in York. Surviving letters from the period of his childhood describe family life revolving around business, the Quaker movement and the Liberal Party. Like his father and brothers, Seebohm was educated at the York Quaker school, Bootham, and from there he went on to study Chemistry at Owen College, Manchester.

Seebohm spent five terms in Manchester, before leaving, while still only eighteen, to join the family business in York. A few years later in 1897 when the business became a limited liability company, Seebohm was ready to take his seat on the board, along with his older brother, John Wilhelm and various cousins under the chairmanship of his father. Throughout this time, he taught on Sundays at the York Adult School – keeping up his Quaker social duties, alongside the business.

In 1901 Seebohm's most famous work, *Poverty, A Study of Town Life*, was published. His father, Joseph, had carried out surveys into poverty in the 1860s and Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* had been published in 1889. Seebohm took their work further, with a mass of statistical data on wages, hours of work, nutritional needs, food consumed, health and housing. His research illustrated current failings and he argued that new measures were needed to overcome the miseries of unemployment, old-age and ill-health.

Seebohm, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, was a great supporter of the Liberal Party. He formed a strong connection with Lloyd George, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer introduced a series of reforms, including the Old Age Pensions Act in 1908 and the National Insurance Act in 1911.

Seebohm, along with his father and other directors, introduced a series of reforms at the cocoa works – including a pension scheme. In his book *The Human Needs of Labour* in 1918 he argued for a Government enforced minimum wage and the introduction of family allowances. At Rowntree, he tried to create an industrial democracy by the use of Works Councils.

In his later years Seebohm continued his surveys on poverty – publishing further works – *Progress and Poverty*, 1941, and *Poverty and the Welfare State* in 1951. His view was always that social policy must be underpinned by research – measuring, comparing and contrasting conditions through detailed field work. In his biography, Asa Briggs went as far as to describe Seebohm Rowntree as “one of the most active individual agents of twentieth-century progress”.