

OUR HISTORY - 70

R H Tawney - Equality (1931)

Tawney was an economic historian. Influenced by the social idealism of Edward Caird and the religious liberalism of Bishop Charles Gore, after Balliol College, Oxford, he went to live at the Toynbee Hall settlement in Whitechapel, where he became involved in social work. He then became a teacher for the Workers Education Association.

This was a lifelong interest and he served 42 years on the WEA's executive council and was president from 1929 to 1945. Tawney's academic base was the London School of Economics, where he was first Reader and then Professor of Economic History. His first academic work was a study of the *Agrarian Problem of the Sixteenth century*, published in 1912. He fought in the First World War, being severely wounded. His 1920 study, *The Acquisitive Society* was a critique of capitalism. In 1926 he published *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism. Equality* followed in 1931.

Tawney was a Christian Socialist moralist not a Marxist. He had a profound belief in political democracy and an opponent of all forms of totalitarianism. He served on a number of Government Commissions, including the Sankey Commission, in 1919 where together with Sidney Webb, he argued for the nationalisation of the coal industry. He was a regular contributor to the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman*, writing mainly on educational reform.

Tawney joined the Fabian Society first in 1906 (later serving on its Executive committee), then the ILP in 1909 and then the Labour Party in 1918. He stood unsuccessfully for a parliamentary seat on three occasions though he considered he was more useful outside parliament. In 1922 he published *Secondary Education for All* and in 1924, *Education: The Socialist Policy*. He also contributed to the Labour Party's 1928 manifesto, *Labour and the Nation*. Tawney was a member of the education

committee of the London County Council and of the consultative committee of the Board of Education. He died in 1962. He is the subject of biographies by Ross Terrill (1973) and Anthony Wright (1987).

"It is true that while inequality is easy, since it demands no more than to float with the current, equality is difficult, for it involves swimming against it. It involves material sacrifices by some, and a lot less painful surrender of sentimental claims by others, and on the part of all, sufficient self-control and public spirit, sufficient respect for themselves and appreciation of their neighbours...."

"The reasons for equalizing, as means and opportunity allow, the externals of life is not that the scaffolding is more important than the shrine, or that economic interests, for all their clamour and insistence, possess the unique and portentous significance with which the fashionable philosophy of the age is accustomed to ascribe to them. It is not, as austere critics assert, to pamper the gross bodily appetites of an envious multitude, but to free the spirit of all.... The chief enemy of the life of the spirit, whether in art, culture or religion ... is as everyone knows, the idolatry of wealth, with its worship of pecuniary success... and its strong sense of the sanctity of possessions and weak sense of the dignity of human beings, and its consequent emphasis, not on the common interests which unite men, but on the accidents of property, and circumstance, and economic condition, which separate and divide them."

"Though the idea of an equal distribution of material wealth may continue to elude us, it is necessary, nevertheless, to make haste towards it, not because such wealth is the most important of man's treasures, but to prove that it is not. It is possible that the ultimate goods of human life May be more easily attained, when its instruments and means are less greedily grasped and more freely shared."

