

Joseph Town's Schooldays, 1843-48

THE Joseph Town, junior, whose autobiographical account of his early life up to 1848 is here reproduced in a series of extracts,¹ belonged to a family which provided the South Parade Church, Leeds, with a succession of members and officers stretching over a whole century and more. Their record in this respect is probably without parallel in that church's history. There were so many of them, often with similar names, that the historian is sometimes baffled to fit them into a coherent scheme of family connexions. One connexion, however, is clear, they all belonged to the firm of paper-merchants which bore their name. It originated at Keighley where the Towns had their Turkey mill and were well-known as leaders of the Baptist cause there; the commercial side of the business seems to have been established at Leeds in the 1820s. It is recorded² that by April 1826, Joseph Town (senior) who was then twenty-two years old, had come from the "sister church" at Keighley and taken part in the Sunday School work at South Parade, Leeds.

As Joseph Town & Sons the firm at Leeds maintained its identity³ until it was absorbed into the Wiggins, Teape group of companies, as part of Allied Paper Merchants, more than one hundred years later.

Joseph Town, senior, was born in 1804 and died on July 28, 1860. It will perhaps suffice here to quote part of the tribute paid to him by *The Leeds Mercury* when it announced his death:⁴

Mr. Town had been for many years a most active and useful member and deacon of the Baptist church in South-parade, by whom his loss will be most deeply felt. He combined so much public spirit and energy with true benevolence and amiability of character, that his death at a comparatively early age will be felt as a public calamity. Firmly fixed in his own principles, whether political or religious, he possessed a liberal heart and a broad catholicity of character which made him ready to unite in any good Christian work and which endeared him to those with whom he was associated in so many benevolent undertakings.

For two years he had been a Borough Councillor, 1851-53, and was in 1839 elected one of the Borough Overseers. Naturally he was a Liberal.

Joseph Town, junior, was born at Leeds on July 29, 1833, educated locally and at Leicester, as will be seen, and was received into the South Parade Church after baptism at the age of fifteen. It was equally natural that he should join the family business and should take office at South Parade in due course. He died at Vevey, Switzerland, on September 7, 1890, and was buried there. Like father, like son: the more general parts of their obituary notices are virtually interchangeable. More particularly, however, the latter's work for South Parade cannot be better described than in the special resolution which the church meeting passed on hearing of his death.⁵

It was a mark of the esteem in which he was held by his brethren that at the age of twenty-six he was elected to the office of Deacon. Twelve years later he was appointed one of the Secretaries of the Church . . . The duties of these offices he discharged with efficiency and fidelity until his death, when he had been a member of the Church 42 years, a deacon 31 years and a secretary 19 years. At one time he was a superintendent of the Sunday School at South Parade; and for a number of years he was a willing helper in the work of the Church at York Road. He was also one of the trustees of the chapel property.

Some of his activities are not mentioned: his work in tract-distribution, for example. Various tract societies had been started at the church, but it was Joseph who started another and a more successful one in 1850, acting as its first secretary: he was "most indefatigable in every department of work,"⁶ and the note-book provides evidence of the truth of this tribute.

THE JOURNAL OF JOSEPH TOWN, 1848

Journal,

Joseph Town, Junr.

May 24

1848

I TRUST I do not begin this journal without feeling my own unworthyness. insufficiency and my constant need of Him who alone is deserving of all the praise and all the glory. May the God of mercy, peace, truth, & love help me to be much in secret, to meditate much on his holy Wood [sic], to examine my self often whether

I be in the faith or no, to live above the world, and to live the life of a holy and devoted christian . . .

It pleased God to give me an existance [sic] in this wicked world on the 29th day of July 1833 and ever since that period (exceedingly sinful though I have been) a merciful God has delivered me from the hands of Death. I cannot have too grateful a heart to Him who has bestowed upon me such a gift even the gift of pious & religious parents, who have and will offer many an anxious & sincere prayer for the eternal happiness of their children . . .

Up to the age of 10 I remained at home, and during the last five years I went to a day school. And notwithstanding the religious instruction which I received [sic] (which was not unfrequent) the warnings & entreaties of my dear Father & the admonitions of my affectionate mother, yet I delighted in sin . . .

At the age of 10 in August 1843 my Father & Mother sent me together with my Brother (Annandale) to Boarding school at Leicester, where he remained 3 & 1/2 years. When I had been there a little time I became still more hardened in sin. I soon gave up my morning & evening prayers, and never approached the footstool of mercy. I did not dare to bow my knee for I feared man more than God. I feared the scorn & plagues of my schoolfellows, more than the awful threatenings of the Almighty. I continued in this state for nearly 3 years, & I am sorry to say my brother was in the same situation as myself . . . About May 1846 I thought of putting a few words of religion in my letters to my parents. But as my brother saw my letters before they went, I was discouraged in carrying out this project. However as he was going to leave the school in the following month I resolved to delay it till the next half year. The time soon arrived and I did not forget my resolution. . . .

When setting out from the city of destruction, my first approach to the world above was to pray unto Him once more who is the hearer & the answerer of prayer & to read a short psalm every night aloud in my bed room before the other boys (there were 5 of us slept in the same room) but they soon got tired of that, & so I had to read it to myself. The Head Master was a baptist but I cannot say that he was a christian, but one of the under Masters was both (Mr. Lyon). However I must not judge other people but examine myself. I not only had many a sweet & comforting letter from my parents, but I also corresponded with my dear Sister Janet, who was endeavouring like myself to enter in at the strait gate . . .

In the beginning of the year 1847 I began to be more bold in religion, and read my Bible regularly in the afternoon after school, whether the boys were in the room or not. But I found it most difficult to spend a happy Sabbath, what with the unprofitableness of the conversation, the laughter & scorn of my schoolfellows. I was

often almost constrained to go back, but the arm of the Lord sustained me . . .

I came home at the Easter Holidays in 1847. It was indeed a profitable season; it was a treat to me to spend a few days with those who cared for my salvation . . . My Sister Janet and I would retire into our secret chamber & enjoy sweet converse with each other . . . After I had been at home for about 10 days I returned to school; helped greatly by my refreshment on the way side. The boys used to try to lead me out of the right way very frequently, & these temptations I believe did me great good . . .

They also called me many names such as "Pious Joseph," "the little Saint" & many others & was scarcely ever called by my proper name except when they wanted to ask a favour of me—something perhaps which the other boys could not give them. When they spoke in this manner I made but little reply, but tried to set them a still better example. Amongst these difficulties I found Jame's Anxious Inquirer a very interesting book. It helped me greatly. I was also fond of Pike's early piety which was a constant companion. The next 3 months soon rolled away, & I again returned home for the Midsummer holidays, looking forward with great pelasure to the enjoyment of the holidays, not only with the sight of the family circle, but also hoping to spend much time with God, & to make rapid advance in the way to Heaven, & to happiness.

June 1847 — My Sister Janet & I once more met together & we endeavoured to assist each other in our journey homeward. But when the holidays were drawing to a close Janet was taken very ill with the fever, which continued for several weeks, for many days of which she was insensible. Many a prayer was offered up for her, many a tear shed; & she was enabled to say into thy hands I commit my Spirit . . . We all thought she was going home & about to leave the cares of this wicked world, & to go to her Father in Heaven. I was at school during the latter half of her illness; and though I was at so great a distance from her, yet I loved her much not only as a relation but as a fellow traveller to the celestial city. Tears often flowed down my cheeks, at the thought of losing [sic] such a friend. However God heard our prayers for her, and raised her up again, & contrary to the expectation of all her health & strength were restored.

August 1847. I obtained permission of the Head Master (C. R. Edmonds, who was not a baptist in practice, but only in principle. I am sorry to say that neither he nor his wife seemed very anxious that their souls should prosper. His Father is blind and is a minister in Cambridge) to attend the week-day Lecture on Wednesday Evenings. These were refreshing seasons to my soul, & I can truly say that I found it good to be there. I did enjoy them so much.

How delightful it was after closing the various studies of the day & when all the temptations & trials of the day were over to spend an hour in the House of God & have sweet communion with his son Jesus Christ. I shall never forget those sweet seasons, they rejoiced my heart & were a great blessing to my soul.

During this half-year (latter of 1847) I made rapid progress in religion. In nearly every letter which I received from my dear Father he gave me the following advice "Be much in Secret." What better counsel could I have than to be much with God . . . This was my last half year at School & truly the best. Before leaving I called upon Mr. Mursell & had some talk with him; he gave me some good advice & encouraged my heart. Our interview closed by approaching the throne of Grace by prayer. I now returned home after being at Leicester 4½ years. While there I frequently went to Mr. Cooks to tea & enjoyed his company very much. Once I went to dinner on the Sabbath & spent such a pleasant afternoon with him. He prayed & I did enjoy it so much. He was & is indeed a good man; . . .

I shall never forget the period of my life that expired at Lester [sic]. The first and greater part I was at a distance to Christ & all the pleasures of Religion, & the second attracted by the light of the Sun of righteousness, drawn by the cords of his abounding love I renounced the world to be his disciple & determined to follow Christ whithersoever he should lead . . .

What a delightful thought: 2 of us Sister and Brother finding that this world is not our rest, are seeking one to come, a city whose builder & maker is God. As one Christian assists another, so does one seeker of Christ & happiness help his companion. So it was with us. We had never been together for above 5 weeks at a time for the last 4½ years & now oh! how cheering to be constant companions.

January 1848. We now sought the Lord in good earnest. We met together for half an hour every day, told each other our difficulties, our discouragements, our comforts & our joys & by so doing we were drawn much nearer to the God of all love . . . February 1848. Being now persuaded that we were the children of the living God, that we had given our hearts to him, we determined to join ourselves to his people, to be baptized, and thus to follow the example of Jesus. . . .

On the 28th of February 1848 my sister Janet & I were proposed to the church (meeting at South Parade, Leeds) according to our desire. On Monday, March 27/48 we went to the church meeting. Before going thither our Father spoke very affectionately to us and prayed that the Spirit of God might rest upon us — & enable us to speak before his people.

After we had been in the library some time, Janet was called in, & told her experience to the church. Then came my turn. The

following is a part of the conversation which passed between the Minister (Mr. Brewer) & myself whilst before the Church —

M. Well my dear young friend I am glad to see you here. We only want you to tell us what God has done for you. Can you tell us how long it is since you began to think about these things? C. About 2 years.

M. What led you first to think about them? C. I don't know anything particular but I think it came on gradually.

M. Have you been led to Christ for your salvation? C. Yes.

M. Can you tell us by what means you were led to Christ for your salvation? C. By writing letters to & conversation with my parents.

M. Have you been led to feel yourself a sinner? Yes.

M. On whom do you depend for your salvation? C. On the Blood & Death of Jesus Christ.

M. Do you take any delight in reading the word of God? C. Yes.

M. Do you take more delight in the worship of God? Yes.

M. Now on the subject of *Baptism*. Which do you think is the proper way? C. By *Immersion*.

M. Do you believe Baptism & the Lords Supper to be saving ordinances? C. No. [*Cetera desunt*].

On another page follow notes of a sermon by Rev. A. M. Stalker, November 5, 1854, and then several pages giving lists of his scholars at York Road Sunday School, 1854 to 1859, with their addresses and notes about his visits to their homes. Several pages are devoted to a list of tracts, the numbers and titles of which are given, together with a note of what he did with them, from September 1848 to 1853. A few examples of his zeal may be quoted.

Tract No. 23, *For ever*, "threw it into a public house." No. 24, *What art thou*, "to a girl in the street," October 12th 1848. He gave them to ordinary people in the street, to soldiers, corporals, sergeants, to his friends and Sunday School scholars. At the annual meeting of the Religious Tract Society on November 20th 1848 he learned one way of tract distribution, "leaving then on stiles which are pretty frequently crossed over—much good has been done in this way." He put tracts under doors, pinned them to gates, sent them by post, on a milkman's pail (with good results), on a hedge, on the pavement: there was no end to his devices. "On the 14th of April 1849 when coming home this evening from a short walk I saw a man selling Tracts belonging to the R.T.S. I was glad to see him endeavouring to get a living by offering for sale such publications. He was one of those men who go about the streets with Turbans on their Heads. I thought I perhaps might encourage him if I gave him some of my Tracts & so I went home & got the

above [Luther on Justification] & went to look for him again. I found him & told him I was very glad to see him selling such Tracts & asked him where he came from? He said Bombay. I then said, have you found Christ precious to you &c. & he answered, ai. I did not know what he meant by this expression. He then asked me several times, Please sir can you give me an old coat? I am so very cold. So I went away commending him to Divine protection & mercy."

Joseph Town's short account is perhaps of some small value as showing what a well-to-do Baptist father was prepared to do for his children. Another member of the same congregation sent his daughter to "Avon Bank" boarding school in the early 'thirties whence she wrote home some charming letters.

NOTES ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

¹ The ms. notebook containing this account, inter alia, is in my possession. Only the more historical parts are given.

² *Jubilee of South Parade* (1877), p. 62.

³ Local directories for Leeds show two modifications in the firm's title. Up to 1860, when Joseph (senior) died, it is styled simply Joseph Town; thereafter it is Joseph Town & Sons. The second variation occurs in 1834 when the entry is John & Joseph Town, doubtless due to a dissolution of partnership in the firm of Smith & Town, of Keighley, in 1831. The directories also give the addresses of the firm and its principals, varying descriptions of the firm's activities (e.g. they were also rag-merchants, in the far-off days when rag was a constituent of paper) and sometimes include a reference to Turkey mill at, or near, Keighley.

⁴ July 31st, 1860, p. 3.

⁵ *Church Manual*, 1891.

⁶ *Jubilee of South Parade* (1877), p. 50. Cottage-meetings were held.

COOK. The "Mr. Cook" must surely be no other than the famous Thomas Cook (1802-92) whose name is a household word among British travellers. He was in Leicester at this period, attached to the General Baptists.

MURSELL. This must be the Rev. James Phillippo Mursell (1800-85), famous for his Radical opinions, whose campaign against church-rates is well known. See A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (1947), p. 214, and *Victoria County History, Leicester*, Vol. IV (*City of Leicester*), (1958), pp. 207ff.

EDMONDS. As described in White's *Leicester Directory* for 1846, Cyrus Reed Edmonds was "Headmaster of Proprietary School," which is also called a gentleman's boarding school in the Post Office Directory for 1848. For this information I am obliged to the City Librarian of Leicester, who adds that he has not been able to find Edmonds's name in the annals of the Leicester Baptists at this period. It is very likely that he is the same as the minor miscellaneous biographer and translator

whose various works are listed in the usual bibliographical sources (British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books, Allibone, etc.). He wrote popular lives of Washington and Milton and translated Cicero and Livy for Bohn's well-known series of Greek and Latin classics.

More information about Edmonds and his school would be welcome. What was his curriculum, for instance, and what were his fees? Who was Lyon, the under-master?

JAMES. "Anxious Inquirer" refers to John Angell James's *Anxious Inquirer After Salvation*, a popular work which went through many editions.

PIKE. "Early Piety" refers to John Gregory Pike's *Persuasive to Early Piety*, first published in 1830. Pike was Secretary to the General Baptist Missionary Society.

BREWER. Rev. Robert K. Brewer had not long been at South Parade at this juncture and was not minister for much longer; he retired in July, 1848, when the split in the church occurred which resulted in the formation of the new church now known as Blenheim. See R. Gawler, *History of Blenheim Baptist Church, Leeds*, 1848-1948.

STALKER. Rev. A. M. Stalker was minister at South Parade from 1848 to 1855.

FRANK BECKWITH

INFORMATION PLEASE — JOHN SMYTH

Did John Smyth teach in Sheffield? The question is raised in the *Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society*, vol. viii, part 4, 1962, p. 223. Mr. P. J. Wallis points out that a gap in Smyth's story (from August 1604, when he was charged in Gainsborough with having preached without a licence, until March 1605/6), coincides with the period during which a "Mr. John Smithe Schoolemaister" was paid for teaching in Sheffield. Anyone who can shed light on this question is invited to write to Mr. P. J. Wallis at 27, Westfield Drive, Newcastle upon Tyne, 3.