



This is Whitechapel

In 1872, the Reverend Samuel Augustus Barnett informed the Bishop of London of his intention to 'go East' to Whitechapel. The Bishop's reply was kind and slightly bemused, the sort of letter a father might send to a son who was proposing to settle in some far distant corner of the Empire. The vicarage was empty and the living available, 'But do not hurry in your decision' he wrote, 'it is the worst parish in my diocese and one which has, I fear, been much corrupted by alms.' The Bishop was speaking from hearsay, for beyond what had been written by a few intrepid 'explorers' or collected in the census of 1871, little was definitely known about Whitechapel.

Barnett and his future wife did not hurry to take up their residence there. They made enquiries; they read the census and they came to see for themselves. Of this visit, Mrs Barnett has given us a graphic description: 'When Mr Barnett and I went to see our proposed home, it was market day and the main street was filled with hay carts, entangled among which were scores of frightened cattle being driven to the slaughter house. The people were dirty and bedraggled, the children neglected, the beer shops full, the schools shut up. I can recall the realisation of the immensity of our task and the fear of failure to reach or to help those crowds of people, with vice, woe and lawlessness written across their faces'. They took the decision to try and Canon Barnett later wrote, 'We came to Whitechapel attracted by its poverty and ambitious to fight it in its strongest fortress.'

The 'fortress' was an area of 'but a few acres, bounded on the West by the city and on the South by Whitechapel High Street, where some forty keepers of small shops lived with their families. There were two or three narrow streets lined with fairly decent cottages occupied entirely by Jews, but with these exceptions, the whole parish was covered with a network of courts and alleys'. These were the evil 'rookeries' which so fired the guilt-infested Victorian imagination and live on in the etchings of Gustav Doré.

'None of these courts had roads,' wrote Mrs Barnett, 'In some the houses were three storeys high and hardly six feet apart, the sanitary accommodation being pits in the cellars; in other courts the houses were lower, wooden and delapidated, a standpipe at the end providing the only water. Each chamber was the home of a family who sometimes owned their indescribable furniture. In most cases the rooms were let out furnished for eightpence a night, a bad system, which lent itself to every form of evil. In many instances broken windows had been repaired with paper and rags, the banisters had been used

for firewood and paper hung from the walls which were the residence of countless vermin. In those homes people lived in whom it was hard to see the likeness of the Divine'.

Much has been said about the nineteenth century inhabitants of East London. Professor Huxley compared them unfavourably with 'brutish island dwellers before the missionaries': the writer's and journalists who went to see all chronicled their various impressions. Men such as George Sims ('Horrible London'), Jack London ('People of the Abyss') and Walter Besant ('East London . . . the City of happily toiling bees') have described them with varying degrees of outrage, compassion and condescension. Charles Booth, the social investigator, was to become a friend of the Barnett's during his stay in Whitechapel. Of all the writers, his view of the average Whitechapel dweller, most closely approximates to Barnett's own.

'They are the casual labourers of low character' he wrote, 'and those in a similar way of life, who pick up a living with labour of any kind. Their life is the life of savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and occasional success. Their food is of the coarsest description and their only luxury is drink. When they cannot find threepence for a night's lodgings they are turned into the street. The young men take naturally to loafing, the girls take almost as naturally to the streets: some drift down from the pauper and industrial schools, others drift down from the classes of casual and regular labour.'

Barnett thought this a fair and accurate description of the people: 'In this moderate language Mr Booth describes the class of people living in Flower and Dean Street,' he wrote. It is not entirely surprising that their views so exactly co-incided: Barnett and Booth shared a common and manifest moralism. They were both essentially middle class reformers, that Victorian genre so despised today. They did not see it as their duty to describe poverty in a more objective way. Nor would they have been able to. In fact it seems possible that in all his time in Whitechapel, Barnett never did see the people as they were, for his vision must have been severely distorted by his own moral and religious cast.

It is only fair to judge Canon Barnett's contribution to Whitechapel in the context of his time. Intellectual modesty and doubt were not qualities which most Victorians possessed — and Samuel Barnett was no exception. It was one of their many social and political misconceptions that poverty would be erased by improving the minds of the poor rather than their material conditions and the Barnett's subscribed to this with all the self confidence of their class. Canon Barnett's main concern was with spiritual turpitude and deprivation, yet he was for an idealist, an unusually practical man.

In his first years in Whitechapel, Barnett achieved a number of concrete improvements: he was a prime mover in the Artisans Dwelling Act of 1875

which made it possible to condemn dwellings unfit for habitation; he used the Sanitation Acts, which had been brought in after the great cholera epidemic of 1848 to ensure that sewers were connected: he helped to set up the East London Dwellings Company to purchase and rehabilitate slum properties along the lines laid down by Octavia Hill and he installed a wash house in the High Street paid for out of the rates.

When in 1877 he came to review the work of his first years, it was not however in these terms that he spoke. Instead the statement which he wrote in the parish report dealt mainly with his religious and moral philosophy: 'If one sentence could explain the principle of our work in Whitechapel, it is that we aim to decrease not suffering but sin. Too often has East London been described as if its inhabitants were pressed down by poverty and every spiritual effort which has been made for its reformation has been supported by means which aim only at reducing suffering. In my eyes the pain which belongs to the winter cold is not so terrible as the drunkenness with which the summer heat fills our streets. The want of clothes does not call so loudly for remedy as does the want of interest and culture. It is sin therefore in its widest sense that we are here to fight. Sin in the sense of missing the Best. . . .'

Barnett's primary attack on the evils of poverty was a sort of moral rearmament campaign for the poor. In this he saw education and 'that love which strengthens character' as his basic weapons. One of the first actions on taking over the Whitechapel Parish, was to dust out and open up the crumbling schoolrooms behind the vicarage. (It was in these rooms that he was later to hold the first of his art exhibitions, which lead in time to the founding of the Art Gallery in Whitechapel). As an educationalist, Barnett was both perceptive and original, his main concern being to create understanding and develop imagination rather than to teach facts. For this reason craft teaching was introduced as part of the St Judes school curriculum and Barnett held that classrooms should be pleasant places for children to be in.

Barnett's concern for the wellbeing of the slum children lead to the creation of the children's holiday fund in 1877. The fund, which was as much Mrs Barnett's idea, was intended to give the smogbound children of Whitechapel a breath of country air: to improve their health and to give them simultaneously a vision of 'God's greater purpose'. Awed by the freedom of the open country, and the luxury in which they were accommodated, the children behaved in an exemplary fashion. This Barnett took as confirmation of his belief in 'the friendship that binds classes'. For it is clear that, as had been said of him, that in Canon Barnett 'Christian optimism' became a moral determinism which few whom he befriended could evidently resist.

For thirty years, Barnett applied his principles to the practical task of

poor relief. In his role as a trustee on the Whitechapel Board of Guardians, he was intent on encouraging a spirit of self-dependence and his early attempts to replace the peremptory system of dole-giving by a more careful concern, were everywhere taken up as a model for welfare administration.

Yet of all his work, it is probably in his capacity of first Warden of Toynbee Hall that Barnett is best known and best remembered. Toynbee Hall was set up in Whitechapel in 1884 as a residence for university graduates eager to work and live in London's East End. It was dedicated to the memory of Arnold Toynbee, the young social historian who died in 1881. Based on a belief in social improvement brought about by a friendship between individuals, Toynbee Hall was immediately hailed as the cure for the chronic lack of contact between rich and poor in all growing industrial cities and it was the first of many such schemes to be set up all over the world.

In his work as warden, Barnett supervised the work of his sixteen graduate settlers and helped them to organise their classes and courses. His talent for organisation was prodigious and it is said that he was remarkable for his ability to inspire effort in his co-workers.

Out of the excellent library for the residents and their students at Toynbee there grew a realisation of the need for a free public library in Whitechapel. Barnett persuaded the philanthropist John Passmore Edwards to provide the library which was to be one of the first free libraries in England. A building was erected in the High Street and opened in 1902. Five years later, Barnett formed a trust to purchase the adjoining site for the Art Gallery, which was to be his last project for Whitechapel.

Not all of his notions for the people were well inspired. In his almost hysterical alarm about the danger's of 'materialism' he seems to have ignored the fact that nearly half of his parishioners were living on less than subsistence wages. And it is hard to forgive him the view that the people had no cultural traditions of their own, no matter how repressed these may have been by their hard lives.

But if we are to recognise Canon Barnett's contribution to Whitechapel, rather than to castigate him for his shortcomings, it is well to remember that his liberal paternalism was certainly an advance on the savage *laissez faire* philosophy of his century. We are still left today with the need to separate welfare from moralism and it could hardly have been expected that a nineteenth century middle class reformer should have been able to transcend all the contradictions of his philanthropy.

When he died in 1913, an obituary in the 'Daily News' said of Barnett that he 'had changed the face of East London.' A place had been reserved for his tomb in the crypt of Westminster, for in 1906 he had left the East End to become a Canon of the Abbey, but he chose instead to be buried in the grounds of St Jude's church Whitechapel. It was his last tribute.