

EDWARD BIRCHALL
BIOGRAPHY

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NCVO
CHAMPIONING
VOLUNTARY
ACTION

Edward Vivian Dearman Birchall (1884–1916) and the foundation of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS)

E. V. D. Birchall was born on 10 August 1884 at Bowden Hall, Upton St Leonards, Gloucestershire, to (John) Dearman Birchall – a woollen merchant from Leeds – and Emily Jowitt, his second wife, who died soon after Edward’s birth. Although his parents were Quakers, Edward Birchall and his siblings (two brothers and two sisters: John Dearman, Arthur Percival Dearman, Violet Emily Dearman, Constance Lindaraja Dearman) were brought up as Anglicans. His brother Arthur Percival Dearman died in battle in Ypres, Belgium, at the age of 38 in April 1915. His other brother, Sir John Dearman Birchall, went on to become a Member of Parliament for Leeds North East from 1918 to 1940.

Birchall was educated at Eton College and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read chemistry. In 1907, he graduated with fourth-class honours. With his father, who purchased a country estate in Gloucestershire in 1869, having lived on private means for decades, Birchall had the opportunity to do the same after graduation.

He became involved in the new philanthropy movement of the time, which introduced a new, ‘scientific’ approach to dealing with poverty. The movement was based on three principles – the organisation of volunteers, who would pay visits to the poor and keep a social casebook on each family in order to assess their need, the reduction of overlaps in charitable effort, and the forging of links between private and public bodies for the provision of social services.

The emerging ‘guild of help’ movement, which began with the foundation of the first guild in Bradford in 1904 at a meeting addressed by the bishop of Ripon and Seebohm Rowntree, was a manifestation of the new philanthropy. It was characterised by the endeavour to make a transition from charity to social work, as seen in the motto ‘not alms but a friend’ and the fact that many of those offering their services through guilds of help were themselves from a working-class background. The guild movement still emphasised personal service to individuals or families through local community action, but it also aimed to forge links between voluntary organisations and the civic authorities.

In 1906, Birchall co-founded the Birmingham Civic Aid Society, an association of aid committees set up by progressive manufacturers who were concerned about the wellbeing of their workers. In May 1910, a conference was held in Sheffield, where it was decided that a National Association of Guilds of Help (NAGH) should be founded.

After the decision to found the NAGH had been taken, a committee was set up and tasked with drafting its constitution. The committee, of which Birchall was a member, presented the constitution at the annual conference of the guild of help at Birmingham in May 1911, where 40 guilds immediately joined the NAGH. Birchall first served as part-time honorary secretary and occasional honorary treasurer, before assuming the presidency of the association in 1915.

Simultaneously, he also served as honorary secretary of the Agenda Club, which he had co-founded in February 1911. The Club was a national organisation of men inspired by the Samurai who they considered to be ‘careless of material gain’ and whose ‘civic heroism’ they admired. The Agenda Club initiated a ‘health week’, the first of which was held from 28 April to 4 May 1912. During this week guilds and other voluntary organisations – and later ten London boroughs and 30 provincial towns – would discuss public health measures.

The foundation of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), the forerunner of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), had been foreshadowed for a while, but the need for an organisation that brought together and represented the vast variety of active relief agencies became even clearer at the annual guilds of help conference of 1913. Here Edward Birchall and his friend S. P. Grundy presented a paper in which they advocated for the fusion of the three major philanthropic movements of the time: the Charity Organisation Society (COS), the councils of social welfare, and the guilds of help.

The COS had been founded in 1869 by a group of social reformers, including Octavia Hill, William Gladstone and John Ruskin. Its aim was to ensure cooperation between charities, prevent their work from overlapping, and put an end to indiscriminate almsgiving, in order to ‘root out scroungers and beggars’. It provided financial help through local committees, deployed home visitors to establish the need of each individual or family, and aimed to register relief efforts in a central office.

The councils of social welfare, on the other hand, had emerged more recently. The first one had been set up in Hampstead by Thomas Hancock Nunn, who served on the Royal Commission on the Poor Law. All three movements aimed to increase cooperation between existing voluntary groups, but in contrast to the COS, the councils of social welfare and the guilds of help also aimed to forge links between statutory and voluntary bodies and embodied a move towards a more inclusive, less hierarchical form of social work. The guilds of help movement in particular spread very fast: by 1911, there were 60 of them with a membership of 8,000, surpassing even that of the COS.

Nevertheless, Grundy and Birchall argued that each of the three movements was incomplete on its own, with the COS placing too much emphasis on casework and the councils of social service trying to influence policy and regulation without being able to build on much casework experience. Therefore, they argued, an amalgamation was necessary.

In 1915, a significant step towards this goal was taken when 600 delegates, including from the NAGH, the COS, and the councils for social welfare, attended a conference at Caxton Hall, Westminster, where they decided to set up a Joint Committee on Social Service. They were later joined by representatives from local government, the Ministry of Pensions and the Charity Commissioners in an advisory capacity.

Unfortunately, however, Birchall did not live to see the eventual foundation of the NCSS. He gave up his posts as president and honorary treasurer with the NAGH in 1915, when he was given the commission of captain in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire light infantry. On 10 August 1916 – his thirty-second birthday – Edward Birchall died in Étapes, France of wounds received in action in Pozières during the Battle of the Somme. After his death he was awarded a DSO for refusing to allow treatment of his wounds until the army's position was firmly held. He was buried in a war grave near Le Touquet. In his will, he left £1000 – which, according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator, is the equivalent of £46,600 in 2015 – to his friend S. P. Grundy. In his letter to Grundy, of which a copy is stored at the London Metropolitan Archives, he writes, 'if I get scuppered ... I've left some money to be used for N.A.G.H. or any other old purpose...: £1000 I think it is but don't mention it till I'm tuning my harp please'.

In 1919, Grundy and five other philanthropists used his legacy to set up the National Council of Social Service, which from the outset aimed to formulate national policies of voluntary work and improve co-operation within the voluntary sector and between voluntary organisations and the state. During the First World War there had been a new surge of voluntary activity with millions of pounds in donations and thousands of new charities, so improved coordination and sharing of intelligence had become even more necessary. The original members of the organisation were a dozen national voluntary organisations and members from central and local government bodies. Since then, the NCSS – which was renamed NCVO in 1980 – has grown to connect and represent more than 12,500 members from across England.

Sources

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