Not Alone in the World
The Atkinson Endowment Story

ORIGINS

The Atkinson Endowment was created in 1948 through a bequest. Joseph E. Atkinson had incorporated a foundation in 1942 to receive the gift of his Toronto Star stock at the time of his death. After almost a decade of political wrangling, the paper was sold to a "voting trust" of family members and friends. A $25.5M endowment was established with the proceeds of the sale in 1958.

The Star's original owners were 21 printers and four apprentices who formed a co-operative to compete with their former employer, The Globe, after a labour dispute in 1892. Seven years later, citing lack of capital, they sold the paper to a small group of wealthy businessmen who were influential in the Liberal Party of Canada. Atkinson accepted their offer to become the Star's editor on the condition that he had full editorial control and independence from any political party. He negotiated a salary of $5,000 a year in 1899 – $3,000 in cash and the rest in shares. By 1913, he had become the Star's publisher and had acquired a controlling interest.

OTHER SOURCES OF CAPITAL

Elmina Culham Elliott married Joseph Atkinson in 1892. Elmina's maternal grandparents were affluent landowners and operators of a sawmill in and around the area now known as Oakville. The Culham wealth was undoubtedly derived from colonial settlement, from the dispossession of land from First Nations and extraction of staple resources: in this case, lumber. The Culhams likely took ownership of land upon its surrender in controversial treaties.

Unlike the Culham-Elliotts, the Storey-Atkinsons were among the most impoverished settlers on the least arable land stolen from Indigenous people through colonization. They had been uprooted from England's Cumberland Hills by labour strife in the 1840s, and were settled along Lake Ontario on the territory of the Mississaugas in a town called Newcastle.

PREOCCUPATION WITH GENEROSITY AND JUSTICE

"Nobody can escape his beginnings. And I despise the man who is untrue to them," Atkinson wrote toward the end of his life. Not only did he not try to escape his beginnings, his personal experiences became the source of his convictions and courage as a "social justice crusader." Joe, as he was known as a boy, was born in 1865. He was the youngest of eight children. His father worked as a miller at a local flour mill until his early death in an accident on the Grand Trunk Railway that left Joe's mother widowed with a six-month old and seven other young children. She raised her children in a rented house on the town's main street, taking in labourers as boarders to provide for her family.

Joe was 14 when his mother died: a death he attributed to the family's deprivation. Shortly after, he went to work in a woollen mill that burned down a few weeks later. Private charity sustained him until he was able to find employment.

Not surprisingly, Joe grew into a charitable man who was generous privately (and often anonymously) and professionally through the Star. But as he established himself in Toronto, he stood out among his contemporaries for his vocal dissatisfaction with charity as a country's safety net and prevailing attitudes toward people who survived on low to no income in a growing city with woefully inadequate infrastructure.

Over the course of his career, Atkinson reported on the social and economic conditions that created and sustained poverty in all its forms in depth as a journalist and editorial writer. But it was his advocacy for a universal system of social protections and health care that became legendary. Using the Star as his platform, Atkinson campaigned for public programs and services such as widows' and mothers' allowances, unemployment insurance, old age pensions and the first phases of a national health plan. He championed a legislated minimum wage and the rights of labour unions. All this to eliminate the need for charity and misconceptions about poverty and its solutions.

ORIENTATION TO WORKERS' RIGHTS

Joseph Atkinson's exposure to the labourers and their lives in his childhood home coincides with the rise of the Nine Hour Movement in Ontario. This global movement was made up of local leagues who fought for better working conditions in their sectors and jurisdictions. It was instrumental in the adoption of the first labour laws in 1872, just a few years after Confederation.

As a newspaper publisher and businessman, Atkinson was known to mostly side with working people. Star reporters were the highest paid in the Canadian media industry in his day. But the Star also resisted unionization of editorial employees and the introduction of company pensions (which Atkinson saw as a public responsibility) for some time under his leadership.

These views carried over to Atkinson's orientation to wealth and a progressive taxation system. He wrote this editorial a year before he established the foundation:

> "Great wealth is not earned. It is amassed, accumulated, collected, gathered, taken. There are many words to describe the process but 'earned' is not one of them. The wealthiest among us do not operate alone in the world. What they enjoy has been brought to their door by the labour of a vast number of people... Under our present social system there is nothing necessarily wrong with being rich, so long as the rich person makes right use of their riches."

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

The Atkinson family was known to have only had two books in their home: a bible and book of Methodist hymns. As one of the Protestant denominations of Christianity, Methodism was at the forefront of the Social Gospel movement that espoused the "Golden Rule": loving your neighbour as yourself, and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. The movement emphasized the Christian teachings that focus on how society and the economy should be organized for greater equality and to serve the common good. Its leaders openly challenged Christian leaders who focused on the reward of eternal life after death, and the promise of ultimate freedom from the pain, suffering and hardship of this life, for only professed Christians.

As editor and publisher of the Star, Atkinson turned leading social reformers, many of whom were progressive religious thinkers, into Star columnists. He also hired women and people from other faith communities in reporting and administrative roles.

There is no evidence that Atkinson had similar relationships with Indigenous elders or communities. We can only conclude that he accepted the Doctrine of Discovery and believed the question of land rights was settled, as was the prevailing attitude at that time. We have not yet uncovered any evidence that Atkinson was an active supporter of the residential schools system or a high profile critic of it. He must have been an indirect supporter because he was a member and lay leader in one of the five Protestant denominations that joined with the federal government in the administration of the schools.

Atkinson's own critics and competitors gave him the nickname "Holy Joe" for what they considered his pious, often radical and uncompromising manner. This caricature was contradicted by his reputation as a frugal and hard-driving businessman who was completely devoted to the ambitious project of building Canada's largest daily newspaper.

THE CALL TO POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Despite claims of political independence, Atkinson's intellectual leanings and close friendships with the liberal politicians of his day were well known. He was a trusted confidant of Prime Ministers Wilfrid Laurier and William Lyon Mackenzie King, and the author of several influential public policy papers. He was also openly sympathetic and connected to the charismatic religious leaders who had mobilized a new social democratic movement, the Commonwealth Cooperative Federation.

Atkinson understood the power of a free press in a democratic society, and shifted some of that power to working people by consistently amplifying their voices and concerns on the pages of his paper. He was also prepared to use it behind-the-scenes, in the corridors of government, business and union power, for policy wins on their behalf. We know he never stood for public office but not if he was ever asked.

THE ETHIC OF RETURN AND REPAIR

Atkinson's ultimate philanthropic act—"to return the paper to the people"—raises several unanswerable ethical questions. We can only speculate why he made this particular decision from among many reasonable choices. Was he trying to protect the paper from competitors who might buy it and shut it down or change its editorial policy? Was he trying to avoid taxes? Was there a reason why he did not want his children or grandchildren to have this burden or windfall? What relationships or systems did he hope to repair and strengthen in the future with this gift? Or maybe his end-of-life reflections on a lifetime of justice-seeking work in the aftermath of a great depression and two World Wars led him to establish this endowment.

All we know for sure is that we have inherited Atkinson's example. We can ask what it means to "return the paper to the people" in this day and age. What is the power or asset that we hold that must be returned for justice to be realized? Who are the people at the centre of this exchange today? What needs repair or strengthening?

A LIVING LEGACY

Atkinson's philanthropy, journalism, political activism and business leadership are a living legacy, revealing the values he held. His decision to turn the ownership of the Toronto Star over to the foundation as a proxy for the working people of Ontario continues to deeply inform our investment framework. It also helps us reflect on the ethical decisions that arise from our participation in financial markets.

In this way, the Atkinson Endowment began with more than the money made from building the Star into Canada's largest daily newspaper. Its assets included, from the start, Joseph Atkinson and Elimina Elliott's shared vision of a better world, guiding principles, record of achievement, and belief that deep systemic and structural change is possible.

ATKINSON
For social and economic justice