Sidney James Webb Biography

Sidney James Webb

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Biography

Sidney James Webb, Baron Passfield (1859-1947), was an English social reformer and a leading Fabian Socialist, a historian of social and economic institutions, founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Cabinet minister.

Sidney Webb was born in London on July 13, 1859. He was educated in Switzerland, Germany, the Birkbeck Institute, the City of London College, and through his own intensive reading. After a brief period of employment in the office of a firm of colonial brokers, he entered the civil service in 1878. In 1885 he was called to the bar and in the following year received his bachelor of laws degree from London University.

In 1885 Webb joined the Fabian Society and soon became a dominating influence on that organization. In 1891 he resigned from the civil service to run successfully for the London County Council. During most of the next 2 decades he was chairman of the Technical Education Committee of the council and brought about a thoroughgoing reform and centralization of the educational system in London. In 1895 he became the founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

In 1892 Webb married Beatrice Potter. From that time on, their work merged so thoroughly that it is impossible to distinguish their individual contributions. Among the earliest and most notable of their works are *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894) and *Industrial Democracy* (1897). Later there were nine massive volumes of the history of *English Local Government,* the first of which appeared in 1906 and the last in 1929.

By 1910 the Webbs decided that the Fabian policy of working through the existing political parties without partisan involvement had outlived its usefulness, and the Fabian Society threw its weight behind the Labour party. From 1915 to 1925 Sidney was a member of the party executive. In 1920 he was elected to Parliament, and in 1924 he was appointed president of the Board of Trade. Although he retired from office in 1928, he was called out of retirement in 1929 to serve (as Baron Passfield) as secretary of state for the colonies.

After the fall of the Labour government in 1932, the Webbs toured the Soviet Union and extolled it in their *Soviet Communism: A New Society"* (1935). Beatrice died in 1943, and Sidney on Oct. 13, 1947.