Vida Dutton Scudder's quest for cultural fellowship

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Vida Dutton Scudder's quest for cultural fellowship

Abstract
For about 45 years (c. 1885-1930) the settlement movement thrived in cities throughout the United States (Carson, 1990). Volunteers lived and worked in settlement houses, which were often converted residential buildings in poor urban neighborhoods. They taught immigrants and other neighborhood residents basic life skills ranging from hygiene to arts and crafts (Woods, 1970). “The settlement movement's virtual gender parity was unique among U.S. institutions during the Progressive Era. At least half of the prominent U.S. settlement houses were headed and staffed largely by women” (Carson, 1998, p. 528).
VIDA DUTTON SCUDDER’S QUEST FOR CULTURAL FELLOWSHIP

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Kristi Van Gorder

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For about 45 years (c. 1885-1930) the settlement movement thrived in cities throughout the United States (Carson, 1990). Volunteers lived and worked in settlement houses, which were often converted residential buildings in poor urban neighborhoods. They taught immigrants and other neighborhood residents basic life skills ranging from hygiene to arts and crafts (Woods, 1970).

“The settlement movement’s virtual gender parity was unique among U.S. institutions during the Progressive Era. At least half of the prominent U.S. settlement houses were headed and staffed largely by women” (Carson, 1998, p. 528).

Many of the women involved in the settlement houses were affiliated with local women’s colleges. Volunteers were often students, recent graduates, or professors.

Settlements satisfied students’ needs to apply the study of social ethics to the real world. College friends independently chose to live in small groups in the slums of different American cities. The common goal was to reduce the distance between rich and poor by
was to reduce the distance between rich and poor by living as neighbors among urban dwellers. Settlements were to be focal points where the two poles of society would meet and forge a better understanding of one another. (Solomon, 1985, p. 109)

In particular, the College Settlement Association was established by faculty members from women's colleges. The faculty women involved believed that collegiate women could enhance their academic pursuits with hands-on experience in the settlement houses. The collegiate women of the 1880s were typically from wealthy aristocratic families. The founders of the College Settlement Association hoped the settlement experience would aid in introducing the collegiate women to people from different social classes, as well as sparking the students interest in social activism (Carson, 1990). One of the founders of the College Settlement Association was Vida Dutton Scudder, an English literature professor at Wellesley College. While remaining a professor at Wellesley College, Scudder also was instrumental in the
founding of Boston’s Denison settlement house. Scudder’s involvement, as well as the development of Denison house will be addressed in later sections.

The settlement movement was more than a notion to promote civic responsibilities in young collegiate women. The movement marked the commencement of women’s social activism. Scudder’s leadership and activism shaped the formation of the College Settlement Association and led to her own commitment in establishing the Denison House. In particular, Scudder’s roles in women’s colleges as a student, professor, and activist provided the opportunity for many young collegiate women to be involved with the College Settlement Association and the Denison House.

Vida Dutton Scudder

Scudder was born in India in 1861 to Christian missionary parents. She grew up in Massachusetts, attending private schools in Auburndale and Boston and traveling throughout Europe as a child. She was enrolled in the first class of Girls’ Latin School, Boston. As a young adult she was graduated from Smith College. Shortly after
graduation from Smith, Scudder experienced an intellectual awakening during postgraduate study at Oxford. An inspiration for part of her awakening was a course of lectures by John Ruskin (Corcoran, 1982).

Ruskin cited the cause of the bleakness and ugliness of the era on conditions imposed by the modern industrial system. His frustration grew from the passivity of citizens who abided by the fallacies created by industrialization. Ruskin called for “humane factory methods, shorter hours, permanent contracts, [and] a just wage” (Corcoran, 1982, p. 23).

Scudder viewed Ruskin’s call for a new social ethic as his most important theory (Corcoran, 1982). Ruskin’s lectures on social theories stirred something within Scudder, essentially forcing her to examine her privileged life. Scudder wrote:

Ever since my Oxford days, I had been beating my wings against the bars,—the customs, the assumptions, of my own class. I moved in a garden enclosed, if not a hothouse, an enclosure
of gracious manners, regular meals, comfort, security, good taste. I liked the balmy air. Yet sometimes it suffocated me. I wanted to escape.

. . The spirit that drives some men to explore the Gobi desert, or to seek the Pole; others to research in the buried past, or travel among alien races. Me, it filled with a biting curiosity about the way the Other Half lived, and a strange hunger for fellowship with them.

(Scudder, 1937, pp. 139-40)

Scudder viewed the settlement movement as the perfect vehicle for her desire for social activism. In addition, the settlement movement met well with Scudder's spiritual desire to follow the socialist teachings of Jesus Christ. Throughout her life, Scudder also was fascinated by the example of Saint Francis of Asissi. However, unlike most, she was not as fascinated with Saint Francis the man as with his ideas about social salvation. Scudder saw the settlements as an opportunity for personal, intellectual, and spiritual fulfillment.
In 1887, two years after Scudder's return from Oxford, she found fellowship in two colleagues, Helen Rand and Jean Fine (Scudder, 1937). The women reflected on the effects of their college years. All three women had spent time in England and were exposed to the idea of university settlements. "Suddenly, a thought flew among us, like a bird coming out of the air; flashing above and around, seen, vanished: Why could not we young women start something of the same kind in our own country?" (Scudder, 1937, p. 110).

The university settlements consisted of groups of men or women, "of trained minds and elevated moral sense" (Woods, 1923, p. 30) who lived together in poor and crowded sections of cities to observe the life of the people and to bring resources to them. The university settlements were not charities; rather, they were places where people from disparate sectors of society could meet and help each other. They were a place where intellectually empowered young people could share their newly acquired knowledge of the social sciences.
The Boston University School of Theology established the first university settlement, Andover House, which was founded in 1891 as a social science laboratory for the students of Boston University (Mann, 1954). Andover House was modeled after Toynbee House in London (Mann, 1954). Toynbee House was a project to bring the different social classes into contact for mutual benefit. However, Toynbee House had no university affiliation. The Boston University School of Theology was the first to realize the benefits of university affiliation on a social project such as a settlement. University affiliation offered many mutual benefits. It created a practical application for the study of social sciences. The settlement house was to the social sciences what the clinic was to the study of medicine and the laboratory was to the study of the physical sciences. The students working in the settlements specialized in housing, intemperance, labor relations, local politics, or education (Mann, 1954). In their application of the social sciences, the university settlements also served to legitimize the study of the social sciences in the United States.

Scudder, Fine, and Rand saw the founding of a settlement association affiliated with women’s colleges as an ideal outlet for
both their knowledge of the social sciences and their desire to apply that knowledge. They founded the College Settlement Association on January 5, 1894, establishing chapters at Wellesley, Smith, Vassar, and Bryn Mawr as well as one non-collegiate chapter (Woods, 1970).

The mission of the College Settlement Association was “to bring into close relations this class [of college women], who having received much, are ready and eager to give of their best, and the other class, who in poverty, ignorance and degradation have yet a singular readiness to receive” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 367). The founders of the College Settlement Association chose to affiliate their project with women’s colleges for several reasons. Scudder, Rand, and Fine had all graduated from women’s colleges. They were still involved in communities of women’s higher education. They were intellectually and spiritually attracted to the unique opportunity of social service that the settlement movement provided. Scudder believed that collegiate women could greatly enhance their educational opportunities by the practical application of social science they had acquired in the classroom toward a “real world” atmosphere.
There were both advantages and disadvantages for the College Settlement Association's affiliation with women's colleges. Among the advantages, Scudder thought, was easy access to educated, competent women to staff the houses. For the college women, the settlements provided rare opportunities to work and apply their learning. This experience, for many, created new options in life. Rather than being sent to women's colleges by their wealthy families to pass time between adolescence and marriage, many women began to perceive the women's college experience as socially useful. In this way, Scudder led the charge for a new kind of woman. These new women realized "that their problem as women was not the further extension of equal rights (that would come with time), but the humanitarian use of their learning; what the feminists had fought for as an ultimate end now became a means for social and economic regeneration" (Mann, 1954, p. 217). Because of a woman's involvement in the College Settlement Association, her education and experience could empower her to affect social change.

Young affluent college women working in lower class neighborhoods also had its problems. Many working class people
were reluctant to be helped by seemingly disingenuous young women. While most young women involved in the College Settlement Association had a genuine interest in the work, some of them were insincere in their motives:

Some retained patronizing airs and felt a sense of superiority to those they helped. One Vassar student did not want to give music lessons to ‘the stupid Norwegian’ maid. A Radcliffe graduate wrote to her mother about motoring in a Cadillac with friends to the mill town of Lawrence to observe the sights. (Solomon, 1985, p. 110)

The College Settlement Association formed a network of outposts for women’s colleges. In particular, the settlements established an ambience “where certain persons from separated sections of society, who by education or by experience become freed from the prejudices of their class” (Woods, 1923, p. 30). Scudder chose for her outpost the Denison House of Boston.

The Denison House

Denison House opened December 27, 1892 (Woods, 1970). It was located in a poor Boston neighborhood populated
predominately by Irish-American families. Over time the face of the neighborhood changed as the Irish-Americans became more prosperous and moved to the suburban area. A new wave of immigrants brought Syrians, Greeks, and Italians into the neighborhood. One of the primary functions of the volunteers at Denison House was to teach these immigrants the laws and customs of the United States. In addition to their work with immigrants, Denison House offered three other types of services: education, labor organization, and economic services.

Educational volunteers offered instruction in hygiene, basic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic), and physical education. Volunteers also organized and encouraged active participation in labor unions. Specifically, volunteers at Denison House targeted women who had been under-represented in the labor force to join labor unions. Scudder organized a social science club in which forty to fifty businessmen, professionals, laborers, and students met weekly for lectures about ethics, trade unions, and politics (Davis, 1984). However, attendance dwindled in the lecture series and the club collapsed within three years. Volunteers were challenged to find a new medium for their activism. New activities
included a successful union group called the Federal Labor Union. This union, which affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, met regularly at Denison House. Many settlement volunteers and neighborhood residents were members of the union. Denison House volunteers opened a branch of the new Women's Trade Union League. The mission of the union was to get women admitted into men's unions, to help women organize their own unions, to help women secure healthful and efficient work conditions, and to obtain fair wages (Davis, 1984).

Economic services provided by the Denison House volunteers included special relief work during the winter of 1893–1894 and the coal famine of 1903. In addition, Denison House offered a program that encouraged neighborhood residents to use the banking system. In 1906 volunteers were also able to offer referrals to a local cooperative boarding house for young women (Woods, 1970).

Conclusion

When Scudder and her colleagues founded the College Settlement Association in 1894 they set out to do something notable. They created a means for young women both to share and
gain knowledge by taking up residence with the working class.

The College Settlement Association affected Scudder in a profound way, but it also changed the lives of her students and other volunteers. However, the College Settlement Association had effects that far outreached the individuals involved. Arguably, the College Settlement Association changed the relationship between universities and society as well.

Both the students involved in the settlements and the successful outreach of the College Settlement Association had profound effects upon institutions of higher learning. In particular, at Wellesley, the College Settlement Association was:

the most important organized contribution of the women's colleges to civilization during its first half century of existence. Through this movement the women have played so large a part, they have exerted an influence upon social thought and conscience exceeded in this period by few other agencies, religious, philanthropic or industrial. (Converse, 1915, p. 193)
As envisioned by Scudder, the College Settlement Association became a model for college outreach programs. In particular, the College Settlement Association became a learning laboratory for the new field of social work.

The [social work] field provides one of the clearest links between extracurricular collegiate life and later activities, if not always long term career choice. Indeed, it seems to have been one of the few fields that the women's colleges deliberately fostered, perhaps because it still hovered between the vocational and the avocational. (Faragher & Howe, 1988, pp. 155-156)

Scudder's involvement of women's colleges in the settlement movement was just another step forward for the steady progress women's colleges were already making. Scudder believed that the work women's colleges were doing was extraordinary and that women's colleges were introducing a new element into society and literally transforming the status of women. Scudder believed that the work of women's colleges was "epoch making" (Hackett, 1949, p.117). At the time, Scudder failed to fully realize the importance of her efforts in the College Settlement Association in extending
the status of women to include professional work in society as a valuable and appropriate (Scudder, 1937). In her memoirs, Scudder lamented the failure of the College Settlement Association, which began to disband in the Interwar period. Scudder wrote that the movement was only marginally successful because it failed to transform society (Scudder, 1937). However, she neglected to acknowledge the importance of the movement in what it accomplished for those who were involved in it. In fact, the College Settlement Association may have been most important not for the working class it was trying to help, but to the college women who were its volunteers.

Scudder's social activism laid the groundwork for young collegiate women to venture outside the academy. Scudder expanded the social justifications for young women to seek higher education. Beyond an academic degree, collegiate women had the opportunity to apply their knowledge in a socially significant manner.

Scudder and the College Settlement Association were a major step in the expansion of women's higher education. The College Settlement Association can be viewed as a notable event in
the historical progression of the justification of inclusion of women in higher education. The College Settlement Association created a new reason for women to seek higher education. This was just one step on the path toward a woman not needing justification of any kind to seek higher education, other than a woman’s own need for personal fulfillment.
References


