

Johanna M. Selles

*The World Student Christian Federation, 1895–1925:  
Motives, Methods, and Influential Women*

Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011. xviii, 294 pp.

Renate Howe

*A Century of Influence: The Australian Student  
Christian Movement, 1896–1996.*

Sydney, Australia: UNSW Press, 2009. 446 pp.

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Writing the history of student Christian movements is no easy task. Were they evangelical groups, focused on Bible study and missions, or were they communities of liberal Christians who valued social action more than personal piety or dogma? Were they elite associations of privileged students, supported by university administrators and financed by wealthy donors, or were they seedbeds of left-wing student radicalism? They were all of these things, depending on time and location. By definition, these student organizations were *movements*. They evolved in their beliefs, structures, and methods, in response to changing contexts at local, national and global levels. Consequently, any historian of a national student Christian movement (SCM) or of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)—the global body of SCM organizations—must wrestle with the fluidity and multifaceted nature of these groups. Such are the challenges facing Johanna Selles in her recent work on the WSCF, and Renate Howe in her history of the Australian SCM. On the whole, both authors face these challenges successfully.

Johanna Selles' study focuses on the first thirty years of the WSCF, as it was transformed from an association of male Protestants committed to "the evangelisation of

the world in this generation” to an ecumenical network of male and female students motivated by “the belief that Christ embodied the ideals required for a new Christian international order” (2). In particular, she examines the important role that women played in the WSCF and its affiliate groups. Previous histories of the WSCF have centred on influential men, but according to Selles, not only were female leaders essential to the daily work of the WSCF and its affiliates, they helped shape the movement, supported the global expansion of higher education for women, and fostered “an international Christian vision of friendship and understanding” (14). The latter point is central to her study: for the WSCF to maintain a global, ecumenical community of students, hospitality and fellowship were crucial. In many cases, it fell to women leaders to extend hospitality and forge the bonds of fellowship. Women were also central to the humanitarian work of European Student Relief (a forerunner to the World University Service), established by the WSCF after the First World War.

A key figure in this study is Ruth Rouse, the British-born head of the Women’s Department of the WSCF, who nurtured student Christian groups throughout Europe and Asia, and supported women in positions of local leadership. We are introduced to the local leaders, both women and men, and how they interacted with the international leaders (particularly Ruth Rouse and John Mott) in a series of chapters on the development of student Christian work in seven nations: Russia, Switzerland, Poland, France, Japan, Sweden and China. Also, Selles does an admirable job of presenting the milieu of inter-related organizations (and overlapping personnel) associated with the WSCF in its early years, including the Student Volunteer Movement, YMCA and YWCA.

Selles’ project is ambitious: she covers the pre-history and early history of the WSCF, as well as the development of student Christian movements in seven countries, and she explores the role of influential women. As much as possible, Selles provides readers with the social, cultural and political contexts for the national movements. Given the scope of this study, Selles presents us with a richly textured history, whose characters come alive to the reader. At the same time, we are left with many questions: What was the relationship between student Christian movements and other student groups? How do we account for the shifting theological focus of the WSCF from evangelical Protestantism to an ecumenical social gospel? What about the political views of its leaders? To explore fully these questions for each country would have necessitated a much longer book, or a focus on fewer countries.

In contrast, Renate Howe is able to address these questions explicitly, and in greater depth, because she focuses on the SCM in a single country—Australia. In *A Century of Influence*, we see how the movement functioned in many ways. It served as “a university within a university,” in which participants gathered in study groups and at conferences to relate theology to the main social and political events of the day. Because of its focus on missions and development, and its connections with the WSCF, the SCM also fostered a greater level of international awareness. Another important dimension of the movement was fellowship; the Australian SCM developed as a close-knit community, and often functioned as a “Society for Courtship and Marriage” (233). Finally, the movement was a spur for social and political

involvement—in campus Labor Clubs, in peace and civil rights activism, and in the radical student protests of the 1960s.

Because the SCM was a site of “lay Christian intellectualism” (17), Howe pays a great deal of attention to the theological and political ideas that engaged participants in the movement. She explores the controversies between fundamentalism and modernism in the 1920s and 1930s (the SCM sided with the latter, while the newly formed Evangelical Union sided with the former), between pacifism and “just war” theory in the 1930s and 1940s (a source of sharp disagreement within the movement) and between Marxism and the democratic left from the 1930s to the 1950s (most in the SCM sided with the non-Marxist left, though some aligned themselves with the Communist Party). She also traces the impact of influential theologians on the movement, such as William Temple, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John A.T. Robinson.

As the title implies, one of Howe’s key arguments was that the Australian SCM significantly influenced Australian society. She contends that its chief contribution “had been a national and international commitment” rooted in “the conviction that being a Christian meant commitment to a deep involvement in the life of the nation and, beyond the nation, to the region and the world” (398). Participants in the SCM went on to become academics, church leaders, high-ranking civil servants, jurists, and politicians (including former Prime Minister Bob Hawke). At times, Howe’s examples of SCM influence are tenuous. For example, she implies that the movement played an indirect role in the Whitlam government’s 1972 decision to recognize the People’s Republic of China (324). Nevertheless, she acknowledges that “the influence of the SCM is difficult to define” and that the movement “was one among many social and intellectual influences in the university environment” (399).

Indeed, student Christian movements were influential in university environments across the world—not only because of their size (at one point, the WSCF represented over 150,000 faculty and students in forty nations), but also because of their commitment to internationalism. As Selles argues, the early “history of the WSCF provides an important insight into the history of higher education particularly since in many regions, the notion of affiliation with national and [international networks] was so new” (253). For these reasons, historians of higher education would do well to read these two meticulously researched, engaging books.