

Book Launch  
Renate Howe, A Century of Influence  
The Australian Student Christian Movement 1896-1996  
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It's an honour and a pleasure to have been invited to launch this volume.

Not being an historian I found the story of ASCM fascinating, for a number of reasons.

First of all, ASCM found itself at the intersection of strong and deep currents that shaped the face of Australia through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So the book is at once a social, economic, political and intellectual history as well as a theological and ecumenical history. In other words it's a rich exploration of the interactions and intersections of these dimensions of Australian life.

Secondly, I found it fascinating to delve into the deep roots of some of the tensions that persist today in Australian Church life. I admit to feeling some relief when I discovered that what I had regarded as issues and tensions that were peculiarly Anglican are in fact more widely owned. And to be able to set some of the tensions and differences we Anglicans still deal with daily in a broader historical, theological, ecumenical and intellectual context was very helpful. It's nice to have others with whom to share the blame!

Thirdly, at a personal level, it was fascinating to explore the roots and shaping forces on some of the people who have in turn influenced me and many others.

It didn't take long for the original American impetus to establish Christian Unions in private secondary schools and universities to be Australianised. There were different emphases in bible study from the outset, our summer gatherings were more rustic, there was less money here and less inclination to US assertiveness, fund-raising and efficiency and so fewer professional staff. Australia didn't adopt the initial slogan 'the evangelization of the world in this generation'. Australians were less inclined to emphasise personal work and spirituality, focusing instead on faith and reason and social issues. A different Australian style caused one early leader to ask 'Are Americans differently constituted to us?' (p.62).

The avowedly secular outlook of Australia's universities presented particular issues. The Melbourne University Council refused to allow John Mott, the forceful American initiator of Christian Unions, to give a lecture in Wilson Hall.

Women dominated the membership of the early Christian Unions in Australia, but it took a long time for them to be represented on the national executive or council. Gender issues were something of a running sore in the early years. Mott's original vision was of a male only organization. But some graduate women in Melbourne had other ideas. Still, women staff workers were paid less than men for years. Lively debates led to the separation of women and men at Sydney university and eventually led to the secretary's resignation because his 'acerbic personality, intransigence and petty retaliations had exacerbated gender conflicts.' (p.73).

The purpose of the organization, its mission, and who should be members, were recurring issues through the decades. Was the major thrust to be about personal conversion, sending missionaries to other lands and the evangelisation of the world? Or, as happened eventually in Australia, was the emphasis to shift from imperial expansion to supporting the emergence of national churches; to shift from proselytizing to dialogue. Were members to be required to have a personal commitment to and faith in Jesus Christ? Or would ASCM open its doors to all who wished to explore the meaning and significance of faith to the great issues of the day?

The World Missionary Conference occurred in Edinburgh in 1910 as the student movement was getting off the ground in Australia. That resulted in intense missionary zeal with a focus on Asia.

At about the same time William Temple was writing and speaking about reshaping the social order on the principles of Jesus Christ and calling for social and scientific research to tackle the problems of urban and industrialized societies. Temple visited Australia in 1910. The ASCU was criticized for hosting comfortable talk fests but not tackling 'any actual Australian evil or darkness, or to uplift any Australian mass of submerged humanity' (p.116). What could be done about the White Australia Policy and materialism. Ernest Bruggmann heard Temple at St Paul's College at Sydney University.

The Sydney University Social Service Committee was led at the time by one H.V. Evatt. But the Sydney Christian Union Executive opposed involvement in these broader social issues.

SCM Press was established and began publishing in the area of social analysis and policy. In 1916 one Robert Menzies was Melbourne University SCU President. He was studying law and set up a Social Services Register. At the time there was resistance to setting up departments of social sciences as

there were in the US and Britain. ASCU stepped in to fill the gap. Running tutorials, lectures and seminars and establishing publications, The Workers Education Association, The Economic Record, the Morpeth Review (established by Burgmann in 1927). ASCU made an important contribution to the development of Australian social liberalism between the wars in what was a predominantly conservative political and intellectual environment. Moving the national office from Sydney to Melbourne assisted this emerging role.

After WWI the real need was to address issues of reconstruction, class tensions, inequality, race and SCM applied itself to this agenda. The interwar years were the highpoint of SCM activism and influence.

It was also in this period that tensions over approach, purpose and membership reached their heights. Open bible study methods, critical-historical approaches, modernist theology were all opposed by conservatives. SCM had become a moral debating society, they thought: 'Christianity as a supernatural revelation of salvation is abandoned for the blathering of conceited professors and young gentlemen' (p.167). Key officers resigned in quick succession. This culminated in the 1920s with the breakaway Evangelical Union hot on the heels of the 1919 World Christian Fundamentals Association formed to combat modernist theology and giving rise to the term and movement of fundamentalism.

These divisions hardened over time to the extent that in 1930 Dr Howard Guinness, one-time Rector of St Barnabas Broadway and leader in the EU at Sydney University concluded that 'The SCM is going to hell' (p.183).

1930 was a year of crisis for SCM. Poverty and social unrest cast a long and dark cloud over the country and SCM's conference. Students had suicided because of social conditions. Unemployment made life intolerable for many families. Views differ over whether the split with fundamentalists was catastrophic or whether it freed SCM to address the huge social issues of the 1930s: the social deprivation caused by depression, the growing threat of war, the relevance of Christianity to international order, communism, fascism, Nazism, pacifism.

Eventually Frank Coaldrake's convinced pacifism and support for conscientious objection put him at odds with the ASCM leaders and he resigned as traveling secretary.

SCM both worked within and bolstered a very different milieu of personal purpose, vocation and meaning. One member commented 'It never occurred to me to ask how I might grow rich or famous, but rather how I might be useful.' Or again, 'by the time you entered university everything pointed in the

same direction – that you were not expected to be accruing possessions, you were expected to serve’ (p.232).

SCM wasn't all gloom and struggle, though. Indeed SCM was variously referred to as the 'Society for Christian Marriage', the 'Society for Courtship and Marriage' and 'Students Contemplating Marriage' which tells you that there was more going on at the big conferences than bible study!

By the 1950s there were 3<sup>rd</sup> generation SCMers. SCM links with private schools bordered on an old school tie network. It extended through universities, to the developing federal public service in Canberra, to politics and to church leadership. The roll call of SCM members sounds like a who's who of Australian leadership: James Darling, HV Evatt, Garfield Barwick, Leonie Kramer, Charles Birch, David Garnsey, Frank Engel, David Penington, Ernest Burgmann, Bob Hawke, Brian Howe, John Neville, Bruce Rosier, Lyndsay and Stephanie Farrall, John Langmore, Frank Coaldrake, Robert Gribben, Neal Blewitt, Ken Cable, Ronald Wilson, Doug Dargaville.

I mentioned earlier that some of the names that appear in the history I had encountered personally, not least because they were my teachers in theological college: Eric Osborn, Harry Wardlaw, Davis McCaughey, George Yule, Norman Young, John Gaden, Bruce Barber.

These are just some of the names that struck me immediately or because of personal acquaintance. The entire roll call is impressive, indeed.

The hey-day of SCM was the period from 1930s to 1950s. A different society was anticipated. The end of the white Australia policy, the emergence of a multicultural society, awareness of the Asia-Pacific region and the birth of an ecumenical church indicated Australia was on the threshold of a new age.

But things turned very quickly for SCM. It wasn't prepared for the seismic social and theological shifts of the 1960s. At the international conference in Strasbourg, students literally overturned the tables on their lecturers. Only the giant Karl Barth was listened to with anything approaching respect. The collapse of liberal Protestantism, the permissive age, youth revolution, mass culture, the sexual revolution, folk festivals, flower power and the death of God theology, pulled the rug out from under SCM. Whereas it had once been on the cutting edge of social and theological thinking it was now seen as part of the old authority structure, bureaucratic and anachronistic. It struggled to keep pace with new universities built in the 1960s: Macquarie, Newcastle, Flinders, Latrobe and it struggled, too, to with the increasing complexity in the existing universities.

Ultimately the confusion that reigned around the notion of secular Christianity and the conviction that the locus of faith was in daily life rather than religious institutions led to a migration of students from theology to the social sciences. Role confusion saw ordained clergy leaving the churches to work as social workers or counselors.

Increasingly militant student protests in the 1960s strengthened the push for SCM to be involved in political action, to be involved in the arena that mattered. By the end of the decade the question was being asked whether SCM was needed at all. Why not just get out there and do things? At the same time SCM's money dried up. Membership had dropped and the old guard who had come to the rescue on several occasions over the years had become sick of the politicized organization. The focus had shifted from mission to power struggle and to some seemed to scorn the church.

The new generation didn't see the need for Christian social action to be firmly based on biblical and theological foundations. Davis McCaughey observed that because of wrong decisions 'a near fatal flaw had entered its life, and in its devotion to one aspect of the truth it had imperiled its contact with the source of truth. The SCM had allowed itself to be carried away on a single issue – the political issue' (p.377).

But there was a lot going on that contributed to the decline of SCM, including external factors. The profile of protestant Christianity and the place of the church in society had changed markedly, as had universities themselves. The churches' attitudes to SCM had shifted as a result of the politicization of the 1960s. Student life was different too with many having to work while studying. And paradoxically, part of SCM's success might have contributed to its decline, namely the emergence of the teaching of theology and religion in Australia's universities.

I think there are clear lessons to be learned from this history and questions to be pondered. Chief among them, to my mind, is the question of whether it is possible, and if so what kind of vehicle might be needed, to engage current and future generations of students in the kind of theological and social engagement that through SCM so inspired and moved our forebears. It seems to me to be particularly urgent for the church's mission today. It begs the question of whether the theological centre and left have vacated the field in work with university students and thereby left it wide open to the right and to fundamentalists. From my limited knowledge of Australian university campuses it is the Evangelical Union that invests time, energy and resources in work with university students and thereby produces a large pool of intellectually able leaders from which to fish. The question is can SCM, or something like it, live again?

For reminding us of all the benefits that flowed from the Australian Student Christian Movement over 100 years and for posing the question of the future, we're indebted to Renate Howe for this important history, which it is my pleasure and honour now officially to launch.