

362.861



**THREE-QUARTERS
OF A
CENTURY**

267.
5941
THR

Pamphlet

267-594 THIR

HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE Y.W.C.A.

Early Days—Seventy-eight years ago the Young Women's Christian Association in its daring and initiative was looked upon as almost a revolutionary movement. In 1855 Miss Robarts started what was called a "Prayer Union," a band of women seeking a life of service to Christ in their generation. In this call of her friends and fellow-members to a wider sphere than their own home Miss Robarts was in fact as much of a pioneer as were Miss Buss and Miss Beale in the world of education.

Almost simultaneously the Hon. Mrs. Arthur Kinnaird started a hostel for Crimean nurses in London, at a time when both careers and hostels for women were viewed with suspicion. Though the venture was meant only to meet a temporary need, it soon became clear that the house would be of service not only to nurses but to any girl coming up to London from the provinces. On these lines it was soon firmly established.

These two ventures both had their seeds in the great evangelical revival, and just as Miss Robarts and her followers found prayer an inspiration to practical service, so Mrs. Kinnaird from the first realised that her social work must be inspired by the Christian ideal. By a process of natural growth the two, so similar in spirit, united to form one movement, and it was this union which in the early sixties became known as the Young Women's Christian Association. Such a title is both a challenge and an inspiration.

The example of Miss Robarts and Mrs. Kinnaird (later Lady Kinnaird) was soon followed by others, and all over the country there sprang up hostels and clubs (institutes as they were called in those days) each forming a branch of the Association, there being a strong sense of national unity between all the branches. The founders knew that in this unity lay the strength and permanence of the local centres. Thus from earliest days,

3802168084

though each town or village planned its own work, every woman or girl who joined in the local activities became a member of the whole Association, sharing in the wider outlook of a national movement.

Mutual Service—From the first, too, the founders built on democratic lines, and in Victorian days, when social work was usually of the nature of "being kind to the poor," the Y.W.C.A. was a pioneer in a fellowship of mutual service. The old conception of one section of the community conferring benefit on others less fortunately placed yielded to a different sense of values. The Association stood then as it does to-day for comradeship and for the mutual gain and knowledge which that brings.

Membership was from the beginning open to women of any Church denomination. This was probably not at first consciously planned, but the principle once established, it soon became plain that the interdenominational character of the membership brought added opportunities and responsibilities. Nowadays co-operation between various Church bodies has become almost a commonplace, but here again the Association was a pioneer and may surely have a growing part to play in promoting better understanding and even eventual reunion within the Christian Church.

Nor has the modern international outlook meant any change of principle to the Y.W.C.A. This fundamental character was indeed strong enough to bear even the strain of war; the international fellowship was never broken.

Women of vision the founders of the Association certainly were, but even they certainly never dreamed of an organisation of such size and influence as the present Y.W.C.A. Yet the motto they chose, now used by the Association all over the world, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord," shows the secret of their success.

GROWTH OF THE MOVEMENT

Local Groups—Before 1870 there were already more than forty groups of women in different parts of the country working on Y.W.C.A. social and religious lines and uniting for common purposes. In very early days we find traces of the fourfold programme now phrased as “the promotion of all that ministers to the mental, physical, social and spiritual development of girls.”

Following Mrs. Kinnaird's example in Upper Charlotte Street, other hostels were opening in London and the provinces, and very soon special holiday homes at the seaside. Later restaurants were often attached to the hostels, where girl workers could get an inexpensive nourishing midday meal. For many years the Y.W.C.A. was the leading organisation in housing women workers. It led the way and others followed, but even to-day, when so many different societies provide hostels, travellers and homeless workers throughout the country turn to the Association instinctively if they want a night's lodging.

The local Unions for prayer and fellowship also developed rapidly—and soon in large cities and country towns began what we should call “clubs.” From the first these had a varied programme. Looking back into the old records we find classes in French, the popular handicrafts of the day, singing and gymnastics, cooking and dressmaking. Every centre had its Bible-class and prayer-meeting, but Mrs. Kinnaird was quick to remind a leader who doubted the wisdom of “worldly” subjects that God's message may be conveyed in many ways, and it may sometimes take more of His grace to conduct a French class than a Bible class.

In other districts, and particularly in country areas, the Association proved its use as a gathering-place for the women and girls of the village. Here the meeting might only take place once a week, and little educational work could be done,

but the members valued their centre of fellowship and the link with women in other parts of the country.

Out of the Association, too, grew two movements well known to-day. Schemes started by the Y.W.C.A. for meeting and helping young girls travelling, afterwards developed into the Travellers' Aid Society with its network of organisation. Similarly, out of Association work amongst factory girls, grew the Federation of Working Girls' Clubs, now also a separate organisation, but still also under Y.W.C.A. auspices. This Federation has done much to promote and stimulate the girls' club movement.

Industrial Enquiries—Various developments often supposed to be recent actually had their beginning in early days. As early as 1870 we find local Associations inquiring into the hours of shop girls and striving after the improvement of working conditions. From this and similar work may be said to have sprung the Y.W.C.A. Industrial Law Bureau, now actively seeking to promote Christian ideals in modern industrial life.

Holiday Facilities—Camp holidays, too, were first started by the Association in 1896, and ever since, year after year, an increasing number of girls have had the opportunity of happy and healthy holidays either at permanent holiday homes or in houses acquired for short periods during the summer months. In 1930 more than 10,000 girls enjoyed Y.W.C.A. hospitality of this kind.

National Organisation—Common aims demanded the expression of a united policy. The local branches and hostels soon formed themselves into groups and finally into a National Association in 1884. This enabled them to speak clearly and with greater weight on behalf of everything which might strengthen their fourfold aim or promote the welfare of women and girls. Moreover, through a National Council, weaker centres

were helped and work throughout the country was consolidated and strengthened. The first National President was the great Lord Shaftesbury, who expressed in his own life the vocation to social and religious work which inspires the Association.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Other Countries—From very early days the Y.W.C.A. in Great Britain was strongly missionary in spirit and carried its work to other countries. At the same time, with the widening of woman's sphere of influence throughout the world similar organisations grew up spontaneously, and eventually adopted the title of Y.W.C.A. America and Germany are typical examples of this. India, China and Egypt, on the other hand, owe their Association work initially to propaganda and organisation from Great Britain. In the newer European countries, such as Rumania, Esthonia and Czecho-Slovakia the Y.W.C.A. has now a firm foothold. The Associations there have developed chiefly as the result of the war-work done by British and American Blue Triangle Secretaries. To-day the Y.W.C.A. has centres in over fifty countries of the world, and the membership totals over one million.

Federation—As the development of local centres demanded national organisation, so national development called for international expression. In 1898 the first World's Conference of Y.W.C.A.'s met in London and decided to federate National Associations in the World's Y.W.C.A. This federation has done much to strengthen international understanding and of recent years has enabled the Association in all countries to work out a common policy on many world questions closely affecting the welfare of women. The National Associations owe much to the World's Committee for encouragement and counsel, and thousands of women could tell of help received, only possible because the Y.W.C.A. is international in conception.

The recent move of the World's Y.W.C.A. office to Geneva has brought the Association into closer touch with other international bodies and still further widened its spheres of influence.

THE WAR AND AFTERWARDS

Looking back to the years before the war it seems as if the Association had then in Great Britain been in a period of inactivity. The pioneer days were over, and many, content with small doings, were not developing with the times. But the world crisis in 1914 called the Association in Great Britain into new fields. War clubs, hostels and canteens were opened at home and in France for women in the Services and munition workers. The Blue Triangle was carried to many places where hitherto it had been unknown and existing work received fresh impetus. Some people think of the Y.W.C.A. as a mushroom growth of war-time, but only long experience could have adapted existing organisation so rapidly and created new machinery as the need arose.

THE Y.W.C.A. AND THE NEEDS OF TO-DAY

An organisation looking back on seventy-five years of unbroken service might well pause to ask whether, since it has certainly outgrown its first youth, it has not also outgrown its useful activity. But the Y.W.C.A. of Great Britain, as its members believe, may go forward in faith, believing that it has still not only a place but a growing place to fill.

For what are the chief needs to-day in the lives of women and girls to whatever section of the community they belong? Perhaps the greatest is a central purpose in life. We, as a Christian movement, believe that this purpose can only be found ultimately in faith in God. Yet we know that for many the approach to a full faith does not come through any one Church, for nowadays there is a widespread, though often quite irrational,

refusal of organised religion. That only makes more necessary such a movement as this, combining social work with a religious purpose, and working on an interdenominational basis. We thankfully believe that through the Association many have been brought to the allegiance of Christ, and become loyal adherents of one or other sections of His Church.

Friendship is another deep need of many girls. Work often takes them far from home, many will never have homes of their own, yet none can do without love and understanding and the opportunity of friendships among both women and men. These things we can offer to girls through our clubs and hostels.

Again, there is clearly a growing desire for education in its broadest sense. The Association, in co-operation with other movements, can and does help to supply this need, perhaps all the better because its purpose is not solely educational.

And to-day every one talks of unity—unity between classes, unity between churches, unity between nations. The Association offers many ways of working out this principle, for it enrolls in its fellowship women of all occupations and classes, of all churches and denominations, of all races and nations.

It is certain that, in present conditions, to meet some of the needs described above, organised action is vitally necessary. We believe that by its essential character the Y.W.C.A. can be that organisation. Under God's guidance the women of this generation may find here an instrument ready to their hands through which they may break down barriers and prejudice and help to interpret Jesus Christ to a world which sorely needs Him.

For this and other leaflets write to:—

The Publications Department,
The Young Women's Christian Association of Great Britain,
Fourth Floor, Y.W.C.A. Central Building,
Great Russell Street, W.C. 1

R/ 1933