The Legacy of Ida S. Scudder

Dorothy Clarke Wilson

The year was 1957. I had come to Vellore, a city in South India, to gather material for a biography of Dr. Ida Scudder, founder of the great international and interdenominational medical center. In the heart of that teeming city there was a gate. A Gate Beautiful, I called it, conceived in a flowing pattern of lotus leaves and opening buds and wrought in silvered iron. Each day at least 1,000 persons passed through its portals, a cross-section of 400 million people.

I watched them come and go. Young Indian doctors in crisp uniforms. Patriarchs in long skirts. Student nurses in blue-and-white saris. Villagers wearing only a strip of cloth about head and loins, yet possessing the peculiar dignity that is endowed by centuries of burden-bearing. Women with patient eyes and hard bare feet. Children clean and dirty, dressed and undressed, laughing, crying, faces bright with health and pinched with misery and disease.

A car drove up to the gate, and an old woman, leaning heavily on a cane, moved awkwardly out of it. Her face was wrinkled with lines, but her eyes were a clean bright blue, and the mass of soft white hair above them was still faintly aglow with its youthful sheen of gold.

Instantly a dozen hands were outstretched to help her. "Thank you, thank you." She smiled gratefully, even while muttering rebelliously. "Oh, dear, terrible having to be helped like this. How I hate it!"

As she moved through the crowded room of the dispensary and onto the corridors of the great and busy hospital, crouching figures straightened. Sad eyes brightened. Hands sprang palm to palm into the welcoming gesture of namaskar. Lips tensed with pain of futility burst into smiles. Unnoticed, a brown hand reached to touch the hem of her blue-sprigged cotton dress. To her dismay a villager in dingy white vaishti sank to his knees, eyes aglow with unmistakable worship, and prostrated himself full length at her feet.

India has a word for it, the sudden radiance of well-being elicited by the appearance of such a person: darshan, the blessing, or benediction, imparted by the mere sight or physical presence of a mahatma, a great soul.

Pausing for a moment on one of the long, high, open corridors, she and I looked out over the hospital area: courtyards, sprawling wings, crowded verandahs, a vast network of veins and arteries pulsing with ceaseless activity. A mile from where we stood, beyond crowded streets and teeming bazaars, was a modest red-brick building, now an eye hospital, which was the core from which all these multiplying structures had sprung. Four miles to the south was a green valley housing a great medical college, a rural hospital, a leprosy rehabilitation unit, and a mental health center. On and outward flowed the healing energy into a fifty-mile radius of towns and villages where some 200,000 persons were ministered to each year.

And it was this smiling, white-haired woman who had created this greatest medical center in all of Asia. I looked at her in wonder. "Doesn't it make you feel a great satisfaction," I asked, "seeing all this and remembering how it all started?"

"Oh, yes, yes," she replied fervently. "God has been very good to me."

My wonder sharpened. What! Only this to sum up one of the most extraordinary successes of the century? God has been very good to me. No pride, only gratitude.

[The preceding paragraphs are adapted from the introduction to the book, Dr. Ida, by Dorothy Clarke Wilson.]

Ida Scudder came from a remarkable missionary family. Her grandfather, the first Dr. John Scudder, was the first medical missionary ever to go out from the United States. He went out under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1819. He had seven sons, every one of whom became at some time a missionary to India. In subsequent years forty-three members of the Scudder family gave over 1,100 years to missionary service.

Ida was born in India in 1870. She came to the United States for her education and graduated from Northfield Seminary in Massachusetts. Then she returned to India because her mother was ill. But she went with just one idea in her mind, that she was never, never going to be one of those missionary Scudders! She would come back to America, go to Wellesley College, and no doubt marry a rich man, a distinct possibility because she was very beautiful with sparkling blue eyes and a halo of blonde hair, and all her life men would be falling in love with her.

But something happened to her one night as she sat writing letters in the little bungalow in Tindivanum where her missionary parents were living. I myself heard her tell the story when I attended a missionary conference at Northfield in 1922. Like all the other teenage delegates, I felt captive to her beauty, her vivid charm, her contagious enthusiasm for Christian service, little suspecting that thirty-five years later I would be journeying halfway around the world to write her story. Though she was then over fifty, she seemed more radiantly youthful than some half her age who panted after her swift serves on the tennis courts or struggled breathlessly to match her pace on the steep hillside paths. And no wonder! A woman who at eighty would still be whizzing tennis balls across the net and at eighty-five would be taking her first ride on an elephant, a four-hour jaunt through the jungle, was at fifty barely approaching her prime.

The story she told has often been called "three knocks in the night." While she sat writing letters three men came to her door, each, strangely enough, with the same request, that she come to his house and try to save the life of his very young wife who was dying in childbirth.

"But I know nothing about doctoring," she told each one. "It's my father who is the doctor. I'll be glad to go with him."

"Oh, no," each one replied, the Brahmin, the Muslim, and another high-caste Hindu. It was not in accordance with his religion to allow any man outside the family to enter the women's quarters of his home. Better that his wife should die than that the laws governing her soul's salvation should be broken.

Three times this happened, and Ida was much troubled. She spent a sleepless night. In the morning she sent a servant to find out what had happened to the three young women. Even before

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she returned she heard the sound of funeral tom-toms as processions made their way to the riverbank. Each one of the three wives had died because there was no woman doctor to go to them. That was her call. All other ambitions were swept aside.

She came back to the United States and graduated from Cornell University Medical College in the first class it opened to women.

She returned to India, to Vellore (where her father was then a missionary), a city teeming with life, with its crowded bazaar section, its population of 60,000, its concentration of poverty, disease, and ignorance. She had no place to work but she could not bear to wait. She opened a little dispensary in a ten-by-twelve room in her father's bungalow and handed out medicines to an ever-lengthening queue of patients who came to her window. Soon she was using not only the small room but her mother's guest room, big enough for three beds. Then she built a mud house on the compound with room for six beds. But, though she treated over 5,000 patients during the first two years, she was only marking time until her new hospital for women should be completed.

She had raised the money for it herself in America. Permitted by her mission board of the Reformed Church in America to solicit $8,000, she had tackled the job with her usual gusto, but her hopes had been sadly dashed. Then—a near miracle! A wealthy New Yorker, overhearing her impassioned recital of the needs of India's women, had donated $10,000 for a hospital in memory of his wife, Mary Taber Schell.

This building, dedicated in 1902, provided a full outlet for Ida's tremendous energy and purpose. Soon she was not only utilizing its original twenty-eight beds but putting patients on mats under the beds and in every available corner of verandahs and corridors. During the first months she had no professional help whatever, performing her first operation with only an untrained butler's wife, Salome, to help her. Even the acquisition of a pharmacist and a few nurses did not lessen her labors, for training nurses for her own hospital was not enough. She must train others, as, year after year on the evening of her nurses' graduation, she stood in the darkened chapel of the great medical center holding the little silver lamp shaped like a teapot, a replica of Florence Nightingale's, and watched it kindle into flame.

Also in 1909, using a tiny French Peugeot, the first motor car seen in that part of India, she started her "Roadside" clinics, which were to become such a dramatic feature of the work at Vellore. Making weekly trips to a small dispensary in a churchyard twenty-five miles away and finding people all along the way who needed help, she appointed stations where she would stop each week—at the edge of a village, under a tamarind or banyan tree—and give treatments to all who wished to come. The little French car was succeeded by a Ford, by a small ambulance, by well-equipped modern buses, until mobile clinics were going out on several "Roadsides" each week, taking teams of doctors, nurses, students, pharmacists, public health workers, a leprosy specialist, an evangelist.

It was a revelation to accompany one of these teams on "Roadside." I myself did it several times, once in 1957 with Dr. Ida B. Scudder, Dr. Ida's niece and namesake. I tried to describe some of the experience in a pamphlet entitled, "Christ Rides the Indian Road."

I follow Dr. Ida B. to the table under the trees where she takes her place with the two young Indian doctors, sitting myself on a folding stool by her side. Now I am no longer a foreigner, aloof. With the crowd pressing around me, dark anxious faces close to mine, ragged saris brushing my shoulders, I am suddenly engulfed in all the poverty and sickness and suffering which still enslave so much of India. I feel an intense involvement. The baby with its knees painfully swollen and its little buttocks covered with bright red rash ("Congenital syphilis," explains Dr. Ida with brevity). . . . The young man with the inside of his arm one mass of ugly cancerous flesh. . . . The blind man who used to be the village musician but lost favor with the coming of the radio, and whose wife had twins twice during the last times of famine. . . . The little girl with the sweet face who discloses the fact that she has coughed blood. ("Oh, no!" cries Dr. Ida B. softly, taking the thin little face between her hands. "Don't, please don't have tuberculosis!" She turns to me in distress. "She's one of my own little girls. I've followed her family through so many years. I'd be just sick if I found she had TB.")

It was dark when we finished, the last treatments given by lantern light. In all, 787 patients had been treated. A small day, for it often ran above 1,000. In the year ending June 30, 1959, the year my book came out, treatments were given on "Roadside" to 92,756 patients.

By 1913 the hospital was getting far too small. Ida ventured to ask permission of her mission board for $3,000 to make additions. But her dreams were soaring high above the heads of plodding boards.

"Each one of the three wives had died because there was no woman doctor to go to them."

It wasn't just an addition they needed. It was a new hospital! And—most daring of all—it wasn't just a new hospital. It was a medical college for women! Finally at a Missionary Medical Conference she exploded her bombshell.

"I propose that this body approve the founding of a medical school for women and that we begin to make plans for it immediately."

The bombshell elicited a startled volley of comment. "Impossible!" "My dear young woman, do you know what such a thing would cost?" "Government would never consent!" "Wonderful if it could be done! But—"

The words "but" and "if" were not in Dr. Ida's vocabulary. Already she had supporters in two denominations, Dr. McPhail of the Church of Scotland, and Dr. Anna Kugler, a Lutheran missionary. In 1913 two Baptist women came touring, Mrs. Lucy Peabody and Mrs. Helen B. Montgomery. They were interested. They were interested in a women's Union Christian College in India, yes, but one for arts, not medicine. Ida took them first to a village, one of India's 700,000, craftily pointing out the tremendous needs.

"Are they all like that one?" asked the shocked Mrs. Montgomery.

"No," said Ida. "Most of them have never seen a doctor."

"And such a lot of women," commented Mrs. Montgomery thoughtfully.
A hundred and fifty million," said Ida, hoping she would ask more right questions.

She did. "And how many women doctors?"

"About a hundred and fifty."

"But why don't they train Indian women to be doctors?"

Bless the woman! Ida chose her words carefully. "There is one Christian medical school for women in the north. But it's a thousand miles away, and Indian parents, even Christians, would not send their daughters so far."

She took the women to a beautiful valley outside of town where she visioned, not the wild expanse where goats were graz-

The inevitable? Not to Dr. Ida. At age seventy-two she began her three-year fund-raising trek of the North American continent, which, together with the bold decision to open the school to men, not only saved the project but gave it the broad strength of international and interdenominational support that made it one of the leading institutions of its kind in the world. Eighty years after the founding of Dr. Ida's work in India, the organizations supporting the Christian Medical College and Hospital would number some seventy-five, two in Australia, four in Canada, two international, one in Taiwan-Hong Kong, one in Singapore, one in Germany, seven in the United Kingdom, twelve in the United States of America, one in New Zealand, and forty-four in India itself.

Dr. Ida died in 1960, in her ninetieth year. It was May. Vellore broiled in suffocating heat, yet crowds by the hundreds moved en masse into the center of town; others poured in streams from the surrounding countryside. Stores were closed, shops shuttered, bazaars deserted. An awed hush pervaded the crowds. Hindus, Muslims, Christians—all were fused into one by a heat of emotion stronger than India's blazing sun.

"Aunt Ida has gone!"

To do her honor they came in such crowds as only India can muster, following in dense masses after the flower-decked open carriage, lining the streets as the beloved figure, face visible to all after the Indian custom, made its last slow journey along the familiar streets where so often it had rushed in pony cart, jutka, ancient Peugeot, modern ambulance, or on its own tireless swift feet.

The dream she brought to such glorious fulfillment—what has happened to it since? Has it kept growing like that banyan tree it so resembled, constantly thrusting down new roots until one can hardly tell where the first small tree emerged? And in spite of its vastness of size, is it still permeated with that life-giving spiritual force that was the essence of Dr. Ida's Christian concern and commitment?

I myself have been involved in a small part of that continued growth. I had heard about Dr. Mary Verghese when I was gathering material for Dr. Ida. In 1954, just after graduating from her residency in gynecology, Dr. Mary was involved in a terrible bus accident, which paralyzed her from the waist down. She showed incredible faith and courage, learning to perform surgery on leprous patients because she could do that seated. Then she was inspired to help all the disabled for whom Vellore—and India—had almost no rehabilitation facilities. She came to New York in her wheelchair, studied in Dr. Howard Rusk's Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Center. And so was born my second book about Vellore, Take My Hands.

How Dr. Ida would have rejoiced in the outgrowth of Dr. Mary's faith and courage! For she returned to become head of a new Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Vel-
lore, one of the first services of its kind in all India, with a building on the hospital grounds for outpatients, and a new Rehabilitation Institute for inpatients up on the college campus.

Dr. Ida had seen and rejoiced in the early work of Dr. Paul Brand, pioneer in surgery and rehabilitation for leprosy, marveled at the operation he had devised that re-created good mobile hands out of stiff claws, fully approved the world's first leprosy rehabilitation center on the college campus and Vellore's cooperation with the British and American Leprosy missions in building a Leprosy Research Sanatorium at Karigiri, ten miles from the hospital. But she never could have visioned the outreach of this work through coming years, the trainees who would come from all over the world to learn Dr. Brand's techniques, the worldwide impact of the discoveries made in her hospital.

It was the story of Dr. Paul Brand that I was privileged to write in my *Ten Fingers for God*.

Dr. Ida went out on one morning of her retirement, as I did, to see one of the "eye camps" pioneered by Dr. Victor Rambo, head of the eye department at Vellore. Like me, she was thrilled to see another sixty or more people out of India's curable blind being operated on for cataract and given their sight, a movement started at Vellore, which has continued to be carried into hundreds of villages and has brought sight to hundreds of thousands of India's blind. Coincidence, it seemed, that during the month of publication of my story of Dr. Rambo, *Apostle of Sight*, he was in India turning the soil for a new eye hospital on the grounds of the old Schell Hospital, where Dr. Ida's work had started. One could almost imagine her there wielding a shovel and urging them to hurry on with the building. For like the life-giving sap flowing from the original stock and activating every fresh shoot of the spreading banyan, the spirit of Dr. Ida is intensively alive, permeating this vast organism that she helped create.

She was an adventurer. The list of "firsts" in India instigated at Vellore during her lifetime is tremendous: mobile dispensary, medical college for women, college of nursing with B.Sc. course, mobile eye camps, neurology and neurosurgery department, cardio-thoracic department, "New Life Center" for rehabilitation of leprosy patients, heart surgery, mental health center pioneered by Dr. Florence Nichols, rural hospital. And her successors have been equally daring.

In 1961 Dr. Gopinath, an Indian physician trained by Dr. Reeve Betts who, with the cooperation of Dr. Kamala Vytlingam, developed the Department of Thoracic Surgery, performed the first successful open-heart surgery in all of India. In 1968 Dr. Stanley John, trained by Dr. Gopinath, performed the first calf's valve transplantation in a human heart. By 1975, 5,000 heart operations, including 1,000 open-heart surgeries, had been performed at Vellore.

There were other "firsts." Returning from study in America, Dr. P. Koshy helped create a Department of Nephrology, establishing the first artificial-kidney unit in India. In 1971 a surgeon trained at Vellore performed the first kidney transplant. Other transplants soon followed. Progress was made possible by an artificial kidney machine, gift of a wealthy Indian publisher and banker. In 1976 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi officiated at the dedication of a new Nephrology Block.

An even more exciting innovation was the first Betatron in India for the treatment of cancer patients, arriving in Vellore in 1976. Happily Dr. Ida B. Scudder, head of the Department of Radiology and Radiotherapy until her retirement, was back in India in time to dedicate this remarkable 42-million-electron-volt machine, a gift from the people of Denmark.

Dr. Ida saw her beloved "Roadside," started with her little chugging Peugeot in 1909, grow into an efficient mobile dispensary serving a wide network along four different roads each week, ministering each year to thousands of villagers. She rejoiced over the building of a rural hospital on her college campus in 1957, over the starting of public health training for nurses under the leadership of Pauline King, public health specialist, and would have delighted to see the further developments of this training under the leadership of Dr. Kasturi Sundar Rao, a graduate of her college of nursing. But she would have exulted even more over a development in rural outreach that took place in 1977.

RUHSA, they call it—Rural Unit for Health and Social Affairs, a team approach to rural development with the community for the community. It first involved work in a Block covering a population of about 100,000, with some 20,000 families in over eighty villages grouped about Kavanur, twenty-five miles from Vellore, where the Christian Medical College and Hospital had long conducted a Rural Health Center.

It is an ambitious program of total care and education for this vast area in cooperation with government, both local and national, involving not only medical and public health service but education in literacy, agriculture, family planning, ante-natal and family welfare, immunization, cottage industries, women's clubs, young farmers' groups, school and road building, a ministry to the whole human being.

As Dr. Daleep Mukarji, its founder and director, said, "RUHSA is an extension and reemphasis of Vellore's commitment in service, training, and research for the needs of India," a commitment that Dr. Ida initiated when she stopped her Peugeot and gave birth to "Roadside."

Dr. Ida would rejoice over new facilities designed not only to heal but to prevent disease among the most needy, such as...
Dr. Hilda Lazarus, revered throughout India, who followed Dr. Cochrane as principal of the college during this critical era, when India became independent.

Sister Delia Houghton, first nursing superintendent, and Sister Vera Putnam, who saw the school of nursing advance into ever higher standards.

Dr. Jacob Chandy, India’s great neurosurgeon, a devout Syrian Christian, trained in India, the United States, and Canada, who developed Vellore’s Department of Neurology and Neurosurgery into one of the most advanced facilities in the country.

Dr. Carol Jameson, one of Dr. Ida’s early staff, whose experiences in obstetrics and gynecology read like an exciting saga.

Treva Marshall, another early devotee, always available for every need and emergency, beloved mother-sister-friend of thousands of Vellore alumni.

Dr. Kamala Vytilingam, first of Dr. Ida’s students to become a professor at Vellore, serving brilliantly as head of cardiology.

Dr. John Carman, Baptist missionary, urologist and surgeon, long the efficient director of the institution, and his many-talented wife, Naomi.

Dr. John Webb, pediatric specialist, trained at Oxford, responsible for the Department of Child Health and living exemplar of Vellore’s dramatic film, To Children with Love.

Dr. K. G. Koshi, director, professor of community health, and college principal, and his sparkling wife, Susie, who made the Big Bungalow a haven of hospitality. How well I remember the trip we took together up the mountains of south India when I was gathering material for my biography of Granny Brand, Dr. Paul’s mother!

And of course Dr. Ida B. Scudder, bearer of the immortal name, which she has worn with far more than reflected glory, building the Department of Radiology into the finest in India, training radiologists of high caliber, developing “Roadside,” always fulfilling the nobility and high purpose associated with the name of “Dr. Ida Scudder.”

On December 9, 1966, which would have been Dr. Ida’s ninety-sixth birthday, I was privileged to be in Vellore with Dr. Ida B. for the dedication of a beautiful auditorium erected in Dr. Ida’s memory on the college campus. Dr. Ida would have approved of this memorial, for it is a source of rich blessing to her beloved students. Her beauty-loving gaze would have reveled in the spacious foyer with its lofty vistas, in the lovely gray-blue meeting hall with 1,000 seats, its white stage curtained with gold-colored jute, in the open-air theater extending into a large garden. But, oh, how she would have hated the plaster bust, later to be made into bronze, a poor likeness, hard, shining, metallic, which Dr. Ida B., with fully as profound distaste, unveiled in the foyer! Fortunately, this was later replaced by a much more attractive and lifelike marble bust fashioned by Mrs. Quien, a fine Swiss artist.

But Dr. Ida would have found this lovely work distasteful, too. As she had done when the city of Vellore proposed to erect a statue of her, I could almost hear her sputter, “Mercy, no! Cover up the drain instead!” Or, more likely at this later date, “Get a better water supply for the college!”

Before the day was over I saw a more beautiful tribute to her memory than a bronze or marble bust. In a bazaar shop across from the hospital the humble proprietor had hung a crude picture of her above his wares and circled it with a garland of marigolds. So greatly is she beloved, long after her death, that the humblest of people for miles around cherish her memory, revere her as a mahatma.

Dr. Ida lived her ninety years to the tune of trumpet calls, and they always sounded reveille, never taps. The last and clearest, for which she had waited long with faith and expectancy, was no exception. For never has she been more alive. Her skilled hands and brisk feet are multiplied by thousands, all dedicated to the sublime task of healing. Her energy flows through the pulsing arteries of a great subcontinent, creating new life, both physical and spiritual.

Almost ninety years have passed since she returned to India to meet the challenge of those three knocks in the night. The one bed for healing in her father’s bungalow has become more than 1,000. Instead of the class of fourteen girls there is now a student body of more than 1,100 men and women each year. The staff of two, herself and the butler’s wife, Salome, has multiplied to include some 380 doctors, 400 nurses, 270 paramedical workers, serving nearly 2,500 patients each single day. Dr. Ida lighted a small candle. In her hands it became a blazing torch. Her successors have taken up that torch of life, passed it from hand to hand, multiplied it by thousands until its light illumines not only the land of India but many other countries of the world.

Works about Ida S. Scudder


The Trustees of the Overseas Ministries Study Center announce the relocation of OMSC's residential and study programs to New Haven, Connecticut.

The Trustees also announce the expansion of OMSC's services to the missionary community through the affiliation with OMSC of INTERFACES, the International Family and Children's Educational Services, of Richmond, Virginia.

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