The Legacy of Ruth Rouse

Ruth Franzén

One of the pioneers in women's history asks us whether women are noteworthy only when their achievements fall into categories of achievement set up for men? Regardless of how one answers this question, it is undoubtedly time to attempt to explore the role of women in both the modern missionary movement and the ecumenical movement. One who deserves an honorable place in this history is Ruth Rouse (1872-1956), missionary, evangelist, and pioneer in reaching students in countless universities and colleges around the world.

A picture taken in 1908 of the officers of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) shows three men and one woman: Ruth Rouse, then 36 years old. The intelligent expression behind the glasses typical of the period reflects good powers of observation. Her long dark hair put up under a huge hat suggests that she did not assume the posture of a radical feminist, in spite of her pioneering role. A certain aristocratic elegance that was regarded as the right and proper thing in those years indicates that the tall slender woman in a fashionable skirt reaching down to her feet was well aware of the significance of appearing as a lady. Symbolically the picture suggests the framework of Ruth Rouse's life work. With her fellow workers she shared an interest in all branches of the burgeoning student and missionary movement of the period. Nevertheless her contribution was very special, a woman pioneering among pioneer women, in a society dominated by men. The picture shows her together with John R. Mott, Karl Fries, and Walton W. Seton; the first two were internationally known Christian workers. She was highly trusted by these men, with whom she had a good, long-lasting, fruitful cooperation.

George Woodford Rouse and his wife W. G. (née) MacDonald, the parents of Ruth Rouse, represented devout evangelical traditions, her father coming from an English family chiefly associated with the Plymouth Brethren and her mother being a Scottish Baptist. When Ruth was born, in 1872, they lived in Clapham Park, a London suburb. A layman leading seaside services from the Children's Special Service Mission was instrumental in helping the tall, sporty youngster fight her conversion through when she was nearly eighteen. After that Ruth was baptized in the church of her childhood, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, where Charles H. Spurgeon preached to thousands every Sunday until his death in 1892. That same year Ruth joined the Church of England. Both the work of the Children's Special Service Mission, based in the Church of England, and Spurgeon's preaching represented a type of interdenominational, or rather undenominational, evangelicalism emphasizing vital religion, not doctrine.

Cambridge, a Life Purpose

In an age when a pious, Victorian, middle-class girl was supposed to stay at home and wait for a suitable suitor, Ruth had parents unprejudiced enough to send their daughter to some of the best schools available—first Notting Hill High School and then Bedford College in London. Later they also let her have her own way when she wanted to study at Girton College, Cambridge. This was one of the first colleges for women and one of the most prestigious ones, with the same standards as the best colleges for men. (The women students took their degree examinations in exactly the same way as men, but Cambridge University did not give women the titles of their degrees until 1923, and not until 1948 were they given membership of the university.)

After studying for the normal three years, Ruth Rouse passed her tripos in classics. In preparation for a missionary career in India, she then studied Sanskrit one year at the British Museum in London.

In 1892 during Ruth Rouse's second year at Girton College, Robert P. Wilder visited Cambridge. He was the son of missionaries and himself on his way to take up a missionary career in India. This gentle and modest young man of prayer had been instrumental in starting the rapidly growing Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). He was one of the foremost advocates of the SVM pledge “willing and desirous, God permitting, to become foreign missionaries.” Wilder distributed declaration cards in Cambridge, and one of those who promptly signed a card was Ruth's friend and schoolmate Agnes de Selincourt. Ruth also took one, but she was unable to make a decision to sign it. About two years later, after much agonizing uncertainty and self-searching, she was finally able to take the decisive step, trusting not herself but God. She later told how Paul's sentence had flashed through her mind: “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” Wilmina Rowland, who had several interviews with Ruth Rouse more than forty years later, writes:

Suddenly it came to Ruth that what she could commit to Christ's keeping could be a purpose as well as anything else. A decision in his keeping, would be inviolable; there need be no fear of changing it. That intuition broke the back of her indecision. At once she signed the declaration. Never again was there the slightest uncertainty in her mind that the purpose of God for her was worldwide and missionary, nor the faintest thought of changing her purpose to follow that will for her life. Her indecision in other matters still continued for a time, but from this moment she began to “grow up.”

During the early nineties there was a great interest in religious matters in Cambridge, with many of the young students later becoming legendary for their enthusiasm and zeal, including Theodore Woods, G. T. Manley, Douglas Thornton, and Louis Byrde. University missions and open-air meetings were arranged using mature and experienced speakers. Many of the prominent evangelists and missionaries of the day were heard, men like Sir Arthur Blackwood, Wilson Carlile, Lord Radstock, E. A. Stuart, J. E. K. Studd, and Douglas Hooper. The morning watch and Bible study were essential parts of the students' active religious life, the center being prayer. Ruth Rouse and Agnes de Selincourt were the backbone of the daily Girton Prayer Meeting.

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Beginning a Life of World Travel

Ruth Rouse started her first paid job in 1895 as the editor of the *Student Volunteer* for one year. As a traveling secretary among women students during the following year, she shared her time between the Student Volunteer Missionary Union (SVMU), the Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, and the Missionary Settlement for University Women at Bombay. The last organization had been founded to secure women students’ contributions to missionary work among the Parsees in India. Ruth and her friend Agnes de Selincourt were instrumental in the planning and purpose. She herself later summed up the benefits of this period for her further career:

An unbelievable opportunity was mine—a most direct preparation for work in the Federation. Not only did I learn to understand the varied and widespread work of the national Y.W.C.A. and Y.M.C.A. movements—a valuable training for cooperation—but along my own line I visited at least 100 universities and colleges, women’s colleges and co-educational, denominational and State institutions, mostly in the East and Middle West. I attended and helped to work up delegations to the Quadrennial Student Volunteer Convention at Cleveland, February, 1898; I was present at summer student conferences, both men’s and women’s.10

John R. Mott and the WSCF

Her own contribution was to direct the attention of the national leaders of the YWCA to the student field, to help them understand the importance of their student departments, and to make valuable links with some new, very important colleges. She tried to cover the enormous area, visiting all types of colleges, from Bryn Mawr—the queen of colleges, “with a course fully as stiff as Harvard”—to small, denominational, coeducational colleges. By placing her side by side with many celebrities in foreign missions, C. Howard Hopkins in his biography of Mott gives her a fine tribute:

At no point was Mott’s talent as a judge of men—and women—better displayed than in his selection of the traveling staff for the SVM. During his absence in 1895-97, Henry W. Luce, Horace T. Pitkin, and G. Sherwood Eddy, all Yale men, went on the road for short assignments before “sailing” to their mission posts. Others to make names for themselves were Harlan P. Beach, Fletcher S. Brockman, Robert R. Gailey, Robert E. Lewis, J. Ross Stevenson, Fennell P. Turner, S. Earl Taylor, Fred Field Goodsell, and Ruth Rouse.11

After attending the Cleveland Convention (2,214 delegates from 458 institutions) Ruth Rouse was offered a post by the YWCA as international student secretary among women. She did not accept it, however, as she felt it to be in conflict with her call to India. Still this invitation demonstrated the direction of her mission in life.12

In a very strict sense, Ruth Rouse’s missionary career was a short one, from December 1899 to the end of 1901, when she had to leave India because of ill health. Sharing her time between the Missionary Settlement for University Women and the YWCA, she had a large and difficult field—from settlement work in Bombay during the years of the bubonic plague to developing and organizing Christian work among schoolgirls and women students in the whole of South India.

Ruth Rouse saw the need for a radical improvement in the position of Indian women, and like many other Western women, she hoped for a cultural transformation through a Christian, and Western, influence. In her early years she was hardly aware of any problematic links between colonialism and British missions. In her later writings she still summed up the missionary motive in the words “saved to serve the world.”13

In 1903 while on convalescent leave in England, Ruth Rouse was asked by Mott to visit Holland, Germany, Finland, and Russia “in order to study the religious conditions of women students, to seek to lead them to Christ and to promote Christian work among them.” The arrangement was officially sanctioned in 1905 when she was appointed traveling secretary of the World Student Christian Federation. In his characteristic manner Mott had taken care of the only serious objection to her appointment by securing means for her salary and expenses from Grace
Dodge, a wealthy American lady deeply dedicated to Christian work among young women.¹⁴ Her personal qualities made Ruth Rouse an ideal traveling secretary. A sense of adventure was part of her constitution. She liked traveling and slept well anywhere; she had considerable ability as a speaker and was in her element doing personal work.¹⁵ Being British, female, and a member of the Church of England, she was a perfect balance in the WSCF for Mott, the American Methodist, who in his turn received a gifted and loyal fellow worker.

Ruth Rouse, independent and capable in her own right, nevertheless admired Mott and his businesslike efficiency very much. Their relation as fellow workers seems to have been a happy one, based on mutual respect. Mott had the rare ability to trust and inspire his fellow workers, and obviously he had a high opinion of women's intellectual capacity and judgment. His own

**Being British, female, and Anglican, Ruth Rouse was a perfect balance for the American Methodist, John R. Mott.**

marriage created a unique husband-and-wife team as well.¹⁶ In spite of all this, Mott was, as Howard Hopkins puts it, “a bit unappreciative of the role of women in the ecumenical movement.”¹⁷ Especially later in life Mott seems to have taken for granted the capacity and generosity of those capable women. During Ruth’s nineteen years as a WSCF secretary she visited sixty-five different countries, many of them several times. Opposition was not lacking, and her apologetic abilities were often put to the test. Her steady aim was to “get a foothold in any group of women students, however few.”¹⁸ She early became accustomed to the aggressive type of woman student who reacted sharply against everything old and established. Probably her most fruitful method of work could be called evangelism by friendship. Furthermore, she had an outstanding ability of finding capable young students and training them for leadership. To all these she reached out in personal friendship; to which her vast correspondence bears ample witness.

**Ecumenical Contributions**

Ruth Rouse was animated by an ecumenical spirit. She was both a promoter and a product of the WSCF as the “experimental laboratory of ecumenism,” which to her meant, according to her fellow worker and friend Suzanne Bidgrain, “the experience of fellowship in faith with all those who worshipped the Lord to whom her life was dedicated.” She was herself gradually molded by her service within the student work, so that to numberless women students she became the embodiment of the WSCF. Her very existence made it impossible to “look at things from a purely racial, national, and confessional point of view.”¹⁹ By conviction both she and Mott tried, and usually succeeded, to avoid all controversies, whether theological or political.²⁰

During World War I and afterward Ruth Rouse, together with J. H. Oldham, Karl Fries, and others, did much to eliminate differences and bring about mutual understanding within the WSCF as well as between the missionary organizations of the opposite sides. Her most outstanding contribution to the relief of suffering and the restoration of international friendship was the launching of the cooperative undertaking of students known as the European Student Relief. Through her vision of the need and the opportunity to act “in the name and spirit of Christ,” the WSCF decided to start a campaign to concentrate the energies of the students of many nations upon the relief of their needy comrades in other places of the world. Founded in 1925, the project grew into an independent university organization.²¹ During World War II the organization continued its struggle to meet the needs of students.

Another field where the impact of Ruth Rouse was felt over an even longer period was the YWCA. From 1906 to 1946 she was a member of the World Executive Committee and its president from 1938 to 1946. The work of the YWCA and of the WSCF was correlated in such a way that the experience of each could help the other. Through her profound understanding and deep sympathy with both movements, she was able to help to make their cooperation more fruitful.²²

Ruth Rouse’s worldwide pioneering among students vitalized the missionary interest in many countries over three decades. Later (1925-39) she served the missionary cause in her own country as educational secretary of the Missionary Council of the National Assembly of the Church of England. This was certainly no easy task, as many types of conflicts affected this body.

At least one more important element of the legacy of Ruth Mott must be mentioned: she was a good writer. Throughout her whole life she produced articles for several different national and international papers and magazines. In addition to her many other duties, she found time to write pamphlets and books. She started her career as editor of the Student Volunteer, and after retirement she took up a new career as historiographer of the WSCF and the ecumenical movement. To her, the ecumenical urge, a yearning for the reunion of all Christians, was an essential part of her Christian faith.

Like so many of the educated women who were her contemporaries, Ruth Rouse never married. Her opinion of marriage as a refuge in which one is “sheltered and cared for and happy” invites further analysis.²³ She was always careful that her private life should not cause rumors. Consequently we should not be surprised that no sources have been preserved that tell us the reason why she did not marry; we are left to guess. Certainly she would have refused to compromise her ideal of marriage if no appropriate suitor appeared. However, we must keep in mind that attitudes toward marriage were not easy for a professional woman of Ruth Rouse’s generation, who first had to struggle her way to college, then to a professional identity. Female role models were usually all single women. Most educated women of this generation seem to have thought that marriage was a vocation incompatible with a career, not to mention with the opinions of a prospective husband.²⁴ Ruth Rouse might well have decided not to marry because of her ambition to “work out her missionary purpose” in worldwide service.²⁵ Still she had her own dependents. When she left her office as traveling secretary of the WSCF, an important factor was her need to take care of her aging mother, with whom she shared her home in England.

**A “Female John R. Mott”**

Ruth Rouse has sometimes been referred to as a female John R. Mott.²⁶ In some sense this hits the nail on the head. She had the same zeal for evangelization and the same ability to inspire students. Like him, she is remembered as an evangelist, person
of prayer, leader, advocate of comity, friend, speaker, executive, author, editor, fund raiser, and traveler. Influenced by Mott's optimism, she still seems to have been critical and reflective. Although she was not perhaps so contemplative as J. H. Oldham, she appears to have had a similar mediating effect. Furthermore, it must be remembered that she was born in a time when ideas of gender differences deemed women to be in a position of inferiority. Thus her starting point was different than that of her male colleagues. Also, working as a pioneer woman among pioneer women made her contribution different.

Though old and retired, Ruth Rouse was still very influential when she undertook one of her final jobs. She helped, rather women made her contribution different.

Rouse's pioneering among students vitalized missionary interest in many countries over three decades.

Notes

9. Memorial of the SVMU to the Church of Christ in Britain (London: SVMU, n.d.).
18. Rouse, World's Student Christian Federation, pp. 11-118.
20. On Mott, see e.g. Hopkins, John R. Mott, pp. 631-33.
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