Colonies in the Slums: Toynbee Hall and Oxford House, 1884–1939

Wednesday 22 Oct. 2014 4:15-5:30pm

School of History Seminar Series
Speaker: Emily Duthie, PhD Candidate, School of History, ANU

McDonald Room, Menzies Library, ANU

In 1884, two centres of reformist effort were established in London’s East End for male university graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. Built in the heart of the city’s most notorious slum districts, Toynbee Hall and Oxford House were imagined as residential ‘colonies’ or ‘settlements’. This imperial imagery implied that East Enders were in need of reformation and that the role of an upper-class resident in East London was comparable to that of a ‘settler’ in a British colony. However, as this paper will examine, the settlements’ reformist mission had a dual reference. Instead of reinforcing traditional binaries of a civilised or moral philanthropist and an irreligious or uncultured poor, the settlements embraced a two-fold mission: a task of elevating the urban poor and a parallel, albeit more introspective, enterprise of improving or advancing the ‘settlers’. Until now, settlement historiography has focused on Toynbee Hall and Oxford House missions directed at the working classes rather than on a programme that was aimed, both formally and informally, at the settlers themselves.

In this PhD pre-submission seminar, I will discuss the second part of the settlements’ two-fold mission which forms the subject of my thesis. I consider Toynbee Hall and Oxford House as sites for the education, training, mentoring and networking of settlers. Placing the settlers, rather than the urban poor, at the receiving end of the settlements’ mission broadens our understanding of the functions of these philanthropic institutions. The task of cultivating the social reformers may appear to be an auxiliary aspect of the settlement houses, but it was inextricably linked both to the goal of redressing problems in the East End and to a wider project designed to form a new generation of leaders and bureaucrats for Britain and its Empire.

Emily Duthie is a PhD candidate in the School of History at the ANU. This is her pre-submission oral presentation.

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