

Searching for Sara Libby Carson

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Sara Libby Carson is a well-known name among scholars who study the history of the settlement house movement in Canada. Carson, along with her friend, Mary Lawson Bell, opened the first Canadian settlement house, the Young Women's Settlement, in Toronto in 1899. It became Evangelia House in 1902. Later, in 1912, she was hired by the Presbyterian Church in Canada's Board of Social Service and Evangelism to work with Dr. John G. Shearer (1859-1925) in organizing a string of houses across Canada. Over the next six years she was the driving force behind establishing five settlement houses associated with the Presbyterian Church: St. Christopher's House in Toronto, Chalmers and Saint Columba houses in Montreal, Robertson Memorial Institute in Winnipeg, and the Community House in Vancouver. While in Canada she was also sought after as a consultant to other nascent neighbourhood houses and their leaders, lectured in the newly formed University of Toronto social work program, and worked for the Dominion (National) YWCA.

While numerous Canadian scholars note her importance, especially during the second decade of twentieth century – a period when the so-called “problem of the city” was on the agenda of concerned citizens and church leaders – little is known about her. In this essay I provide an overview of what historians do know about her and then discuss some reasons for the obscurity that surrounds her life and thought. Probable reasons include her American-Canadian nomadic lifestyle, her lack of long-term ties to any institutional organization, her scant number of publications, and her apparent lack of formal familial ties.

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The problem of inadequate sources regarding a historical figure (or figures and movements) is not new. Yet after almost twenty years of researching Carson and delving into numerous archival collections in Toronto, New York City, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and elsewhere, I have succeeded in uncovering only scant tidbits of information that are probably unknown to other scholars. And, sadly, I have not found enough to shed important light on her contributions as a leader within the Canadian context. Ultimately, then, this is a paper about failure. Yet I hope it is an interesting and even an enlightening paper because it shows how difficult it is adequately to place women within the normative historical narratives and, consequently, the improbability of historians being able to transform these narratives to be more fully inclusive of women's contributions in their time and place.

Let's begin with what historians do know about Carson and why they point to her work as significant in Canada. Carson was born in 1867 in the United States. The place of her birth and the names and occupations of her parents are unknown. Her contemporaries, however, always identified her as a New Englander. She died in 1928 in New York City and was buried in Woodbury, Connecticut.¹ In her last will and testament, Carson left \$500 to Mary Lawson Bell (1867-1956), her long-time friend who worked with her at the Toronto Young Women's Settlement and then became the head worker at Evangelia House. She bequeathed the remainder of her estate, including her house and all her belongings, to Helen Love Hart (1890-1936), who was her younger and long-time friend and the first headworker hired for St. Christopher House upon Carson's recommendation.²

Mary Jennison (1892-1970), a leading social worker and committed socialist and pacifist, wrote the earliest known history of settlements in Canada. In her unpublished 1965 manuscript on settlement houses, she wrote that Carson was a "Quaker in belief, a puritan by inclination . . . [and] a graduate of Wellesley College for Women."³ But, as historian Cathy James noted almost twenty years ago, there is no evidence that Carson attended Wellesley College or any of the northeastern women's colleges; perhaps she attended a college but simply did not graduate.⁴

By the mid 1890s Carson was in New York City. Christina Isobel MacColl (1864-1939), with whom she co-founded Christadora House in 1897, stated that Carson had been a "business girl" in Harlem before they met while both working for the YWCA.⁵ Carson was considered a good public speaker and conducted evangelical YWCA meetings and organized

clubs at various colleges throughout the northeastern United States. She was especially welcomed at Syracuse University, which was a co-ed university from its founding. In 1897 she was invited by the Toronto YWCA to hold ten meetings for workingwomen, which led to the opening of the Young Women's Settlement.

Carson's adult life was one of geographical and institutional movements. She split her time between New York City and Toronto during the late 1890s and early 1900s, working for New York's Christodora House and Toronto's Evangelia House; but, during these years, she also worked for the New York YWCA and the Dominion (National) YWCA. By 1908 she was back in New York City and is listed as the first head worker at Wesley House, a settlement house established by the Madison Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church.⁶ She appears to have held this position until she accepted the invitation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to help them organize their settlement houses.

While employed by the Presbyterian Church (1912-18) she kept a permanent room at St. Christopher House. Even though she had a permanent residence in Toronto, she was most often in other cities – such as Montreal, Winnipeg, and Vancouver – where she conducted neighbourhood surveys to determine where a house might most be needed, trained local leaders (including clergy), and organized the initial staff and programs of the houses themselves. Once she deemed everything to be in place, she moved on.

During her tenure as General Supervisor of what was called the “evangelical settlement work” of the Presbyterian Church, she wrote three short articles. In a 1914 article published in the *Social Service Congress*, Carson opens with a quote from renowned American settlement house leader Professor Graham Taylor (1851-1938), a professor of applied Christianity at the Chicago Theological Seminary and founder of the Chicago Commons settlement, who defined a settlement as a “group of Christian people who choose to live where they seem most needed, for the purpose of being all they can to the people with whom they identify themselves.”⁷ She then goes on to say that settlement residents need to be of “trained mind and developed character” and must exhibit “clear thinking” and “steady living” in order to help their neighbours “learn to meet their own needs.” She notes that settlement residents do not necessarily need to be university graduates – perhaps because she herself was not one. She touches on how settlements work with various community groups to address problems of housing, industrialization, and corrupt

politics, and help individuals to access medical services, for example. She highlights the work of Evangelia Settlement, St. Christopher House, and Chalmers House because their various clubs and activities enable people to engage in “wholesome recreation, good citizenship and civic righteousness.”⁸

A second short article written by Carson appeared in the *Canadian Woman's Annual and Social Service Directory* in 1915. Here she once again reiterates Professor Taylor's definition of settlements, their work in communities as places of advocating for basic needs (such as parks) and providing social and educational outlets. She concludes her article by repeating that such places provide opportunities for “wholesome recreation, good citizenship and civic righteousness.”⁹

Also in 1915 an article appeared in the *Presbyterian Record* entitled “How Settlement Work Began.” In this publication the author is identified as “S.L. Cowan,” but the author can be no one else but Carson.¹⁰ She paraphrases what she had said in the earlier two articles, but it is clear that she is consciously writing for a Presbyterian audience – in other words, for her employers – and that she is concerned about convincing them of the Christian worthiness of settlement house work. She writes that settlement houses made “Canadians” out of recent immigrants, that they were taught to pledge alliance to the British, and, through club participation, that they learned parliamentary skills. Yet in this article she adds – immediately after her line about settlements providing opportunities for “wholesome recreation, good citizenship, and civic righteousness” – that settlement work is done “through the power of Christ, by telling in new ways ‘the old, old story of Jesus and His love.’”¹¹

The addition of such deliberate evangelical Christian language was clearly her attempt to appease the Presbyterian Church leaders who were unconvinced about the worthiness of settlement houses organized and supported by the church institution itself. Indeed, there was division among Presbyterian leaders: some saw settlement houses as an extension of the Christian gospel, where the very teachings of Jesus were put into practice, while others believed that they were not overtly religious enough. Ethel (Dodds) Parker, a prairie-born Presbyterian and a member of the first graduating class at the University of Toronto who went on to become the head worker at St. Christopher House in 1917, remembers that there was a significant protest by some Presbyterian leaders regarding the “lack of religious teaching” in settlement houses. Parker said that such people asked: “Why were they not conducting Sunday services, opening every

meeting with prayer, and bringing members into the church?”¹²

Carson’s three articles were the work of someone who did not appear to be interested in theology or in theological debates. Rather, she reported on activities and how individuals found community within settlement houses and how these houses became places to promote necessary urban reforms. She was an administrator, an organizer, and a doer. She clearly had a strong personality and loads of energy. As Mary Jennison put it, “Miss Carson came like a meteor” into Canada. While Jennison had much praise for Carson, she stated that Carson’s lack of a critical inquiry was because she “did not and could not at that time connect knowledge learned from books about the working out of the capitalist system with the squalour surrounding her.”¹³ (In this comment, Jennison was showing her own socialist perspective.)

Yet, much earlier, in 1935, Jennison stated that the opening of Presbyterian settlement houses across Canada “owes much to the vision and leadership” of Dr. Shearer, but “still more perhaps to Miss Sara [*sic*] Libby Carson who, under Shearer, organized the work.” She then added a tribute “to Miss Helen Hart, who as head resident of St. Christopher House, trained workers to go out to the other houses bearing with them the torch of friendship and transcendence of class distinctions.”¹⁴ Jennison saw Carson, as well as her friend and colleague, Hart, as critical in establishing the first Canadian settlement houses and, interestingly, she assigned Hart a special role in establishing the tone of settlement work as being about neighbourliness and the crossing of class barriers.

Although apparently loved by the children and the mothers, the latter of whom she organized into White Shield clubs – a popular group at St. Christopher House comprised of wage-earning mothers – Carson was not an easy person with whom to work. Ethel (Dobbs) Parker said of Carson that she had “warmth and merriment” and was skilled in “teaching the social work students the fine points of good leadership,” but she was autocratic and exhibited a military style of management:

[A]s a student or staff member you did what you were told. Workers were moved from place to place like men on a chess board. You were never asked whether you cared to go or not; you just went, and did your best.¹⁵

Ethel Parker also illustrated Carson’s commanding style of leadership by describing the first meeting of the men’s club at St. Christopher House:

“Suddenly one Scotsman flung himself out of the room saying, ‘it’s no fair, it’s no fair, Miss Carson is coercing the members.’” Parker continues: “And she was. To Miss Carson democracy was less important than laying proper foundations.¹⁶

Even Helen Hart, Carson’s friend and handpicked first head worker at St. Christopher House, in writing a letter to Dr. Shearer in 1915 about establishing a supervised playground, education classes, and popular lectures in the Ryerson area of Toronto, said: “Miss Carson may not agree with this view of the subject, in which case, of course, she is right and I am wrong.”¹⁷

Given the independent and dominating leadership style of Carson, it is not surprising that when the Presbyterian Church decided to make local presbyteries responsible for the houses and the houses directly accountable to them – and not to the central board via Carson and Shearer – she resigned and returned to New York City. Back in the States she worked for the War Camp Community Service agency and, in this position, she organized institutes throughout the country to train people so that they could provide recreational activities for troops stationed in camps. She then worked for the State of Delaware as the Supervisor of Community Americanization, in which role she organized home English classes for immigrant women and recreational night programs in schools for immigrants groups.¹⁸ She subsequently took up a position training students at the East Side Settlement House in New York City, where her friend Helen Hart was then the head worker.

In a 1924 exchange between Hart and the head worker at St. Christopher House, Marion Yeigh, Hart writes: “The Canadian work is very dear to our hearts, and both Miss Carson and I would make a special effort to be of service to any Canadian worker in the city, especially yourself.” She concludes by adding: “Miss Carson has been quite ill, but is much better. She sends her very best wishes to you.”¹⁹

Carson retired in 1926 and moved to a house in Woodbury, Connecticut, a community in which she had never before lived. In a considerably long obituary printed in the *Social Welfare* journal, Carson’s many accomplishments as an organizer were upheld as well as the “extraordinary personal influence she exerted – usually unconsciously – on everyone with whom she came in contact. Literally hundreds of social workers owe their inspiration to her.”²⁰

The influence that she exerted, however, almost vanished with the deaths of her friends and former students. Therefore, scholars who are

interested in digging deeper into what motivated her work and what she really thought of the social gospel movement, for example, or of socialism or of women's suffrage, are left with next to nothing on which to base their judgments. Scholars do not know how she defined "civic righteousness," an often used term by social gospellers of her day, yet one that was differently understood among them. Scholars also do not know if she was aware of, or supportive of, or contributed to the development of social work away from its early Christian base in North America and into the secular profession that it became. Clearly she combined the goals of Christianization and Canadianization (and Americanization) – what is now called the assimilation of immigrants – as did many of her contemporaries, and yet she is said to have believed that "religion would be caught and not taught," and therefore she avoided direct evangelicism.²¹

Furthermore, although being identified as a Quaker, she never seemed to be connected with any particular religious institution or denomination. She did not join the Presbyterian Church when she was in Canada, and this lack of formal association may have been part of the problem that more conservative and evangelical Presbyterians had with her leadership. That said, she did have ties with the American Presbyterians through her earlier association with Christina MacColl (a daughter of a Presbyterian minister), and they received financial support from members of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church in the early years of Christadora House (NYC).²² Yet she also had associations with the Methodist Episcopal Church while she was the head worker at Wesley House (NYC). Furthermore, although her peers always identified her as a Quaker, there is no evidence that links her to any specific Quaker meeting or association. Not having a clear institutional base within a Christian denomination or community or even within a government agency resulted in the unlikelihood that any speeches, records, and papers would find a natural place to reside after her death. Her movements between Canada and the United States – and within both countries – and her relatively short length of employment with each of the various organizations with whom she had worked, including the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the YWCA, added to her lack of being "claimed" by anyone.

There are a couple points, however, that can be said in regards to Carson. First, if one considers a person's last will and testimony to indicate a degree of close attachment to specific individuals or causes, then it appears that Carson's closest humans were Mary Bell and especially Helen Hart. This would be quite similar to other single, professional

women of her time, such as Mary Rozet Smith and Jane Addams, for example. Interestingly, Hart, to whom Carson left almost the entirety of her estate, was listed in her will as also residing in Woodbury, Connecticut, which makes it likely that Hart and Carson lived together in Carson's home. Further connecting this probable friendship/familial relationship is the fact that the Rev. Dr. Hastings Hart of New York City assisted at the funeral service of Carson, and he was Helen Hart's father.²³ Carson's final will and testament also appears to indicate that she had no living relatives, or at least relatives with whom she was connected.

Second, it is reasonable to accept the word of Carson's contemporaries who speak of her significance in the early twentieth century Canadian context. She founded the first settlement house in the nation, and she organized settlement houses across the country in her work with the Presbyterian Church. (Only two still exist today: St. Christopher's House in Toronto, which is now named West Neighbourhood House, and St. Columba House in Montreal). It can also be affirmed that she was influential in teaching the first wave of university-trained social workers at the University of Toronto. But this is about all that one can say because of the lack of historical records.

The problem of Carson brings to mind the groundbreaking 1975 article by historian Gerda Lerner entitled "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges."²⁴ Lerner argues that the first level or stage is to identify the women who are worthy to be included in history; this is compensatory history, the naming of noteworthy women who are added to the traditional storyline of history. Compensatory history is important even though such exceptional women do not represent the experiences and history of most women of their time. Carson's name and work is included in the historical narrative of the settlement house movement in Canada, so Lerner's first level is achieved, but scholars are stumped when moving on to her second level, namely that of contribution history.

This stage highlights how particular women have aided in the advancement of particular movements. In the case of Carson, while scholars know that she made a contribution to the settlement house movement and to the educational formalization of social work, not enough sources exist on her – and from her – to enable an accurate judgment. Was she, as a doer, more important (as Jennison suggested) than her male clergy colleague, Dr. Shearer? One cannot say with any degree of certainty. Furthermore, this stage does not take into account other contributions such women may have made which were outside of the

male-defined norms of their day or matters that male-defined historians usually uphold as important. Lerner gives as an example the fact that scholars highlight the importance of Jane Addams in contributing to American Progressivism but ignore her contributions in creating supportive women networks. If the obituary on Carson is worth any weight, then perhaps Carson's most important contribution was not in organizing settlement houses but in training and inspiring the first generation of women social workers. Not enough is known, however, to do more than speculate at this contribution level, let alone go on to Lerner's third and final stages which would transition women out of the margins of history and then seek a synthesis between female and male experiences that would result in a truly inclusive "new universal history."²⁵

The example of Carson indicates how almost impossible is such a goal of seeking a synthesized and universal history for women and men. Yet, the search for Sara Libby Carson will continue. The Smith College Sophia Smith Collection holds the YWCA archives and something important may be found on Carson related to her early working life. The Marjorie C. Smith papers at Syracuse University (SU) has a box of newspaper and magazine clippings from 1888 to 1900 which may include something on Carson's speaking engagements, and SU also has a photograph collection on the YMCA/YWCA, so perhaps even a photo of Carson exists! Her death certificate has been ordered from New York City, and this may provide the names of her parents and her place of birth. The search can certainly continue.

The death certificate arrived from the New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Municipal Archives. It states that Carson was a single white female who died at the Presbyterian Hospital at the age of sixty. It lists her occupation as a social worker. Her father is named as Charles W. Carson and her mother as Elizabeth Libby – Libby being her mother's maiden name. Birthplace is given as "WS" (West Side, New York City?). Cause of death: Carcinoma with metastasises (primary) and cardiac failure (secondary). Place of burial identified as Woodbury, Connecticut. Most interestingly, a "Mrs. Helen Heart" [*sic*] is identified as the "sister" of the deceased and is the person who hired the undertaker to prepare Carson's body for burial.

Endnotes

1. Shirley J. Yee, *Immigrant Neighborhood: Interethnic and Interracial Encounters in New York Before 1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 208, footnote 20 notes that Carson was the daughter of Elizabeth and Charles Carson and was born in New Jersey in 1861. This is incorrect. For her obituary see *Social Welfare* 11, no. 5 (February 1929): 113.
2. Mary Bell was born in Montreal and it is unknown how she and Carson met and became friends. Bell was headworker at Evangelia until 1906 and, in 1911, was headworker at the Ottawa Settlement. Also see 'As it begins 80th season Ladies' Club now accepts men,' *Montreal Gazette*, 2 October 1971, on her founding of the Ladies' Morning Musical Club in Montreal in 1892. Helen Hart was only twenty-one years old when she was hired as the headworker at St. Christopher's House, a position she held until 1917. She was a 1912 graduate from Mount Holyoke, where she was awarded honors in English. "Mount Holyoke Graduates; the college celebrates its seventy-fifth commencement," *New York Times*, 16 June 1912, 15. For Carson's will see Probate Estate File #5314, Sara Libby Carson, 1929, State Archives Record Group #004:168, Records of the Woodbury Probate District, Connecticut State Library.
3. Mary Jennison, *Study of the Canadian Settlement Movement* (unpublished manuscript, ca. 1965), 46.
4. Cathy Leigh James, "Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Organization of Neighbourhood and Nation: The Role of Toronto's Settlement Houses in the Formation of the Canadian State, 1902 to 1914" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1997), 22-23, footnote 1.
5. "History of Christodora House (as told by C.I. MacColl), 1933," Box 3, #1, Christodora House Records, 1897-1991, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
6. Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *Handbook of Settlements* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), 239.
7. Sara Libby Carson, "The Social Settlement," in *Social Service Congress, Ottawa - 1914, Report of Addresses and Proceedings* (Toronto: Social Service Council of Canada, 1914), 134.
8. Carson, "Social Settlement," 136.
9. Sarah [sic] Libby Carson, "Social Settlements in Canada," in *Canadian Woman's Annual and Social Service Directory*, ed. Emily P. Weaver (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1915), 283-85.

10. Cathy James also notes this in "Reforming Reform: Toronto's Settlement House Movement, 1900-20," *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 1 (March 2001): footnotes 36 and 76. See S.L. Cowan, "How Settlement Work Began," *Presbyterian Record* 40, no. 6, 245-46.
11. Cowan, "How Settlement Work Began," 246.
12. Ethel (Dobbs) Parker, "The Origins and Early History of the Presbyterians Settlement Houses," in *The Social Gospel in Canada, Papers of the Interdisciplinary Conference on the Social Gospel in Canada, March 21-24, 1973, at the University of Regina*, ed. Richard Allen (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), 110. Also see Cathy James, "Practical Visionary: Tracing the Life of Ethel Dodds Parker," *Touchstone: Heritage and Theology in a New Age* 25, no. 1 (January 2007): 41-49.
13. Jennison, *Canadian Settlement Movement*, 47.
14. Mary Jennison, "Current Trends in Canadian Settlements," 3 June 1935, 1, Box 7, Folder 12, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota.
15. Ethel (Dobbs) Parker, "The Origins and Early History," 100.
16. A. Ethel Parker, "50th Anniversary Committee – Reminiscences of Former Staff, 1961-2, St. Christopher House" (September 1961), Box 137032 (SC 484 Box 4), File 4, 4, St. Christopher House Fonds 1484 (formally SC 484), City of Toronto Archives.
17. Helen Hart to Dr. Shearer, 19 June 1915, Book D, Part II, Toronto Playground Association, 1915-1919, Baldwin Room, S54 (History of Canadian Settlements), Metro Toronto Reference Library.
18. *Social Welfare* 11, no. 5 (February 1929): 113. In 1919 and 1920 she also conducted a survey of the "foreign districts" of Wilmington, Delaware, for its Americanization Committee.
19. Helen Hart to Marion A. Yeigh, 10 October 1924, Box 137037, File 13 (SC 484 Box 9), "Executive Directors-Head Workers Reports," St. Christopher House Fonds 1484 (Formerly SC 484), City of Toronto Archives.
20. *Social Welfare* 11, no. 5 (February 1929): 113.
21. "Canadian Beginnings," Book D, Part II, Metro Toronto Reference Library.
22. "Club for Working Women," Scrapbook 1898-1904, April 1898, Box 24, Columbia University.

23. Obituary, *Social Welfare*, 113. Hasting Hornell Hart (1851-1932) was a respected social worker especially known for his work in delinquency and penology and with the Russell Sage Foundation. The officiating minister was the Rev. Clinton W. Wilson, a Congregational minister in Woodbury, Connecticut.
24. Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1975): 5-14.
25. Lerner, 13.