

## A Settlement at the crossroads

One of the University's most remarkable institutions has survived turbulent times but desperately needs support. Rodney Molesworth explains.

**T**he Settlement Movement arose in England in the late 19th century, when the squalor created by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation was at its peak.

Amid many other charitable activities, what distinguished the movement was the belief of university men and women

that the conditions of the poor would not improve until educated people were prepared to live and work among them; to befriend them, assist them and learn from them; to abandon the security and comfort of their leafy neighbourhoods and risk disease, crime and the disdain of their peers.

Today that same spirit inspires the work of the Settlement Neighbourhood Centre in Darlington, an institution with more than 100 years of history. For the past 30 years it has had a particular focus on helping indigenous residents of the area.

The first “settlement house”, Toynbee Hall, was set up by Oxford men in 1884 in the East End of London. The idea was initially lampooned – *The Spectator* predicting it would be “the vacation resort of undergraduate hotheads and frothy declaimers” – but it was widely successful and even became fashionable. It still thrives, serving a population now nearly all immigrant.

News of Toynbee Hall spread rapidly to Sydney, and by 1896 former Toynbee residents were “settling” independently in Surry Hills. The Sydney University Settlement proper can perhaps claim a beginning in 1891, when the Women's Society began its work among the poor of Woolloomooloo. More realistic is 1908, when Sarah Evans went into residence in a house outside the gates of Women's College.

From the beginning, the Settlement was not an official part of the University of Sydney. It was begun and was led, until the 1960s, by societies auspiced by the Union and was supported

by the voluntary efforts of academics and their families and undergraduates.

Despite recurrent financial crises, it has been a success. At the beginning it had support from the wealthy and titled. The Sydney University Women's Society was brought into being by the efforts of the wife of the then governor of NSW, and its first president was the wife of the chancellor. Vice-regal patronage continued for decades.

By 1913 it was the Sydney University Women's Settlement, and the annual general meeting was held in the Great Hall with 50 present. In the mid-1920s, perhaps emboldened by the strong support from senior academics and administrators, it was resolved to purchase the hall at 17 Edward Street, Darlington, for £1600, even though the building fund stood at a little over £100. After an extraordinary outpouring of generosity by individuals and local businesses, the deal was accomplished. The Settlement operates today from the same premises.

In its early years the leadership of the Settlement was an all-female affair. Not until 1931 was its constitution changed to permit male members, creating an elaborate structure for graduate and undergraduate involvement, particularly through the cultural and social activities of university clubs and societies.

By the 1940s the Settlement executive and the undergraduate committee were adopting the ideas of professional social work, and the Department of Social Work had an *ex officio* position on the committee. That is still the case on the current management committee,



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**Professor Tony Vinson ... reconnecting the Settlement with the University.**

where the position was energetically filled by Professor Tony Vinson of the Faculty of Education and Social work. It is now held by Ruth Phillips.

The '40s and '50s was a time of great activity and achievement, including the purchase of all the houses between the hall and Vine Street – numbers 1 to 15 – which are still owned by the Settlement and provide low-income housing. Around this time it became apparent that the ultimate goal of the Settlement Movement was finally being achieved: the traditional client group – working-class and post-war migrants – were increasingly taking over decision-making from their university friends, and as a result the association with the University began to wane from the mid-1960s.

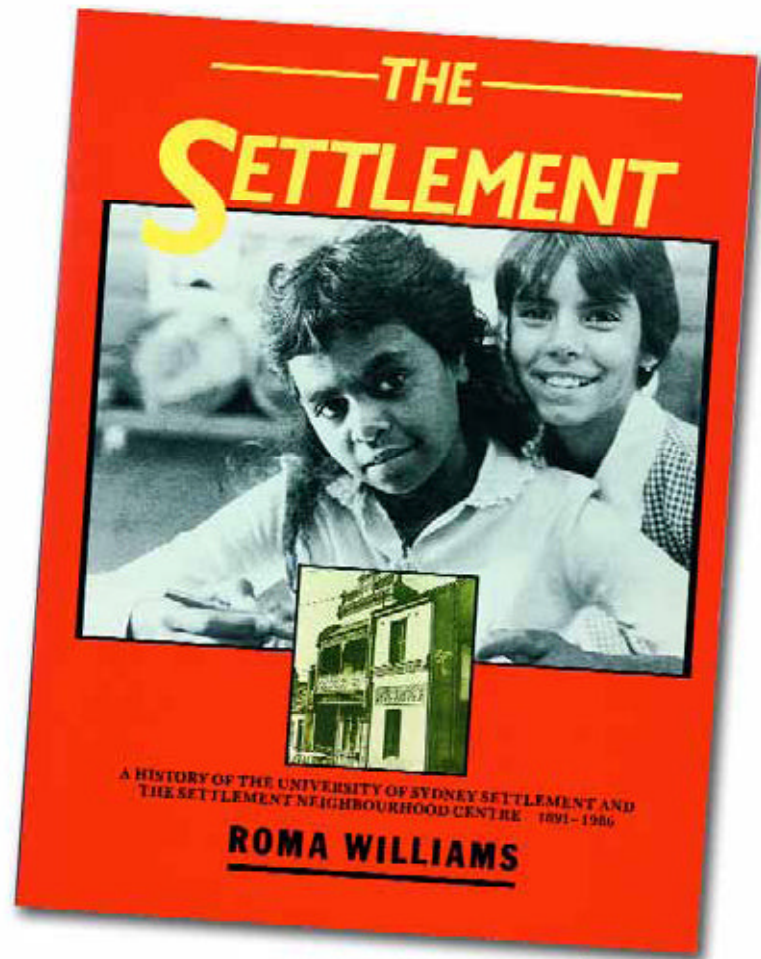
## New radicalism

One of the most contentious issues at this time was the expansion of the University into long-established working-class districts of Darlington, ousting families with deep roots in the area. Equally, a new radicalism found itself at odds with the traditional style of fund-raising, based as it was on garden parties and debutante balls.

In 1974 the federal government funded the purchase of The Block in Redfern for Aboriginal housing. The subsequent influx of indigenous residents to the area has been a principal factor in the changing role of the Settlement, but there are others. Increasing gentrification has led to instances of cultural conflict. The loss of traditional blue-collar employment has increased welfare dependency. The winding back of the welfare state has left fewer resources for the needs of the homeless, the mentally ill and those rejected by mainstream agencies. Drug and alcohol abuse, and the crime they encourage, have increased.

The Settlement's client group for its programs and its low-cost housing is almost entirely Aboriginal, and this client group is in a state of distress that would be readily recognised by any 19th century "settler". The wheel has turned, then turned again.

The institution has been a magnet for drama and controversy from the outset. In 2004 the management committee came under the control of a group of



**Roma Williams's book on the Settlement ... the institution has been a magnet for drama and controversy from the outset.**

people, many of whom owned property in Edward Street. They decided to sell the run-down Hall for \$815,000 and buy another (also run-down) for \$2.85 million. The difference could only be made up by selling most or all of the other properties bought over three-quarters of a century by the efforts of dedicated volunteers. This would, of course, have meant the removal of all Settlement clients from Edward Street.

Matters came to a head in July last year when it became apparent that contracts intended to bind the Settlement had been signed in respect of both properties. Amid high tempers and wild statements a special general meeting was called. A private member's bill was rushed through the NSW Parliament to prevent property being sold without the consent of members – but too late.

The special general meeting voted to remove the management committee and elected an entirely new one, charged with keeping the Settlement in Edward Street, revitalising its programs

and operations and restoring its finances. It is a tall order, but the new committee has worked strenuously to meet these aims.

The contracts for sale were rejected as invalid and have been terminated, although the financial fallout is unquantified. Much work has been done to restore confidence and revitalise the Settlement's image and function. Professor Vinson has worked tirelessly to reconnect the Settlement with the University. Plans are being drawn up for the long-overdue refurbishment of the Hall.

There is, naturally, not one penny available for these renovations, estimated to cost \$400,000. One cannot help but recall the brazen audacity of the Settlement's guiding spirits in the 1920s and hope for a similar, miraculous, outcome.

*Rodney Molesworth (BA '68, LLB '73) until very recently was a member of the management committee of The Sydney University Settlement.*