



Amy

Carmichael

A life and legacy of grace





The pony pounded along close to the water's edge, its hooves marking the damp sand. Gripping the reins tightly, its young rider leaned forward, cheeks flushed, long plaited hair blowing in the breeze, her bright eyes fixed on the stretch of beach ahead.

Anyone close enough might well have heard snatches of a song – the child often sang to reassure her skittish pony that all was well.

It's an image that hints at the future; a caring girl, bursting with enthusiasm for life, quite fearless and very determined.



Amy Beatrice Carmichael was born in the seaside village of Millisle, County Down in Ireland on the 16th of December 1867 to David and Catherine Carmichael. As they held the first of their seven children, her parents no doubt prayed their baby daughter would grow into a strong, healthy child.



They almost certainly never imagined this innocent newborn would one day push two younger brothers through a skylight to slide down the roof slates and march along the lead gutter of their home just for fun.



Nor could they have foreseen the impact this little girl would one day have on thousands of lives around the world through her work, her writing and her inspiration.

The Carmichaels were well known in Millisle; a century earlier, Amy's great-grandfather had leased two flourmills there, providing a healthy income for the family. Governesses steered her formal education, while her parents instilled a love for the world beyond the study. Rock pools were explored, trees climbed, flowers drawn and every bug, bird and beastie identified. In quieter moments at home, the sweet sound of their mother's voice surrounded the children with hymns and Bible stories as she shared her Christian faith.



Taught at a young age that God answers prayer, Amy sought His intervention on a very important matter: her mother had eyes the colour of the sky on a sunny day, but Amy's were disappointingly brown. She longed for a change of colour and, confident that "all things" were possible, she asked God to make her eyes blue. Having petitioned the Almighty, she slept soundly.

In the morning, she climbed on to a chair to look in the mirror at her transformed eyes, only to see that nothing had changed.



Hadn't answered her at all!
Never more
Could she pray - her eyes were brown
As before.
Did a little soft wind blow?
Came a whisper, soft and low,
"Jesus answered. He said 'NO'.
Isn't 'NO' an answer?"*

(from "Jesus Always Answers" by Amy Carmichael)





Bitterly disappointed at the time, she came to recognise that God had answered her prayer – and for a reason she would only understand later in life.

In her twelfth year, Amy was sent to Marlborough House, a Methodist boarding school in Harrogate. She struggled with the discipline, homesick for her family and the freedom she'd enjoyed in Millisle, describing herself as “a little wild-bird child” who'd been caught and put in a cage. It was, however, only a matter of time before she found plenty of opportunities to break free of her ‘cage’ – and the rules.

In her last year at school, the Children's Special Service Mission (CSSM) organised a gathering in Harrogate. Through stories, games and singing, the young leaders explained the Christian faith.

One song had a huge impact on Amy; "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." The words connected with her heart as she realised Jesus really did love her and a response was called for. That day, Amy chose to follow Jesus.



Jesus loves me this I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to him belong
They are weak but he is strong
Yes Jesus loves me
Yes Jesus loves me
Yes Jesus love me
The Bible tells me so



Financial problems brought the Carmichael family to live in Belfast and brought an end to Amy's time at boarding school. Glad to be home, she settled back into family life, although things were about to change again. After a short illness, her father died.

Aged just 18, Amy became like a second parent to her younger brothers and sisters and in caring for them, she became more sympathetic to the needs of others. Walking home from church one dull, wet Sunday morning, she saw an elderly woman, dressed in rags and carrying a heavy bundle. Aware of the raised eyebrows of 'respectable' church-goers, Amy and her brothers stepped in to help, carrying the bundle and taking the woman's arm to help her home. It was a turning point in Amy's life.



At that moment, she 'heard' the voice of God speak to her quite clearly about what was really important and she decided that only things with eternal value would occupy her from then on.



With her new-found focus driving her on, the coming weeks and months were spent alongside staff from Belfast City Mission, working with children, visiting the poor and always, at every opportunity, telling them about Jesus and what he meant to her. The work was supported through prayer groups, including one she established for girls and staff at Victoria College.



Victorian Belfast was earning a name for itself as the linen capital of the world, thanks to a workforce of thousands of women. Their low wages didn't stretch to the purchase of hats, so they draped shawls over their heads and were known as 'Shawlies'.

Amy was never a bystander. When she saw a need, she stepped up to the mark and so it was with the Shawlies. The women worked long hours in poor conditions and Amy befriended them, encouraging them to come to church. They came in large numbers and their lively participation wasn't to everyone's taste, so Amy arranged special services in the Church hall, just for the women.

When their numbers outgrew the hall, Amy realised a bigger space was needed. Never one to fuss with fundraising, she set about praying for a building large enough for 500 people. It was a pattern she'd follow throughout her life; turn to God for help, not his people.





WELCOME HALL

1889

In no time, thanks to gifts 'God's people' felt prompted to give, a new, purpose built "tin tabernacle" was opened and Amy called it "The Welcome". The Shawlies clearly felt 'welcomed'. The hall buzzed throughout the week with Bible Classes, a Sewing Club, and even a space for recreation for the younger girls who spent many hours in the mills. Recently refurbished, it's still there today, in Cambrai Street, just off the Shankhill Road in Belfast.

News of what was happening in Belfast travelled and in 1888, Amy and her mother were invited to bring their ministry to Manchester. The work was difficult, even dangerous and conditions in the slums were dreadful; in no time, an exhausted Amy became ill.

Help was offered by Robert Wilson, an elderly family friend who lived in the Lake District. His wife had died, as had his daughter who was about Amy's age. His home offered her a quiet place to convalesce and once recovered, she stayed to help care for him. Robert was the chairman of an annual gathering of Christians known to this day as the Keswick Convention.

Again, Amy heard God speak to her; she believed he was calling her to go overseas as a missionary. It wasn't an easy decision; leaving those she loved would be difficult, but reassured by her mother, Amy obeyed God's will.

It was the first time the Keswick Convention had ever agreed to send and support a missionary overseas. They could not have questioned the commitment of their new candidate. While travelling to Japan in March 1893, Amy took every opportunity to speak about her faith. Regardless of sea-sickness, rats or cockroaches, she encouraged the passengers - and even crew members - to attend morning Bible readings and evangelistic services in the evening.



Her love for God was clear in word and action and as they crossed the China Sea, the ship's captain was drawn to Amy's strong Christian faith. By the time they'd reached their destination, he'd become a Christian.



While working in Japan, Amy became ill again. By Christmas 1894, she was back in the Lake District, having spent a few months in Ceylon on the way. She wrote, "Change the **D** in disappointment into an **H**".





Initially she was ‘disappointed’ her time in Japan had ended, the move onwards was definitely at God’s bidding – ‘His appointment’.

At home, she recovered her strength and made preparations to move overseas again and by the following December, Amy Carmichael was in India. It would be her home for the next fifty-six years.

Women who’d left the Hindu faith to follow Jesus were cast out by their families and often persecuted by their communities but it was with a group of such Christian converts that Amy began her work. As they travelled around the villages together, they became known as ‘The Starry Cluster’ – the light of God shone brightly through their lives. The women explained how religious rituals did not please God; but when people trusted Jesus and asked for his forgiveness, God would welcome them forever and they’d be part of his family.



Amy was determined to blend in so she could move among the local villages without drawing attention to herself.

Wearing Indian clothes, sometimes staining her skin with coffee, and living with the Starry Cluster, the brown eyes that once troubled her in Millisle were clearly an advantage. God’s ‘no’ to her childhood prayer made sense now!

On a March morning in 1901, an encounter with a seven-year-old child called Preena would change the course of Amy Carmichael's life and work for ever.

As a way of gaining favour, Preena's widowed mother had been persuaded to give her young daughter to be 'married to the gods'. It was a common practice; babies and children would be trained to tend to the Hindu temple and the priests who served there. In reality, the children were being groomed for a life of slavery and abuse.

Preena was unhappy with the arrangement and had already escaped her captivity once, running back to her mother's home. She'd been tracked down and brought back to the temple by other women who served there. As punishment, the little girl's hands were branded with hot irons and her every move watched. Despite the all-seeing eyes, Preena escaped again and this time found her way to Amy who cared for her, refusing to return the child to the temple.



Preena was the first of many temple children who were rescued; within three years, Amy had become "Amma" (mother) to seventeen children and six babies in a growing refuge in South India called Dohnavur. That number would continue to grow.



From Preena, Amy learnt things that ‘darkened the sunlight’ – chilling details of what happened to the temple children. A medical worker confided that she often heard the children scream during the night – supposedly because they were being beaten. Amy resolved to do all in her power to bring the evil practice to an end, but there was opposition. On several occasions, she faced imprisonment for allegedly ‘kidnapping’ temple children, and she was quite prepared to go to prison rather than allow any child to be returned to such abuse.

It would take decades but in time, her protests and letter writing bore fruit and a law was passed in India making it illegal to ‘marry’ a child to a god.

Throughout the years, Amy’s little family of rescued children continued to grow and Dohnavur expanded to include a hospital, nurseries, a school, a House of Prayer and lots of wonderful outdoor space. It was – and still is – a joyful place where instead of birthdays, the anniversary of each child’s arrival was celebrated as their ‘coming day’.

Those still in need were not forgotten; as Preena had arrived on the 6th of March, the 6th day of every month was set aside as a day of prayer for all children in dangerous situations.

After a bad fall in 1931, Amy was unable to walk much and spent the last two decades of her life confined to

her bedroom and veranda. Her body may have failed her, but her mind was razor sharp and she put her pen to good use, writing poetry, hundreds of letters and around 40 books that challenged, encouraged and still inspire her readers around the world.

Amy Carmichael was a follower of Jesus to the end. She humbled herself, gave up all that was dear to her and took Him at his word, trusting Him to provide for her, and He did. Every step of the way, the resources arrived just as they were needed. The 'home' she created continues to offer a refuge and a new family to those in need throughout their lives. Rescued babies have grown to adults there, left to be married, and when widowed, have returned 'home' to Dohnavur. While she never nursed a child of her own, to hundreds, even thousands of children, she was "Amma" - mother.

Amy Carmichael never returned to Ireland. She died on 18th January 1951 and was laid to rest in the garden at Dohnavur, surrounded by the nature she'd always loved. There's no headstone, just a birdbath with the name Ammai (The Mother) - a fitting memorial for a wild-bird child.

The determined girl who led her brothers from the darkness of an attic into the bright fresh air on the roof of their childhood home in Millisle, fearlessly led a great many children in India from darkness into God's light and freedom.

One can give without loving, but one cannot love without giving

Amy Carmichael



This booklet was produced to mark the unveiling of the Amy Carmichael sculpture on the 150th anniversary of her birth. Created by Ross Wilson, it honours Amy's childhood beginnings and can be viewed at Hamilton Road Presbyterian Church in Bangor, Northern Ireland.

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