



Amy Carmichael (1867-1951)

Known affectionately as 'Amma' (which is Tamil for 'mother'), Amy Beatrice Carmichael lived a long life, being born on 16 December 1867 in Millisle, on the north coast of Ireland, and dying in India in 1951. Her biography can be told in three stages: from 1867 to 1901 when the work with the Temple children began; from 1901 to 1931 when she was at the height of her powers in the work with the Dohnavur Fellowship; and from 1931 to 1951 when she was a virtual invalid but carried on an active writing and praying ministry.

Amy was born into an Irish Presbyterian family, the daughter of a respected mill owner. Raised to know God, at age three she prayed that she'd be given blue eyes, and was bewildered the next morning when they were still brown. Recovering from this setback, returning home from church with her family on a bleak wet Sunday morning in Belfast, they saw an old woman lugging a heavy bundle. Somewhat embarrassed, Amy and her two brothers helped the poor woman. Passing a fountain, Amy thought she heard the words, 'Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble - every man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be declared by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide ...' (1 Cor. 3:12-14). On reaching home, Amy shut herself in her room, to settle her life with God.

In 1892 Amy felt the call to missionary service. At first she thought that she would go to Ceylon, then to China, only to be thwarted by the doctor, so she thought of Japan. In November 1895, under the auspices of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, she made her way to India, which was to become the scene of her life's work. India had long aroused the evangelical conscience with its Hindu idolatry and its associated practices of suttee (widow burning), child marriage, temple prostitution, and rigid caste system. When she finally settled, Amy never returned home to Europe.

Amy knew that sanctification was a struggle: 'Wings are an illusive fallacy. Some may possess them, but they are not very visible, and as for me, there isn't the least sign of a feather.' At times she could be quite caustic: 'There isn't much of a halo in real life; we save it all up for the missionary meetings.' In 1901 she went to Dohnavur in south India, and so began the work to save girls from temple prostitution. Amy was both loving and strict in dealing with the rescued girls. From 7.00 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. each evening she played with them with toys from her cupboard. The sickest baby always slept in her room. Amy could be innovative, once tying two girls' pigtails together to teach them how to co-operate. A child who lied might have quinine put on her tongue.

In August 1912 after two senior missionaries died, Mrs Hopwood and Thomas Walker, Amy took over the leadership at Dohnavur. She wrote that she suddenly felt like a weaned child. The Dohnavur ladies took the name the Sisters of the Common Life - an echo of Groote's Brethren of the Common Life which was set up about 1380. They took no vows, but there was to be no marriage. In 1918 the first two boys arrived at Dohnavur to be looked after, but the arrival of Godfrey Webb-Peploe in 1926 saw the boys' work structured in a way that corresponded to Amy's work with the girls.

Life was tough: 'Under the sweetness there is a real Cross.' In 1931 Amy fell into a pit and broke her leg and twisted her spine. For the last twenty years of her life she was confined to her room, incapacitated and in pain. She told her New Zealand nurse: 'When you hear I have gone, jump for joy!' She went on 18 January 1951, and was buried without a headstone, although a stone bird-bath was erected beside her grave.

Amy held strong views – she never appealed for funds and never wasted a penny; she opposed using pictures of Christ, claiming that the Church only resorted to pictures when its power had gone; she also disapproved of fairy tales and any kind of fiction as a waste of time and a threat to the foundations of character; and was utterly opposed to teaching her girls any sex education, thinking that it was the task of the husband, not the parents or teachers. Slander was stamped on at Dohnavur through the use of the slogan 'Never about, always to.' When she was included in the Royal Birthday Honours List, she was horrified: 'It troubles me to have an experience so different from His Who was despised and rejected, not kindly honoured.'

In 1922 she cited the words of 1 John 3:16, and commented: 'How often I think of that ought.' Her little work, If, is incomparable in its devotion and power. Echoing the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, she wrote: 'If I want to be known as the doer of something that has proved the right thing, or as the one who suggested that it should be done, then I know nothing of Calvary love.'