

A doctor was sent for, and only then was it discovered that she was starving to death. Arrangements were made for her to return home in the company of a nurse, but it was too late. She died aboard ship while at port in Kobe, Japan, on Christmas Eve 1912, one week after her seventy-second birthday.

What she could not do in life, she accomplished in death. In the years that followed, the “Lottie Moon Christmas Offering” increased, and the Lottie Moon story was repeated over and over again. By 1925 the offerings had surpassed three hundred thousand dollars, and by the last decades of the twentieth century, more than twenty million dollars was collected annually. For Southern Baptist women, she had become a symbol of true womanhood and of what women could accomplish for missions. The highest compliment the *Foreign Missions Journal* could pay her at the time of her death was to say she was “the best man among our missionaries.”³⁴

Amy Carmichael

Probably the only woman missionary whose fame exceeded that of Lottie Moon in the early twentieth century was Amy Carmichael. She served in India for fifty-five years, from 1895 to her death in 1951. During that time she founded Dohnavur Fellowship and wrote some thirty-five books, a number of which were translated into more than a dozen languages. One of them, *Gold Cord*, has had sales of more than a half-million. She founded a religious order, the Sisters of the Common Life, made up primarily of Indian women, who along with Carmichael pledged themselves to celibacy and sacrificial ministry. To many people she was a living saint. Sherwood Eddy, a missionary statesman and author, was impressed by the “beauty of her character”; and character, according to Eddy, was the key to successful world evangelism. “Here is the point where many a missionary breaks down. Every normal missionary sails with high purpose but as a very imperfect Christian.... His character is his weakest point.... [But] Amy Wilson Carmichael was the most Christlike character I ever met, and ... her life was the most fragrant, the most joyfully sacrificial, that I ever knew.”³⁵

Amy Carmichael was born in 1867 into a well-to-do North Ireland family whose little village of Millisle was dominated by the prosperous Carmichael flour mills. She lived a carefree life until her father died when she was eighteen and, as the oldest of seven children, heavy responsibility fell on her shoulders. Her father had left the family in severe financial straits, and soon afterward they moved to Belfast. Here Carmichael was introduced to city mission work and the “deeper life theology” of “victorious living.” Then came her call to missions.

In 1892 Carmichael heard the words “Go ye” as her missionary call, and one year later, at the age of twenty-four, she was in Japan. But the Japanese language seemed impossible to her, and the missionary community was not the picture of harmony she had envisioned. To her mother she wrote, “We are here just what we are at home—not one bit better—and the devil is awfully busy.... There are missionary shipwrecks of once fair vessels.” Her health was also a problem. To Sherwood Eddy she later confided that she had “broken down from nervous prostration during the very first year of ... service, suffering, as some foreigners do, from what was called Japanese head.” “The climate,” she had written her mother, “is dreadful upon the brain.”³⁶



Amy Carmichael, founder of Dohnavur Fellowship in India.

After fifteen months in Japan she departed. Without even notifying the Keswick Convention, the mainstay of her support, she sailed for Ceylon. Her explanation was simple: “I simply say that I left Japan for rest and change, that when at Shanghai I believed the Lord told me to follow Him down to Ceylon, and so I came.”³⁷ After a short time she left Ceylon and returned home. But after less than a year in the British Isles, she was back in Asia—this time in India, where she would remain for more than fifty-five years without a furlough.

Carmichael’s ministry was primarily one that reached out to children—child widows, temple prostitutes, and orphans. Her compound, Dohnavur Fellowship, became a center for humanitarian services. By 1913, twelve years after she began her ministry, she had 130 children under her care, and in the decades that followed, hundreds more found a home at Dohnavur.

Dohnavur Fellowship was a unique Christian ministry. The members wore Indian dress and lived communally. To critics who accused her of focusing too much on humanitarian activities, she responded, “One cannot save and then pitchfork souls into heaven.... Souls are more or less securely fastened to bodies.”³⁸

Years before, while in Japan, she had dealt with the matter of singleness. It was a difficult struggle and one that she was unable to write about for more than forty years—and even then she only shared it privately with one of her “children,” whom she was admonishing to follow the same course:

On this day many years ago I went away alone to a cave in the mountain called Arima. I had feelings of fear about the future. That was why I went there—to be alone with God. The devil kept on whispering, “It’s all right now, but what about afterwards? You are going to be very lonely.”

And he painted pictures of loneliness—I can see them still. And I turned to my God in a kind of desperation and said, “Lord, what can I do? How can I go on

to the end?” And he said, “None of them that trust in Me shall be desolate.” That word has been with me ever since. It has been fulfilled to me. It will be fulfilled to you.³⁹

That others should follow her in forsaking marriage and a family was to Carmichael both a practical and spiritual commitment. The ministry needed staff who would serve as mothers and spiritual counselors to the children. That led her to form the Sisters of the Common Life for single women.

Carmichael insisted—at least outwardly—that reports of the work not be embellished. She was criticized for her book *Things as They Are* because it gave a negative perspective of missions: “It is more important that you should know about the reverses than about the successes of the war. We shall have all eternity to celebrate the victories, but we have only the few hours before sunset in which to win them.... So we have tried to tell you the truth—the uninteresting, unromantic truth.”⁴⁰

But as forthright as Carmichael was about the difficulties and downside of mission outreach, she was very careful to shield from public view any negative aspects of her private life or of life inside Dohnavur Fellowship. She was also concerned that Dohnavur might become contaminated with the outside world. “O to be delivered from half-hearted missionaries!” she wrote. “Don’t come if you mean to turn aside for anything—for the ‘claims of society.’... Don’t come if you haven’t made up your mind to live for *one thing*—the winning of souls.” She insisted that those who worked with her not associate with other missionaries. Even when taking a rest at a retreat house in the hills, “you had to be insulated there from other missionary ideas and certainly from the rest of the European community.”⁴¹

Her individualism and eccentricity are seen in her autobiographical writing. In one story, she tells about riding her horse wildly. “Oh, that you could see us as we tear along,” she wrote. “We are called the mad riders of Kotagiri.” While riding along a road, they came upon a group of people, including the retiring Anglican bishop, the new bishop, his wife, and “various old ladies.” The people “parted with alacrity as we shot through, and we caught a fleeting glance at the gaze of astonishment and horror.” There is a tone of contempt as she concludes her story: “Once I ran over a man. I did not mean to—he wouldn’t get out of the way and one can’t stop short in mid-gallop.”⁴²

Another aspect of her separation from the world was her “Victorian sensitivities”—though the Victorian era was ending as she was beginning her mission work in India. The most extreme form of modesty reigned over Dohnavur. So offended by the English word *leg* was she, writes Elisabeth Elliot, that “even the doctors found themselves inserting [the Tamil word] *kaal* into an English sentence when it was necessary to refer to that unspeakable limb.” And despite the medical work conducted at Dohnavur, “a missionary who worked with her many years later insisted that Amy not only did not then know the truth about sex, but never learned.”⁴³

Carmichael was a hard taskmaster. When those who worked with her “raised the question of furlough or even just a weekend off,” they were denied the request. Even the nature of the ministry was rigidly guarded. When an elderly Indian coworker, Saral, asked if she could teach Hindu women how to knit with some pink wool yarn she had been given, Carmichael explained that “the Gospel needed no such frills.” The woman “protested that there was nothing in the Bible which bore upon pink wool and knitting needles.” But Carmichael insisted there was. She quoted Zechariah 4:6 (KJV), “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”⁴⁴

She had utter contempt for non-Christian religious practices. Once while walking in the hills with Saral, they came upon three stones under a tree, which Saral identified as

“heathen idols.” Carmichael was incensed: “To see those stupid stones standing there to the honor of the false gods, in the midst of the true God’s beauty, was too much for us. We knocked them over and down they crashed.” She also took a militant stance against Hinduism when it related to evangelism. Speaking of a high-caste woman who she hoped would openly express interest in the gospel, Carmichael responded: “If so, we shall be in the very thick of the fight again—Hallelujah!” Regarding another such woman, she wrote, “Will God move in [her] heart so that she will dare her husband’s fury and the knife he flashed before her eyes? If so, our bungalow will be in the very teeth of the storm, angry men all around it, and we inside, kept by the power of God.”⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, other missionaries strongly disapproved of her approach. “There arose during the early years of the Dohnavur work,” writes Elliot, “a fairly strong ‘Get-Amy-Carmichael-out-of-India’ movement among missionaries and Indian Christians.” As the years passed, she was more often ignored than opposed by other missionaries. But the criticism continued. “Someone suggested that her efforts to save temple children were nothing more than a stunt, meant to draw attention to herself.... She was a dictator, she opposed marriage, her Indian girls worshipped her.”⁴⁶

Carmichael believed she was divinely directed in her work and her decision making. “Our Master ... demands obedience,” she wrote, and it was her duty to obey the instructions. “Sometimes the Spirit of Jesus gave a direct command.... Sometimes an angel was sent, sometimes a vision.... In the end our God justifies His commands.”⁴⁷

Carmichael was accused by some of being a dictator—particularly some of those who came to Dohnavur to work with her, including the Neill family, who arrived in 1924—the parents, both physicians; their daughter; and their son Stephen, a recent graduate of Cambridge. Within six months after their arrival, the elder Neills had severed their ties with Dohnavur, but Stephen continued on for more than a year. Carmichael was impressed with his brilliance—particularly his quick grasp of the language, but she resented his efforts to change things God had already ordained. He introduced interscholastic athletics, bringing Dohnavur boys in contact with “the outside.” This she viewed as perilous. In other ways he sought to bring Dohnavur closer to the missionary community, but she feared contamination.⁴⁸

The stormy relationship continued until November 28, 1925, when, according to Elliot, Stephen Neill was dismissed from Dohnavur. For Carmichael it was “one of the saddest nights of my life.” There had previously been an altercation that caused “a dreadful time of distress.” She wrote in her diary: “Never such known before. I am beginning to sink. Lord, save me.” A year after Neill left Dohnavur, she wrote to a friend: “I long over him still, miss him and want him and long to be one in affection. The scab is not even beginning to skin over. It’s just red raw.”⁴⁹

From Neill’s perspective, this period of time was equally distressing, as he confessed in his autobiography: “During that first year, fellow Christians had brought into my life such darkness and suffering that it took me many years to recover from the injuries, and the scars are still there.”⁵⁰ Neill recalled his initial meeting with her as “an impression of power”—that not even the “smallest disagreement” was permitted. Those who came to Dohnavur found it to be a “myth.” The compound was thoroughly separated from the surrounding area and “flooded with Europeans.” He later confessed, “I gave my whole soul to Dohnavur,” but his time spent there only brought him lifelong wounds.⁵¹ “Some of the experiences of my first year in India,” he writes, “were so excessively painful that by January 1926 the darkness was complete. A year in England helped, but this time of trouble did not really clear itself up until 1933.”⁵²