

AMY CARMICHAEL

*'Beauty for Ashes'*

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A Biography

By the same author:

*The Life of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 1899–1981*

*Archibald G. Brown: Spurgeon's Successor*

*John MacArthur: Servant of the Word and Flock*

*The Old Evangelicalism*





AMY CARMICHAEL

*'Beauty for Ashes'*

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A Biography

IAIN H. MURRAY



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh EH12 6EL, UK  
P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA

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ISBN:

Print: 978-1-84871-552-3

EPUB: 978-1-84871-553-0

Kindle: 978-1-84871-554-7

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Typeset in 11.5/16 pt Sabon Oldstyle Figures at the  
Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh

Printed in the USA by  
Versa Press, Inc.,  
East Peoria, IL

**With thankfulness for  
The Dohnavur Fellowship**

*To give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy  
for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit  
of heaviness; that they might be called trees of  
righteousness, the planting of the LORD,  
that he might be glorified.*

ISAIAH 61:3

*Suffer little children, and  
forbid them not, to come unto me:  
for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*

MATTHEW 19:14





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### *Acknowledgements*

The publisher is grateful to the Dohnavur Fellowship for use of illustrations 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16; Mr Paul Williams for the use of his photographs, 17, 18, 19, 20, and Dr Jacky Woolcock for supplying photograph 21.

## FOREWORD

The truly moving biographies of noble Christians are surely encouraging, while also being convicting. They tear at the fabric of our complacency and selfishness. The lifelong sacrificial usefulness of Amy Carmichael fits that pattern. Women today who, in seeking spiritual examples to follow, read the story of Amy will face their own shortcomings and love of comfort.

Iain Murray says: ‘It is compulsive writing that leads to compulsive reading.’ I might add that a compulsive life begins that sequence. If Amy was anything, she was compelled to love and serve her Lord for His glory.

For all women and men (my husband, John, was first to read this account) who experience this journey to a faraway time and place, my

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prayer is that it will lift them up and out of the infectious influence of worldly culture that dominates our day.

PATRICIA MACARTHUR

Warm Springs

Santa Clarita

California

November 2014

## PREFACE

**I**nternational tensions can re-route flight paths as happened to me earlier this year. Instead of flying the usual London to Australia route, via Bangkok, our Qantas flight stopped at Dubai, then down over India, before leaving the sub-continent at Cape Comorin, its southern extremity. Thirty miles north of that Cape, our unexpected flight was too high to see anything of a place of which I knew by repute. There, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a Christian oasis came into being of greater power than all India's ancient heathenism. In the Old Testament a promise of divine blessing was expressed in the words, 'the streets shall be full of boys and girls playing'. Something like that happened at Dohnavur in the century after 1901. One thousand eight hundred and fifty girls and six

hundred and seventy boys became part of a new family. In addition to playing, there was the love and the Bible teaching which changed lives and prepared witnesses for Jesus Christ. 'A little one shall become a thousand' is a promise fulfilled in Christian history (Isa. 60:22).

I was not always interested in Dohnavur. For one thing, I thought it was only past history. I did not know that after Britain's close tie with India ended in 1947, this work of grace was going on to the present day. For another, I thought that the books of Amy Carmichael, the founder of Dohnavur, would be principally beneficial to Christian women. I was late in discovering my mistake. Not only are her writings a significant part of missionary history, they show how female authors can be at the forefront of devotional evangelical literature, just as they are at the forefront of hymnody devoted to the person of Christ.

I have sought to put these pages together not out of penitence but rather out of the sheer enjoyment and profit which has been involved. Amy Carmichael is one of the best-recorded



evangelicals of the twentieth century, and her two leading biographies, Frank Houghton's *Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur* and Elisabeth Elliot's *A Chance to Die*, continue to be currently available. These are splendid books and my pages are not intended for those already familiar with them. But Amy Carmichael is not known as she used to be, and I suspect that is because many Christians do not know the pleasure of which they are depriving themselves. In her books there are not only the tender graces that may shine in female Christian character, but also the high devotion, the fortitude, the resolution in the presence of evil, with which we all need to be inspired. It is a testimony which leads to closer fellowship with Christ, and a recognition of the better Christians we ought to be.

Many friends were involved in the production of this book. They included Ian S. Barter, Stephen Taylor, librarian of the Evangelical Library, London (an invaluable resource for authors), Ezekiel Devairakkam, Jacky Woolcock, Tahany Hanna, Margaret Holland (members of the Dohnavur Fellowship), Grace Baptist Church, Carlisle, Pa.,

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my colleagues in the Banner of Truth Trust, and,  
as ever, my wife.

IAIN H. MURRAY  
Edinburgh  
November 2014

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FROM BELFAST TO INDIA

*Before I Was*

Thou knewest me before I was,  
I am all open unto Thee,  
And yet Thou lovest me, because  
My Lord, Thou lovest me.

No other reason can I find,  
No other reason can there be;  
No human love, were it not blind,  
Could ever care for me.

But Thy pure eyes do read me through,  
My soul is naked unto Thee;  
And yet, O wonder ever new,  
My Lord, Thou lovest me.

And Thou wilt love; if good of mine  
Had caused Thy glorious love to be,  
Then surely would Thy love decline  
And weary, Lord, of me.

I may not fear, for to the end  
Thou lovest, Lord. O who but Thee,  
The sinner's Saviour and his Friend,  
Would set his love on me?

And on Thee now my heart is set,  
Thy name is music unto me.  
O help me never to forget  
That I am loved by Thee.

A.C.

In India, on a street in Madras in the early twentieth century, a Britisher had a first meeting with a woman whose appearance struck him as distinctly different. It was not that she was white, for there were numbers from Britain in that part of the British Empire. But she wore a bright-coloured *sari*, and the three girls with her were clearly Indian. The short, dark-haired woman 'looked so loving and the three small children with her were so friendly and un-shy and clung to her, and were just like little blue butterflies in their blue *saris*—quite different from the usual staid children that I knew'.<sup>1</sup> Only later did the observer learn that this eye-catching group were visitors from Dohnavur, a village in the far south of India. The woman was Amy Carmichael, and had he first met her at Dohnavur, surrounded

<sup>1</sup> Frank Houghton, *Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur* (London: SPCK, 1953), p. 243. Hereafter referred to as *Houghton*.

by 200 Tamil-speaking girls, for whom she was mother, nurse and teacher, he would have been still more surprised.

To understand the story of Amy Carmichael we must go back to the beginning. Born at Millisle, Northern Ireland, on December 16, 1867, she came from the Ulster Presbyterian stock which produced generations of women whose lives moulded homes and missionary outposts across the world. Part of what they were came from their genes, another part from the heritage into which they were born. Reverence for God, the Book of Psalms, family worship and the Ten Commandments were part of the fabric of their lives. Sundays, pre-eminently, were for God and his word. It would be said of Amy, 'For the rest of her life the majestic cadences of the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible shaped her thinking and every phrase she wrote.'

Two centuries earlier, the Carmichaels had been persecuted Scots who had seen the gospel spread in days of revival. It was a history not yet forgotten. The lessons of duty, discipline and hardship had come down through generations

and, when found in Christian women of vivacious and energetic personality, the earth knew the impact. Amy Carmichael was one such Ulster woman. Born into a moderately affluent family, sent to a boarding school in England at the age of twelve, she was about fifteen when, she wrote,

In His great mercy the Good Shepherd answered the prayers of my mother and father and many other loving ones, and drew me, even me.

At this same time the financial circumstances of her parents, David and Catherine Carmichael, underwent a reversal. Her father had prospered as a mill-owner in Millisle, and had, with his brother, William, built a new mill in Belfast. But here financial difficulties arose, severely aggravated when a large loan they had made was not repaid. This must have happened in 1883, for one year earlier her two brothers, Norman and Ernest, had been sent to King William's College, in the Isle of Man, only to be withdrawn in the summer of 1883.<sup>2</sup> At the same time Amy's three

<sup>2</sup> Norman (b. 1869) went to British Columbia in

years' schooling in Harrogate had to end. Life changed further for the Carmichael household (in which there were two more younger brothers and two younger sisters), when their father died suddenly on April 12, 1885, at the age of fifty-four.

At this point Amy was occupied in helping all the younger members of the family and with taking classes in painting. Then, one Sunday morning, she and her brothers met an old woman, clearly not a churchgoer, struggling to carry a heavy bundle. Ordinary as it might seem to us, the decision to stop and help marked a stage in Amy's life. An element of embarrassment was overcome as the words of Scripture came forcibly to her mind, 'Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it' (1 Cor. 3:12-13). From this period her life would be shaped by the thought that 'Nothing is important

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1890, and Ernest (b. 1870) to New Jersey in 1889. *King William's College Register, 1833-1927* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1928), p. 194. Their cousin, Sidney Carmichael, son of their father's colleague, had a similar short stay at the school.



but that which is eternal.’ Gospel work among children in a deprived area of Belfast now became a leading interest.

She had become a Christian at a time when the truth that spiritual usefulness is related to personal holiness was gaining wider attention among evangelicals. For some it was stimulated by an annual gathering at Keswick, Cumbria, and parallel conventions were held elsewhere. At the age of eighteen Amy went to Glasgow for meetings ‘on the deepening of spiritual life’. Andrew Bonar was also there and wrote in his *Diary*, ‘The meetings of the Convention though sometimes a little misleading, have been helpful.’<sup>3</sup> In 1887, at a similar meeting in Belfast she heard Hudson Taylor and Robert Wilson.

Wilson was to play a major part in her future life. Owner of a coal mine, and a brick-making factory at Broughton in Cumbria, he was one of the founders of the Keswick Convention. After meeting the Carmichaels in Belfast, he invited Amy and her brothers to attend the Convention

<sup>3</sup> *Andrew Bonar, Diary and Life*, ed. M. Bonar (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2013), p. 261.

and to stay at his home, Broughton Grange, some fifteen miles from Keswick. He had lost a daughter who had died about the age that Amy had now reached, and more recently his wife had also died, leaving him alone with two bachelor sons in the eleven-bedroom house he had built in 1859.



2. Robert Wilson, the 'Dear Old Man'.

An observer at the time of the visit of the young Carmichaels noted the 'brightness and cheerfulness' which Amy brought with her, and the same thought was not missed by Robert Wilson. Financial difficulties were now scattering the Carmichael family, and they also probably entered into the unusual request which he put to Amy's mother in 1890: could Amy be allowed to stay with them at Broughton Grange for part of each year as a kind of adopted daughter?



3. Broughton Grange, near Keswick, Cumbria.

The proposal was agreed. If it helped the Carmichaels, it certainly helped Mr Wilson. One day she happened to call him a 'Dear Old Man', and thereafter D.O.M. became the affectionate nickname. Amy recognized that he could teach her much, and she delighted in the scenery of Cumbria. Robert Wilson was a man of sixty-five years, of strong character and winsome personality. Among other things which he gave to Amy was a closer knowledge of overseas missions. This was to have a consequence which he had not intended. He prized Amy's presence at Broughton Grange, and hoped it would be her main home all his days. That prospect was not unwelcome to her, but it came to be overruled by a stronger compulsion. On July 26, 1892, she noted, 'Definitely given up for service abroad.' The next month she offered herself to the China Inland Mission (CIM), and left to be interviewed in London. She was accepted by the Mission. Her trunks were packed, and she was ready for sailing, when the Mission doctor turned her down on health grounds. Amy was joyfully received back at Broughton Grange, but not for long.

Her thoughts now turned to Japan. A letter was sent to Barclay Buxton, leader of the Japanese Evangelistic Band, and with the D.O.M.'s support, she sailed to China, en route for Japan, in March 1893.

For the next fifteen months Japan was to be a difficult but valuable training ground, where Amy threw herself into language study and evangelistic witness among the people. Some of her experiences during this time would mark the rest of her life. She learned to reject some methods of winning the attention of unbelievers which some evangelicals were adopting. She was advised, for example, 'that more girls would be drawn to meetings if she offered lessons in sewing or embroidery and administered only a mild dose of the gospel'.<sup>4</sup> By that means, it was said, more would listen to her speak about Jesus. But she did

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *A Chance to Die, The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*, (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 1987), p. 84. This work is a valuable and beautifully written addition to the earlier biography by Frank Houghton. I am indebted to both volumes. Amy's letters home formed the contents of her first book, *From Sunrise Land: Letters from Japan* (London: Marshall, 1895).

not believe in such indirect dealing with people:

I would rather have two who came in earnest than a hundred who came to play. We have no time to play with souls like this. It is not by ceremonial tea-making and flower arranging, not by wood chrysanthemum-making and foreign sewing-learning, but *by My Spirit, saith the Lord.*

Similarly, she would not follow the common practice she found among missionaries of using supposed pictures of Christ in the presentation of the gospel. This was 'unthinkable to Amy' writes Elisabeth Elliot: 'No one, she felt, had a right to presume to imagine the Son of God. Who could possibly separate manhood from Godhead? She shrank in dread from such holy ground, and reminded those who disagreed that the apostles had avoided all appeal to the senses, trusting in the power of the Word alone. The Church, she said, resorted to pictures only when her power had gone.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Chance to Die*, p. 93. In later years Amy met a child looking with disappointment at a picture of 'Jesus'. 'Oh', she said, 'I thought he was much more wonderful than that.'

A casual remark, made to her one day by another missionary, focussed her mind on a subject that would remain at the centre of her thinking. In a discussion of behaviour among missionaries it was said to her, 'You don't mean to say you think all missionaries love one another?' Amy was astonished. The words suggested to her the tolerance of failure to practise a clear command of Christ. While still in her twenties, Amy saw love as the foremost Christian grace, and as foundational to Christian living and witness.

The time in Japan seemed prematurely cut short when acute and persistent neuralgia led a doctor to question Amy's suitability for the climate. She was directed to take a rest with CIM missionaries in Shanghai. Once there, however, in July 1894, a week put Amy back on her feet, and if Japan was not the field for her, then, she believed, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) should be. To the dismay of her hosts she departed on the first boat to Colombo. When news of this reached her patron at Broughton Grange he was concerned as well as surprised. At the age of twenty-six Amy was dependent on the Keswick Mission

Committee who funded her going out, and they knew nothing of the sudden change. Understandably, her adopted father was not happy. He wrote advising her to come home, and against her joining another mission in Ceylon. Amy's response was to write:

Talk of coming home! Did ever a soldier,  
worth calling one, run away at the first shot!  
Praise Him—the pain is gone now, and I am  
strong for the battle again.

Nonetheless she did go home when she heard in November that D.O.M. had suffered a stroke. By December 15, 1894, the day before her birthday, she was back in England where her mother met her in London.

Wilson recovered, and delighted that she was 'given back', while she was glad to be at the much-loved home at Broughton. But it was not for long. She had his help and blessing in responding to an opening in the work of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society in India. On October 11, 1895, she left Britain at the age of twenty-seven never to return.



‘Zenana’ was a Hindi word for the part of a house where women are kept in seclusion. After her arrival at the Mission Hospital at Bangalore, South India, Amy was to take several years to understand the full implications of that word. Meanwhile she had to learn the Tamil language, spoken by 15 million. While learning languages did not come naturally to her, it was not the language study which was most painful. She had seen something of heathenism in Japan, but here the evil, the darkness, and the demonic were more palpable. Two centuries of British rule had little touched the social structures which enslaved millions, with women and children the greatest sufferers. These structures were either endorsed or tolerated by Hinduism, the principal religion, and were left largely undisturbed by the British governing authorities for fear of upsetting the native population. Trade was the priority for too many Europeans.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Amy was far from thinking that Britain had done nothing for India. ‘The British Raj may have its faults’, she wrote in 1914, ‘but it is certainly a peacemaker.’ Amy Wilson-Carmichael, *Walker of Tinnevely* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1916), p. 275.

Hindus were born into a caste system which determined their position and trades for life. By this means the position of the poor and the weak was rendered irreversible. Women suffered most. In the majority of cases they remained servants for life and, where the practice of *suttee* continued, even in death. The *suttee* tradition required that, when a husband died, the 'true wife' showed herself by being burnt alive with him on his funeral pile. It was not long before Amy saw this done among the Kota people; none of their number, she was told, had yet been brought to Christ.

No less a shock was it for Amy to find a formal Christianity often existing, quietly and too comfortably, in the midst of a prevailing darkness. Christian missions of various kinds had been in India for many years but, along with conversions, a large measure of formal Christianity had come into being in some areas. There were 'Christians' who neither read nor possessed Bibles, who

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Hereafter cited as *Walker*. The inclusion of 'Wilson' in her surname, a practice followed in all her early books, indicates the closeness of the relationship with Robert Wilson.

would do Christian work only if paid to do so, and who understood the meaning of the gospel no better than the heathen. Amy wrote home, 'The saddest thing one meets is the nominal Christian ... The church here is a "field full of wheat and tares".' In Bangalore, Amy came to believe that in the face of discouragement missionaries were tempted to tone down their Christianity and to accept a degree of compromise with the prevailing conditions.

It was a very significant day for Amy when she heard Thomas Walker, a clergyman of the Church of England, working with the Church Missionary Society in the Tinnevely district of south India. He was preaching at a convention meeting at Ooty and she had taken a Tamil grammar with her to read in case he should prove dull. She had heard reports of Walker as 'a bit narrow-minded but scholarly parson'. That image was immediately changed, yet their first meeting at Ooty gave no indication of future friendship. It was rather to his wife that Amy gravitated. But her husband's fluency in Tamil was an attraction, and when the Walkers invited her to join them in

Tinnevelly, as a better area to study the language, with a promise that he would coach her, she accepted. The Zenana work and the CMS were closely associated.



4. Thomas Walker.

By the end of 1896 Amy was with the Walkers, and so began one of the strongest influences in her life. She would later describe what her host's sermon on the first Sunday of 1897 meant to her:

The punkahs were waving sleepily on that Sunday evening, and the congregation, a few missionaries, fewer civilians, and a few Indian friends had settled down for the sermon. The preacher gave out the text: 'The powers of the world to come'. The text was read with piercing solemnity: they seemed to cut through the air like a knife. All sense of time, place and people passed suddenly; there was nothing left to think about but those great solemn powers, the powers of the world to come. A certain nervous mannerism in the speaker which would have been disturbing if the subject had not been less finely handled, was forgotten—all the personal and trivial was forgotten; this present world with its puny powers seemed as nothing, a shrivelled leaf. Only the Eternal was important. That was the sense of the hour; it deepened life for at least one who heard. But the preacher never knew.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Walker*, pp. 182-3.

It was part of the sense of reserve they both shared that Walker was not told by his pupil. A breakthrough in the more formal relationship came at the breakfast table one morning when Amy recounted a dream of the previous night. Clearly her daytime problem over learning Tamil came back to her in her sleep when an 'angel' asked her, 'How much do you want the language?' 'Enough to win souls, and a little over', she had replied. When her coach heard of the dream, there was a smile in his usually serious eyes as he assured her, 'You *shall* have a little over.'

Thomas Walker, born in Derbyshire in 1859, was only eight years older than Amy. He had come from Cambridge as a missionary in 1885, and married a 'Miss Hodge' of the Zenana Mission in 1890. For most of the years since his arrival he had assisted the evangelical bishops of Tinnevely, and given much time to administrative work, but at this date he had resigned from these duties to give himself to evangelistic outreach, as well as the training of candidates for the gospel ministry. One of his journal entries indicates how teaching Tamil to Amy was an extra:

Eight a.m., prayer meeting. Tamil proof sheets (Pearson on *The Creed*). Heard of my father's death. Lord, make me hear the voice! Correspondence. Coached \_\_\_\_\_ [A.C.].<sup>8</sup> Evening to Savalai ( a Hindu village] to Hindu Naiks.

'He was', Amy records, 'a capital teacher, very patient with stupidity, at least so his pupil at that time found him, and quick to welcome the least sign of small intelligence. For example, that particular pupil happened to be keen on the history of words; and he would hunt through his Sanskrit and Tamil dictionaries till he satisfied her on every minute question, thinking nothing a trouble if only the result was appreciated.'<sup>9</sup>

Amy's appreciation of her mentor deepened as she saw him as an evangelist. Walker had initiated a men's itinerating 'preaching band' which, travelling in a bullock-bandy cart with a matting cover, visited many parts of the large Tinnevely district. While he had prayed for the help of 'two bachelors', Amy was part of the answer. Assisted

<sup>8</sup> Although Amy's presence is occasionally evident in her biography of Walker, her name nowhere appears. Square brackets in the quotation are mine.

<sup>9</sup> *Walker*, p. 184.

by a little group of Indian Christian women, she became the leader of a women's band as soon as she had enough of the language.

It was an experience which confirmed for her the truth of Walker's words:

The life of an itinerating missionary is a grand school in which to learn the lesson that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. I can recommend it to luxurious Christians who think that they could not possibly exist without this favourite picture or that particular diet.

The busyness of the Walkers' lives was an example never to be forgotten:

Missions were taken for Christians, and special meetings for workers, for men and women; Bible classes, meetings for prayer and prolonged waiting on God, and numberless open-air meetings for Hindus. A Sunday school for men, women and children was organized (Mrs Walker's special care), and teachers were trained.<sup>10</sup>

How much Amy owed to Walker it is impossible to say, but again and again in her *Walker*

<sup>10</sup> *Walker*, p. 187.



*of Tinnevelly* she highlights features which were also her own: the authors he loved;<sup>11</sup> the ‘wordiness’ and ‘religious sentimentality’ which he hated; the place given to prayer, to music, and poetry; the fear of ‘half-conversions’; the need for separation from the world; faith in the reality of revival—all these, and more, would be mirrored in her.

One of Walker’s sayings, ‘Let us build for the years we shall not see’, was to be fulfilled in Amy.

<sup>11</sup> For example, such books as the biographies those of Henry Martyn and M. Coillard, and William Arthur’s *Tongue of Fire*. The habit of bringing reading to be shared at meal times was also something she learned from Walker.