

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn reflects on the lives of famous women

HEROES 13: WINNING WOMEN

In our series of heroes of faith there has been one glaring omission. Women. It's a strange gap, because the evidence suggests that the early church had plenty of remarkable women. Hence Paul singles out 15 notable women to write to in his epistle to the Romans¹ alongside 18 men. Women were attracted to a church that gave higher status to women than pagan society, and offered relief from coerced early teen marriage, abortion, infanticide and remarriage after widowhood.²

But the memory of Christian women from the early church, until perhaps the nineteenth century, leaves little solid history to rejoice in. There are a few mystics (Julian of Norwich, Joan of Arc), and hermits, but many more legends where it is hard to tell where history ends and myth begins. And it's unclear what example we can follow from fables of stigmata, visitations and the like.

Of course, the problem is not unique to female history. For instance, Richard Coles' collection of saints' stories³ contains many doubtful male legends. But we are left with too few stories of women to inspire us. Perhaps women had little



opportunity outside the home before this time. Perhaps male historians were biased. However belatedly then, here are four women of exemplary faith, where at last we have reliable records.

Elizabeth Fry
(1780-1845)

a noteworthy woman

Born Elizabeth Gurney, she had a comfortable upbringing in Norfolk. But in 1813 she visited Newgate prison, in the heart of the capital, which nonetheless kept 300 women and children in squalor, sleeping on straw like cattle in four open stalls. She was appalled by their conditions, and spent many nights in solidarity with them. People often refer negatively

to the biblical text 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' as if it were a barbaric demand. Actually, English law was more barbaric, giving disproportionate sentences of 14 years for stealing a pound of potatoes, and transporting children to Australia. The Old Testament *limited* punishment to a just maximum.

Elizabeth felt the divine imperative to 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute'.⁴ Her persistent advocacy shamed the establishment



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into action, such as ending the practice of transportation. She became so well known that the King of Prussia visited her when he came to London. She started sewing and Bible classes, and reforms that westerners take for granted as 'humane', but are actually an expression of Christian compassion.⁵

Her movement was probably the first national organisation for women, well before secular feminism. She founded a school of nursing, and Florence Nightingale was inspired by her example. Such was the ripple effect of a conscience stirred by the love of Christ, that we have remembered her on every five pound note. Although from a wealthy family, it wasn't her money we remember her for on the bank notes. In fact, when her husband was bankrupted, she refused to ignore the plight of the poorer still, and kept fighting their cause.

Mary Slessor (1848- 1915)

trod where men feared to tread

Not all missionaries gave up wealth and comfort. Mary Slessor was a working class woman from Aberdeen, who as a youth slept on a mattress on the floor, and grafted 58 gruelling hours a week at a mill. Three of her six siblings



died young and her father was an alcoholic. Mary worked at her education in the church library, but not in order to escape poverty. In fact she was inspired by the *greater* deprivations of her fellow countryman David Livingstone in the cause of the gospel.

Hence she travelled to West Africa, which was such a lethal place that missionaries used coffins as their suitcases. They did not expect to return for cosy retirement. Mary threw herself into pioneer work. She was a natural linguist, acquiring not only the colloquial sayings but also the mannerisms of the locals. She soon became a district nurse, and later

vice-consul to the Okoyong people in modern Nigeria, undaunted by the murder of the previous male missionary.

But she was horrified by occult practices. When asked to treat a chief, she was in a precarious position. What if he died? Would she be blamed for his death? She cleared away the charms and sacrificial animals, provided good nursing care and soup and waited. Thankfully God vindicated her, and her reputation grew. The chiefs soon wanted to know about her God and her book!

She frequently intervened in miscarriages of justice, where women, children and the elderly

often bore the brunt. On one occasion, a woman was accused of adultery, wrongly in Mary's opinion, and without a hearing. The defendant was staked and spread-eagled, and about to have boiling oil poured over her. Mary faced the assailants down, who eventually backed off. This feisty woman, who was intimidated by neither chiefs nor witch doctors, frequently impressed men, and they considered the God she served.

She had a particular burden for the mistreatment of twins. There was a belief that twins were the result of an evil male spirit or maternal sin, and they were often left abandoned in the jungle. Mary rescued hundreds and personally adopted four African children, who must have been a rare sight, when they visited Aberdeen in 1883! She was held in high esteem by local people for her advocacy, and was titled 'White queen' and 'Mother of all the peoples'.

Amy Carmichael (1861-1951) *kindly kidnapper*

When she was a little girl, Amy prayed for smiling blue Irish eyes. When she jumped out of bed in the morning and checked in the mirror, she was bitterly disappointed. But she humbly learned that 'no' was still an answer from her



heavenly Father. It was in a very different setting that she would be grateful for her brown eyes. Years later, as she smuggled girls out of prostitution in Indian temples, she thanked God that she was relatively inconspicuous.

It's strange to think that in our age of child protection, the law was not on her side, and that she risked lengthy prison sentences or worse. She was upsetting a system that echoed pagan practices in the Old Testament. Amy was so sickened by them that she could not document much of what she saw. Some were children of poverty, drugged and trafficked, or left to the temple to induce a favour from a deity. Amy managed to rescue hundreds of children to her orphanage at Dohnavur, where she was the

'Amma', mother to so many.

She was bedridden for the last 20 years of her life but remained productive. In fact many more people have been touched by her devotional books, and praise God. Perhaps our restless strivings are less important than our faithfulness, wherever we find ourselves.

Ida Scudder (1870-1960) *the woman for other women*

Another woman who championed mother and child health was Ida Scudder. She came from

a family of distinguished missionaries, thirty of whom had collectively given a millennium of service in the field! But like many missionary kids, she had hoped for a more normal family life back in the States. However, one night staying with her parents in India, consecutively three husbands of women in obstructed labour visited her. Each time she offered to get her father, but they declined as 'it is better that my wife should die than that another man should look on her face'. She was horrified to learn in the morning that all three had died. Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim rulers had ruled India for millennia, but it would take Christian values to bring healthcare to women.⁶

Ida resolved to be the change that she sought, and trained in medicine in order to open a medical college for women, to offer female patients medical care denied them across Asia. Male colleagues said she would be lucky to get three applicants. In 1918 the Christian Medical College of Vellore opened with 151 students, and became a world-renowned centre of training and care, attracting luminaries such as Paul Brand whose



pioneering work on leprosy not only transformed surgery for that condition, but for diabetic neuropathy worldwide.⁷ Gandhi called it the best college in Asia,⁸ and it remains the largest Christian hospital in the world, with 2000 beds.

Ida became so famous, that a letter once arrived at Vellore simply addressed to 'Dr Ida, India'. Despite working in a remote setting, *Time* magazine recognised her as one of the most outstanding doctors of her generation.⁹ Ida never had the normal family life she had hoped for, but countless families across Asia owe her a debt of gratitude to this day. Her hospital's legacy was honoured by a national postage stamp in 2000. You might even say that Ida left her stamp on the entire continent!

Maternal mortality has fallen markedly over the last century through pioneers like Ida. But even today the equivalent of a jumbo jet full of women die from pregnancy related causes, which are largely preventable.¹⁰

Are you the next Elizabeth, Mary, Amy or Ida? What has God uniquely prepared you for?¹¹ =

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