The Legacy of Florence Allshorn

Eleanor Brown

Florence Allshorn? Who was she? ... She seems hardly to belong in this gallery of missionary statesmen, writers, influential figures in the international church scene: this Englishwoman who was known to only a comparatively small circle, who wrote nothing for publication, who was only directly involved in the missionary enterprise for the twenty years between 1920 and 1940.

Yet J. H. Oldham, who must have met most of the outstanding missionary leaders of his day in his work for the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches, could say that of all of them Florence Allshorn was “one of the most remarkable”; she “saw further than most into the meaning of the missionary task and the nature of its demands.” Who then was this woman who made such an impact on men like Oldham and William Paton, secretary of the International Missionary Council who said of her: “I think she has the greatest spiritual insight of anyone I have ever known”?

Early Life

Allshorn’s life had very inauspicious beginnings. She was only three when first her doctor father and then her mother died, and she and her two brothers were brought up in Sheffield, England, by a governess, a kind but undemonstrative lady of strict religious outlook. It was a home without brightness, stifling to a child with a naturally lively, beauty-loving temperament. Her brothers went away to boarding-school, and Florence had a lonely and cramped adolescence. This hard early experience gave her much sympathy later on with people who had been deprived of a happy home life, but it also gave her confidence in human courage and resilience. “You don’t give people credit for enough courage,” she would say to someone who was handing out enervating sympathy.

Florence’s promising beginning at the Sheffield School of Art was cut short by serious eye trouble: after a rest of six months in almost complete darkness her sight improved enough for her to take a four-year course in domestic science, from which she emerged with a first-class diploma. She used to say later, in her training of missionaries, that she thought the disciplines of art and homecraft were especially valuable in that they taught one really to look at things (and people) appreciatively and objectively, and to express one’s seeing practically.

The first influence to draw her into a living relationship with the church was that of Dr. Gresford-Jones (afterward bishop of Uganda), who came to work in Sheffield. He and his wife recognized at once in Florence an unusual potential, which in the warmth of their friendship quickly flowered into vivid life. She worked with them on the cathedral staff, enlivening factory girls and Sunday-school teachers alike: forty years later one of them wrote of her, “She inspired every girl with her intense love of beauty, not only to look at, but beauty of mind and thought; and everything we did had to be of the very best.”

At some time in these years she “fell in love with Christ’s way of seeing things,” as she sometimes put it, in a new way. In her letters to friends there comes a note of passionate longing for “the one supreme thing.” “I’m not content with goodness and niceness and feeling nice, but it isn’t, it isn’t. Love is the most immense unselfishness and it’s so big I’ve never touched it. I hope I shall have enough courage to want it even.”

Uganda

In 1920 Florence was accepted by the Church Missionary Society for service in Uganda, and at the age of thirty-two found herself in charge of a girls’ boarding-school at Iganga in Busoga country; they spoke no English and at the beginning she spoke no Luganda. The climate of Busoga is exceptionally unhealthy: in the early days Bishop Tucker had written of it that all nature seemed to be suffering from limpness and lack of energy. Seven young missionaries had been sent to Iganga in as many years, but none had stayed. The trouble was not only the climate but the temperament of their senior missionary, who had struggled on heroically but at considerable cost to herself and to anyone who tried to live with her.

The crucial battle of Florence’s life, which was fought and

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Eleanor Brown served as a missionary educational worker with the Church Missionary Society in Kenya. After returning to England, she was a member and then the head of St. Julian’s Community in Sussex.
Florence Allshorn was a born educator in the true sense and, in the few years she was at Iganga, brought the school to a point that was described in the Phelps-Stokes Report on education as "first-rate." She discerned the potential for growth in her apparently slow and lethargic pupils, and could write "it is a work fascinating in the extreme, full of hope always." Underneath the hard but rewarding work in the school, however, Florence was aware all the time of a basic failure, a failure in personal relationship that was undermining all that was being taught.

She was almost in despair. The children were fully aware that the atmosphere was wrong; words about the love and power of Christ sounded hollow. She had come to the crisis of her life. What followed is told in her own words:

One day the old African matron came to me when I was sitting on the verandah crying my eyes out. She sat at my feet and after a time she said: "I have been on this station for fifteen years and I have seen you come out, all of you saying you have brought us a Saviour, but I have never seen this situation saved yet." It brought me to my senses with a bang. I was the problem for myself. I knew enough of Jesus Christ to know that the enemy was the one to be loved before you could call yourself His follower, and I prayed, in great ignorance as to what it was, that this same love might be in me, and I prayed as I have never prayed before in my life for that one thing. Slowly things rightened. Whereas before she had been going about upsetting everybody with long deep dreadful moods, and I had been going to my school depressed and lifeless, both of us found our way to lighten each other. She had a great generosity and I must have been a cruel burden to her, worn out as she was. But I did see that as we two drew together in a new relationship the whole character of the work of the station altered .... The children felt it and began to share in it, and to do little brave unselfish things that they had never done before.

For a whole year Florence read 1 Corinthians 13 every day. Though she rarely spoke of this experience again, her later teaching of missionary students was founded on it, and in a talk given on the eve of her last illness, the hard-won truth is in every sentence:

To love a human being means to accept him, to love him as he is. If you wait to love him till he has got rid of his faults, till he is different, you are only loving an idea. He is as he is now, I can only love a person by allowing myself to be disturbed by him as he is. I must accept the pain of seeing him with helpfulness and expectancy.

To the end of her life she accepted the pain of seeing with helpfulness, suffering frustration and disappointment often, but never denying her central belief that "we are made to love as the stars are made to shine."

**Training of Missionaries**

When Florence returned to England on leave at the end of four grueling years, she was found to have a cavity in one lung. Having lost her mother and her much-loved brother through tuberculosis, it felt like a death sentence. But she had a strong faith that, as she said, "God is with life, and sickness is the enemy." She refused an operation, which would have meant living with one lung, and set her purpose toward healing. In one of her later talks she referred to this experience:

"Faith is not an easy thing to come by. You are fortunate if you have been ill enough to think that only faith will save you. Then you have to have it, when your body is saying the opposite. You can gull yourself about the soul, not the body. To believe that God is stronger than the enemy and he has looked on you, His creation, and said, "It is very good."

After a winter in Switzerland and a year in a curious little colony of "dropouts" in the Sussex countryside—a year of bohemian existence that she found fascinating and freeing—Florence Allshorn was sufficiently recovered to work again, though she had to contend with precarious health for the rest of her life. At this point the Church Missionary Society (CMS) invited her to fill a temporary gap in one of their two small training colleges for women missionaries. The CMS did not know what the "temporary appointment" was going to mean. In the next eleven years Florence was to effect a quiet revolution in the whole concept of missionary training, a revolution whose effects have been spreading ever since, and which has changed the attitudes of people who never knew her. This was partly because she brought a completely fresh mind to the situation. She had never had missionary training...
the curriculum, but in her conception of what was the essential purpose of the training. She enlisted the help of excellent lecturers, and broadened the range of speakers on topics of the day; she developed the practical training—all things that are a usual part of training. Underlying all this was her burning conviction that the prime necessity was for the Christian witness to be real. Her years in Africa had shown her the inadequacy of conventional religion up against the reality of conflicting personal relationships. This was by no means only a projection of her own experience. Her clear eyes had made her aware of what she called “the silent disasters” that went on in many missionary lives underneath all the hard work and the building up of successful institutions: the loss of vision, the hardening of attitudes, the acceptance of mediocre standards.

Florence Allshorn’s first aim was to develop in her students some real experience in holding together belief and action, theory and practice: far more important to her than any technical or academic training (though she valued both) was that they should be growing in their love for God and their capacity to live with their fellow students. She considered doctrine to be “of such importance that it must not be separated from the rest of the programme. Its position in this training is that it is related directly to the total experience of each person. The truths we know and teach must be ‘proved upon the pulses.’” So pious words in chapel followed by complacent or contemptuous attitudes in conversation would meet her quick challenge: lofty sentiments about beauty would be held up against sloppy standards of practical work; new insights into the great Christian truths emerged from discussion of some small-seeming argument or breakdown in the common life.

For many of Allshorn’s students it was a revelation of the wholeness of life. Everything was to come under the discipline of Christ’s two great commandments; but within that discipline there was a sense of freedom, freedom to learn, to grow, to take risks, to rebel, to have fun. Florence’s deep seriousness about basic issues was balanced by an irrepressible gaiety: as one of her friends said, unlike the self-conscious obedience that in many of us drains life of color, “her obedience put the colour into life, and enabled others to see a new world, informed by beauty and light.” “Religion to me really is a song,” she said one day. She was an artist rather than a moralist in her approach to people, and she had the patience of an artist as well as the artist’s care for perfection.”

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It was just because of the possibilities Florence Allshorn saw in the young women coming into training that she was able to confront head-on not only their own weaknesses but what she felt to be the unfaced failures of the mission field. “I believe our great trouble is that we won’t stir up courage to look at failure.” In her only published article, “Corporate Life on a Mission Station,” she set out forcefully what she saw that failure to be:

The failures amongst missionaries are those who have lost the forward vital impulse, the life of the Spirit, because they have never got through their own spiritual, personal and social problems. This may be due either to the fact that they were the wrong kind to send out—people whose spiritual life was unreal—or because they have become caught in the cog of the mechanical routine of too much work, and have become exhausted and unable to deal with their problems. Failing to find success in their spiritual and mental life they are seeking it by putting almost all their vitality into “the job.” But womanhood may not do that. Womanhood means more than a bright vision of success in a job; it means patience and longsuffering and the deepening of gentlenesses; it means going down into deep places.

In this article, much of which is relevant fifty years later, she goes on to speak of how, in training, the emotional life of the student has been left to take care of itself—“this queer hinterland where there huddle the anxieties, timitudies, antagonisms, self-deceptions, which somehow our spiritual life does not go deep enough to touch.” Florence was considerably ahead of her time in getting all the help she could from psychology, and some of the books that are now considered classics were on her shelves soon after they appeared. But what she read only confirmed her growing conviction that any deep change in a person needs time. She was finding as the years went on that the year allotted to mission­ary training was only the first stage of a process. “You really cannot do much in the initial training,” she wrote to a colleague. “They have not come to the end of themselves; you can only gently try to make them more real.”

The first furlough was crucial: watching her own students coming home after what was often a very testing first tour, Florence saw that as well as those who seemed satisfied with their life and service, there were “those who had gone out on a big spiritual adventure, but were rather immature in Christ and found they could not cope.” For these especially it was necessary to have time for quiet thought and for guidance from someone further on, for regripping their vision in a deeper way.

But what was happening (what still happens) was that they were being plunged into a succession of courses, conferences, meetings at which they had to give a “good” picture of their work, all conspireing to mask the things that were troubling them; so that often they returned to the same situation no further along, more likely than ever to be dominated by obvious needs, and to stop growing—in Florence’s eyes the only real defeat.

With her usual incisiveness Florence Allshorn wrote in a memorandum:

Some very clear thinking has to be done about what is real vocation. If they go out primarily to do medical work then obviously the first claim on their time when they come home is the renewal of their medical knowledge, and consultation with doctors who can help them. If they go out primarily as ambassadors for Christ, then surely the first claim on their time and energies is this period of readjustment to Him and fresh vision of Him, and nothing must be allowed to take its place.

Toward Community

It was largely her awareness of this need which led Florence Allshorn to resign from the Church Missionary Society training and to launch into the final, the hardest, and the most creative adventure of her life: the founding of St. Julian’s Community in Sussex.
She expressed some first thoughts about this in a letter to her old students:

I want to do something where I can still go on serving you with what I have of experience and real caring for you. I have a dream of a house in some lovely quiet place where you could come and be quiet and rest and read and talk—where things could be refreshed and recreated before you went off on your new courses… Also for Church people at home who go on and on and on in the same rut.

Beneath this thought was another, which was pressing increasingly on Florence Allshorn's attention, and which was to become the dominant aim of the St. Julian's experiment. For some time she, like many others, had believed that the Christian witness needed by the twentieth-century world was not so much that of outstanding individuals as of groups committed to working together. She saw also that, while this was happening to a certain degree, there was almost always a sticking point, where human conflicts became too strong, and the group foundered or retreated to a diluted "putting up with each other," which in reality signaled defeat. She felt the need of a center where some would make the attempt to break past the point at which most people draw back.

The story of that attempt is told in Oldham's biography, *Florence Allshorn and the Story of St. Julian's*. Nothing illustrates more powerfully Florence's unique blend of originality, single-minded devotion to an ideal, and clear-eyed realism than the bringing of her purpose into being. In the darkest years of World War II, with little money and against active dissuasion from her advisers, she gathered three companions to begin a dual enterprise: to make a place of physical and spiritual refreshment for hard-pressed men and women, and to discover at depth the meaning of love in relationship. It seemed an exciting adventure as they hunted for a place in which to begin, and as they settled into an inconvenient but rent-free house in lovely Surrey countryside.

They wrote together later:

We were very green, and did not realize the deep selflessness that was required of everyone. We were overburdened with self-centeredness to an extent that we only began to realize when we got going. What kept us together was not that we immediately got on together. We did not. What carried us through was that we had said that we would not leave if we found ourselves in a bad patch, and that we would not accept defeat.

They were all people who had previously got on quite well with others in ordinary relationships; but now, living at very close quarters with none of the usual escape routes, and determined not to make "easy adjustments at a surface level," they were thrust down to a much deeper level, the level of conflicting wills and temperaments, which is so often the arena of human disaster. They had to get beyond "the sticking point," "the check that comes in human relationships," as Florence put it. "At times it seemed intolerable," one of the group wrote later.

We knew hate and malice and that dreadful desire to hit back hard if we had been hurt…. Such deep resentment, perhaps, that one knew that one could not forgive, and yet saying every day the Lord's Prayer…. When people talk about starting communities we look at each other. They seem to us like people starting for the North Pole without even knowing that they need a warm coat.

Through all the difficulties the four held together, gradually becoming a real community united in a common purpose and in a growing experience of "the peace which lies at the other side of conflict." From the beginning the house was filled with people of all sorts, both individuals and groups, grateful for an oasis of peace and order in the harshness of wartime Britain, and also looking for help in their own relationships. The community began to discover that, in a way they hardly understood, their guests seemed to find renewed strength and fresh vision just when their own struggles were most acute. This gave them confidence that they were being led in the right way, untied as it was.

Within three years the experiment was sufficiently established for a Trust to be formed and a larger house to be bought on a mortgage: the community grew to eight and then twelve, and launched into the running of a farm and the beginning of a children's house. This was all accomplished during the exigencies of the war and of the drab war-weary period that followed it. Those of us who came to stay at St. Julian's Community can still remember the sense of vitality, of gaiety of spirit that met us, as well as the warmth of hospitality and the ordered beauty of the house and garden, somehow achieved in those penurious years: a quality of living that communicated the hope and grace of God much more effectively than words.

By the end of the decade the lovely old house at Barns Green was becoming too cramped for its purpose, and at the beginning of 1950 the community moved to its present location at Colham, near Horsham in Sussex, a spacious house, with outbuildings and cottages, in beautiful grounds looking out over a lake and wide fields to the South Downs. It was a brave and risky act of faith, fraught with financial difficulties, but has proved to be a most blessed one for the community and the thousands of people who have visited it since then, not only for rest and quiet but to work alongside the community, learning from them and with them.

Florence was undaunted as one seemingly insuperable obstacle after another was surmounted. When the move to Sussex was finally accomplished, she wrote to a friend in Africa: "You'll love this place when you come home. It could be a lovely place for God's children for a hundred years." But Florence was not well; in May she developed an acutely irritating skin rash, which was finally diagnosed as Hodgkin's disease, and after some weeks of very painful illness she died on July 3, 1950. She was sixty-two.

It was a desolate shock to the community and all the friends for whom Florence Allshorn had been a strength, a challenge, and a light. Many thought that St. Julian's could hardly continue without her. But Florence had the ability, often lacking in strong personalities, to inspire rather than control; and because the inspiration came through her from beyond herself, from the Master she loved, it did not die with her. Many of the experiments in communal living that were made in the postwar years have passed into oblivion. But the strong foundations that were laid at much cost by Florence and her companions have enabled St. Julian's Community to live and grow, through the years since her death, as a center of refreshment and re-creation for men and women of many walks of life and of varying religious allegiances, or of none.

Many things have altered in those years, in response to changing times and circumstances, but the paper and the Foundation has remained a living testimony to what Florence intended and hoped for.
needs and new insights; most of the present community never knew Florence “in the flesh”; but they still keep steadfast in their living witness to “the peace that lies on the other side of conflict” and to the healing alchemy of love.

In Florence’s last address, given when she was already ill, she spoke of something she had “proved upon the pulses”:

It is a hard way, but everyone who has known this “losing your life to find it” tells us how, as the mind and desire go the way of self-naughting more simply and readily with practice, you do know that you are living in a new and fresh world: that at the root of you, instead of the old unease, the old feeling of guilt, the lovelessness, there is a content happy shining, whatever comes. If God is love, and we were made to love as the stars were made to shine, then every creature is desirous of finding this disinterested love.

This faith lived out within a small company is the legacy of Florence Allshorn to all those who were and are willing to receive it.

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**Bibliography**

Although Florence Allshorn wrote nothing specifically for publication, some of her writings have been published.


Women and Ministries!

Women, Ministry and the Church, Sr. Joan Chittister. Applies the Christian tradition to the questions of how women can function ministerially within the community of the church.

Woman Sealed In The Tower, The, Betsy Caprio. Jungian and Christian exploration of the four “inner women” present in women of all times and places.

Women and Religion, A Reader for the Clergy, edited by Regina Coll, C.S.J. Some of the most creative contemporary religious thinkers have contributed to this effort to explore the role and meaning of the woman’s movement and its significance for religion.

Seasons: Women’s Search for Self Through Life’s Stages, Anita Louise Spencer. The changes of crisis and growth in the life process of women.

Bringing Forth In Hope. Being Creative in a Nuclear Age, Denise M. Priestley. Examines the basis for hope in a seemingly hopeless world of nuclear confrontation. In the face of the absence of any future, giving birth seems to be ultimately futile. Is it possible for Christians to know the realities of nuclear annihilation and to possess a deep hope that moves us to bring forth life?

Mixing: Catholic-Protestant Marriages in the 1980’s, Barbara D. Schiappa. A person who has “been there” has compiled this helpful digest of information for couples, their parents, their ministers.

Breaking Boundaries, Male/Female Friendship in Early Christian Communities, Rosemary Rader. This scholarly study deals with a neglected aspect of Christian history, the phenomenon of heterosexual friendship. Through a variety of early Christian sources, the author traces the origins and development of Christian friendship from the 3rd through the 5th centuries.

Invisible Partners, John A. Sanford. An examination of the feminine and masculine qualities in every person.

Women and Orders, edited by Robert Hoyer. Reflects: should women be ordained as ministers?