
The Legacy of Isabella Lilius Trotter

Lisa M. Sinclair

The life and work of Isabella Lilius Trotter (1853–1928) are curiously relevant to current missiological issues. As a single independent British missionary to Algeria and the informal founder of the Algiers Mission Band (AMB),¹ Trotter was well acquainted with such concerns as female leadership and singleness. Her writings reveal wrestlings with the as-yet-unnamed concepts of incarnational ministry, contextualization, and power encounter. She spearheaded the use of short-termers and was active in the philosophy and process of missionary recruitment and training. She was a Muslim mission strategist and was indefatigably optimistic.² Trotter surrendered her unique gifts to the Lord, leaving a legacy of prayer, writings, illustrations, perseverance, and vision. She was known to the Muslims of Algeria and Tunisia as Lili, the one who “loves me and will not turn me out.”³ Her voluminous diaries are ornate with her burden for individual souls and her longing that Muslim converts live out the principles of the Christian life. Today, little known and little read, her voice still calls to mission.

Constance Padwick, an Islamic scholar in her own right and a contemporary and acquaintance of Trotter, described Trotter’s lasting contribution to world missions as the “first-fruits of the Church’s offering of surrender to the Cross on behalf of the Moslem world”—a world against which the church of Jesus Christ historically had shown “prejudice for prejudice, antagonism, dominance, [and] fear, rather than redemptive love.” Padwick notes that the church “has been the part-builder of the spiritual barrier . . . , and the only weapon mighty to the pulling down of this stronghold is a penitent love which claims both the cleansing of the Cross for her own past and present, and a share of the suffering of the Cross for the sake of others. . . . This was [Lilius Trotter’s] spiritual quality.”⁴

Early Life and Call

Isabella Lilius Trotter lived and served during the “Great Century” of Christian missions. Born in 1853, she was the daughter of a London businessman and enjoyed a happy, open, and educated childhood. She was converted under the ministry of Hannah Pearsall Smith,⁵ and her life’s work was stamped with a longing for Spirit-led victorious Christian living. At age twenty-one, she was turned to ministry through meetings held by D. L. Moody and I. D. Sankey, after which she ministered to prostitutes on the streets and in an unused nightclub in London.

In an age when young, unmarried daughters of well-to-do families never walked out without a chaperone, Lilius dared to be different. She was soon a well-known figure in the night streets of London, recognized, loved, and respected. The girls flocked to her shelter, and she helped many of these victims of their circumstances to start a new life.⁶

As she started, so she would continue—different, creative, bold. Her very uniqueness would threaten her missionary vision. In 1876, while she and her mother traveled in Venice, Lilius

came under the tutelage of the famous artist John Ruskin, who was quite impressed with her sketches, seeing “extremely right-minded and careful work.” After two or three lessons, Ruskin noted that Trotter “seemed to learn everything the instant she was shewn it, and ever so much more than she was taught.” Ruskin showed her drawings to his Oxford students as examples in which the “plainest and frankest manner shew us how to do it—or, more modestly speaking, how, if heaven help us, it can be done—minute, instantaneous and unerring record of the things that are precisely best.” John Ruskin would have “possessed her spiritually and have had her whole life devoted to the service of art.”⁷ He coveted her as an artistic talent and as a fascinating friend. In 1879, Trotter turned from her potential future as a brilliant artist, saying, “I see clear as daylight now, that I cannot dedicate myself to painting in the way that [Ruskin] means and continue to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.”⁸ (Still, their friendship spanned three decades and was a source of mutual edification.) Trotter would later recount to Padwick that the “renunciations” and the “pain” of her gift were with her to the end, and most clearly felt in her illustrations of Arabic primers and devotional booklets. Padwick described this as the “peculiar discipline and sorrow” of the “artist-saint.”⁹

Neither Trotter’s journals nor friends’ anecdotes nor biographers speak to the issue of singleness. Given the historical context of England in the latter half of the nineteenth century and Trotter’s upper-class social standing, it is likely that her penchant for intense ministry in unlovely places marked her for celibacy.¹⁰

In 1884, still balancing her London ministry to needy girls with her art, Trotter experienced the first of many periods of exhaustion and necessary convalescence. She underwent a minor surgery with a slow recovery, and suffered permanent cardiac weakness. Her most recent biographer notes, “Such overextension in work, followed by a period of enforced rest, would become an observable pattern throughout Lily’s life.”¹¹

Lilius Trotter received the call to Algeria. She recounted to her biographer Blanche Piggott that whenever she heard the words “North Africa” it sounded as if a voice were calling her.¹² In May 1887, when Mr. Glenn of the North Africa Mission asked in a missionary meeting, “Is there anyone in this room whom God is calling to North Africa?” Trotter rose and said, “He is calling me.”¹³ Her longing to go and minister “where Christ was unknown” endured throughout her life’s ministry.

Experience in Algeria

Rejected by two mission societies for health reasons, in 1888 Trotter and two single friends, Blanche Haworth and Katie Stuart, sailed for Algiers as independent missionaries. Trotter describes their arrival:

On March 9th, 1888, we steamed into the Bay of Algiers, the water below shimmering with phosphorescence, the crescent of the shore set with gleaming lights, and the glorious southern sky above full of its quiet stars. . . . Three of us stood there, looking at our battle-field, none of us fit to pass a doctor for any [mission] society, not knowing a soul in the place, or a sentence of Arabic, or a clue for beginning work on untouched ground; we only knew we had to come. Truly if God needed weakness, He had it!”¹⁴

Lisa M. Sinclair and her husband are serving as missionaries in Mali, West Africa, under United World Mission. A certified Family Nurse Practitioner, she has been active in trauma healing and reconciliation workshops in Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Kenya.

She said that those early years were like “knocking our heads against stone walls,” with learning Arabic and trying to gain access into national homes as the first formidable barriers. With just a few vocabulary words, Sunday school classes for the market and “shoe-black” boys were initiated. Entrance into national homes came through the children. The first converts were a “poor set—the paper and sticks . . . needed to set light to the coal,” which would become “the real fire.” A time of outward disappointments and inner-life failures followed. She wrote of the “nerve strain of the climate, the pressure on our spirits of the Satanic forces with which all teems out here, the lessons which we thought we knew and which we had ‘turned back’ again and again to be learnt afresh.”¹⁵

From 1890 to 1902 Trotter and colleagues learned the hard work of ministry in the North African Muslim context. Burdened for the interior, she started her winter itinerations to unreachable locations. Her artwork and words were forever marked by a fearless appreciation of the colors and shapes of desert beauty and with a love for the Arabs there.¹⁶

In 1896, after a six-month convalescence in England with debilitating heart strain, Trotter entered into a period of external conflict. French-English relations were acrimonious, and the French prohibited evangelistic endeavors. Government relations were strained. Newspapers printed negative press, there was general suspicion, and the Band’s winter journeys to surrounding villages were curtailed. Men were prohibited from going near the AMB workers or from taking their offered literature. In 1905, her “darkest year,” Trotter was forced by climate, exhaustion, and strain to take six months of bed rest. During such times of forced inactivity, she wrote her devotionals and illustrated her letters and journals with tiny watercolors of Arab life. Yet, even with the cyclical constraints of illness and painful limitations that lasted until the end of World War I, Trotter saw some come to know the Lord.

She had a special compassion for the plight of Muslim converts, who suffered banishment, beatings, brain drugging, and poisoning. She “saw dullness and misery gather over them and they would stay aloof from us. . . . We grew to know the symptoms sadly well—they had fallen under the brain drugs . . . that can be given unnoticed in food or drink, and produce a paralysis of mind and will. . . . Long were the prayer fights to keep hold for God against this satanic counter-pull. . . . These triumphs of the enemy were the saddest of that time.” Many came to Christ, only to die, and Trotter came to rejoice in their loss. “[We] were glad to let them go. One needs to live in a Moslem land to know the meaning of those words, ‘He comforted concerning him knowing that he was dead.’ One draws a breath of relief when they get safe home [to heaven].” At the same time, Christian death was a witness to unbelieving families, who marveled, saying, “Your death is a beautiful death.”¹⁷

Miriam Rockness characterizes Trotter’s first years in North Africa—those years of “knocking heads against stone walls”—as “inexhaustible and indiscourageable.”¹⁸ There were many disappointments, many closing doors and confusing signs for those who read God’s leading through the interplay of circumstance and his word, yet Trotter’s resilience was revealed as she trusted God for the unseen and the impossible. In her inimitable style, she wrote, “Let us take very good care not to make a misery of anything that ‘anywhere’ brings us. To us in Algeria it [may] mean . . . Arab food. Do we object to it? And mice, do we mind them? And mosquitos, do we think them dreadful? In some parts it means close contact with dirt and repulsive disease. Yet if Jesus is there what have we possible to complain of? It means living

among a stiff-necked and untrue people and struggling with a strange and difficult language. And yet let us evermore write over all our miseries . . . these transforming words ‘With Jesus.’

The map over her bed was her “manual of intercession,” and Trotter agonized under it in prayer into the early hours of the morning.

And then the very breath of Heaven will breathe upon our whole being and we shall be glad.”¹⁹

By 1906 there came a season of greater freedom, with an expansion of workers, of areas covered, and of points and means of ministry. By 1920 AMB had expanded from three to thirty full-time workers, and fifteen preaching stations had been established. Portions of Scripture were translated into colloquial Arabic, lithographed in Arabic script to be more culturally attractive and accessible. Conversions came from among the Arabs, French, Jews, and black Africans.²⁰

The Traveler-Journalist

Trotter loved to travel and had a pioneer-adventurer-explorer spirit. Her “journeyings satisfied the gypsy and the tramp in her.”²¹ Throughout her forty years in North Africa, Trotter learned the importance of taking regular times apart with the Lord for her necessary refreshing. Summers were spent in England or Switzerland, or in the Band’s Algerian respite house, Dar Naama. In later years Trotter traveled broadly in her role as mission leader and conference speaker with John R. Mott and Samuel Zwemer.²²

The map of Algeria and Tunisia—her “manual of intercession”—hung over her bed, and she would strategize and agonize in prayer under it, with lamp lit until the early hours of the morning, “of such intercession as only lovers make.”²³ Inscribed on the map in her own calligraphy was the rally, “Take heed to the ministry which thou has received in the Lord that thou fulfill it.”

Trotter was also a prodigious writer. Her prose may seem too flowery for us, yet it accurately reflected the literature of her day. Journaling a full page almost daily during her forty years of service in Algeria,²⁴ she filled her writing with descriptions and illustrations of the natural creation around her. Trotter saw the way of effective service as the way of the cross, the way of surrender and death, the way of sacrificial love. This was the foundation of her enduring vision and staying power. Her lovely devotional book, *Parables of the Cross*, was described in the foreword by H. W. Stalley as “The expression and illustration of [her] great theme ‘MORS JANUA VITAE’—Death is the gateway of life.”

“Death is the gate of life.” . . . Have we learnt to go down . . . into its gathering shadows in quietness and confidence, knowing that there is always “a better resurrection” beyond? . . . It is when we come to self-despair, when we feel ourselves locked in waiting our doom, that the glory and beauty of God’s way of escape dawns upon us, and we submit ourselves to Him in it. . . . Take the very hardest thing in your life—the place of difficulty outward or inward, and expect God to triumph gloriously in that very spot. Just there He can bring your soul into blossom.”²⁵

The Mission Strategist

Trotter did not leave a manual of her missiological principles. They must be drawn from her practices, her writings, and the anecdotes of her biographers and coworkers. Trotter never solicited funds, finding that "the supply always forestalled the want, as is the wont of an earthly father whose wealth is boundless." This provision, she mused, was as if God "knew how hard the battle would be in other ways, and has never let that weight press, glory to His name."²⁶

The ministry of early years was funded primarily by the independent income of the women themselves, until expansion required a new dependence on God for financial care. The AMB

Single female missionaries were recruited. Trotter saw outreach to women as a "great line of cleavage in the rock face of Islam."

was international, comprising British, Danish, and French in the early days, and collaborating with other mission societies. Christian community development was not a catchword of that time, yet the Band established an industrial farm where inquirers and converts could learn a trade such as irrigation or agriculture. The need for urban/rural cross-training was emphasized, and new workers did their required internship at the urban "slum-post," named the Room of Grace.²⁷

Short-termers were solicited, and a hostel was created for them. Trotter believed that "there must be many educated girls who can come on a self-supporting basis for a term of service, in all the countless ways in which such can be rendered, with small knowledge of language, if hands and hearts are ready."²⁸

Single female missionaries were solicited as essential in the outreach to Muslim women, who represented the majority of the population as caregivers to small children and conservative defenders of Islam.²⁹ Trotter saw that outreach to women was a "great line of cleavage" in the rock face of Islam. "What women of the Moslem world need supremely is the sacrificial service of their Christian sisters from the West."³⁰

All work was based in prayer, and spiritual warfare was a constant reality: "We need yet to learn how to stand in the battle over them [Muslim converts] as they win their way inch by inch against the power of darkness."³¹ Signs and wonders, dreams and visions were commonplace occurrences as guidance to Christ for Muslim seekers.³² The Band knew that only God could bring life to this dry land, so dry that it seemed dead.³³

Trotter took on the role of mission leadership, but viewed it as "a heavy discipline of loneliness," one that she was eager to give over in heaven, if not sooner.³⁴

The AMB was called to the "outlying and untouched places,"

and Trotter related to Padwick that she felt ashamed "when there are too many round this table." She determined to send them out two by two. Stalley described her as "forward looking" and "ready to take advantage of every new opportunity that presented itself."³⁵ Her mission methodology reflected flexibility and an embodiment of 1 Corinthians 9:22b: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." For the AMB "all means" included literacy and education, knitting and spinning wool, storytelling and artwork, medical work and traveling, colporteurs and literature distribution, translations of the New Testament, and establishment of places of refuge.

Trotter viewed literature as the "unused explosive force" in Muslim evangelism. Because of the solidarity of Islam, she felt that materials could be used across the Muslim world with little alteration if written in Arabic. With the assistance of the Nile Mission Press, the entire AMB rose to the challenge of literature needs for boys, girls, men, and women, illustrated with culturally appropriate design and color.

Trotter was invited to cross unheard of boundaries and debate among the mystical Brotherhood of Sufi. She wrote a devotional guide for these Muslim mystics based on the seven "I am" statements found in John's writings, *The Way of the Sevenfold Secret*. She found among these men "an instant response when one speaks of seeking Him who is light and life and love."³⁶

Trotter continued her massive correspondence and her writing through her invalid years (1925–28), educating and fascinating the West, rallying prayer support, and winning workers to North Africa. Her bedroom became the heart of the mission, the seat of strategy, the center of prayer. In weakness she strategized, trained future leaders, and wrote voluminously. In *Between the Desert and the Sea* she describes with almost tedious detail the geography of the land, the different people groups, cultural patterns, and the joys and sorrows of life in Algeria and Tunisia. Because of her writing and her illustrations, many became involved in the far-off work of North Africa.

When Lilius Trotter summarized the meaning of her life and work, and that of the AMB in Muslim North Africa, she gave the following analogy:

The autumn-crocus is the snowdrop as it were of these lands, breaking out of the hard dry ground and laughing at the barrenness of everything around in its faith that the rains are coming. . . . Wonderful things may be waiting in the ages to come as the fruit of Christ's sacrifice, but nothing can come up to the joy of being part of His "autumn-crocus"—the first thing which He sees of the travail of His soul. . . . Others may see the full glory of the sunrise in the Moslem world, to us only is given the joy of seeing Him as the morning star. To miss the first rose flush of the dawn is to miss the whole.³⁷

Trotter died in her bed in Dar Naama, after forty years of ministry in Algeria, surrounded by her beloved coworkers. Her courage, tenacity, vision, and touch of beauty are worthy of our study.

Notes

1. The Algiers Mission Band (AMB) was started by Trotter in 1888. It later merged with North Africa Mission and Southern Moroccan Mission to become Arab World Ministries.
2. Trotter staked her work on the miraculous intervention of God. For her, "Difficulty is the very atmosphere of miracle. It is miracle in its first stage. If it is to be a great miracle, the condition is not difficulty but impossibility." Constance E. Padwick, *Lilias Trotter of Algiers* (Rushden, Northants: Stanley L. Hunt, n.d.), p. 16.
3. Constance E. Padwick, "Lilias Trotter of Algiers," *International Review of Missions* 21 (1932): 124.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 126–27.
5. Hannah Pearsall Smith, author of *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, and her husband influenced the founding of the Keswick Convention. See M. Fackler, "Hannah Whitall Smith," in *Who's Who in Christian History*, ed. J. D. Douglas and P. W. Comfort (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992), p. 628.
6. Patricia St. John, *Until the Day Breaks* (Bromley, Kent: OM Publishing, 1990), p. 14.
7. Padwick, *Lilias*, pp. 6–7, 3.
8. St. John, *Until the Day Breaks*, pp. 16, 17–18.
9. Padwick, *Lilias*, p. 10; "Lilias," p. 119. About this giving of her gift to the call, she later challenged: "Have we learned the buttercup's lesson yet? Are our hands off the very blossom of our life? Are all things—even the treasures that He has sanctified—held loosely, ready to be parted with, without a struggle, when He asks for them? . . . Death means a loosened grasp—loosened beyond all power of grasping again. . . . Are you ready to ratify the words when His emptying begins to come?" (*Parables of the Cross* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1947], pp. 20–21).
10. Miriam Huffman Rockness, *A Passion for the Impossible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1999), p. 60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
12. Blanche Piggott, *Lilias Trotter* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.).
13. Padwick, "Lilias," p. 122.
14. I. Lilias Trotter, "Back-ground and Fore-ground" (personal mission report, 1913), p. 1. This work provides a brief history of the early mission work and the first of her mission reports. In the first seventeen years on the field, only one other woman joined the little team. From 1905 to 1912, nineteen women and only two men joined the AMB.
15. Trotter, "Back-ground," p. 3.
16. Rockness relates the story of an 1894 trip: "The initial trip to Biskra was an almost 450-mile stretch achieved by primitive arrangements: rail, diligence (rickety horse-drawn carriage), and camel. Penetration deeper into the desert . . . was long, fiery hot, and risky. Two women traveling alone with an unfamiliar native guide were at the complete mercy of humankind and the elements. They were in a place where thieves made it their business to profit from unsuspecting Europeans. Deadly scorpions, disease, and ferocious dogs were the gamble of any given day." (Rockness, *Passion*, p. 109.)
17. Trotter, "Back-ground," pp. 12, 7.
18. Rockness, *Passion*, p. 92.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
20. Ian Sellers, "Isabella Lilias Trotter," in *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 987.
21. Padwick, *Lilias*, p. 11.
22. Zwemer wrote of Trotter, "My best impression of her life could best be expressed in two words—it was a life of Vision and a life of Prayer. . . . She was . . . an embodiment of her own expression, 'The glory of the impossible.' Personally, I owe very much to her missionary messages, which were my inspiration and comfort in the early days of my pioneering work in Arabia." (Rockness, *Passion*, pp. 275–76.)
23. Padwick, "Lilias," p. 124.
24. Personal correspondence from St. John to the author, 1991.
25. I. Lilias Trotter, *Parables of the Cross* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1947), pp. 16–17.
26. Trotter, "Back-ground," pp. 1–2.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
29. Annie Van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer, eds., *Daytime in the Harem: A New Era for Moslem Women* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1911), p. 213. Resolution 11 from the Jerusalem and Lucknow Conferences states that "the aid of Christian women is urgently needed for the evangelisation and uplifting of Mohammedan women who with their little children, constitute the larger part of the Moslem world."
30. A. E. Zwemer and S. M. Zwemer, eds., *Moslem Women* (West Medford, Mass.: Central Committee for the United Study of Foreign Missions, 1926), p. 138.
31. Trotter, "Back-ground," p. 14.
32. Padwick, "Lilias," p. 125.
33. Trotter questions rhetorically, "Do we believe that each heaven-sent prayer brings the cloud-burst nearer? That one last cry of faith, somewhere, will set it free? Do we act as if we believed it? Shall we give ourselves to hasten it? And when it comes, we shall see the latent possibilities awake, and the latent powers assert themselves, and the people of Moslem countries, men and women, show what they can be and do for Him and in His Kingdom. For, thank God, they are not dead lands, they are 'only dry'" (Annie Van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer, eds., *Our Moslem Sisters* [New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1907], p. 98).
34. Padwick, "Lilias," p. 124.
35. Harold Stalley, former Home Secretary of AMB, wrote of his desire after WWII to consolidate the workers into teams. A peer of Trotter retorted, "I know what Lilias would say to that—may God drop a bomb onto your team and scatter them." Stalley, personal correspondence with the author, 1991.
36. Padwick, "Lilias," p. 124.
37. Padwick, *Lilias*, p. 23.

Selected Bibliography

Works by I. Lilias Trotter

- 1913 "Back-ground and Fore-ground." Personal mission report.
1915 *Brides of the Nile*. Algiers Mission Band.
1933 *The Way of the Sevenfold Secret*. Cairo: Nile Mission Press.
1947 *Parables of the Cross*. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott.
1950 *Between the Desert and the Sea*. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, in association with Algiers Mission Band.
n.d. *Parables of the Christ-Life*. London: Marshall Brothers.

Works About I. Lilias Trotter

- Padwick, Constance E. *Lilias Trotter of Algiers*. Rushden, Northants: Stanley L. Hunt, n.d.
———. "Lilias Trotter of Algiers." *International Review of Missions* 21 (1932): 119–28.
Rockness, Miriam Huffman. *A Passion for the Impossible*. Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1999.
Sellers, Ian. "Isabella Lilias Trotter." In *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974.
St. John, Patricia. *Until the Day Breaks*. Bromley, Kent: OM Publishing, 1990.