

A Life Worth Looking into:



Gladys Aylward:
Christian Missionary in
China

Aylward was born to a working-class family in Edmonton, North London, on 24th February 1902. Her parents were Thomas John Aylward, a Postman, and his wife, Rodina Florence Aylward (née Whiskin). She had one brother, called Laurence and one sister, called Violet.

She wasn't particularly religious as a child and had very little formal education. She had worked as a parlor maid for a wealthy family from the age of 14. When she was 18 she attended an evangelistic meeting and found God. She then read about the need for missionaries to go out and work in China, and she knew she had found her calling in life.

At the age of 26, she became a probationer at the China Inland Mission Centre in London. She studied with great determination but failed her exams because her academic background was inadequate. The Mission was convinced that it was not possible to learn the Chinese language at her age and they denied her any financial support as a result.

Gladys then heard of a 73-year-old missionary, Mrs. Jeannie Lawson, who was looking for a younger woman to carry on her work. Gladys wrote to Mrs. Lawson and was accepted for the job – as long as she could get to China under her own funding. To earn extra money, she began working as a housekeeper for a retired missionary and his Chinese wife. She could not afford passage on a ship - the cheapest option was to go by train.

In October of 1930 she left London Liverpool Street Station with her passport, her Bible, her tickets, and two pounds nine pence, to travel to China on the Trans-Siberian Railway, even though China and the Soviet Union were engaged in an undeclared war. She carried two suitcases, a bedroll and wore a bright orange jacket. The trip was perilous. At one point on her journey, she was asked to get off the train as it was being used to carry only Russian soldiers. She insisted on staying and was dropped off later in the middle of nowhere to eventually retrace her steps on foot and take another train through Siberia. She arrived in Vladivostok and sailed from there to Japan to confirm with the British counsel and then went from Japan to Tientsin, and thence by train, then bus, then mule, to the inland city of Yangchen, in the mountainous province of Shansi, a little south of Peking (Beijing). Most of the residents had seen no Europeans other than Mrs. Lawson until Miss Gladys Aylward arrived.

Work in China

Yangchen was an overnight stop for mule caravans that carried coal, raw cotton, pots, and iron goods on six-week or three-month journeys. It occurred to the two women that their most effective way of preaching would be to set up an inn. The building in which they lived had once been an inn, and with a bit of repair work could be used as one again. They laid in a supply of food for mules and men, and when next a caravan came past, Gladys dashed out, grabbed the rein of the lead mule, and turned it into their courtyard. It went willingly, knowing by experience that turning into a courtyard meant food and water and rest for the night. The other mules followed, and the muleteers had no choice. They were given good food and warm beds at the standard price, and their mules were well cared for, and there was free entertainment in the evening— the innkeepers told stories about a man named Jesus.

These stories also served to open Gladys' mind to the new challenge of learning the language as she sat and listened, participating as and when she was able. She spent many hours each day learning to communicate in the vernacular of the locals, something the China Inland Mission Centre had thought beyond her ability.

After the first few weeks, Gladys did not need to kidnap customers anymore because they turned up at the inn by preference. Some became Christians, and many of them, both Christians and non-Christians, remembered the stories, and retold them more or less accurately to other muleteers at other stops along the caravan trails. Gladys practiced her Chinese for hours each day, until she was becoming fluent and comfortable with it.

A few months later, Mrs. Lawson suffered a severe fall, and died. Gladys Aylward was left to run the mission alone, with the aid of one Chinese Christian, Yang, who was the cook. A few weeks after the death of Mrs. Lawson, Miss Aylward met the Mandarin of Yangchen. He arrived in a sedan chair, with an impressive escort, and told her that the government had decreed an end to the practice of foot binding. Among the upper and middle classes, it had for centuries been the custom that a woman's foot should be wrapped tightly in bandages from infancy, to prevent it from growing. Thus, grown women had extremely tiny feet, on which they could walk only with slow, tottering steps, which were thought to be extremely graceful. The government needed a foot-inspector, a woman, so that she could invade the women's quarters without scandal, with her own feet unbound, who would patrol the district enforcing the decree. It was soon clear to them both that Gladys was the only possible candidate for the job, and she accepted, realizing that it would give her undreamed-of opportunities to spread the Gospel.

During her second year in Yangchen, Gladys was summoned by the Mandarin. A riot had broken out in the men's prison. She arrived and found that the convicts were rampaging in the prison courtyard, and several of them had been killed. The soldiers were afraid to intervene. The warden of the prison said to Gladys, "Go into the yard and stop the rioting." She said, "How can I do that?" The warden said, "You have been preaching that those who trust in Christ have nothing to fear."

She walked into the courtyard and shouted: "Quiet! I cannot hear when everyone is shouting at once. Choose one or two spokesmen and let me talk with them." The men quieted down and chose a spokesman. Gladys talked with him, and then came out and told the warden:

"You have these men cooped up in crowded conditions with absolutely nothing to do. No wonder they are so edgy that a small dispute sets off a riot. You must give them work. Also, I am told that you do not supply food for them, so that they have only what their relatives send them. No wonder they fight over food. We will set up looms so that they can weave cloth and earn enough money to buy their own food."

This was done. There was no money for sweeping reforms, but a few friends of the warden donated old looms, and a grindstone so that the men could work grinding grain.

The people began to call Gladys Aylward "Ai-weh-deh," which means "Virtuous One." It was her name from then on.

Soon after, she saw a woman begging by the road, accompanied by a child - a girl about five years old - covered with sores and obviously suffering severe malnutrition. She satisfied herself that the woman was not the child's mother but had kidnapped the child and was using it as an aid to her begging. She bought the child for nine pence. A year later, "Ninepence" came in with an abandoned boy in tow, saying, "I will eat less, so that he can have something." Thus, Gladys acquired a second orphan, "Less." And so, her family began to grow.

She was a regular and welcome visitor at the palace of the Mandarin, who found her religion ridiculous, but her conversation stimulating. In 1936, she officially became a Chinese citizen. She lived frugally and dressed like the people around her, and this was a major factor in making her preaching effective.

Then the war came. In the spring of 1938, Japanese planes bombed the city of Yangcheng, killing many and causing the survivors to flee into the mountains. Five days later, the Japanese Army occupied Yangcheng, then left, and then came again, then left again. The Mandarin gathered the survivors and told them to retreat into the mountains for the duration. He also announced that he was impressed by the life of Gladys and wished to make her faith his own.

There remained the question of the convicts at the jail. The traditional policy favored beheading them all lest they escape. The Mandarin asked Gladys for advice, and a plan was made for relatives and friends of the

convicts to post a bond guaranteeing their good behavior. Every man was eventually released on bond.

As the war continued Gladys often found herself behind Japanese lines, and often passed on information, when she had it, to the armies of China, her adopted country. She met and became friends with "General Ley," a Roman Catholic priest from Europe who had taken up arms when the Japanese invaded, and now headed a guerrilla force. Finally, he sent her a message. "The Japanese are coming in full force. We are retreating. Come with us." Angrily, she scrawled a Chinese note, Chi Tao Tu Pu Twai, "Christians never retreat!" He sent back a copy of a Japanese handbill which was offering \$100 each for the capture, dead or alive, of the Mandarin, a prominent merchant, and Gladys. Only then did she realize she HAD to leave but she could not leave her adopted children behind.

She was determined to flee to the government orphanage at Sian, bringing with her the 100 or so children she had accumulated. An additional 100 had gone ahead earlier with another colleague. With the children in tow, she walked for twelve days. Some nights they found shelter with friendly hosts. Some nights they spent unprotected on the mountainsides.

On the twelfth day, they arrived at the Yellow River, with no way to cross it. All boat traffic had stopped, and all civilian boats had been seized to keep them out of the hands of the Japanese. The children wanted to know, "Why don't we cross?" She said, "There are no boats." They said, "God can do anything. Ask Him to get us across." They all knelt and prayed. Then they sang. A Chinese officer with a patrol heard the singing and rode up. He heard their story and said, "I think I can get you a boat." They crossed, and after a few more difficulties Gladys delivered her charges into competent hands at Sian, and then promptly collapsed with typhus fever, pneumonia, malnutrition, and supreme exhaustion.

As her health gradually improved, she started a Christian church in Sian, and worked elsewhere, including a settlement for lepers in Szechuan, near the borders of Tibet. Her health was permanently impaired by injuries received during the war, and in 1947 she returned to England for a badly needed operation.

After 10 years she sought to return to China. However, she was denied re-entry by the Communist government and instead settled in Taiwan, in 1958. There she founded the Gladys Aylward Orphanage, where she worked until her death on 3 January 1970. She is buried in a small cemetery on the campus of Christ's College in Guandu, New Taipei, Taiwan.

The Hidden History Blog : Gladys Aylward: Christian Missionary in China
(chrissyhamlin.blogspot.com)

By The History Researcher at September 23, 2017