



Marie Irwin

Pioneer in Viet Nam

By KAREN MCKELLIN

No, I won't tell you how old I am," she said to me, while lifting the teapot. "When I tell people my age they start waiting on me as if I were sick."

The table was set with china cups and embroidered linens. Streetcars rumbled along Toronto's St. Clair Avenue three stories below. The flat was filled with mementos of Viet Nam—a tall porcelain vase, silk wall-hangings, a brass filigree table on carved legs—gifts from loving Vietnamese friends.

She is Marie Irwin, retired missionary, who with her husband, Frank, pioneered the work of the Alliance in Viet Nam in the early 1900s.

She was born Marie Morgenthaler in Hamilton, Ohio, before the turn of the

century, the ninth of ten children. Her father died when she was six, but her mother continued to manage the family's general store. Every Sunday the children were marched off to the German Evangelical Lutheran Church.

At 17, without ever having met or heard a missionary speak, Marie knew she wanted to be one. In a meeting conducted by the evangelist Mrs. Cora Rudy Turnbull, Marie dedicated her life to Christ. Mrs. Turnbull took an interest in the young girl and arranged for her to attend Nyack College.

The school accepted her before she had finished high school, and although her family opposed her ambition, Marie resolutely embarked by train for New York, arriving in Nyack in September 1909. She was only 18 and had not one penny for her tuition. But she

found work—peeling onions, folding laundry and one year landed the job as second housemaid in a big house on the Hudson River.

"That's where I learned how to do things properly," she says. "If ever I'm asked to dine with the queen, I believe I shall know how to do it."

It took her five years to graduate, but she was chosen as one of four commencement speakers for her 1914 class. One of the other speakers was a brilliant, well-mannered Canadian named Frank Irwin.

Wait for Two Years

They became engaged and applied to the C&MA as candidates for the South China mission field. To their dismay they learned the Board required couples to serve two full years as single missionaries before they could marry.

They bowed to the Board's ruling and in 1915 joined 10 other new missionaries for the long boat trip to Hong Kong. In those days French Indochina (Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos) was administered by the C&MA South China superintendent of missions. Frank and Marie were assigned to the port city of Tourane (now Danang) in south central Viet Nam. Ironically they were billeted in the home of the Cadmans, who were newlyweds.

This awkward arrangement mercifully came to an end. As World War I approached, Germany attempted to sabotage France's war effort by exploiting undercurrents of Vietnamese nationalism. A jittery French colonial government grew suspicious of foreign missionaries and clamped down on their freedom to preach and travel.

At this time the diplomatic and resourceful Robert Jaffray was appointed superintendent of the Indo-

to be pressed; they had to be held back. "Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift" (verse 4).

They were like the children of Israel when the Tabernacle was being built. Moses had to stop the offerings. That is God's standard of giving.

The secret of it is personal consecration to God. We are told, "This they did, . . . first gave their own selves to the Lord, and then unto us by the will of God."

First they gave themselves. Then it was easy to give everything. All true giving begins with consecration.

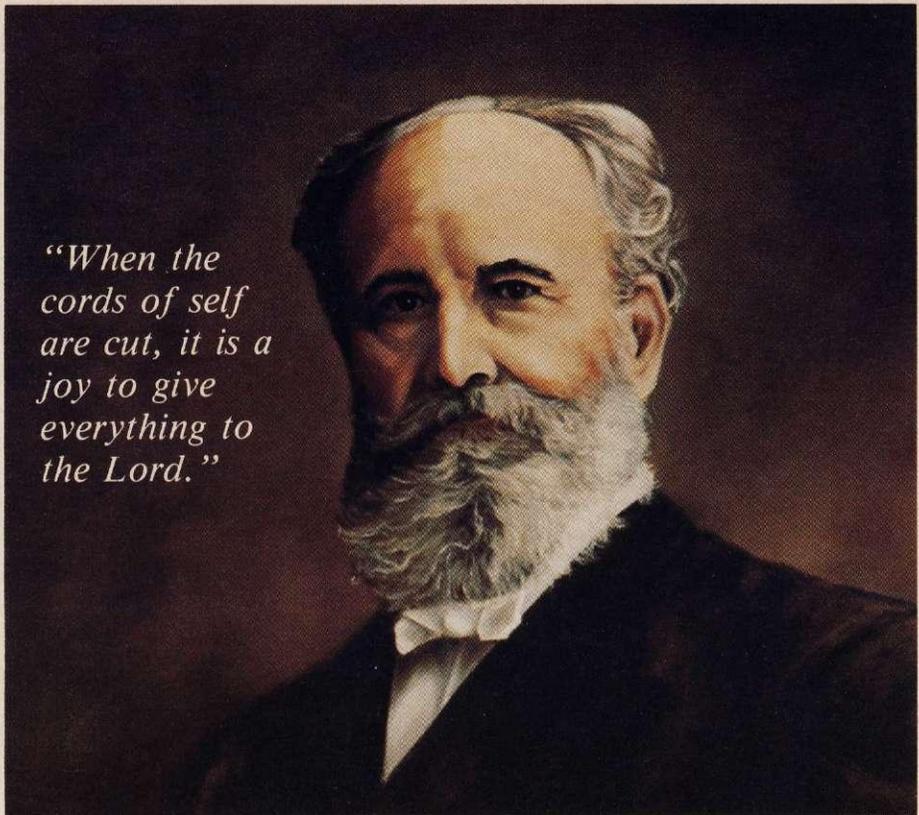
I might talk to 10,000 ordinary people and not get \$10.00 from them for missions. And I would not attempt it unless their hearts were prepared.

People came to me often when our missionary offerings were talked about in the press, and agents of great societies asked me the secret of it—what sort of hypnotism or new auctioneering style had I discovered. They would scarcely believe me when I told them we used no arts. I told them the secret of it was that these people were so filled with the Holy Spirit and joy of the Lord they could not keep anything back from Christ.

When we give ourselves to the Lord, everything is given—clothes, food, the support of family—all are consecrated for the Lord. When the cords of self are cut, it is a joy to give everything to Him.

Consecration to a Cause

Let me call your attention to another point often overlooked. They not only gave themselves to the Lord first, they gave themselves to the cause—to the special cause, the great missionary campaign that Paul and his associate



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Dr. A. B. Simpson

workers represented. "They . . . gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God" (verse 5). David's men of old were of one heart to make him king, men that knew their place and "kept rank," men that were true to their fellow soldiers. And the Lord Jesus has called us not only to be true to Him, but in Him to be true to our fellow workers.

God wants this true touch of loyal service in every great movement to bring back the King and hasten on the cause of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. So it happens that we are bound together in a fellowship reaching around the world in which we have grown together in a mutual relationship—heart to heart and shoulder to shoulder and hand to hand—in the great and solemn trust which God has committed to us. As we are loyal to Him, God can make us terrible as an army with banners in carrying out the Great Commission for the evangelization of the world.

Let us remember this double consecration—first to give ourselves to Him and then to give ourselves in fellowship with our brethren to the great cause of

witnessing for Jesus in His fullness and of giving the gospel in the present generation to the uttermost parts of the earth.

I plead in His name for fidelity to the great trust committed to our hands, to standing true for full salvation and for the evangelization of the world. There are millions of Christians who will do the other things, but God has only us to do this thing.

Hundreds of missionaries who have gone overseas are standing in perilous places today, and they belong to us. God expects us to stand true to them. I believe God wants a spirit of magnificent loyalty to possess us in upholding them.

Missionary Pledges

We have some light in this chapter on pledging for missionary offerings. It has been a help to some questioning minds.

Have we Scriptural warrant for making an estimate of what we will give in the coming year for the cause of missions? Or must it be just giving as we can and make no pledge?

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children of missionaries in Viet Nam.

Thus Dalat School was opened in 1928, amid the cool peaks and serene lakes of the French resort of Dalat, 80 miles north of Saigon.

After three terms the Irwins left Danang for Saigon. The Viet Nam field had by now grown to include nearly 25 missionary couples and their children. Mr. Irwin was elected chairman and their *Mission Evangelique* administrative offices were set up in Saigon, the commercial hub of the populous south.

"Those were blessed years, before World War II," Marie remembers. "We were a close-knit missionary family, a team dedicated to the Lord, supportive of one another, with no one seeking personal advancement." The work prospered. The church flourished.

In December 1939 World War II broke out in Europe. A powerful Japanese force was poised in China. After the fall of Paris, the French government submitted to Japanese pressure to provide military bases and troop transit rights in Viet Nam. The Japanese presence obliged the hitherto sympathetic French colonial administration to keep the foreign missionaries under surveillance.

As the war worsened, the missionaries were told to congregate in the school at Dalat, where they lived for six months under "observation." At the height of the war the Vichy government in France interned all Allied personnel—British, Dutch, American, Canadian, even the Italian consul and his wife—in the barracks of an old military camp at Mytho, a river town south of Saigon on the Mekong River.

Held by the Enemy

Their first two years of internment were not unbearable. Their quarters were roomy although somewhat damp. They were permitted to send their servants in and out of the camp to market. They were secretly in constant communication with the Vietnamese church. And they were allowed to receive some funds from the outside for their care.

However, their comfortable routine was shattered in March 1945. Japanese gunboats sailed up the river and bombarded the town. They arrested the town's French mayor and the camp

commandant. A fierce Japanese officer lined up the captives and counted them with his revolver. All their privileges were revoked, their funds cut off and Mr. Irwin told his people they would now have to tighten their belts and prepare for rather a bad time.

By September the tides of war shifted. One morning the camp awoke and discovered their Japanese jailers had disappeared in the night. All that day Japanese foot soldiers passed through the camp, fleeing to Burma. Although French and British troops arrived in Saigon in September 1945, they did not discover Mytho camp until November.

Lady Mountbatten herself, accompanied by a group of Gurkha soldiers, liberated the camp. Dusty from riding in an open jeep, she asked if there was some place she could freshen up. Marie took her to her own room and gave her a tin basin of water and a clean towel. The lady asked for a mirror and applied a smear of dark red lipstick. "It cheers the boys, you know," she explained to Marie.

The grateful camp wanted to honor Lady Mountbatten with a dinner. They turned to Marie for help. She agreed to cook a meal as long as no alcohol was served. The Italian consul's wife, who fancied herself a countess, fussed at the breach of protocol and the French commandant declared a meal without wine was unthinkable. But Marie remained firm and they acquiesced. A boy was sent to town for a chicken, and by pooling their rations they served up a fine meal.

Longing for Home

The missionaries left Viet Nam for England on British ships. In each port along the way—Bombay, Aden, Port Said—Marie searched the Red Cross depots for clothing. Always tall, she had grown so thin in camp that she could find nothing suitable until they arrived in London.

Here they encountered an unexpected delay to Canada. The authorities could not determine if Marie, who was American-born, married to a Canadian and traveling on a British passport, had ever been "landed" as a Canadian immigrant. They threatened to detain her for six weeks while they processed her papers. Weary and longing for home, the Irwins appealed to a se-

nior officer in the high commissioner's office. He stamped her passport. The commissioner's senior man in charge was Lester Pearson who later became prime minister of Canada.

The Irwins arrived at last in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1946, aboard the *Mauritania*.

Three More Terms

They returned to Viet Nam after furlough and served three more terms until their retirement in 1960. Mr. Irwin, who suffered from crippling arthritis contracted in the Mytho camp, died in Toronto in 1967.

All three of their children returned as missionaries to Viet Nam. "We never pushed them," Marie is quick to point out. "We naturally hoped they might consider becoming missionaries, but the calling is so high, my husband and I knew it would have to come from God."

Since the fall of Viet Nam to Communist rule in 1975, George and Harriet (Stebbins) Irwin have been working in Toulouse, France, with the Vietnamese. Franklin and Doris Irwin and Helen Mae and her husband, David Douglas, are missionaries in the Philippines.

Today there is a 200-member Vietnamese church in Toronto. Many of the Christians are the children and grandchildren of the Irwins' first converts. They call her *Cu Irwin*, a name denoting both veneration and affection.

She regularly attends the Vietnamese service on Sunday afternoons and then travels by subway to Toronto's First Alliance Church for the evening service. Most Sundays she entertains her grandchildren, their spouses, and three great grands—ten all told—for dinner. She takes a keen interest in politics and is an enthusiastic fan of Canadian hockey.

"I've learned to trust the Lord every step of the way, and I have found Him to be gracious and faithful. I've not always had things my way, but God's way is better. When I look back on my life I know that, given half a chance, I'd live it all over again." AW

Mrs. Karen McKellin, a graduate of Wheaton College, is now a writer/homemaker. She and her family attend the Little Trinity Church in Toronto, Ont.

The remarkable life of Marie Irwin spans nine decades

china field. It was clear to him that Marie's German-sounding name might invite trouble, so he instructed her and Frank to leave Viet Nam and join him at the Mission in Wuchow, China.

Mr. Jaffray then traveled to Hanoi to meet with the governor-general and succeeded in having the sanctions against missionary activities lifted.

Mr. Jaffray decided the political situation warranted a break with the Board's two-year-wait marriage policy. He ordered Frank and Marie to register their marriage at the British consulate in Wuchow in June 1916, and then he sat down and wrote retroactively to New York for permission to do so.

A Church Begins in Tourane

When the Irwins arrived in Tourane in 1916 there were only three Christians and one dilapidated bamboo church building. The inhabitants practiced a form of Buddhism mixed with elements of Confucianism and animism.

But Frank knew God had called them to Tourane, so they settled down to the study of French and Vietnamese. God sent them a teacher, a mandarin from the imperial capital of Hue, schooled not only in the ancient Vietnamese Sinitized calligraphy, but also in the romanized Vietnamese alphabet (developed in the 17th century by a Catholic priest).

Tonal, musical Vietnamese proved to be a difficult language to master. After 10 months of study Frank could wait no longer to communicate the gospel to the Touranese. It happened their first convert was their teacher, who was able to understand Mr. Irwin's fledgling attempts to preach in Vietnamese. They formed a team, Frank dictating his sermons to the teacher, who in turn preached them to



In 1912 Marie was a member of the "China Band" at the Missionary Training Institute at Nyack. She is in the second row, second from right.

small gatherings in the Irwin home. In three months 18 people were saved.

These first Christians were from Tourane's noble, merchant and educated classes. Once during a prayer meeting the Irwins were horrified to hear one man pray, "Lord, I thank You we are all the upper class." Thereafter they redoubled their efforts among the poor.

The French were largely indifferent to mass public education for their subjects, and the Vietnamese traditionally educated only their sons. Marie gathered into her home a group of street-waif girls from poor families and taught them to read and write. The wife of the local French schoolmaster became intrigued and offered to tutor the girls for the entrance exams to school.

Marie now believes the work went ahead so quickly in Viet Nam because the missionaries trained Christian workers right from the start. During their second term Ivory Jeffrey joined the Irwins in Tourane and started a

two-year Bible school in a converted horse stable. The curriculum included everything the missionaries had learned at Nyack College.

Marie turned her small school over to others and began a Bible class for illiterate women in her home. Twelve of them came faithfully every weekday morning for three years to hear Marie read them Bible stories, to memorize Scripture and to learn hymns.

Dalat School Founded

As Marie's children came along—first George, then Franklin and then Helen Mae—she taught them with the Calvert correspondence course. But by the fifth grade George had progressed beyond Marie's teaching skills. He balked when they enrolled him in the French school, and they began to wonder if perhaps they should stay home in Toronto until he was ready for high school. A wealthy Canadian friend, hearing of their dilemma, sent sufficient funds to headquarters to hire a teacher and create a school for the