

# Isabella Morris Gilmore

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The career of Isabella Gilmore, William Morris' third sister, provides a fascinating parallel to that of her famous brother. Isabella left a life of middle-class comfort and respectability to minister to the poor of South London as a Deaconess in the Church of England. She founded an institution which provided training for women to pursue vocations as deaconesses among the underprivileged and was instrumental in advancing the role of women in the Church.

Isabella Morris, or Issy as she was known in the Morris family, was born on 17 July 1842 at Woodford Hall. Her brother Edgar remembered her as a child as "rather a Tomboy."<sup>1</sup> She was educated by governesses at home with her sisters Henrietta and Alice and then sent to a private school in Brighton and a finishing school at Clifton.

Isabella was living with her mother at Leyton Hall in Essex when she met Arthur Hamilton Gilmore, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. He was the son of Commander John Gilmore, who lived near the Morris family. Isabella's family apparently approved of the match in spite of a ten year difference in the couple's ages. In September 1860, they were married, William giving his sister away. Gilmore's naval duties took him away from his wife for long periods of time. He served tours of duties in the North Atlantic and the China Seas. Later he was stationed with the Home Fleet or on tours in the Mediterranean. His health was never good, and in the early 1880s the Gilmores moved to Lyme Regis, where Arthur died in November 1882.

After her husband's death, Isabella returned to her mother's home and then made the decision to train as a nurse. This was strongly opposed by her family, but she persisted and began training at Guy's Hospital in London. At about this time, she took over responsibility for the children of her brother Thomas Rendall Morris who was an alcoholic. Apparently the Gilmores had taken an interest in Thomas' children even before their father's death. An affectionate letter from Arthur Gilmore to Ada Morris, the eldest of the children, survives in which his concern for the children is obvious.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1880s, Anthony Wilson Thorold, the Bishop of Rochester, was involved in a far-reaching reorganization of his diocese. Rochester was one of the most diverse and unwieldy sees in Britain. It included large rural areas in Kent and virtually all of London south of the Thames. Among the projects which Thorold wanted to initiate for the diocese was an order of deaconesses to work among London's poor. Deaconesses had been revived in the Church of England in the 1860s but had been tried in only a tentative manner in other dioceses. Deaconesses differed from Anglican nuns in that they were ordained by a Bishop and worked directly under his supervision as did members of the clergy rather than owing allegiance to a religious order. Thorold believed that deaconesses could be a useful tool in the Rochester diocese. He began a search for a suitable leader for the organization, and Isabella was recommended to him by her supervisors at Guy's Hospital.

Isabella was interviewed by Bishop Thorold and a committee of diocesan clergymen. She was frank with them, admitting that she "knew nothing about any parish work, but that I was a good nurse & I loved the poor & was ready to do what



Isabella Gilmore and her dog Tottie;  
taken at Pembroke Dock, probably in late 1860s.  
*Courtesy of the William Morris Gallery.*

they wished me to do for them.”<sup>3</sup> She was offered the position, and after some doubts generated by her responsibilities to her nieces and nephews she accepted. This was a major step for Isabella. She was leaving a life of comfort for one of hardship and toil. The night before she took up her duties, she visited friends and realized that they “might never again see me again in my smart clothes.” (RGP) Isabella had committed herself to serving the poor.

The Morris family (with the exception of William and her eldest sister, Emma Oldham) were outraged at her decision:

I had many troubling times to go through with my relations, many hard unkind things were said but it had been so before when I went to Guy's & except for my mother being angry with me, I did not trouble very much, that did trouble me not only then but for many years & it was a great comfort that before she died she had entirely forgiven me. (RGP)

The first major hurdle Isabella and Bishop Thorold had to overcome was the difficulty of finding a parish willing to accept the deaconesses in it. She later recalled, “I don't think the clergy wanted it & fought the institution being put into their parish.” (RGP) South London was at that time known for the Low Church attitudes of its clergy. Therefore, there was a built-in suspicion of the deaconesses, who were (wrongly) thought to be associated with the Anglo-Catholic branch of the church. A friend of Isabella's asked her “[w]hat made the bishop put you in Clapham it was like shaking a red rag at a bull.” (RGP)

Finally they were able to find a suitable residence in Park Hill, Clapham. The house they found needed extensive renovations. Kept on a tight budget, Isabella did much of the work herself, including staining the floors. She also sought help from her brother:

I got my brother William Morris to come and tell me how I might make the chapel beautiful, he was in one of his happy tempers liking the old houses in the Common & telling me it was a nice place to live in & saying I might make alot out of the rooms we were considering, so he took the order off with him & his people would come and do it all & give me no trouble. (RGP)

Morris decorated the chapel “with a beautiful madder chintz” of Morris & Co. design. Morris also decorated Isabella's private quarters. A surviving photograph of her sitting room shows Morris & Co fabrics on an upholstered chair and table covering as well as a Morris carpet and wallpaper.<sup>4</sup>

From the start, Isabella felt the importance of improving the role of women in the church. This initially took the form of insisting that all her deaconesses be “ladies.” In recalling this early period Isabella wrote “at that time a Deaconess was not thought of as a lady . . . mission women of that day were a very inferior sort of woman to what they are now.” Isabella took particular care in designing the deaconesses' uniform. It was made of fine materials and designed as “a dress which people would see at once that the wearer was a lady.” (RGP)

Isabella was ordained by Bishop Thorold at Park Hill on 16 April 1887. Emma Oldham was the only member of her family who attended the ceremony.

Isabella had visited deaconesses in various part of England to understand how other institutions operated. However, she did not like any of the arrangements she

saw. Some were organized like religious orders, others had very informal arrangements. Isabella designed a system where she would run a central home where women would be trained by working with the poor locally. After ordination, these women would be assigned to parishes which would pay a stipend for their support. The Institution would also provide a center where they could come for a rest each year. Isabella would retain authority over the deaconesses but their assignments would be determined in conjunction with the parishes in which they worked. She also provided moral support for her deaconesses. Isabella described the role of a Head Deaconess: "she has to be a mother to all – to strength, help and comfort, to sympathise and sometimes offer advice."<sup>5</sup>

Isabella, an assistant, and her trainees worked in three parishes in Battersea. The area in which they ministered was one of the poorest in London. The families the deaconesses encountered eked out a miserable existence:

it was an agony to find how terrible their condition was, they were heathen, went to no place of worship & in the low parts the education act was a dead letter, the sanitary laws were nil, the overcrowding ghastly & the dirt and poverty beyond all words. (RGP)

The deaconesses discovered that in their destitution, these people did not understand the most basic sanitation, they were "covered with vermin – indeed we always expect to find them and their clothes alive." (RGP) The deaconesses found that they brought fleas and lice back to the Institution. The children they encountered were often abused and neglected, and alcoholism was rampant among the adults. Isabella deeply empathized with those she cared for. "Often I think to myself what should I have been if I had been brought up in such a hell as this?" (RGP)

The deaconesses provided a substantial aid effort. They ran a soup kitchen which served hot food to the poor, distributed donated clothing and blankets, taught basic sanitary methods, nursed the sick and gave religious instruction to the children. They also organized referrals to hospitals and other charitable organizations. In coordinating all of these activities, Isabella displayed remarkable administrative abilities. She was able to efficiently deal with the major logistical problems posed by providing all of these services.

The deaconesses worked 14- to 18-hour days, at the end of which they had to walk from Battersea to Clapham. Often they would be so exhausted that they would have to support each other on the long walk back. (RG) They also were in danger from the violence endemic to the slums they worked in. "Saturday afternoon & night Sunday & Monday were awful days street fights & rows were going in every direction." Isabella recalled "once I was struck by a drunken woman & I used to get abused when the poor things were half drunk." (RGP) The deaconesses were frequently subjected to harassment, particularly by Irish Catholics. However, after a time, they found that they would be defended by people in the neighbourhood. William Morris was deeply moved by Isabella's devotion to the poor. He told her "I preach Socialism. You practise it."<sup>6</sup>

In 1891, Bishop Thorold was transferred to Winchester and Randall Thomas Davidson, who had been Dean of Windsor, was named Bishop of Rochester. This change deeply disturbed Isabella who worried that the new bishop would not be supportive of the Deaconess Institution. She later recalled, "the dear Bishop's



translation to Winchester . . . was a great grief to me. He had upheld me during the first trying years when the clergy cared nothing at all about us.” (RGP)

When Davidson was installed, Isabella wrote to him immediately to request a meeting to discuss the Deaconess Institution. “I feel more and more how much wisdom & care the whole deaconess question requires. When you have time there are many things I want to ask you to think of for us.”<sup>7</sup> Isabella’s worries proved to be unfounded. In Davidson, Isabella found a sympathetic advocate who took a personal interest in the Deaconess Institution. Davidson recalled his first impressions of the Institution:

I found the Deaconess work in full swing. Bishop Thorold, whose heart was in the cause, had been especially fortunate in securing as Head Deaconess Mrs. Gilmore, a widow, sister of William Morris, the Socialist Poet, a woman of remarkable capacity, enthusiasm and perseverance. The whole subject was new to me but as soon as I looked into it I felt persuaded that if the Deaconess order could be wholesomely and vigorously revived it would mean more than almost anything else could mean for the practical efficiency of the ministry in poor parishes.<sup>8</sup>

A large group of letters from Isabella survives among Davidson’s papers, consulting him about the operations of the Institution. However, in her dealings with him, Isabella insisted upon receiving the precedence to which she felt the deaconesses were entitled. In 1893, Davidson initially declined to officiate at the ordination of new deaconesses, intending to send his suffragan bishop of Southwark. Isabella wrote a strong letter of protest and insisted that Davidson appear himself.<sup>9</sup>

Under Davidson, Isabella expanded the role of the deaconesses. She created rural deaconesses to work among impoverished agricultural workers. She also appointed a deaconess to minister to the needs of the families of sailors in the Royal Navy. She was familiar with the long absences naval service required and the need for assistance to the wives of the seamen. “My own connection with the Navy made me at once realise its immense importance.”<sup>10</sup> Isabella reviewed applications from parishes which wished deaconesses appointed to their staffs. Unlike the early years, Isabella now found herself confronted with more applications than she could provide trained personnel, an obvious sign of the Institution’s success. She reported her opinions of the requests to the Bishop. From the fragmentary record which survives, it appears that all her recommendations were followed.

Another responsibility which fell upon the head of the Institution was fundraising. Isabella apparently found this duty to be unpleasant, but she actively appeared at various charitable meetings or before congregations in parishes throughout Britain to plead the Deaconess Institution’s case and to seek financial support for it. Her first such appearance was at a garden party at Bishop Thorold’s residence. It appears that she was quite nervous although she acquitted herself well. The Bishop wrote her, “your address touched and charmed everybody . . . the children found out you were nervous by your hands, I did not.”<sup>11</sup> her proficiency grew with experience. In 1894, the vicar of a wealthy parish in Tunbridge Wells reported to Bishop Davidson about a fundraising presentation she had made in his church. He related “there was something in her words and manner that strongly moved us all.” Her speech was so successful that she was able to raise £48.<sup>12</sup>

Isabella’s success at raising funds enabled the Institution to move to a large house on the north side of Clapham Common. It was much more comfortable than the Park

Hill house which the Institution had outgrown, and had the additional advantage of being closer to Battersea. Isabella had been working with Bishop Thorold to purchase the house and now she pressed Davidson to continue negotiations. After a review of the Institution's needs and an inspection of the property, he arranged for the purchase of the freehold and the Institution moved in 1891.

One of Isabella's most cherished projects was the establishment of a home for underprivileged girls. Named the Girls Preventive Home, it provided care for girls from abusive or neglectful family circumstances. Isabella described it as "for girls from homes absolutely miserable from careless or drunken mothers . . . they swell the list of the lowest prostitute or become mothers of families as miserable as their own."<sup>13</sup> The girls received a basic education and training to prepare them for domestic service or as seamstresses. To support the Home, Isabella traveled on separate fundraising appeals. Jane Morris contributed to the Home annually in her own name (the only Morris family member to do so).<sup>14</sup> It was established in a building adjacent to the Deaconess Institution and run by a series of matrons one of whom was a former inmate of the home.

Her continual contact with the misery of the poor worked gradually to radicalize Isabella. While initially she was judgmental about the vices she found in Battersea, soon she began to see that the poor were victims of the social order. In one of the Institution's annual reports she wrote: "It sometimes makes me feel almost angry . . . Rich people living in West London know hardly anything about the south bank . . . yet for whom do these toiling millions work? For rich London."<sup>15</sup>

In 1894, Emma Shelton Morris died. In her will, she left Isabella a substantial sum. Isabella decided to use her mother's money to build an enlarged chapel for the Institution. She consulted William and he arranged for Philip Webb to design it. Webb designed a simple chapel in an arts and crafts style with a steep roof supported by oak beams. He also designed furniture for the chapel and a cross which was crafted by Catterson Smith. May Morris embroidered an altar cloth for the chapel.

Isabella also had the Kelmscott Press print the Institution's Associate's Card. In 1897, she asked Sydney Cockerell, who was winding up the Press' operations, to print the card. As he reported to Jane Morris, "Mrs. Gilmore was anxious to have the associate's card of her institution printed at the Kelmscott Press and it is now being done. Please let me know whether you wish her to be charged for it. It is a small affair, and one that might be made an 'unbirthday present' of, if you think well."<sup>16</sup> Presumably she was not charged for the printing. The card has a prayer on one side,<sup>17</sup> and a bible passage,<sup>18</sup> the Institution's address and two "rules"<sup>19</sup> on the other. Isabella was quite proud of the card and sent a copy of it to Davidson.<sup>20</sup>

Isabella had a close relationship with Jenny and May Morris. Jenny's letters to Sydney Cockerell contain frequent references to Isabella and she was clearly important in her life.<sup>21</sup> May also saw her aunt often. Prior to one visit, Isabella wrote "I am expecting a visit from May. She is kind & good to me & it is a pleasure to have her here."<sup>22</sup>

Bishop Davidson was transferred to Winchester in 1895. Once again, Isabella had the worry of the attitudes of a new bishop. She had created a genuine bond with Davidson. As he remembered "Head Deaconess Gilmore and I worked in the completest harmony."<sup>23</sup> However, after some initial ambivalence, Davidson's replacement, Edward Stuart Talbot gave his support to the Institution. Davidson instituted a Deaconess order in Winchester based closely on Isabella's organization.

She continued her close relationship with Davidson after he left the diocese. She sought his help in a dispute the Institution had with an order of Anglican nuns in 1896.<sup>24</sup> She also pressured him to use his influence to further the cause of women in the church. On one occasion she pushed him to change the agenda of the 1897 synod: "Is there really nothing to be said or done about Deaconesses at the synod this summer?"<sup>25</sup> Isabella's friendship with both Davidson and his wife Edith was to continue throughout her life.

Isabella retired in 1906. However, she continued to take a strong interest in the deaconesses' role and continued to be an advocate for women in the church. She was urged to this role soon after her retirement by Bishop Davidson, now Archbishop of Canterbury. He wrote her: "you may do more work for our cause *as a whole* when you are relieved from the anxiety the worries and the daily hard work of attending to your *Diocesan* office."<sup>26</sup> Isabella spoke at the Women's Committee of the Pan-Anglican Conference in 1908 on the Status and Work of Deaconesses. She was also active in the Association of Head Deaconesses, many of whose members were her former trainees.

She also continued her maternal care of Thomas Rendall Morris' children. In 1915 she wrote, "my brother Rendall's 8 children were left in my care & I had to do everything for them & very grateful I am to have done it. They are good sons and daughters to me & I have 14 grandchildren . . . so I am a happy old woman with heart & hands full."<sup>27</sup>

Isabella died on March 15, 1923. After her death, her old friend Randall Davidson personally conducted a memorial service in her honour and a monument to her was erected in Southwark Cathedral. She was buried in Lyme Regis with her husband.

It seems remarkable that a family as traditionally middle class as the Morrisises should have produced two members who turned their backs on convention to devote themselves to work for social justice. William Morris fought for a more just and humane society through his writing and political agitation. His sister Isabella toiled to improve the living standards of the poor of South London. Both of them committed themselves to a more humane society and through their lives struggled to achieve it.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Morris to Ada Morris, undated, Isabella Gilmore Papers, Church of England Record Centre, London (Gilmore Papers).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Gilmore to Ada Morris, undated, Gilmore Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Handwritten Reminiscences of Isabella Gilmore (Reminiscences), Gilmore Papers. This document is voluminous, handwritten and unpaginated therefore, it is not possible to make a more specific reference to it. Further references to it are indicated by RGP in brackets after quotations.

- <sup>4</sup> Photograph in Gilmore Papers.
- <sup>5</sup> Annual Report of Deaconess Institution, 1893.
- <sup>6</sup> Grierson, Janet, *Isabella Gilmore, Sister to William Morris*, SPCK, London, 1962, p.95.
- <sup>7</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Bishop Davidson, 29 February 1892, Randall Thomas Davidson Papers, Lambeth Palace Library (Davidson Papers).
- <sup>8</sup> Memoir of Bishop Davidson quoted in Bell, G.K., *Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury*, O.U.P., London, 1938, p.211.
- <sup>9</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Bishop Davidson, 17 March 1893, Davidson Papers.
- <sup>10</sup> Annual Report of Deaconess Institution, 1896.
- <sup>11</sup> Bishop Thorold to Isabella Gilmore, 18 June 1887, Gilmore Papers.
- <sup>12</sup> P. Townsend, Vicar of St. Mark's Church, Tunbridge Wells to Bishop Davidson, 13 February 1894, Davidson Papers.
- <sup>13</sup> Annual Report of Deaconess Institution, 1892.
- <sup>14</sup> Subscription lists in Annual Reports of Girls Preventive Home 1894 through 1898 and 1901, Lambeth Palace Library (Annual Reports for the remaining years do not appear to have survived).
- <sup>15</sup> Annual Report of Deaconess Institution, 1897.
- <sup>16</sup> Sydney Cockerell to Jane Morris, 19 March 1897, British Library Add. Ms. 52738.
- <sup>17</sup> Almighty Father let Thy constant benediction rest on this House of Mercy, which we would ply all our needs. Give Thy HOLY SPIRIT to those who shall enter its walls, or go out from them, whether to rule, to learn, or to serve. May self be utterly forgotten. May pure devotion fill every heart. May the love of CHRIST constrain us to joyful service. May we grow from strength to strength, & charity to charity. May Thy Name be glorified, and Thy Word be made effectual in the winning of many souls into Thy love. We ask this for CHRIST'S sake. Amen.
- <sup>18</sup> Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.
- <sup>19</sup> – To do some definite work for GOD and his Church.  
– To pray daily for the Institution, its Members & Associates, and assist them as opportunity may offer.
- <sup>20</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Bishop Davidson, undated, Davidson Papers. Copies of the card survive in both the Davidson Papers and the Gilmore Papers.
- <sup>21</sup> There are nine letters from Jenny Morris in the British Library (Add. Ms. 52739) and one in the Pierpont Morgan Library which contain references to Isabella.
- <sup>22</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Sydney Cockerell, 29 December 1915, Pierpont Morgan Library.
- <sup>23</sup> Memoir of Davidson, quoted in Bell, p.211.
- <sup>24</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Bishop Davidson, 17 January 1896, Davidson Papers.
- <sup>25</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Bishop Davidson, 10 April 1897, Davidson Papers.
- <sup>26</sup> Bishop Davidson to Isabella Gilmore, 10 March 1906, printed in Grierson p.186.
- <sup>27</sup> Isabella Gilmore to Sydney Cockerell, 29 December 1915, Pierpont Morgan Library.