

KNIBB, MARY (c.1798 - 1866), abolitionist and social reformer

Name: Mary Knibb
Date of birth: c.1798
Date of death: 1866
Spouse: William Knibb
Child: Mary Ann Knibb
Child: William Watkins Knibb
Child: Catherine Mary Knibb
Child: Ann Knibb
Child: Andrew Fuller Knibb
Child: Thomas Burchell Knibb
Child: James Coulthart Knibb
Child: Fanny Knibb
Gender: Female
Occupation: abolitionist and social reformer
Area of activity: Religion; Activism
Author: Hilary Slack

Mary Knibb was born around the year 1798 in the parish of Pontypool, Monmouthshire. Her parents, whose surname was Watkins, died when she was young and little is known of her early life though it is safe to assume that she stayed in Wales as it was reported that Mary was a Welsh speaker. Mary moved to Bristol before March 1823, where she became a member of Broadmead Baptist church. She taught in the Sunday school alongside fellow parishioner, William Knibb, who was an apprentice printer from Northamptonshire. The pair formed an 'acquaintance' and got married in Bristol on 5 October 1823, before travelling to Jamaica as missionaries a month later. Letters from Broadmead's minister and fellow church members describe Mary as an 'exceptionally sweet tempered and sensible girl'. They felt Mary would be a 'calming influence' on her husband, who they considered an 'impulsive and passionate man'. Mary and William had eight children in Jamaica.

As a missionary's wife Mary's role was to help and instruct the women of the congregation and to look after the domestic side of the mission, especially when William had to travel to distant plantations to visit his parishioners there. Biographies of her husband and journals of some who came to stay with the Knibbs reveal Mary's welcoming nature; she was found to be 'calm, gentle, affectionate and happy'. Missionaries were completely dependent on their wives for social support. William shared with his wife both his burdens and his joys, discussing with her his thought processes and intended actions. He wrote that Mary bore 'much of the anxiety of the stations ... I attribute most of my successes in my missionary career to her'.

William and Mary soon became aware of the cruelty and brutality of slavery which affected their parishioners, and in 1832 they chose to go against the remit of the Baptist Missionary Society and spoke out against slavery, arguing that immediate emancipation was needed. Their stance and subsequent campaigning contributed to the eventual abolition of slavery in 1834 but was not without cost. They often found their home and church buildings destroyed by the anti-abolition supporters as well as having to escape death threats from plantation owners who classed them as the enemy.

Even after the Abolition Act had been passed, William and Mary continued to campaign for better working and living conditions for the African Jamaicans. An apprenticeship system had been put in place until 1838, to give instruction to the ex-slaves for a life of freedom. Many of the plantation owners brought in rules that made the African Jamaicans' lives harder than they had been during slavery, with punishments such as the treadmill becoming the norm for all crimes, large or small. The Knibbs were instrumental in helping set up free villages in Trelawny, the parish where they lived, where the newly freed could live away from the confines of the plantations. They raised money to buy the land on which to build a village with chapel and school, by asking friends back home to send funds, often having already sold their furniture and anything else that was of any value. Having fought for the rights of African Jamaicans, the couple also looked out for indentured Europeans who were being brought into the country to replace the slave labour force. Many found themselves ill or unable to earn enough money to return home after they had worked their allotted time and the Knibbs often gave their last penny to buy food or a ticket home for them.

The African Jamaican inhabitants of Trelawny held Mary in such esteem that they built a residence for her and her children in the free village of Kettering, Trelawny. Edward Barrett, a deacon of Falmouth Chapel, informed William, 'you may die, and we cannot bear the thought that your wife should go home.' After William's death in 1845, unlike most missionary wives, Mary took the decision to stay in Jamaica, living in the house in Kettering. With financial aid from the Ladies Negro's Friend Society in Birmingham, Mary and her daughters, Catherine and Ann, ran a school for girls from the house, continuing the educational programme the couple had started when William was alive. Regular reports were sent to the society informing them of how their money was spent and of the progress of the girls attending the school.

Mary felt at home in Jamaica, regarding those she lived with in the free village of Kettering as her fellow countrymen. She and William believed that they had been sent to the island not to turn the African Jamaicans into Caribbean versions of Englishmen but to assist them in creating a new Jamaica, one where Black and White had equal opportunities. Mary's daughter Ann married Ellis Fray, a Black graduate of the Calabar seminary, a facility set up by the Knibbs to enable African Jamaicans to train for the ministry, and their descendants still live on the island today.

Mary died on 1 April 1866 in Jamaica, having suffered from a long illness. The mural tablet in the William Knibb Memorial Chapel reads: 'Mary widow of the Rev. William Knibb, born in South Wales in 1798: in January 1825 she and her devoted husband arrived in this island: alone with him, she laboured and suffered to promote the temporal and spiritual interests of its enslaved inhabitants.' Unlike her husband there are no blue plaques denoting Mary's contribution to the abolition movement nor her work for social reforms. In 1948, the then chief minister of Jamaica - and later Prime Minister - Alexander Bustamante wrote in the forward to the William Knibb memorial publication: 'In truth and in fact he laid the foundation for everything we attempt to do this day in our march, towards emergence of a Jamaican nation.' This surely applies to the work that Mary undertook too.

Author

Hilary Slack

Sources

Ancestry.co.uk Births, Marriages, Deaths

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Further reading

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Owen Griffiths, *Knibb a'i orchestion: darlith* (Caerfyrddin 185-?)

Images

Bell Smith, William Knibb

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