

Evelyn Underhill: Mystical mother of souls

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Robyn Wrigley-Carr celebrates the life and legacy of Evelyn Underhill



Sculpture of Evelyn Underhill by Charles Gurrey of York, one of four added to the west front of Guildford Cathedral in 2004. She faces Archbishop Michael Ramsey

TO MARK the 80th anniversary, next Tuesday, of the death of Evelyn Underhill, a new ledger stone will be dedicated at her place of burial outside Hampstead Parish Church. Whereas the original stone describes Underhill simply as “wife” and “daughter”, the new stone reads:

Evelyn Underhill 1875-1941

Christian — Scholar — Spiritual Guide

“A Christianity which is only active is not a complete Christianity.”

Underhill’s conviction that our active lives need to be informed and nourished by contemplative prayer prompted Archbishop Michael Ramsey to claim that few, if any, did more than Underhill in the 1920s and ’30s to help the Church of England grasp the priority of prayer, and particularly the place of the contemplative element in our Christian lives.

She is commemorated in the liturgical calendar of Churches in Great Britain, the United States, and Australia, and is on the Lutheran Church's "Proposed Calendar of Saints"; and the events planned to mark the anniversary of her death attest to the fact that her writings, though some of them a century old, continue to resonate with people around the globe.

SO, WHO was Underhill, and why is she worth celebrating? Born in Wolverhampton in 1875, she spent most of her life in London, dying in June 1941 during the Second World War. Raised in a secular household, she dabbled briefly in the occult (the Order of the Golden Dawn) before coming under the spiritual direction of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, in 1921. Encountering and experiencing Christ was, in her words, "like watching the sun rise very slowly — and then suddenly one knew what it was". Thereafter, reading scripture was filled with things previously unnoticed, and partaking of the eucharist became more compellingly beautiful and alive.

Underhill became a practising Anglican, though she always wore her Anglicanism "with a difference". She described herself as like "a scamp . . . unable to crystallise into the official shape", and "a cat of any other colour" at a cat show (*The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, edited by Charles Williams, 1943). She was deeply ecumenical, but kept herself anchored through a consistent focus on the person of Christ. She felt in sympathy with Christians from all branches of the Church — "except", she wrote, "when they start hating one another".

She was also deeply aware of the "Church Invisible": the historic, wide, generous, supernatural society where all Christians are one in Christ. Drawn to the writings of the historic Christian mystics, she translated and popularised many of their works, before segueing into writing about the spiritual life.

As an effective oral communicator, she was the first woman invited to lecture in theology at the University of Oxford. After her death, the obituary in *The Times* described her gift of insight into the "individual gropings of the soul" as "unmatched by any professional teacher of her day".

She received an honorary doctorate from the University of Aberdeen, and was made a Fellow of King's College, London. Her 39 books and hundreds of articles and reviews have gained respect from multitudes of lay people, clergy, and scholars; for she wrote about some of the deepest realities of the soul in ordinary language, providing homely and winsome illustrations to drive her points home.

Some of Underhill's final words (written just weeks before her death) are worth quoting, eight decades on. She reminds us that our Christianity is "distorted and incomplete" unless we pray for — and expect — the Holy Spirit's renewal in ourselves and the Church, to "enlighten our dark minds, enkindle our cold hearts, reveal God's Will for the future and enable us to do our part" ("Letters to the Prayer Group", in *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 1960).

Perhaps her most outstanding contribution was her groundbreaking work as a pioneer retreat leader for the the Church of England in the 1920s and '30s. As a lay woman, her leading of Anglican clergy on retreat in 1926 was truly remarkable, and her words at that retreat still provide a provocative challenge today: “Enrichment of the sense of God is surely our crying need”; for so much Christianity comprises a shallow, “brightly-varnished, this-world faith” with its “eye on humanity rather than on Deity” — putting the emphasis on service, with little emphasis on awe and adoration of God.

This type of Christianity, Underhill argues, doesn't “wear well” when pain and life's mysteries are deeply felt; nor does it lead to sanctity (*Concerning the Inner Life*, 1927). So she encourages us to place the emphasis on God: to be more intentionally attentive to him and his ongoing action; to be alert and watch, wait, listen, and gaze at Christ, and adore. And she reminds us that we live in two worlds: the seen world, which largely preoccupies us, and the unseen, eternal world, which is in fact the more significant reality calling for our attention.

THE enduring appeal of Underhill's writings lies in her teaching about prayer as a lived experience, which enables her to communicate depth, but with a lightness of touch and playful humour, illustrating complex ideas through everyday, earthy examples. Charles Williams, in his edition of her letters, writes of her that “She ingeminated ‘Love!’” Her generous compassion is evident in her retreat talks and letters, which best reveal her gifts in “the motherhood of souls”.

Underhill challenges us, encouraging us to leave our “stodgy, vague, twilit, inner life” and embark on a “costly”, daring, Christian life rather than settle for the comfort of the shallows. At the same time, she urges us to “gaze at Christ's life with loving awe and breathe in His Presence” (“Fruits” in *The Ways of the Spirit*, edited by Grace Adolphsen Brame, Crossroad, 1994).

Adoration of the triune God was central to her life and message, and she urges us to live more attentively to God and worship him more fully with all of who we are. As she put it in one of her retreat talks, “Receiving means to keep ourselves carefully tuned in, sensitive to the music of Eternity. We can never adore enough.”

Robyn Wrigley-Carr is the author of Music of Eternity: Meditations for Advent with Evelyn Underhill (The Archbishop of York's Advent Book for 2021), which will be published by SPCK on 19 August 2021. She is Associate Professor in Theology and Spirituality at Alphacrucis College, Australia, and Adjunct Associate Professor at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Her previous books include The Spiritual Formation of Evelyn Underhill (SPCK, 2020), and Evelyn Underhill's Prayer Book (SPCK, 2018).

THE anniversary is being marked by **A Celebration of Evelyn Underhill**, which has been organised by Chelmsford Diocesan House of Retreat (Pleshey), the Evelyn Underhill Association (USA), and Hampstead Parish Church (London). This international celebration, **from Monday to Friday (14-18 June)**, comprises online events including

a commemorative dinner, a series of talks, and scholars presenting the latest in Evelyn Underhill research. All proceeds from the event go to Pleshey, the retreat house much loved by Underhill.

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