The Life and Achievements of Dora Abdy

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The life and achievements of Dora Abdy

Though Dora Abdy was at Stanford High School for only three years, the SHS Old Girls' Guild were proud to acknowledge her connection with the school, and for good reason, says James Buckman

Dora Channing Abdy was born on 16 November 1872. This was just months after her family had moved to Lincolnshire for her father, the Revd Albert Abdy, to take up the post of Rector at St Mary's Church, Stamford. He was also an alumnus of Magdalen College, Oxford, who had followed his father into the Church of England. Dora's mother, Dora Merriman, had been the second of five children of a widowed solicitor, and had attended boarding school in Cheltenham. The couple married in 1668, and had ten children (eight daughters and two sons) over a period of seventeen years; Dora was their third child. In 1883, Dora was enrolled at the recently opened Stamford High School, but her time there was cut short after three years by a tragedy. On 21 November 1885, just five days after Dora's thirteenth birthday, her father died from apoplexy. The Abdy family subsequently relocated to Guildford, Surrey, where Dora completed her school days at the local High School. She was the first student from Guildford High School to attend Oxford.

Dora went up to study at St Hugh's Hall Oxford in September 1894. During her time there she became acquainted with the Revd Charles Lustwidge Dodderg, better known by his pen name, Lewis Carroll. He was a lecturer in mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford, and he would make frequent visits to her sister in Guildford. Dora is first mentioned in his diary during a visit to Guildford over the Christmas period of 1894. In January 1895, Dodderg called at the Abdy household to make acquaintance with Dora, whom he had probably first met on a visit to Guildford High School. In Oxford, Dora dined with Dodger, or went for long walks with him. On one occasion, Dodger took Dora to the Garrick Theatre to see The Alabama by Augustus Thomas. This was followed by a walk 'some way beyond Newlands Corner' the next day. In 1897 Dora came down from St Hugh's Hall with First Class Honours in what was then known as the 'Examinations for Women'. This would have been the qualification with which she was able to fulfil her ambition to become a teacher. Dora's first teaching job was at St Mary's College, London, then in 1898 the Abdy family relocated to Kent for Dora to become an assistant mistress at Tunbridge Wells High School. Dora had her dream job, but at the turn of the century she made a life-changing decision. Dora, along with other members of her family, had a deep interest in the work of missionaries, but she never intended to become one herself. However, Dora kept this interest very much at heart and found the temptation too strong. She joined a society called the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA). On 9 January 1902, Dora set sail for Magila in German East Africa (modern-day Tanzania). Her adventure had begun. The Universities' Mission to Central Africa was a society established in response to an appeal made by the Scottish pioneer and explorer Dr David Livingstone. His travels to the African Continent enabled him to provide a vivid description of the country, and of its issues, in particular a flourishing slave trade. The Universities' Mission was set up to put an end to that trade, and to implement the Christian work among the Africans. The Mission made its first mark on Zanzibar; an island just off the coast of German East Africa. In the 1870s, they extended their influence onto the East African mainland between the Indian Ocean and Lake Tanganyika. Less than a decade later, the same part of the continent became of interest to the German Empire. The missionaries had no option but to come the German colony to help foster peace and order within the country. When Dora Abdy arrived in Africa, her first position was at a school for Indian children in Zanzibar. At the start of 1903, a nearby Christian school closed down. It was becoming too small to accommodate its student body. Dora's school for Indian children took in all the pupils and merged the two schools to form one. Months later, they were joined by four little boys from another school. As a result, Dora was not only overseeing the education of children from three different nationalities (Indians, Arabs and Swahilis), but she was also attempting a co-educational system. This did not get off to a good start. The different groups and genders of children were hostile to each other. The boys felt it was beneath their dignity to learn with little girls instead of alongside big boys, but gradually the children warmed to each other. At Christmas, Dora initiated a school feast. In October 1905, Dora was transferred to German East Africa. At the time of her arrival, gender inequality was rife. When Dora had attended school in England, education for children of both genders was only just becoming compulsory. Her first school, Stanford High School, opened in the wake of the Elementary Education Act, 1876. The Act decreed that it was the parents' duty to ensure every...
child in the family received an education. In Africa their situation was very different. Fathers could not see any benefit in having their daughters educated. From their early years, girls were taught that their duties were to cook the food, work the fields and rear children. Before Dora’s transfer onto mainland Africa a fellow missionary, Lizzy Dunford, had overcome these expectations. Under her leadership a girls’ school at Hegongoy had flourished. Girls within a radius of three to four miles of Hegongoy had learnt to come to school regularly and do domestic work afterwards. However, this did not solve the issue of girls within rural communities who were too far away to reach this school.

During 1906, Dora trekked from village to village in German East Africa. In each one she attempted to bring the communities together to form girls’ schools. This was an experiment without funding or even a building. The schoolhouse was the shade under a tree. Every morning, the teacher would bring all her school materials balanced on her head, and collect the children as she went along. Dora wanted these girls to have a religious education as well as a secular one. The hope was that encouraging ‘out-schools’ would help spread the Christian Faith among the women and girls who lived far away from the Mission Centres. If African women teachers had enough zeal to do the same work for the girls as male teachers for boys then the whole status of African women could be gradually raised. The task of finding a woman who would be willing to teach the girls was a further challenge.

Dora made her first attempt to overcome that problem in August 1906. She knew that former students of Lizzy Dunford were now the wives of teachers. The solution was to ask them if they would teach the girls and work side-by-side with their husbands. These women would work for only one hour a day so that the job did not interfere with domestic work. Dora wrote that most of the women teachers managed to collect fifteen to twenty girls through their own efforts, but these schools were sensitive to public opinion, and there was some opposition. In some cases, the teachers’ husbands were against the idea of having their wives teaching instead of performing domestic work, despite Dora’s intention that they would only teach for one hour. When the time came for weeding Indian corn in the Magila country, one of the spouses declared that his wife could not perform two types of work and her priority was to weed his field. This woman’s school had had a promising start with thirty girls in attendance, so a European missionary had to be brought in as a substitute. The parents also put up some resistance to the idea of having their girls educated. Dora wrote about another teacher, half of whose students were taken away by their parents who insisted on sending them to an initiatory tribal dance. Nevertheless, it seems that the teachers did not allow themselves to be daunted by the opposition. By 1907, Dora had lots of people to teach at odd times. The teachers’ wives were coming to her on a regular basis. Those who did attend teacher training were known as ‘Miss Abdy’s Grey Angels’.

When the Great War broke out in the summer of 1914, Dora was in Britain on leave. The conflict prevented her from returning to her missionary duties, and severed all communications between her and her fellow workers in German East Africa. While she was stranded in Britain, Dora did manage to perform some charitable work. Under her direction, the King’s Messengers of the Leatherhead Missionary Association gave a very successful Christmas play. This raised a sum of £6 towards the work of missionaries. In April 1915, Dora returned to Zanzibar; the island remained loyal to the Triple Entente during the war. For over a year, Dora and other members of the Mission Staff had to wait anxiously before the British Army finally managed to force the Germans into a retreat from East Africa. By Christmas 1916, Dora was back on mainland Africa, and finally saw the full extent of the hardships her friends, both African and European, had endured for two years.

With the Germans out of East Africa, the missionaries turned their attention towards reviving the work that had been shattered by the war. Dora provided invaluable help with this recovery. She spent the mornings teaching women and girls. She would travel the countryside visiting all the out-schools. She encouraged and helped the teachers, and looked up both the lost and the strayed. After the war ended in 1918, Dora began to feel the strain of teaching and long walks. She resigned from the Universities’ Mission in 1919 and returned to Britain.

On her return to Britain Dora went to work with the UMCA Sisters at the Christ Church Mission House of St Frideswide’s, Poplar. After two years she relocated to Reading, Berkshire where her widowed mother resided until her death. Dora attempted as many jobs, both missionary and educational, as time and strength would allow. She started to write her own books. Her first book published in 1922 was a non-fictional account on the life and work of the pioneer, Dr David Livingstone. The Universities’ Mission commented that this book was not only recommended for readers who were interested in the history of the Mission, but it would also be useful as a textbook in a series of school lessons on the subject. One year later Dora published her second book: Dora and the Mission. This story was a work of fiction, but in which Dora used her knowledge and experience to provide a vivid account of African school life. As soon as she learnt about a plan to reorganise the Central School in Zanzibar, Dora wrote to the Universities’ Mission, and offered her assistance with this project. This was accepted by the Mission Staff in the diocese of Zanzibar who considered it a sporting offer. Dora was appointed deputy at the Kiwanda Central School. The headmaster took leave in preparation for his new duties, so the first stages of the reorganisation were carried through by Dora herself. She shouldered her way through any initial difficulties, and the school got started on the right lines. The most important development with this project was the starting of a Training College for Grade II teachers. The headmaster and school inspectors of the diocese had asked if this could be established, but it was Dora who took on the pioneering role. She capitalised on her rich experience in the needs of village schools, and of the village school teacher. Dora laid the foundations of a training course in which training was practical as well as theoretical. Dora’s return to Africa was always intended to be a temporary posting, but none of the staff could have anticipated how significant her contribution would be, nor how long she would stay for this period of service. Both the diocese and the Mission were very grateful to Dora. Her second resignation from the Universities’ Mission in 1932 was no small loss.

Dora continued to be involved with the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa until the end of her life. She returned to Africa for one final period of service in 1936. This was to help cover a shortage in staff. At home in Britain, Dora taught Swahili (a language that she spoke fluently) to candidates for the Universities’ Mission. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Dora provided tireless help to refugees from Europe. In 1940, Dora was elected onto the General Council of the Universities’ Missions, retaining this role for the final ten years of her life. Dora Abdy died in her sleep during the early hours of the morning of 15 April 1950, at the age of seventy-seven. Dora Abdy was with Stanford High School for only three years, and was never actively involved with the SIBS Old Girls’ Guild. However, the Guild’s committee were proud to acknowledge the connection between the school and Dora, the pioneer of secondary education for women in Africa. A priest associated with the Universities’ Mission said, in tribute to Dora, that the success of her efforts in the founding of girls’ schools became the foundation for a complete revolution in the African attitude to women’s education. My impressions of Dora are that she was a woman ahead of her time in two ways. Firstly, Dora had grown up in a time when women were expected only to get married and have children, but she clearly did not intend to go down that path. Her ambition was always to take up employment. Secondly, she believed that girls deserved to be educated to the same level as boys, even if it meant changing the expectations of African women, and encouraging them to break with their customs.

Above, from top: Class of 1897, St Hugh’s Hall (Reproduced with the permission of the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh’s College, Oxford)

Dora Abdy, enlarged from the class photograph

Cover of Dora Abdy’s 1922 book David Livingstone

Lincolnshire Past & Present