Florence May Freeth (1871–1946): Church Missionary and Founder of Kindergartens, ‘Children and Grass Sandals’

ROB FREETH

May Freeth With Japanese Child

A MISSIONARY’S LIFE IN RURAL JAPAN

Florence May Freeth’s life was one of pioneering missionary work in Kyushu, Japan, and commitment to the care and education of young children. She touched and influenced the lives of many with her establishment of kindergartens and nurseries around Mt Aso near Kumamoto.

In 1896 as a single, twenty-four-year-old English woman May Freeth, always known by her middle name, travelled to Japan as a missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS). For nearly forty-five years, between 1896 and 1940 she lived amongst the communities in Fukuoka, Kumamoto and Mt Aso working to improve the lives of women and children through the establishment of kindergartens and day nurseries. Her story is that of a determined and
compassionate English woman who took the unusual step, for those days, of settling in a little-known foreign land with a vastly different culture, and eventually adopting the Japanese people and culture as her own.

She commenced her missionary work in Fukuoka, and later moved to Kumamoto in 1909. In 1921, when fifty years old, she moved to Aso and chose to live her life there, dedicated to missionary and welfare work. Her kindness and charitable work endeared her to the inhabitants, and she clearly left an indelible impression of goodness. Some who remembered her erected a memorial stone in 1990 at Ichinomiya, the central town of the Aso region, on which is inscribed:

We think that one’s life is short, but one’s wish survives long after one’s death. We, Miss Freeth’s admirers, were all children when she was active in her work. But we have cherished her memory for her faith in human love and wanted to honour her memory. For this reason, we set up this monument to praise her activity and hand her name down to posterity.¹

She continued her work until the outbreak of the Second World War, and on her death in 1946 the CMS Outlook recorded: ‘one who knew her very well writes: Her life was one of prayer and was an inspiration to all who knew her. As a missionary her heart was in her work and her devotion to the Japanese was unsurpassed.’²

FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

May Freeth was born in London, England, on 17 February 1871 into a relatively well-off and conservative family with strong Christian faith. Her father Sir Evelyn Freeth moved to Dublin in 1884 as Deputy Controller, Legacy and Succession Duties for Ireland, and took his young family with him. The family lived in Ireland until Sir Evelyn returned to London in 1902 as registrar of the Estate Duty Office, Somerset House.

May was just thirteen years old when her family moved to Dublin in 1884, and spent her adolescent years in Ireland. She was the eldest of eight children, and with her father a senior public servant the family was comfortable rather than wealthy. It was a family which believed a sound education served as a necessary passport into a professional career, typically in the armed services, the law and the ministry; three of her brothers went into the army, medicine and engineering. May especially developed a strong affinity with her youngest brother Robert who initially followed May’s example and became a missionary in the Pacific and later a Bishop.

May attended the Alexandra School, Dublin, and proved to be a good scholar. She received a prize in 1886 from the Board of