

Thanksgiving service for Chérie Conner's life, 24 September 2011
Peter Everington

Thank you Patrick and Judi for this privilege of paying tribute to your remarkable mother. I worked with her and your father for 35 years and have been with her in many countries of the Middle East. The last time was a memorial occasion for Bill in Cairo. My wife and I accompanied her to this, and to the homes of her devoted friends in Alexandria and Cairo, and finally to Aswan for a few days. Ever the elegant memsahib she was treated with enormous respect by the old Egyptian boatman helping her on to a swaying felucca, and by the supervisor of the Aswan camel market. As the brigadier's daughter she always wanted to be turned out just right. Once in London she and Bill came upon a group of people unexpectedly, and Bill said, "Why don't you go and talk to so-and-so?" Her classic reply was "I can't, I'm not wearing the right shoes."

And it was in Egypt in the 1930s, as Judi said, that this daughter of the Army and daughter of Empire became also a daughter of faith, through the Oxford Group, soon to be known as Moral Re-Armament (MRA). Chérie enjoyed relating her father's robust comment at the first meeting he attended in Alexandria: "I've tried religion twice and I'm not going to try it again."

He and his wife did try it and so did Chérie. What appealed most to her, it seems, was that the Almighty has a plan for our needy world and each of us can find how to play our part. If we're in doubt where to start, a look at absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love provides an indicator. Times of silent listening to the inner voice often lead to initiatives of change for the better. And she saw people from different countries doing it with flair and enthusiasm.

It was a turbulent time in the late 1930s in Egypt, as in the rest of the world. Underneath the gilded social life of many westerners in Egypt, there was a deep resentment against the British, in particular, going back three generations. Jamal Abdel Nasser as a boy chanted the popular jingle "Ya Azeez, ya Azeez, dahya takhud al'ingleez – O Mighty God, may destruction fall upon the British." In the Great War Britain had taken complete control of Egypt, and the same was about to happen in World War Two.

Chérie returned to Britain and began to work full-time with MRA at their London headquarters. There was quite a crowd of people in their twenties, and a Cambridge graduate Bill Conner came to her notice. As war broke out, the men joined the armed services. With the threat of the Blitz in London, MRA moved its headquarters to a country estate in Cheshire called Tirley Garth loaned to them. Here Chérie and the other young women became land girls, a hard work of many years, while also staffing the Centre. Tirley was running a national campaign of morale building, as well as hosting servicemen who were either on leave or about to go abroad.

One day two men arrived for a few days, both posted to Egypt, Bill Conner and another called Tom. Chérie fell deeply in love with Bill, a love not declared between them. When he left she wept bitterly for what might happen to him. But another woman there helped her decide that, whatever did happen to Bill, she would remain faithful to God in her world calling.

Tom was killed at the Battle of Alamein, Bill survived.

In 1946 Chérie and he married in London and they lived adventurously ever after, working without salary for MRA for the rest of their lives. This was a time when, amid the ruin brought by Nazism, Soviet Communists confidently expected to swallow up the whole of Europe. The Conners went to work with other Europeans on the rebuilding of morale in Germany. At MRA's new centre for reconciliation in Caux Switzerland they helped look after Germans and other former combatants year after year. They were in Turkey at one stage, and they spent two years in Brazil. In all these

places Chérie's language skills were invaluable. For some time they worked with trades unionists in Bristol for the industrial harmony Britain needed so badly.

In the tradition of Empire and Army, friends and family gave loving care to the children while the parents were away on duty. For Chérie there was often the ache of absence, as there was in the children. Did MRA always get its deployment of people right? No. Can the whisper of human conformism get confused with the still small voice of the Almighty? Yes. We come here to pray for Chérie's eternal reward, and for the everlasting mercy we all need.

Chérie is best known and loved for her work with people in the Middle East. A few years ago I took a Muslim Egyptian mother and son to see her in the care home. By that time Chérie could not be guaranteed to recognise old friends. But as these two came into the room, she cried out "My family from Egypt, my family from Egypt." Three generations of that family have been her dear friends. The mother as a student had initiated, from the Egyptian end, the programme of British-Arab exchange visits. Founded by the Conners in London, that programme has since extended to Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq.

One image of Chérie is her copious letter-writing to Egyptian women students who had come to Britain on these exchanges, and whom the Conners later visited in their homes in Egypt. A Coptic Christian, student of those days and now a grandmother, wrote a few days ago: "To me Chérie was a typical British lady, elegant and beautiful and at the same time a hard worker for whatever she thought was a real cause."

What were the "real causes" for Britain in regard to the Middle East in her day? In 1956 the British Government committed what is still our biggest political blunder since World War Two, the invasion of Egypt in the so-called Suez crisis. At a stroke our Government lost friends across the Arab world, in the process deceiving America, the Commonwealth, and the UK Parliament and electorate.

Chérie and Bill and their colleagues played a major role in restoring that lost trust over the next decades. In the 1960s MRA put on a series of plays at the Westminster Theatre which cheerfully highlighted the moral essentials for a healthy society. One evening a week for years the Conners laid on a buffet reception before the play and invited Arab diplomats, business people, students and others. Chérie would spend hours with a team preparing a tasty Arab meal for 50 or 60 people, and then change into evening dress for the reception and play. She and Bill also entertained generously in their own home. They received invitations to Arab diplomatic receptions, and Chérie attended meetings of the Arab Women's Council.

By the end of that decade Egypt was much more open to British visitors, and the student exchange programme could begin. This required a parallel effort to find young British with the right spirit to take part. One of those, Alison Shambrook, describes life with Chérie and Bill: "I marvel now at how they honoured me in expecting me to be part of an evening, perhaps with a guest who seemed rather prestigious, or later part of a trip to Egypt to keep alive the friendships with Egyptian students. I felt I mattered and that I could be part of something, even if I did not quite understand what."

Another "real cause" was for British Christians to understand how to relate to Muslims appreciatively and constructively. Chérie and Bill were ahead of their time in forging that spiritual comradeship. A message of condolence has come from an Egyptian Muslim woman now in California, Aida Osman. She and her late husband Fathi Osman used to live in Ealing. A book has just been published about him, one of the leading scholars of the worldwide Muslim reform movement. It tells how he was imprisoned in Egypt for his beliefs 50 years ago, and how he

launched into interfaith work in the wider world. Chérie and Bill got to know him and his wife in London, and became their close friends. The book pays tribute to Moral Re-Armament as a stimulus to, and channel of, Fathi Osman's thought.

Time fails to talk about Chérie and Bill's friendships with a senior Palestinian leader and his family; with several of the peacemakers of Lebanon from different communities during and after the long civil war; with members of the British establishment who were interested in the human approach to the great issues of the day. Scores of such people passed through their home, and went away encouraged. Bill came across as the daring innovator and articulate persuader who caught people's imagination. It was Chérie in her straightforward genuineness who clothed each encounter with heart and humanity.

One more "real cause" for Chérie was the experience that if you take time to listen in silence (to conscience, to the inner voice, to God), especially before the clamour of the day, and act on the thoughts you get, you may be able to help another person in what they face, or bring some light into a tough situation. Chérie had that simplicity of faith. There was a group of colleagues who met with them in London at least twice a week to see what we should do next with our exchange programme and other initiatives related to the Muslim world. Three of the men were called Peter. (Glad we're all on parade today with wives Alison and Jean, though Su can't be here). I was the one with experience of Sudan, having taught there for eight years, and usually had something to say on the subject. Yet it was Chérie one day who looked me straight in the eye and said, "I believe now is the time to start a programme with Sudan." Those words seemed to come straight from her soul, with the ring of truth, as so often. Jean and I went to Sudan to see if people there were interested. All the doors opened. It was the start of five years' work with two Sudanese universities, and the profoundest of friendships some of which last to this day. We all played our part but Chérie was the initiator of that phase of work.

Her life, and her husband's life, can be summed up in words from a letter written over nineteen hundred years ago by St Paul to his friends in Corinth. Bill underlined them in his Bible:

"Our hearts ache, but at the same time we have the joy of the Lord. We are poor, but we give rich spiritual gifts to others. We own nothing, and yet we enjoy everything."

Thanks be to God.