

YMCA Spiritual Legacy Series

George Williams – Founder of the YMCA

George Williams



Scouting. Sir George Williams did that as founder of the Young Men's Christian Association.

Many people today have no idea what the "C" in YMCA refers to. Powerful movements, especially those touching young people, can usually be traced to one visionary individual who sets the "genetic code" of the future movement. Lord Baden-Powell did that for

Sir George Williams was the youngest of the eight sons of Amos & Elisabeth Williams, of Ashway Farm, Dulverton, in the county of Somerset. He was born on October 11th, 1821. George Williams represented the massive 19th century shift from the rural to the burgeoning English cities

"I entered Bridgewater", said Williams, "a careless, thoughtless, godless, swearing young fellow". But the town of Bridgewater where he first learned the draper (clothing-goods) trade

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had a lasting impact on him. "I first learned in Bridgewater", said Williams, "to love my dear Lord and Saviour for what He had done for me... I

was on the downward road... I said, 'Cannot I escape? Is there no escape?' They told me in this town of Bridgewater how to escape - Confess your sins, accept Christ, trust in Him, yield your heart to the Saviour." Williams commented: "I cannot describe to you the joy and peace that flowed into my soul when I first saw that the Lord Jesus had died for my sins, and that they were all forgiven."

From that moment on, Williams' motto became: 'It is not how little but how much we can do for others'... J.E. Hodder said that "it was impossible to resent his cheerful, unaffected sincerity; his manly directness; his courageous simplicity."

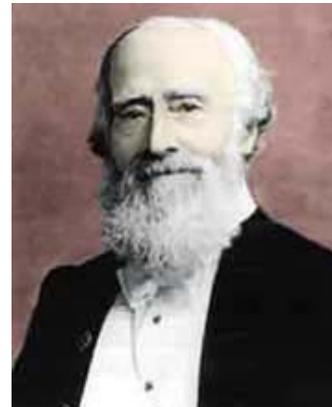
On June 6, 1844, twelve men, all but one associates of Williams' firm, met in his bedroom and created the Young Men's Christian Association. Its original intent was merely to work with employees of other drapery houses. The era was one of evangelical advance. Associations to deal with the dreadful social and moral consequences of the industrial revolution were springing up everywhere in Protestant countries. The YMCA hired a hall and assumed the task of reclaiming men through lectures, exercise and innocent amusement.

Many prominent men threw their weight behind the work. Lord Shaftesbury was the YMCA's president for a time. Thomas Binney and other evangelical leaders gave their support.

The organization caught on like wildfire. Long before Williams' death in 1905, it had achieved a membership of 150,000 in Britain and half a million in America with thousands of branches worldwide.

Williams was a keen and brilliant businessman, who understood the art of delegation and ongoing accountability. From his growing and prosperous clothing-good business, he regularly gave away two-thirds of his income, in order to help others. Williams once said: "What is my duty in business? To be righteous. To do right things between man and man. To buy honestly. Not to deceive or falsely represent or colour." He once prayed: "Oh Lord, You have given me money. Give me a heart to do your will with it. May I use it for you and seek to get wisdom from you to use it aright."

In Williams' room hung a framed card illumined with the words "God First". George Williams had learnt from Dr. Charles Finney that everything worth doing needed to begin with, and end with prayer. Williams' early YMCA gatherings met to pray for the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of their co-workers and neighbors. His very last words, which he spoke while at the 1905 World YMCA Jubilee, were: "...if you wish to have a happy, useful, and profitable life, give your hearts to God while you are young." He was then carried to his room and died.



George Williams in old age

For his service to the well-being of the nation, Queen Victoria knighted him. He has been commemorated by a stained glass window in Westminster Abbey and is buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, both among the highest honors given to English national heroes.

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