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How Oswald Chambers's Wife Compiled and Self-published His Books

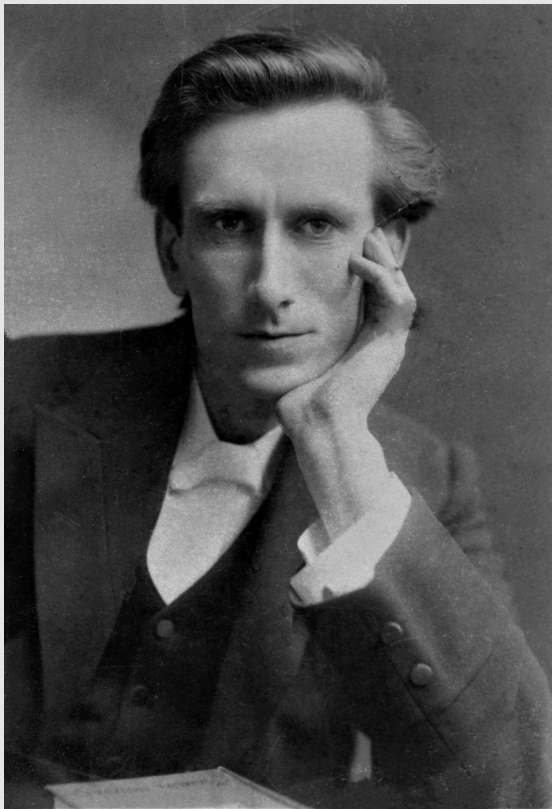
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Biographer of *Mrs. Oswald Chambers: The Woman Behind the World's Bestselling Devotional*

"I want us to write and preach; if I could talk to you and you shorthand it down and then type it, what ground we would get over! I wonder if it kindles you as it does me!"

Oswald Chambers (McCasland 1993, 171)

When fledgling British author and Bible preacher Oswald Chambers wrote those words to his



[Image 1] Oswald Chambers (photo provided by Michelle Ule)

fiancé in 1909, he had no idea what those hopes kindled. He only oversaw three books published in his too-short lifetime: *Biblical Psychology* (1911), *Studies in Sermon on the Mount* (1915), and *Baffled to Fight Better* (1917). Twenty-seven more followed, all with him listed as the author. But who wrote them if Chambers died in Cairo, Egypt, on November 15, 1917? The answer is in fact a master compiler/editor who fashioned seven years' worth of shorthand notes into a legacy still in print today: Gertrude "Biddy" Chambers.

But why? As an act of love for her late husband and for God. Long before she ever met Oswald Chambers, Biddy (nicknamed "Beloved Disciple," by Chambers, which he shortened to 'BD', slurred into Biddy) worked

as a secretary. A dedicated and focused woman, she had perfected her shorthand skills by the time she met Chambers. Indeed, Bidy could ‘take down’ words at the phenomenal rate of 250 words per minute. (The average person speaks at 125 words per minute)

Attracted to the pretty young woman who shared his desire for ministry, Chambers took special note of her keen mind, understanding heart, and practical abilities. He particularly appreciated her skill because, as a popular Pentecostal League of Prayer speaker, he already believed “the most lasting of all preaching is with the pen” (McCasland, 1993, 255). It was a match made in heaven. Their partnership began during their American honeymoon when Bidy first picked up her pencil and sat in the back at the camp meetings Chambers conducted that summer. She soon found she retained his teaching better if she wrote down what he said. Later, when they opened the Bible Training College (BTC) in London’s Clapham Common in 1911, she worked as both the school’s ‘Lady Superintendent’ and Chambers’s personal stenographer.

Throughout the college’s five-year duration, Bidy took notes of nearly all of Chambers’s lectures. When she accompanied him to League of Prayer meetings, she picked up her pad and went to work. Afterwards, she typed up her notes and often fashioned them into magazine articles. As Chambers wrote in the preface to the original 1911 edition of *Biblical Psychology*: “The reports were taken by my wife and sent on to the editors of *The Revivalist* [magazine] who now, out of the generosity of their hearts, are publishing them in book form” (Chamber 2000, 133). He subsequently used *Biblical Psychology* and his studies in *the Sermon on the Mount* in 1912, which was also organized by Bidy as BTC textbooks.

The Chambers family closed the BTC in 1915 when they moved to a YMCA soldiers’ mission outside Cairo, Egypt. Whilst there, Chambers gave many talks, and several magazines, including *The Revivalist* in the US and *Spiritual Life* in the UK, published articles Bidy



[Image 2] Bidy Chambers (photo provided by Michelle Ule)

organised from notes taken during these YMCA talks. Her husband's death in November 1917 left Bidy in charge of the YMCA camp at Zeitoun. She received hundreds of condolence letters. Overwhelmed by the tasks of replying to so many – often 100 messages a day – Bidy edited one of Chambers's talks into a small pamphlet and sent it in reply. The pamphlet in turn inspired return letters, often asking for more of Chambers's wisdom. Using her notes and with the YMCA's financial support, she compiled a monthly pamphlet for the rest of the war. Soon, the YMCA was mailing 10,000 pamphlets a month to all Allied theatres of war.

Bidy also sent both the pamphlets and a copy of *Baffled to Fight Better*, which was published in 1917 by Nile Mission Press – the book Chambers had finished reviewing mere weeks before his death – to former BTC student C. Rae Griffin. As the director of a London publishing house, he already had turned some of Chambers's BTC talks into saleable pamphlets. He began reprinting Bidy's pamphlets, as well as *Baffled to Fight Better*. Proceeds supported the Zeitoun camp ministry. Surprised by the enthusiastic response, Bidy examined her notes for other inspirational writings. Among Chambers's papers, she found a list of pithy statements he wrote daily on a camp blackboard, such as, "Don't waste time asking God to keep you from doing things – don't do them!" (Chambers 2000, 1141) Taking 365 of these sayings, Bidy created a narrow booklet suitable for a soldier's breast pocket. She called it *Seed Thoughts Calendar*. Nile Mission Press and the YMCA gave away thousands of copies. Bidy's sense of God's direction and guidance in preparing the pamphlets brought great satisfaction. Each finished project convinced her she could produce many books from the Chambers notes she took down in Egypt and her shorthanded notes stored in London.

Ten years later, she explained why Chambers's teachings and insights were essential in the introduction to *My Utmost for His Highest*, citing Robert McCheyne's words:

"Men return again and again to the few who have mastered the spiritual secret, whose life has been hid with Christ in God." It is because it is felt that the author is one to whose teaching men will return, that this book has been prepared, and it is sent out with the prayer that day by day the messages may continue to bring the quickening life and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Chambers 2000, 734).

The success of the pamphlets, and letters from so many readers, convinced Bidy that she needed to produce more books. As she wrote in her diary, "It is a joy to step out in complete dependence on God and to look forward to the new things he will open up" (Chamber, B, 1919).

Oswald Chambers did not believe in life insurance and left his wife and child no financial resources. After her return to England in 1919 with her five-year-old daughter Kathleen, Bidy visited former BTC students. Many donated funds to produce more Oswald Chambers material. Once reunited with her trunks full of BTC notes, Bidy turned to Griffin for advice. His publishing house only produced technical journals, but he had good relationships with other publishers, paper merchants, printers, and bookbinders. Griffin introduced her to a Christian book publisher. Unfortunately, the publisher saw nothing exceptional in Chambers's material and declined to help. In her diary, Bidy described herself as "undone" and left the meeting feeling foolish. Further reflection led her to another decision: "We must simply go on our way with God. It seemed like a closing of a chapter ... I feel a clean space now, liberty only to go along the lines of spontaneous moral originality" (Chambers, B. 1919).

By choosing to continue without a publishing house's backing (aside from Griffin's encouragement), Bidy became a self-publisher 75 years before the birth of Amazon.com. This meant that Bidy controlled the content, design, page style, and covers, but she also needed to arrange for marketing and distribution.

As a Zeitoun soldier wrote in her obituary many years later, "Mrs. Chambers, left homeless, without means of support, and with a small daughter to educate, started absolutely from scratch ... yet nothing daunted her in her enthusiasm to get her husband's message circulated" (Pulford 1966). Within a week of her discouraging appointment, Bidy completed a new version of *the Seed Thoughts Calendar*. With Griffin's help, she arranged its physical publication with London printer S. W. Partridge, Ltd. The calendar appeared in London bookstores in 1921. With that, Bidy Chambers was 'in business'.

Some might argue that Oswald Chambers's 'insurance' was the material stored in Bidy's notes. In compiling and selling books, Bidy might have made enough money to support herself and her daughter. However, she did not see Oswald's talks that way. Bidy felt Chambers's life and work were gifts. God gave Oswald

the insight and skills; the ideas belonged to God. To that end, she turned all earned book revenues into more books. As her only child, Kathleen Chambers later explained in her interview with David McCasland: “The money aspect was always so careful where my mother was concerned. We didn’t spend the money or use the money except for putting the books in print. Nobody, as it were, sort of made anything out of the books except to have them continually in print” (McCasland 1993, 255).

When caring for her daughter required more funds, Bidy opened a boarding house for university students in Oxford. After making breakfast for her four boarders, taking her daughter to school, and running household errands, Bidy compiled *My Utmost for His Highest*. The idea of writing a devotional may have come from her lifelong reading of the Bagster family’s *Daily Light on the Daily Path*, or possibly from receiving a copy of *Streams in the Desert* from her friend Lettie Cowman. Bidy designed *My Utmost for His Highest* in the same style. She provided a title, quoted a snippet from a Bible verse – usually less than ten words – and then used several paragraphs from as many as three different lectures by Chambers to augment and underscore the Bible verse’s theme. In this way, Oswald’s words instructed, but Bidy’s mind compiled them into a complete message. She selected the book’s title from one of Oswald’s ‘signature’ remarks: “We have to realize that no effort can be too high . . . It must be my utmost for His highest all the time.” (Chambers, 525) By this time, Griffin had arranged for all the Oswald Chambers books to be printed by Alden Press of Oxford and distributed to bookstores by Simpkin Marshall of London, the largest book wholesaler in the Commonwealth. Friends again donated funds to pay for the book’s publication. First published in England in October 1927, *My Utmost for His Highest* has never been out of print.

Following the success of *My Utmost for His Highest*, Bidy’s friends formed the Oswald Chambers Publication Society, Ltd. (OCPA). Serving as a team of advisers, five people assisted Bidy with business-related decisions. As the Chairman of the OCPA, Bidy insisted she be allowed to give away books to whomever she wanted. Bidy Chambers focused on ministry, not revenue. Whilst some would say this was no way to run a publishing house, it worked for the woman who could read the shorthanded notes that produced the books.

Whilst we know that OCPA is still operating now in 2024, World War II nearly brought an end to the Chambers enterprise. In July 1940, with a nervous eye toward Hitler's activity on the European continent, British insurers sent letters to all British publishing entities, including OCPA, to warn of potentially devastating results if they did not carry proper insurance. In accordance with 'the teaching of the books' (to trust God designed all events, including potential catastrophes, according to his plan), the OCPA voted not to insure their unsold Chambers books. In addition, OCPA wrote to Simpkin Marshall to advise them if a fire happened in their warehouses, OCPA would not seek a claim against the book distributors, "even if circumstances caused them [OCPA] to regret the decision" (Chambers 1940).

Alas, the 'Crematorium of the Books' occurred on 29 December 1940 (Holman 2008, 30). Under a bomber's moon, 24,000 high explosives and 100,000 German incendiaries were released with the aim of destroying St. Paul's Cathedral. Fire watchers saved the cathedral but could do little about the surrounding publishing warehouses. What the fire did not burn, water sprayed by firefighters finished off, leaving 4,000,000 destroyed books. The damage included the Simpkin Marshall warehouses and all the unsold Oswald Chambers books.

As Chairman, Bidy Chambers maintained a simple attitude: if God wanted the work to continue, it would. If God wanted to end the production of the books, God would tell Bidy what he wanted her to do next. However, God had other plans for Chambers's books. Copies of unsold books and printing plates turned up in unexpected places. By the war's end, OCPA had found enough plates to reprint and put on sale all of the Oswald Chambers books. *My Utmost for His Highest* was smuggled into German concentration camps throughout WWII. Copies of the devotional slipped through the Iron Curtain with 'God Smuggler' Brother Andrew. Translators ultimately translated the devotional into 47 different languages.

As Bidy herself wrote to a friend long before her 1966 death, "The books go out all the time, and God still blesses the messages" (1957). Indeed, *My Utmost for His Highest* continues to encourage, challenge, intimidate, and bless people to this very day at www.utmost.org, thanks to Bidy Chambers.

About the Author

Michelle Ule is the biographer of *Mrs Oswald Chambers: The Woman behind the World's Bestselling Devotional*, as well as *Overflowing Faith: Lettie Cowman and Streams in the Desert*. She is also an historical novelist, including *A Poppy in Remembrance*, a WWI coming-of-age novel featuring Oswald and Bidy Chambers. Learn more at her website, www.michelleule.com, where she has published more than 100 blog posts about the Chambers family and *My Utmost for His Highest*.

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