

CHARLOTTE MARY YONGE

1823-1901

A Victorian novelist in her Bicentenary year

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Charlotte Mary Yonge is Hampshire's other woman novelist, and, like Jane Austen, she has a memorial in Winchester Cathedral. Following her death on 24 March 1901 there was a suggestion that she too should be buried in the cathedral, but in fact her grave lies near the south door of St Matthew's, Otterbourne, in the village four miles from Winchester where she was born, spent all her life, and died. Her memorial in the cathedral is the carved wooden reredos in the Lady Chapel, erected by subscription in 1905.

In her day Charlotte Yonge was highly regarded. Her most well-known novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) was a best-seller, avidly read even by young men in the Crimean War, as was its successor, *Heartsease* (1854). *The Daisy Chain* (1856) was the first of the long family chronicles that became her trademark, and which she thought had sold the most of all her books.¹ Although she continued to write novels, including historical novels, for an adult readership, she gradually turned more and more to



writing for young people and children, so that by the end of the century she was regarded as a writer for girls. Of the forty-odd volumes of the Macmillan uniform edition of her works, perhaps eight can be regarded as novels, seventeen are historicals, and twelve are what we might now call 'teen fic'; this collection does not include her many historical schoolbooks, her numerous books of religious teaching, her massive *History of Christian Names* and her biography of her cousin, the martyred missionary bishop

¹ See letter to Mary Elizabeth Christie, 8 Dec 1896, online in *The Letters of Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901)* edited by Charlotte Mitchell, Ellen Jordan and Helen Schinske, at <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge>.

John Coleridge Patteson. It is generally held that anyone who says they have all Charlotte Yonge ever wrote is telling a lie, for quite apart from the quantity (at least 250), many of her works were ephemeral and are now impossible to find.²

Enthusiastically reviewed in the 1850s and 1860s, that she did not achieve the status of such contemporary women novelists as the Brontës, George Eliot, or Mrs Gaskell, let alone Jane Austen, or such male competitors as Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope, may be attributed not just to a lesser talent (her characterisation is good, her plots on the whole not) but to the fact that increasingly she aimed at a different audience and with a different purpose. She was not looking for fame or fortune. Born as she was into a comfortably off gentry family, she did not write to support herself or her family and, brought up in austere religious (though not joyless) surroundings she was emphatically not seeking personal glory. At the very beginning of her writing career, in 1844, before the publication of *Abbeychurch*, her first real book, her father put it to her that there were three reasons for wishing to publish: love of vanity, or of gain, or of the wish to do good. 'I answered, with tears, that I really hoped I had written with the purpose of being useful to young girls like myself'.³ Wishing to do good through her writing remained her abiding motive, and though in later life her brother's financial difficulties did require her monetary assistance, her original literary earnings were devoted to such good causes as the Melanesian Mission⁴, and she never spent more on herself than was absolutely necessary.

Quite apart from this over-riding principle, Charlotte Yonge's life did not give her the wide experience to become a great novelist. What she did become was a very good writer for children and girls – she may be said, if not to have actually invented, to have greatly developed fiction for adolescents. From 1851 to 1891 (and then, with a

² A full bibliography, as far as is possible, may be found on the website of the Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship <http://www.charlottemyonge.org.uk>

³ *Lifelong Friends*, *The Monthly Packet* Dec.1894, reprinted in *A Chaplet for Charlotte Yonge* ed Battscombe and Laski, London 1965.

⁴ The Melanesian Mission was founded in 1849 by George Augustus Selwyn, first Bishop of New Zealand, to support the work of the Anglican church in Melanesia, and is still in being. Mrs Yonge was particularly interested in its work and no doubt encouraged her daughter to support it. The proceeds of *The Heir of Redclyffe* made a substantial contribution to the Mission's schooner, the *Southern Cross* (1854), and all the proceeds of *The Daisy Chain* were given to the Mission.

collaborator, to 1899) she edited *The Monthly Packet*, officially of *Evening Readings for Younger Members of the English Church*, which rapidly became aimed at 'young ladies' from fifteen to twenty-five. Many of her major works of fiction were first serialized in *The Monthly Packet*, with their intended readership determining their scope. She specialised in drawing a large family of gentry or professional background and taking its members through various vicissitudes of fortune to established adult life, showing how following (or not following) the precepts of high Anglicanism determined their moral success. She did not overtly preach Tractarianism – that would have been against the principle of reticence on religious matters which she imbibed from John Keble - but she makes quite clear what she considered the best path through life. Contemporary readers would have picked up the indications of her churchmanship in her books, and realised her distaste for enthusiasm and her open disapproval of religious dissent. Later readers were either unaware of, or cheerfully ignored, her subtle hints, and enjoyed the books for their lively characters and occasional excitements, while being able to identify with their 'ordinary' settings. She was extremely good at depicting groups of young people, often through their conversation, and her characters are alive and attractive. Life was not always easy for the right-minded, but we are shown how they cope successfully with their difficulties. Ethel May, in *The Daisy Chain*, (serialized 1853-5, published 1856), is clever and deeply religious, longing passionately to assist the inhabitants of a neglected hamlet by building a church and a school, but she is also careless and clumsy and has to learn to manage herself as well as to take effectively the first small steps which will ultimately achieve her ambition. She is not a pious prig but a real girl, and we care about her and her family.

The kind of author Charlotte Yonge became was determined by her own background. Born in Otterbourne on 11 August 1823 she was the elder child of William Crawley Yonge, scion of a Devonshire gentry family, who had in 1822 married Fanny Bargus, whose mother in comfortable widowhood had bought the small property attached to Otterbourne House. The couple had resolutely maintained their affection through years of opposition from both their families – William's father did not wish him to give up a promising career in the army (he had fought at Waterloo), and Fanny's mother did not want her only child to marry into a marching regiment. Eventually William agreed to retire from the army and settle down on his mother-in-law's small estate,

where he threw himself into such good works as doctoring the poor (with advice from a medical brother), reforming the village schools, becoming a magistrate, and building a new church in Otterbourne. He was fortunate that a neighbouring landowner was Sir William Heathcote of Hursley, that John Keble was from 1836 his parish priest, and that among his friends was George Moberly, future bishop of Salisbury and from 1835 headmaster of Winchester College. They and their families formed a circle of friendship which was religious in practice as well as precept, educated and literate, and in deep sympathy with each other's ambitions. The fathers of both William Yonge and Fanny Bergus had been clergymen, and William in particular had been brought up in dutiful obedience to the old high church Anglican tradition which enjoined service to God through devotion to the Church (of England) and an obligation to help their poorer neighbours. Charlotte Yonge was to draw a picture of her parents' early years in Otterbourne in her late novel *The Carbonels* (1895), in her autobiographical writing⁵ and in the factual *Old Times at Otterbourne* (1891).

One result of William Yonge's lack of a profession was that he had time to devote to his daughter's education. Her earliest lessons were done with her mother, but after the birth of her brother her father took in hand her mathematics and writing (difficult, since she seems to have been left-handed but was of course, typically of the period, made to use her right hand). He was a stern master, but Charlotte loved and respected him, and he was her ideal all her life. Although in her later years she was interested in, and acknowledged the worth of, such schools as Winchester High School (now St Swithun's), she remained convinced that the best education for girls of her own class was at home, under the supervision of an intelligent and right-minded father.

Her mother Fanny is a more shadowy figure. Charlotte certainly loved her, and found her congenial, but never quite draws us her picture. We are told that she was a good linguist in French and Italian, well-read, small of stature and delicate of health, that she took great care of her daughter to the extent of forbidding her to enter the labourers' cottages (for fear of idle gossip), and sincerely religious. It was Fanny whose work for the village girls started the seven-year-old Charlotte on the Sunday-school teaching she carried on for the rest of her life, and Fanny whose desire for a

⁵ Included in *Charlotte Mary Yonge, Her Life and Letters*, Christabel Coleridge, London 1903.

new girls' school brought about Charlotte's first book, the privately-printed *Le Château de Melville*, a French reader based on stories she had written for her French master and translations of English works (including one by Fanny herself). We have a sense that Fanny was repressed by her own mother, who did not die until 1843, aged over 90, and who was very much the mistress of Otterbourne House. Publication of *Le Château de Melville*, even with the object of raising money for the school, was opposed by old Mrs Bargus and only permitted if it was anonymous. But quiet, gentle Fanny seems to have had a streak of determination, as shown by her resolution to marry William Yonge, and she was able to fight for her daughter where perhaps she had failed to fight for herself and *Le Château de Melville* was published in 1839.

There is little enough to tell about Charlotte Yonge's uneventful life. She grew up intelligent and dutiful, a solitary though not unhappy child whose only sibling, her brother Julian, was not born until she was six-and-a-half. She had no close friends of her own age nearby, but until she was thirteen she had the excitement of an annual visit to cousins in Devonshire, where she could be one of a large, rumbustious family. These visits ceased when her parents became involved in the new church project, and her grandmother became too infirm to be left. At the same time Keble became vicar of the joint parish of Hursley and Otterbourne, and his preparation for her confirmation influenced Charlotte for life. She had the interest of the building of the new church (to be reflected in *Abbeychurch*), the intellectual stimulus of more advanced teaching (including starting Latin with her father when he began to teach her brother), and of gradually taking a more adult part in her parents' social circle, both with the Heathcotes at Hursley and with the Moberlys in Winchester.

With adult life came her embarkation on her literary career. She began with books for girls like herself, with stories for the village children like the ones she was teaching in Sunday-school⁶ and history textbooks at the suggestion of an older friend who was running a small school for girls. *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) was much discussed as she wrote it among her family circle and marked an advance into more adult literature. It had an attractive hero in Guy Morville, a young baronet who has to learn to curb himself and his inherited temper, a charming heroine in Amy, his guardian's daughter,

⁶ *Langley Little Ones*, 1850.

with whom he falls in love, an agreeably irritating (but not wicked) villain in his older cousin Philip, who always has to know best, and amusement in Amy's crippled brother Charles. There is enough of a plot to keep things moving (not something Charlotte Yonge always managed), some thrilling scenes of seaside and mountain rescue, and the bitter-sweet finale of Guy's death and Philip's succession. It sounds sentimental, but the characters are so well-drawn that the effect is not maudlin, and it captured the public.

The *Heir* was just meeting its success, *The Monthly Packet* a new venture, and Charlotte happily absorbed in her writing, when her personal life received its first serious blow. Her brother entered the Rifle Brigade in 1852 and had just embarked for the Crimea in 1854, to his family's apprehensive pride, when her father died suddenly after a stroke, aged only fifty-eight. Charlotte had to endure her own grief and support her mother, dealing with all the practicalities of bereavement because of her brother's absence. It was both a relief and a certain source of chagrin when he came home, because, while an Otterbourne neighbour took part in and survived the charge of the Light Brigade, Julian Yonge was invalided out of the army for nothing more heroic than sunstroke. Although there was never any suggestion that his personal life was unsatisfactory, he failed to find a worthwhile or lucrative career,⁷ and his financial innocence later lost so much of his modest fortune that his sister, as we have mentioned, had to use her savings and her earnings to help support him and his family, when she had hoped to be able to provide the endowment that would make Otterbourne a separate parish. In the 1850s and 60s, however, there was enough money for Julian to marry, and to finance the move which Charlotte and her mother made in 1862 from Otterbourne House to Elderfield 'Cottage' along the road. This house was then much smaller than it is today, but was still a fairly commodious residence. Charlotte Yonge had never had a writing-room of her own in Otterbourne House, and did not have one now, but no doubt her literary work was easier without her small nephews and nieces underfoot. Her life was narrow but not dull, with her writing and her editorial work, and many of her immediate social circle available. There were long visits to be made in the summer months, notably some weeks in Ireland in

⁷ See Susan Walton, *Imagining Soldiers and Fathers in the Mid-Victorian Era: Charlotte Yonge's Models of Manliness*, Ashgate, 2010, particularly pp. 58-69.

1857 for a cousin's wedding in Dublin (her mother's stepbrother was Sir John Colborne, 1st Lord Seaton, then Governor-General of Ireland) and to France in 1869. That followed her mother's death, on 28 September 1868, which although it left Charlotte alone was, because it followed a trying period of mental decay, in some ways a relief – Charlotte was never a good nurse, and for anyone the decline of a much-loved parent is a difficult experience.

She faced her solitary future with courage. A further blow was the death of her favourite cousin, Anne Yonge of Puslinch, with whom she had had a life-long friendship and had shared thoughts and experiences. The Kebles had died in 1866, and in the same year the Moberlys left Winchester. In 1871 William Bigg-Wither, who had been curate in charge of Otterbourne for nearly forty years, left for a parish elsewhere, and his successor was a married man to whose wife Charlotte gracefully gave way. This was in fact the time of her greatest achievements, her long novel *The Pillars of the House* (serialized 1870-3) and her most significant biography, that of her cousin John Coleridge Patteson, murdered bishop of Melanesia.⁸ Her working method, of having two or three pieces of work going at the same time, is illustrated by the account of her saying 'I have had a dreadful day. I have killed the Bishop and Felix' (the hero of *The Pillars*).⁹

From 1872 her life was circumscribed by the fact that her sister-in-law's youngest sister came to live at Elderfield, which meant that it was no longer possible to have guests to stay and difficult for Charlotte to leave home for any length of time. Gertrude Walter was congenial, but considerably younger than Charlotte, and though she was a companion she suffered severely from rheumatoid arthritis and was ultimately confined to bed. She may have taken charge of the housekeeping, but she could not supply the kind of literary criticism Charlotte Yonge had been given by her parents, the Kebles and Moberlys. The friends left to her were devoted but could not guide or correct her. Public taste had changed, and she was now regarded only as a writer for girls and children.¹⁰

⁸ Susan Walton, *op.cit.* Chapter 7, 'The Heirs of *The Heir of Redclyffe* in the South Pacific' has a useful account of Bishops Selwyn and Patteson and the missionary work in Melanesia.

⁹ Georgina Battiscombe, *Charlotte Mary Yonge*, 1943, pp.134-5, quoting the Moberly family.

¹⁰ See, for instance, the review of *Magnum Bonum* in *The Pall Mall Gazette* of 6 Feb 1880, which refers to 'the young ladies who form the bulk of Miss Yonge's readers and admirers'.

She went on writing, but the books grew shorter and less enthralling to new readers, while her brother's difficulties meant that she had to produce more quickly than was good for her work. In 1891 came the sadness of Julian Yonge's decision to sell Otterbourne House and move to London, where he shortly afterwards died. Fortunately, in the following year, a niece's husband, Henry Albany Bowles, became vicar of Otterbourne, giving her renewed family support and interest, but she was increasingly aware that life was passing on. In 1895 she lost her devoted maid Harriet Spratt, who had come to Otterbourne House as a young teenager and served Charlotte in various capacities, and as a friend, ever since. Her passing left a big blank, as did Gertrude Walter's death in 1897. Still her faith sustained her, and she worked on until the end, continuing to visit and teach in the village schools, and attending church every day. From 1890 she edited *Mothers in Council*, the magazine of the Mothers' Union, which was aimed at the middle, rather than working-class, mothers; this was at the request of Mary Sumner, the founder of the movement, wife of George Henry Sumner, then Archdeacon of Winchester and later Bishop of Guildford and, of course, son of Charles Sumner, Bishop of Winchester from 1827 to 1869. Mrs Sumner approached the famous author Miss Yonge with some trepidation, but was soon on easy terms with her.¹¹ Indeed, Charlotte Yonge seems to have felt consoled by being asked to edit *Mothers in Council* for her dismissal as sole editor of *The Monthly Packet*. In 1901 Bishop Sumner was a leading figure in the movement to erect memorials to Charlotte M. Yonge in Otterbourne church and Winchester Cathedral.

All her life Winchester had been 'her' cathedral. When the Moberlys moved to Salisbury she visited them and appreciated that cathedral, yet she wrote '... the Cathedral could only be a second love to old Winchester. One gets through it so much sooner, as we found when we tried to go round it, than we used when we went round the massive old edifice, the growth of ages, whereas Salisbury always seems to me as if it might be a sort of petrified iceberg grown up in a night.'¹² In 1869, describing Bishop Wilberforce's enthronement, she wrote to a friend '... I never saw the Cathedral like it was to-day. I really feel some parts of the day were among the best delights of my life. To see that dear old Cathedral which in some respects is one of the things I

¹¹ See Mary Sumner's account quoted in Coleridge, *op.cit.*, pp 288-291.

¹² Quoted in *Dulce Domum*, George Moberly, *his Family and Friends*, C.A.E. Moberly, London 1911.

love above all, doing as it ought to do, and ringing from everywhere with its voice, and overflowing with white robes, was something precious and delightful beyond all.¹³ This experience was reflected the following year when she incorporated a choral festival in Chapter XI of *The Pillars of the House*, in a cathedral clearly based on Winchester. In 1889, in her last major historical fiction, she used the city as one of the locations for *A Reputed Changeling*, other settings in the same book being Fareham and Portsea, where she knew her Bargus ancestors had lived.

Perhaps Winchester might have been an appropriate resting-place for her. She identified very closely with her father's Devonshire family, but on her mother's side her ancestry belonged to Hampshire, and though she did not stress it she never forgot it. She is truly Hampshire's other authoress. But in the end, after her death on 24 March 1901, she was buried in Otterbourne, the home of her whole life, beside her parents and at the foot of the cross she had raised as Keble's memorial. Crowds came to her funeral, and the schoolchildren she had taught so faithfully lined her grave with the spring flowers she had loved.

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PHOTOGRAPH

Signed carte de visite of Charlotte Yonge, probably taken by her cousin Duke Yonge in 1858 (courtesy of Hilary Clare).

¹³ Letter to Marianne Dyson, 16 Dec. 1869. Printed in Coleridge, *Life*, p.260 and may be found online in *The Letters of Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901)* edited by Charlotte Mitchell, Ellen Jordan and Helen Schinske, At <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge>.