

Charlotte Mary Yonge

Mary Seeger

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In the decade which filled the middle of the last century, a number of writers whose names have long been familiar won, by the publication of one novel, of a sudden a fame that was more or less enduring. Thackeray led the list with *Vanity Fair*, and Charlotte Bronte followed soon after with *Jane Eyre*. In 1850 Charlotte Yonge's most important book *The Heir of Redcliffe* appeared. A little later John Halifax achieved as sudden and brilliant a reputation, while Anthony Trollope and Mrs. Oliphant came before the public with books that are still read and liked. Scenes from *Clerical Life* and *Richard Feverel* were not far behind; and time, which reverses so many verdicts, has placed this last book at length very high on the list. It has not been Miss Yonge's good fortune to hold in all respects the place she made her own so early in life, but it has been and still remains her distinction to have been, among English novelists, the exponent of a movement that changed to a great extent the life of the common people.

George Eliot in her earlier books had not passed beyond its influence, Charlotte Bronte rebuked some of its phases with fine satire, Thackeray's cynical temper remained untouched by the main currents of an influence that furnished Trollope and Mrs. Oliphant with material for much realistic study. Meredith, whose genius is of the heights, seems scarcely to have heard the murmur of its wave; but Miss Yonge was in it and of it. She came of a line of churchmen on both sides. Her maternal grandfather had been a vicar in Hertfordshire, while her father's father held the living of Cornwall—in-Devon. The Yongses were all, whether laymen or clergy, of the ecclesiastical cult, and Charlotte, by temperament and training, was true to the traditions of her race.

Long before she was born (in 1823) the forces were at work which culminated later on in the Oxford movement. All over England the small country churches were falling to pieces. Hannah More's statement that in the parish of Cheddar she found but one Bible, and "that was used to prop a flower-pot," expressed a truth that had not been outlived. Miss Yonge has left on record a vivid account of the state of things that prevailed when Keble was made vicar of the two parishes of Hursley and Otterbourne. Even those who believed the Established Church to be deadening to the life of ideas saw that with its decay apathy and ignorance were on the increase.

In the upheaval which followed the long stagnation, Hursley and its neighbourhood became a stronghold of sanity and resistance to the reactionary spirit that was driving so many fine souls, like Newman and Clough, by widely different roads away from its communion altogether.

Along with the growing sense of the importance of sacrament and symbol in the evolution of a religious faith, went a wider philanthropy and a strict belief in the strenuousness of obligation as between the rich and the poor. If Keble became the poet of the new order of things, Miss Yonge became, indirectly at least, the most faithful historian. In no other books of the period can be found such graphic and charming pictures of that side of English life which, both in religious and secular matters, was most faithful to the new ideals. She was the spokeswoman of an established order, in which she wholly believed and threw the whole force of her strong nature into the furthering of that forward movement in the Anglican Church which was the final outcome of the Tractarian controversy.

If among those who knew her there are many who wished that she might have studied human nature in relations that were more universal, and who believe that a touch of that scepticism which in Miss Austen we call humour

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would have saved her to higher literary ends the fact remains that neither of these things would have been likely to make her influence in her own day and generation greater than it was.

Her fame has, undoubtedly, suffered from an excess of production an excess which has left a great part of her work stranded as wanting in interest and artistic quality. It is difficult to consider even a clever writer seriously who has been a prolific contributor to the several fields of biography, history and romance, and who has succeeded almost equally well in each. Once or twice only did she rise to a high level of dramatic portrayal, as in the *Heir of Redcliffe*. This, her first successful book, was followed rapidly by many others. The *Daisy Chain*, its more powerful, but less interesting sequel; *The Trial*, *Heartsease*, *The Pillars of the House*, *The Clever Woman of the Family* and a score of others were published in close succession; and later began that charming series of historical novels for young readers, which in their own way have never been surpassed.

During years of constant and rapid production her life to an onlooker was conspicuously devoid of varied or picturesque experience. Nearly the whole of her long life from its beginning was spent in the little village of Otterbourne, near Winchester. The region round about is full of historic interest, and in summer of abounding charm. The road thither winds through a broken and hilly country, dipping now and then into a green valley or climbing long slopes, flecked at intervals with dark green yews. On one side are the austere lines of the downs, on the other stretch fragrant meadows, with occasional groups of low-thatched cottages, that seem long ago to have sent forth groundward shoots and taken root in the soil. A slight detour takes us through Hursley and the little hamlet of Pit, where, through Miss Yonge's efforts, a church and school have been established. Perhaps this is the church whose corner-stone we saw laid with such breathless interest in *The Daisy Chain*. The church at Hursley we know was rebuilt mainly with the profits of *The Christian Year*; and in the embowered garden which surrounds one of the most charming vicarages in England Newman said good-by to Keble for the last time. The neighbourhood is not without association that might have been missed elsewhere. The small house at Otterbourne has opened its doors to many notable people, Keble's friends and her own. At any rate, it was the environment that made the enormous output of her life possible. For Miss Yonge has written about one hundred and twenty books. She herself could hardly have told how many. A large number were written to point a passing moral, and others as a sort of paedagogical stop-gap to the demands of the parochial Sunday-school and library; but in the midst of this mass of work, more or less unilluminated by any real inspiration, certain truer and finer things shaped themselves in her imagination, in which her unquestionable gifts found their best expression.

For many years the routine of writing was varied by daily teaching in the village school and visiting among the poor and sick of the neighbourhood. A change of work was a rest, even when it meant the putting aside of one novel for a time and taking up another. This habit may account for the continual reappearance in her books of characters to whom we had thought to say good-by. Readers of an older generation who followed the fortunes of the May family through successive volumes never felt that they could see too much of them. The modern girl, who looks into life more closely, has lost the open sesame to these pages. She has no regrets that so nice a girl as Ethel does not wear her clothes as a lady born should do, nor is she interested when Norman's missionary and matrimonial plans come to a head together. She would not dream of shedding floods of tears over Guy Morville's early death or Amy's desolate widowhood. Are there any books, for that matter, that one does cry over nowadays? Is it that the pathos is too obviously claptrap and the scenes shifted for effect? Are Miss Yonge's characters too well bred for the up-to-date reader? Have honour and gentleness and courtesy the habit of sweet family affection, of mutual helpfulness the small daily graces of renunciation, grown old-fashioned in books? There are no real villains in her stories this is undoubtedly a loss. If there are any that seem unpromising in the beginning, they speedily develop qualities meet for repentance. Neither do her best characters receive the lion's share of good fortune. We half suspect sometimes that behind her Anglican prejudices lurked an embryonic rationalist. In her pages a watchful Providence raps the devout man over the knuckles and reminds him wherein he has failed. She was not far behind Huxley in her recognition of the fact that law does not excuse or condone. Dr. May's habit of reckless driving bore fruit as certainly in the death of his wife and daughter Margaret as though he had not been the most devoted husband and kindest of fathers. The rigorous experience which taught courage was never to be lamented. Ethel May, putting love aside, and with it riches and great honour, that she may be true

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to the task which is nearest, is but one of the many instances in which Miss Yonge emphasises the fact that happiness must sometimes be found in "doing without."

In spite of her excessive shyness, even a casual acquaintance would have been impressed with the directness and force of her character. Her eyes had a quick, responsive flash when anything moved her, and she was so full of eager human sympathy that a more intimate knowledge but deepened the impression that she herself was greater than anything that she had done, and that she had missed by just too much or too little, among the influences that shaped her life, the chance of writing her name among the immortals.

Mary K. Seeger.