CHARLOTTE YONGE (1823-1901)

by Lindy Bradley

The writer, Charlotte Yonge, is commemorated in Winchester Cathedral by the reredos in the Lady Chapel, a relief of the Annunciation, designed by C E Kempe. The proposal for this reredos was made to Chapter by George Sumner, Bishop of Guildford. He and his wife, Mary, founder of the Mothers’ Union, were living at No 1, Winchester Cathedral Close at the time of its installation in 1905, and had known Charlotte well.

EARLY LIFE
Charlotte Mary Yonge was born in 1823 to William and Fanny Yonge (née Bargus) in Otterbourne, a village near Winchester where she was to live all her life. Colonel William Crawley Yonge was a retired army officer, a veteran of the wars in Spain and the Battle of Waterloo and he had resigned his commission in order to marry Fanny, whose mother, Mary Bargus, refused to allow her daughter to marry a military man. He and his family lived with his mother-in-law at Otterbourne House, Charlotte’s home for 39 years. Charlotte was an only child until 1830 when, at the age of seven, her brother Julian was born. Their extended family was a large one and Charlotte enjoyed lively companionship with her cousins on holidays in Devon, but for most of the time she was alone in her own world, indoors with her dolls and the children of her imagination. She was happy but it was a solitary happiness.

William Yonge built a small school in the grounds of Otterbourne House where the mistress was an elderly servant of Lady Heathcote’s. (The Heathcotes of Hursley Park were friends of the YONGEs.) Charlotte described this mistress, “...like Katherine of Aragon, she married, or thought she married, two brothers, and had been cast off by the second. She had pretty black eyes, a bad leg, and nice manners and was ludicrously incapable of keeping order.” This was where Fanny Yonge started her
first Sunday School, which Charlotte attended from the age of six. Charlotte’s first written work was for Sunday School children.

Charlotte was educated at home by her father, studying Mathematics, Ancient History, Latin, Greek, German and religious instruction, while tutors taught her French, Spanish and Italian. William Yonge could be hard on his daughter, often reducing her to tears, but she was devoted to him and the lessons continued until Charlotte was in her 20s. This brilliant girl at Otterbourne House, though she never went to school, was extremely well educated. However, this repressive upbringing severely limited her horizons. Obedience to her parents, whom she adored, and submission to the principles of the Anglican Church formed Charlotte’s character and she dedicated herself to her family, the Church of England and to her writing.

Charlotte was a pretty child and grew to be a beautiful woman, devoid of all vanity. She took pleasure in simple things and although well read and well informed with an extraordinary memory, she was always ready to listen to others. She shunned praise and adulation and, in spite of her fame and her friendship with many brilliant people, she was afflicted throughout her life by shyness. After her death Mary Sumner wrote of the example of her steadfast life, its high standard of simplicity and devotion to duty.

OTTERBOURNE CHURCH
William and Fanny Yonge worried about the poor condition of the small church on the banks of the Otter, which had been sadly neglected. Their family pew could only be reached by climbing a stepladder outside the church! The parish had no resident clergyman, being joined to Hursley but the situation improved when a young curate arrived to take charge of the parish. William Bigg Wither and William Yonge made elaborate plans for a new church, but they knew nothing about basic church architecture. When the vicar of Hursley resigned, they decided to wait and consult the new incumbent.

The new vicar of All Saints Church, Hursley and rector of Otterbourne was John Keble. He and his wife arrived in 1835, and Keble immediately set to work on the church building plan. The site for the new church was given by Magdalen College, Oxford and the architect was Owen Browne Carter of Winchester. William Yonge laid the foundation stone on 16 May 1837 and took an active part in the planning of the building, which was consecrated by Bishop Charles Sumner (father of George Sumner) on 30 July 1838 and dedicated to St Matthew. William Yonge gave the oak pulpit and the chancel rails, which came from an abbey in Flanders. A rood screen with carved figures from Oberammergau was later erected to commemorate Charlotte’s life and work for the church, and the chair in which she sat, Sunday after Sunday, is still there, close to the lectern. As an old lady Charlotte became very like her own formidable grandmother, Mary Bargus, and from this chair she would interrupt the preacher if she disagreed with the theology being expounded. The lych gate was a gift to the parish from Charlotte on her seventieth birthday in 1893.
JOHN KEBLE
John Keble was born in 1792 at Fairford In Gloucestershire. After a brilliant academic performance at Corpus Christi, Oxford he became a Fellow of Oriel College. He was ordained in 1815 and his first post was as a curate to his father. In 1827 his book of poetry, *The Christian Year*, was published, resulting in his being appointed to the Chair of Poetry at Oxford, which he held until 1841. It was, arguably, Keble’s greatest contribution to the high church Oxford Movement (also known as the Tractarian Movement), 95 editions being printed in his lifetime. Unlike his colleague John Newman, he did not convert into the Roman Catholic Church. John Keble had a great spiritual influence upon his generation. He certainly influenced Charlotte Yonge and, from the time of his arrival at Hursley, when Charlotte was twelve years’ old, a new life opened for her.

Bishop Charles Sumner at first welcomed Keble’s views on high standards of worship and dignity but his support rapidly diminished when the movement became more and more a stepping-stone to Roman Catholicism. After preaching once in the Cathedral on the subject of ‘ Tradition’, shortly after his arrival in Hursley, Keble was never invited again.

WRITING
Charlotte Yonge’s literary output was prodigious and she became one of the most prolific and bestselling novelists of the Victorian period, highly regarded by writers such as Tennyson, Charles Kingsley, Anthony Trollope and Lewis Caroll. Strongly influenced by her grandmother, she declared her belief in the inferiority of women. Her intention was to offer a pattern of dutiful behaviour to middle class girls but, at the same time, she was actively involved in furthering their education. Her novels often reflected the values and concerns of Anglo-Catholicism and she became known as the novelist of the Oxford Movement. Charlotte loved history and she loved the village folk for whom she wrote many of her stories. The characters in her books came alive to her and filled her great need for companionship. Her work was widely read and respected in the 19th century but, unlike Jane Austen, the popularity of her novels has not endured and most are now out of print. Like Jane Austen, Charlotte knew the life of the great house but, unlike her, she also knew the life of the poor and believed in education for the poor, as literacy would promote Christianity.

Charlotte’s most well known book was *The Heir of Redclyffe*, a long moral novel published in 1853 by John Murray, which brought her instant fame. Her brother, Julian, found that nearly every officer in his regiment had a copy. Morris and Rossetti admired it and Oxford undergraduates loved it. This book, with its spirit of the Oxford movement, Christian suffering and high ideals, took the country by storm and many happy hours were spent discussing the characters with John Keble, to whom it was of great interest. She treasured his words: “If you keep watch, and go on in your own natural way, it need do you no harm.” She did keep watch and never let fame go to her head.

As well as publishing over 90 novels, Charlotte wrote children’s stories, Sunday School books, history books and numerous non-fiction works, including the life of a
distant relative, Bishop John Patterson, Bishop of Melanesia, who was martyred in Fiji in 1871. Many gifts of money were subsequently sent to the Melanesian Mission. She was the founder and editor for 40 years of The Monthly Packet, a magazine for young ladies and, in 1890, Charlotte took over the editorship of the Mothers’ Union journal, Mothers in Council.

An important influence on Charlotte, as far as education was concerned, was provided by the Revd George Moberley, headmaster of Winchester College. He shared many scholarly interests with Keble, including how moral training and higher education could be combined. Moberley had 15 children, all younger than Charlotte, and their friendship taught her much about large families.

When Julian returned from the Crimean War he married and started a family. Together with their servants, they all lived at Otterbourne House until, in 1862, Charlotte and her mother moved to a nearby house, Elderfield.* This was to be Charlotte’s home for the rest of her life. The Elderfield household included five servants, the most devoted and loyal being Harriet Spratt who had come to the family as a young girl and remained with Charlotte until her death in 1895, aged 73. In 1873 the youngest sister of Julian Yonge’s wife, a Miss Gertrude Walter, moved from Otterbourne House to Elderfield, space being required by Julian’s children. She and Charlotte shared many interests and, for 24 years, Charlotte enjoyed her companionship until Gertrude’s death in 1897.

LEGACIES
In 1868 a new parish was formed to the south of Otterbourne, containing the villages of Eastley and Barton. Charlotte donated £500 towards the parish church and was asked to choose which of the two villages the parish should be named after. She chose Eastley, but decided that it should be spelt ‘Eastleigh’ as she thought this spelling was more modern.

Mary Bargus, Charlotte’s influential grandmother, was adamant that ladies of Charlotte’s social standing should not be paid to work. Throughout her career the profits from her writing, which were considerable, were given either to the church or used to fund charitable works and it probably never occurred to Charlotte to dispose of the money in any other way. Certainly she would never have spent it on herself. Julian suffered serious money losses and Charlotte was happy to “devote her earnings to a yet nearer and dearer claim.” At the end of her life, in 1899, the Charlotte Mary Yonge scholarship at Winchester High School for Girls was set up to assist the entrance of girls to Oxbridge colleges. St Swithun’s School, as it now is, continues to offer a Charlotte Yonge Award, biannually, but it is not restricted to girls going to Oxford or Cambridge. It is awarded to the girl who achieves the highest academic standard overall on leaving the school.

At the age of 77 Charlotte Yonge died in Otterbourne. The funeral, on 29 March 1901, was conducted by the Revd H A Bowles, vicar of the parish, assisted by the Dean of Winchester, the Very Revd William Wood Stephens, and the Revd H W
Brock. Charlotte was buried in Otterbourne churchyard at the foot of the memorial to John Keble. Queen Victoria also died in 1901, so Charlotte was a true Victorian.

*Today Elderfield is a Langley House Trust property. Opened in 1959, it was the first of 60 sites around the country, helping ex-prisoners to live crime-free lives. This trust was started by John Dodd, who had himself survived incarceration as a Japanese prisoner of war. Dodd bought 8 acres of land adjoining the back of Elderfield, which became a market garden.

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Otterbourne House today
The Lych Gate given by Charlotte Yonge to Otterbourne Church on her 70th birthday

Charlotte Yonge’s chair in Otterbourne Church
Charlotte Yonge’s grave at the foot of the memorial to John Keble

Reredos in the Lady Chapel installed in 1905 in memory of Charlotte Yonge

Photograph by John Crook