# Script for Penelope Wallace's talk *Introducing Charlotte Yonge* at the ALS AGM 23 March 2023

Good morning. Sometimes I sit in front of a screen waiting for a Youtube video to load, and there's a small button in the bottom right hand corner. If I'm lucky, the button says "Skip trailer;" if I'm unlucky it says "Video will play after ad." In other words…even though I'm not a literary expert, nor even an expert on Yonge… I'm the ad you're not allowed to skip.
By the way, Charlotte **M** Yonge is the name she published under. The M stands for Mary. However, "Charlotte Yonge" rolls off the tongue much more nicely.

She was born in 1823, when the future Queen Victoria was four years old, and she died in 1901, two months after the end of Victoria's reign. During this long life, she wrote and published well over a hundred books.
Wait a minute. You know this.
You've all been provided with a copy of our bicentenary Review.
Here, when you read it, you will find an account of Miss Yonge's life, an introduction to the religious beliefs that coloured everything she wrote, information about what she was doing when she wasn't writing books, including her assistance in founding this school [St Swithun's School, Winchester] an assessment of whether or not she invented the genre of teen fic, what she thought of other authors and what they thought of her, mention of a new book about her, two or three reasons why her fans love her, and which books to start with.
So how much more introduction do you need? Maybe I should sit down.
I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to make 5 points that I personally find interesting about her work, illustrating them through three of her books, and occasionally name-dropping other famous British authors (and one French one.)
The five points are:

- Charlotte Yonge and the varied output
- Charlotte Yonge and the novel sequence
- Charlotte Yonge and the proactive protagonist
- Charlotte Yonge and the submissive woman
- Interlude,
- Charlotte Yonge and the rules of dialogue

But first to set the scene. This is how her friend and first biographer Christabel Coleridge described her: "Charlotte comes before me in the period of her early middle life, with hair already white turned off her broad forehead, but with still black brows and lashes, with hazel eyes which flashed and laughed, and a constantly changing countenance. She was at this time very handsome, and when she was at ease a most brilliant talker—talking and writing almost at the same time—with an untiring capacity for interest and enjoyment."
Note that she was very shy all her life, so the expression "when at ease" is significant.

First, **her output.** These are the books she wrote:

- Wide variety of non-fiction, which we won't go into
- A little devotional poetry, and a few plays
- Stories for children
- Novels for teenagers
- Novels for adults
- Historical fiction as well as contemporary
- Ancient myths turned into modern or historical fiction, a slightly strange concept, but there you are.

She also knew what she couldn't do, and despite her great love for Sir Walter Scott, she did not attempt epic poetry, unlike some of her characters.
This I suggest is a pretty amazing range.

Nowadays several authors write for different age groups. JK Rowling's Harry Potter books are for children and teenagers, but as Robert Galbraith she produces adult detective stories with a lot more bad language. Terry Pratchett and Ursula K Le Guin also notably write for different ages. But in the mid-19th century this was surely far less common.
In fact I'm struggling to think of any author ever with as wide a range as Yonge. Maybe CS Lewis?

Anyway, I've chosen for examples three of her fictional works, one intended for children, one for teenagers, and one for adults. Although adults can and do enjoy all of them.

First, one of her most entertaining children's books, *The Stokesley Secret*.
This is my copy, and you may be able to see that it seems to be called "Countess Kate and the Stokesley Secret", which sounds intriguing, but the volume actually contains two separate stories.
"*The Stokesley Secret*" begins with the Merrifield family at tea-time, and a five-year-old boy asking, "How can a pig pay the rent?" His brothers and sisters are at first too busy teasing each other and throwing bread about to answer, but then he's given an explanation:

"I'll tell you," Davy man," began Henry, first recovering. "The pig is a very sagacious animal, especially in Hampshire, and so he smells out wherever the bags of money are sown underground, and digs them up with his nose. Then he swings them on his back, and gives a curl of his tail and a wink of his eye, and lays them down just before the landlord's feet; and he's so cunning, that not an inch will he budge till he's got the receipt, with a stamp upon it, on his snout."

By the end of tea-time they've worked out that if a certain poor widow had a pig, she'd feed it on scraps during the year, and in autumn it would be butchered, and its value would pay her rent. So Henry suggests they should all save up to buy her a pig. Here is a nice pig picture from one edition, by artist Jemima Blackburn, who herself was a notable Victorian, especially famous as a painter of birds.
"*The Stokesley Secret"* tells of how the money for the pig is saved, then stolen and then secretly restored. It's also the story of how the 19 year old governess struggles to tame the seven children under her care.
(Can I draw your attention to the young conscientious but fun-loving governess, and the seven children? Actually there are nine children, but the youngest two don't come into the story.)
Yonge loved to invent and write about large families, making each member an individual, and an individual who grows and develops.
150 years later, JK Rowling gives us the Weasley family, and I think she does a good job of creating seven individuals who are all believably related, although the mischievous twins are more or less the same person. But seven would be a fairly small family for Yonge. The Merrifields of Stokesley are connected to another set of Merrifields, where there are eleven children. More famously in "*The Daisy Chain"* we also have eleven, and in the Pillars of the House 13, including one set of identical twins and one of fraternal twins, none of whom are similar in character.
Most of her largest families are connected to each other in what her fans call the Linked Novels, connected by a complicated set of family trees, which brings me on to my second point:

**Charlotte Yonge and the Novel Sequence.**
Here we have a set of books that aren't exactly sequels to each other, but whose characters intermarry, go on picnics together, hire each other as governesses etc over a period of over fifty years.

Why don't more authors write novel sequences, following the examples of Trollope, Zola, PG Wodehouse, and again of course Terry Pratchett? For a reader, they are enormous fun. You're busily reading about one set of people and suddenly someone you remember from a completely different book shows up for dinner.
Yonge's sequence begins I suppose with "*Scenes and Characters*", published in 1847, and ends with "*Modern Broods*", published in 1900. The characters age in real time, so that Lilias who is 15 at the beginning is a grandmother by the end. You can travel through the Victorian era with these people, watching them react to cultural change along with their author.
Most but not all of the sequence were originally intended for teenagers. And the fundamental book here is "*The Daisy Chain*", a family saga published in 1856, after having been first serialised in "*The Monthly Packet*".
At the start of "*The Daisy Chain*", a country doctor called Dick May goes for a drive with his wife and two of their children. He drives carelessly, and the carriage crashes, killing his wife, and seriously and permanently injuring his eldest daughter. If this had happened today, the police and social services might have become involved. But not in the 1850s. Dr May does indeed feel appropriate guilt, but the main interest is in how he and the family are going to cope without his wife. Can he bring up eleven children himself, ranging from Richard the university student, down to Gertrude, sometimes called Daisy, only a few weeks old?
The story covers the next seven years, with all the events of the family – being bullied at school; good works and confirmation; marriage; career choices; and of course shipwreck and being presumed dead.
This book also contains Dr May's daughter Ethel, a most unusual Victorian heroine, not just because she is not pretty. In Ethel we have a girl, and then a woman, who sees no need for marriage, and who juggles family life, intellectual development and community service instead, not without some regrets, but on the whole with satisfaction. And what I think is particularly interesting about Ethel, as some of you have heard me say before, is that she doesn't just react to dramatic circumstances, like most heroines, and indeed most heroes, then and now, do. She is proactive, she disturbs the status quo, without waiting for her author to disturb it for her. I told you I wasn't an expert on literature, but I think this is very rare.

**Charlotte Yonge and the Proactive Protagonist**
Hamlet, for example, is a bereaved prince. This is his status quo when the playwright steps in. Then he meets a ghost and is told that his father was murdered. He reacts. Harry Potter is a bullied child, who learns that he's a wizard and **his** parents were murdered, and he reacts. Elizabeth Bennet is a nice young lady. She meets three potential husbands, one who seems haughty but is in fact quite amiable when you get to know him, one who seems likeable but is in fact villainous, and one who seems pompous and obnoxious and is indeed pompous and obnoxious, and she reacts.
Ethel of course reacts to her mother's death, but she is also proactive. She looks at her ordinary town and sees part of it that is poor, ignorant and lacking in Christian teaching. At the age of fifteen she decides to change this. What she's reacting to here is simply the world around her, and a fairly low-key perception of a divine calling.
Not only is Ethel proactive; she's also successful. By the end of the book this suburb is a happier place, and has a church. And if proactive protagonists are rare, successful ones are rarer still.
King Lear is proactive, deciding for unknown reasons to divide up his kingdom – and look how well that turns out. Emma Woodhouse is proactive, deciding to organise a few marriages for the lucky people of Highbury – and it doesn't end in tears because this is a comedy, but she makes such a mess of it. Dorothea Brooke –

This brings me neatly to my third book, one intended for adults, Charlotte Yonge's "*The Clever Woman of the Family*."

Believe me, George Eliot Fellowship, I'm not suggesting for a moment that this lively but often irritating novel is the equal of "*Middlemarch*." A thousand times No.
But I'd like to point out that Yonge published in 1865, and Eliot published in 1871, and the two books begin in almost exactly the same way. In each book two sisters are looking over prettythings – in one case jewellery, in the other a wreath of white roses which is a birthday present. The younger and more conventional sister is happy with them, the elder is impatient with worldly frivolity.
Rachel Curtis and Dorothea Brooke are both rich, intelligent, well-born, naïve young women who long to achieve good in the world. They both fail. Dorothea probably because she's unlucky and because society won't let her succeed. Rachel because she's arrogant and pigheaded, rubs everyone up the wrong way and refuses to listen to advice. She sets up a charitable concern to help young girls and is swindled by her male associate. One of the girls ends up dead, and she blames herself, quite rightly.
She really should have listened to advice, especially from wise men.
And this brings me to my fourth point, the elephant in the room

**Charlotte Yonge and the Submissive Woman.**
Charlotte Yonge was an old-fashioned pious Tory. She believed that social classes were ordained by God, and the good squire should rule the village, in conjunction with the good clergyman. She believed that women should obey their husbands, and children their parents. When it came to daughters obeying their fathers, she took this to lengths that were fairly extreme even in her own time. These were the ideas she promoted in her books.
"It gave me a great moral shock," she wrote of herself, "when I first found out that a Radical could be a good person."
I find this funny. And then it occurs to me that it gave me a great moral shock when I first found out that a Conservative voter could be a good person. We all have our prejudices.
And of course she did move; over the years she can be seen to develop her views along with her characters, and admire progress. Still, many of her opinions do create issues for readers 150 years later.
However. She also believed, and this didn't change, that every human being – rich or poor, aristocratic or common, male or female, black or white, disabled or active, ladylike or vulgar, was a soul of infinite value; and further that every action or choice of every person was deeply, even cosmically significant.

So Ethel May can change her town. So Rachel Curtis can learn from her mistakes and go on to useful work – and I should point out that the Clever Woman also contains two successful author-approved professional women. And the Merrifield children can buy a pig.
Here are some of the things women can do, and do well, in Charlotte Yonge's novels:

- run complex family businesses and households
- have their water-colour paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy – there's also a professional sculptor
- educate younger siblings and stepchildren to a high level
- publish books (at least three examples)
- speak at meetings
- go to university
- set up charitable sisterhoods
- work as governesses
- marry into dysfunctional families, and reform them.

She has a wonderful array of governesses. These women are not feeble or downtrodden, they do not marry the young man of the house, nor are they all the same. One of them is extraordinarily incompetent (Lucilla Sandbrook in "Hopes and Fears") and several of them are less than ideal, but

the vast majority are conscientious, intelligent and for the most part successful women with a vocation.
And when we come to reforming families, the families are not reformed instantly, or perfectly, or without making mistakes. Of course not – all the characters in her mature books make mistakes, even the almost perfect Felix Underwood and Margaret May. This is encouraging and endearing.

You may have noticed - this is the Interlude I mentioned - that I've said nothing so far about her most famous novel, "*The Heir of Redclyffe*," my personal favourite – the story of two cousins, an ancient feud and a family curse. But you can find out about the Heir from other sources.

Go onto BBC Sounds and look for Clare Walker-Gore's February Essay for the series Stories to Keep Space For on the Bookshelves – but be warned, she does give away most of the plot. Or just search for "The Best Victorian Novel You've Never Heard Of," and you'll get fifteen minutes of a burly American called Shaun the Book Maniac telling you how he hates religion but adores "The Heir of Redclyffe," which he was put on to partly through his liking for Barbara Pym.
Also, I suspect the Heir is going to be mentioned later on today.

**Charlotte Yonge and the Rules of Dialogue**
To be fair, surely most of the classic Victorians write great dialogue. Have you ever thought what a difficult thing this is to do? These are my personal rules for what to demand of great dialogue:

> Good dialogue should
> Be natural and realistic
> …. but not er, um, I mean, too much so
> Move the plot along
> … but not too ham-fistedly ("Did you know Auntie Maud is dead?" "Oh, no, in the middle of an avalanche, too!")
> Be in character… and, most crucially,
> Be enjoyable to read.

And Yonge does it so well. She tells a lot of story through dialogue. "*The Stokesley Secret*" begins with the question, "How can a pig pay the rent?"
"*The Daisy Chain*" begins with "Miss Winter, are you busy? Do you want this afternoon? Can you take a good long walk?" "Ethel, my dear, how often have I told you…?"
"The Clever Woman of the Family" begins, ""'It is very kind in the dear mother.' 'But what, Rachel? Don't you like it?'"
And this is the beginning of "*The Pillars of the House*." Nearly twice as long as the Daisy Chain, 13 children, taking place over 18 years.

> "It is come! Felix, it is come!"
> So cried, shouted, shrieked a chorus, as a street door was torn open to admit four boys, with their leathern straps of books over their shoulders. They set up a responsive yell of "Jolly! Jolly!" which being caught up and re-echoed by at least five voices within, caused a considerable volume of sound in the narrow entry and narrower staircase, up which might be seen a sort of pyramid of children.
> "Where is it?" asked the tallest of the four arrivals, as he soberly hung up his hat.
> "Mamma has got it in the drawing-room, and Papa has been in ever since dinner," was the universal cry from two fine complexioned, handsome girls, from a much smaller girl and boy, and from a creature rolling on the stairs, whose sex and speech seemed as yet uncertain.
> "And where's Cherry?" was the further question; "is she there too?"
> "Yes, but –" as he laid his hand on the door – "don't open the letter there. Get Cherry, and we'll settle what to do with it."

> "O Felix, I've a stunning notion!"
> "Felix, promise to do what I want!"
> "Felix, do pray buy me some Turkish delight!"
> "Felix, I do want the big spotty horse."

You can probably guess that what has come is money, but how much?

So there you are, five points. But what I was asked to do was to provide an introduction to Charlotte Miss Yonge, may I present the ALS?