

# 1.

## *Introduction: Who Was Charlotte Mason?*

Miss Mason was *grande dame, grande âme*. Her thoughts and her tastes had lineage. To be with her, to come under the spell of her courteous and considerate self-possession was to know what it must have been like to meet Madame de Genlis or some other of those great ladies of the *ancien régime* who won fine culture through teaching children and through sharing with them the love of things which are beautiful and true. Miss Mason had a genius for education. She had an inbred good sense and an unfatigued sensibility. Her mind was tempered by great literature. She loved the humanities. She had a very distinguished gift of leadership in co-operation. There was a tenderness, a humility in her self-confidence. . . . And the greatness of the thoughts she lived with made her greater-hearted as her experience deepened and as the circle of her pupils grew nationwide. . . .

Charlotte Mason represented the culture of the home-school at its best. . . . This, I think, was her great contribution to the thought of her time. . . . Through Ruskin and Thomas Arnold of Rugby, she was in direct succession from Wordsworth. . . . The liberal movement through Rousseau found expression in Miss Mason's work as in that of her predecessors. . . . She was steadied by a deep religious conviction, by the reverence for human personality which has in it the quiet awe of faith in divine guidance.<sup>1</sup>

This glowing tribute to Charlotte Maria Shaw Mason (1 January 1842–16 January 1923) was composed for her memorial anthology of eulogy, *In Memoriam: Charlotte M. Mason* (1923), by Sir Michael Sadler CB (1861–1943), distinguished liberal educationist, former government adviser and Master of University College, Oxford, at the time. Sadler greatly admired John Ruskin (1819–1900), a major influence on the Victorian educated classes. For many years, aristocrats and educationists had metaphorically gathered at the feet of Miss Mason, the gracious

principal of her House of Education at Ambleside, in the Lake District, the only contemporary training college for governesses. Sir Robert Morant (1863–1920), Permanent Secretary to the Board of Education from 1903 to 1911, and Horace Household (1870–1954), Director of Education for Gloucestershire from 1903 to 1936, admired her liberal educational ideas. Miss Mason's use of *Aids to Scouting* (1899) as a school book inspired Sir Robert Baden-Powell (1857–1941) to found the Boy Scout movement in 1908 after hearing that his brigadier general had been successfully ambushed from a tree-top in 1904 by his son and Katherine Loveday, the House-of-Education-trained governess!<sup>2</sup> In Ambleside, Miss Mason made friends with people of standing such as Frances Arnold (1833–1923), the youngest sister of Matthew Arnold (1822–1888); the three gifted Armit sisters, Sophia, Annie and Mary Louisa; Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley (1851–1920), co-founder of the National Trust; and Gordon Wordsworth (1860–1935), the poet's grandson.

Charlotte Mason's lifestyle, her manners and her morals were quintessentially Victorian. As Victorian social standing was important to our heroine and because she was customarily addressed as Miss Mason by all who knew her at Ambleside, the title 'Miss' will be used throughout this biography as a mark of respect.

In January 1895, Miss Mason settled her House of Education in the stately Georgian mansion, Green Bank, previously owned by Mrs Dorothy Benson Harrison (1801–1890), daughter of Robinson Wordsworth, a cousin of William Wordsworth (1770–1850), the romantic Lakeland poet. This spacious domain gave Miss Mason a gracious setting in which to receive her students and many distinguished visitors. She drew upon Ambleside's rich inheritance of Norse names in renaming the house 'Scale How', meaning 'summer lodge on hill'. Wordsworth used to visit Green Bank regularly as Dorothy, the owner, orphaned at eleven, had lived with his family at Rydal Mount until her marriage to Benson Harrison at the age of eighteen.<sup>3</sup>

As the acknowledged founder and philosopher of the Parents' National Educational Union (PNEU) (1887–1989), Miss Mason was revered as a saintly Madonna figure and leading educational guru, famous for treasured epigrams such as 'Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life.' Her credo, 'for the children's sake', founded upon her respect for children as *persons*, lay at the heart of her teaching.<sup>4</sup> From 1914 onwards, her liberal educational programmes, designed for upper- and educated-class home schoolrooms spreading across the British Isles and the colonies, were introduced into state schools, bringing widespread acclaim. As the PNEU movement declined in Britain towards the end of the twentieth century, Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy was transported overseas to America, Australia and other lands, where it is being enthusiastically resurrected, practised and reinterpreted for the new century.

Born in the early years of Victoria's reign, Charlotte Mason grew up during a time of educational ferment and growing recognition of children's rights. Wordsworth's romantic revival and the writings of 'new' Enlightenment educationists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), with Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), had engendered a fresh awareness of children as personalities. As the Victorian age progressed, far more children were surviving to adulthood. The sound preparation of succeeding generations for the responsibilities of Empire demanded reverent attention to the education of mothers. For the higher classes, a well-ordered home life was deemed essential for those gentlemen obliged to 'encounter all peril' through toiling at 'rough work in the open world'.<sup>5</sup> Rigid social class divisions, the outcome of a civilising process extended over past generations, were believed by the upper echelons of society to be fixed in accordance with divine laws, although these invisible barriers were already being breached by the emergent new middle classes. By the late Victorian age, the popular image of womanhood as the passively decorative 'Angel in the House' was giving way to matriarchal dominance as upper-class married and independent single women joined committees and engaged in philanthropic works outside the protected domestic sphere, sometimes challenging established patriarchal authority.<sup>6</sup>

The dilemma faced by Victorian female educational pioneers was how to open up academic education and acceptable work opportunities for middle-class women whose families could not support them without prejudicing their health, social standing and chances of marriage. Three educationists who helped Charlotte Mason to establish the PNEU addressed this concern by developing school and university education for women. They were Anne Jemima Clough (1820–1892), the first principal of Newham College, Cambridge, from 1871; Dorothea Beale (1831–1906), principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College from 1853 and founder of St Hilda's College, Oxford, in 1893; and Frances Mary Buss (1827–1894), headmistress of the North London Collegiate School from 1850 onwards. Miss Buss and Miss Beale were among the first cohort of women attending evening lectures at Queen's College, Harley Street, boldly founded by the Christian socialist Professor the Revd Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–1872) with other King's College London professors in 1848. Linked to the Governesses' Benevolent Institution, established in 1843 to provide training and relief for indigent women, the lectures were intended to raise the standard of governesses' knowledge. Maurice's campaign for higher education and qualifications for women challenged the widespread misconception that intensive academic study not only caused dangerous 'overpressure' and physical prostration, but also wrecked feminine beauty and womanly charm. The pejorative appellation 'the third sex' was crudely applied to campaigning groups



*Frances Buss, Principal of the North London Collegiate School.*

of strong-minded, intelligent spinsters, as suggested by the well-known ditty attributed by some to J.C. Tarver:

Miss Buss and Miss Beale  
 Cupid's darts do not feel  
 How different from us  
 Miss Beale and Miss Buss.<sup>7</sup>



*Dorothea Beale in her study at Cheltenham Ladies' College.*

Apart from marriage, what did the future hold for gently nurtured, less assertively intelligent, single Victorian gentlewomen? After a year or two at a private school, they rejoined the home circle under their parents' protection, their days taken up with acquiring accomplishments, light reading and social calls. For those of slender means, becoming a private governess was usually the only option. Precariously poised between the nursery and the servants' hall, the despised, 'ignorant' governess remained the proverbial butt of unkind humour. As this book will show, addressing this tension while steadily raising her own social and intellectual standing was skilfully achieved by Charlotte Mason in the application of her educational philosophy and methods, first to home and subsequently to school education.<sup>8</sup>

Charlotte Mason was an outstanding personality. She met the challenge of unprotected spinsterhood with a graceful verve that commanded attention and respect. By the 1880s, she was already a published writer. Her lectures to ladies were published as *Home Education* in 1886; they inspired a young mother called Mrs Emeline Steinthal (1856–1921), with whom Miss Mason founded the Parents' Educational Union (PEU) in Bradford in 1887 and launched the cultural journal *Parents' Review* in 1890, the year the PNEU was nationally constituted. In 1891, Charlotte Mason moved to Ambleside and started the *Parents' Review* School (PRS), renamed the Parents' Union School (PUS) in 1907. The PRS offered educational programmes for children under nine learning at home. In January 1892, she boldly opened her House

of Education to train governesses for home schoolrooms, followed by the Mothers' Education correspondence Course in June of that year.

A deeply religious woman, Miss Mason was observed to conduct her personal relationships with grace and charm, speaking in a quiet but impelling voice. On the evening of her death, Dr Hough of Clappersgate, who attended select patients, told the House of Education students,

Wherever she went the charm of her presence brought sunshine and happiness. She made all about her feel at ease and then acted as a magnet for drawing out all that was good in them. Her beautiful face was in her the index of a beautiful soul.<sup>9</sup>

The reverential devotion in which she was held enthralled Miss Mason's far flung followers as much in her absence as in her presence. Nurtured by chosen women disciples at Scale How while quietly reigning from the blue sofa in the drawing room, she was a remote but dynamic presence, missing nothing with her searching blue eyes.

I can't conceive that there is no Miss Mason lying as usual on her couch, so gentle, so quiet and serene amid the soft greys and blues of her cushions and rugs, that we shall not hear her low, but quite determined voice, or see again that little movement of her hand, that said so much.<sup>10</sup>

Nothing was known of Charlotte's early life. Although her disciples were reluctant to peer behind her veil of secrecy, their tactful reticence did not inhibit eager speculation about what lay hidden.<sup>11</sup> The unspoken question remained: *How* had a previously unknown, frail, spinster school teacher, apparently without patriarchal familial backing or wealth, achieved so much in so short a space of time? Miss Mason's lifestyle at Scale How, fashioned from the best elements of cultured Victorianism, appears to have been deliberately designed to keep spontaneous personal revelation at bay. Her conversation was modelled on the classic Victorian precept, 'Servants talk about people; gentlefolk discuss things.'<sup>12</sup> Everyone knew that Miss Mason suffered from life-long serious heart trouble, restricting all activity. Sometimes breathless, she would claim to be too tired to talk or to meet with more than one person at a time. No one was allowed to drop in without invitation. She was never photographed with the official House of Education groups; snapping by students or visitors was sternly prohibited.<sup>13</sup> Just a few photographs, mostly captured unobserved, have survived; several of these are included in this volume.

When asked if she would not dictate some notes of her life, her only reply was – 'my dear, my life does not matter. I have no desire that it should ever be written. It is the work that matters and, I say it with all

reverence, it will some day (not in my lifetime) be seen to be one of the greatest things that has happened in the world'.<sup>14</sup>

In this manner Charlotte Mason effectively inhibited her followers from delving into her private past, determined to forestall a biography. Why? This seems inconsistent in one who clearly enjoyed the acclaim she had won towards the end of her life and was not averse to a little 'spin' about past achievements. Reticence was sanctioned by Holy Writ:

There was another reason why Miss Mason never talked of herself. It was a matter of principle. . . . 'The laws of life and conduct are laid down for us by our Lord and we do well to ponder every hint that the Gospel story gives us'. On this particular point she would, as that part of the Gospel came in its natural sequence, dwell on the words 'If I bear witness of myself, my witness is *not* true' and she would say to the students – 'My dear friends, think of this. Do not dwell upon yourselves, your belongings or even your families unduly, in talking to others. This saying is literally true. If I bear witness of myself my witness is *not* true.'<sup>15</sup>

Fanny Williams (1850–1925) was vice principal of the House of Education from 1898 to 1920. A former student at the Bishop Otter Memorial Training College at Chichester in Sussex, she had known Miss Mason since 1876. Setting a 'daily personal example of utter loyalty' to Miss Mason and her ideals, her reminiscences for *In Memoriam* were said to be 'so typical, so humble and loyal'.<sup>16</sup> After Miss Mason died in 1923, she averred, 'My memory [at seventy-three] fails me sometimes', thus tactfully regretting her inability to recall more than a few fragments.

Moreover, dear Miss Mason was so much absorbed in her work that she spoke but little of her own life. For many years before her death those who lived with her tried to save her as much as possible from the fatigue of conversation; we always read to her in her few leisure hours.<sup>17</sup>

Daringly disregarding the implicit embargo on investigation, Elsie Kitching (1870–1956), who had lived with Miss Mason for thirty years as her amanuensis, guardian 'dragon', companion and mainstay, could scarcely wait to investigate her leader's mysterious early life. Seeking answers, she confronted the same socially constructed barriers faced by the present writer.

In the spring of 1923, Elsie Kitching wrote to Mrs Elizabeth Groveham (1841–1930), formerly Lizzie Pendlebury, Charlotte's longstanding college friend, also known to Fanny Williams. Elsie must have met Mrs Groveham during her sole recorded visit to Scale How on 8 December 1899.<sup>18</sup> Lizzie's response manifested loving respect for her friend's resolute reticence:

I fully realise your difficulty and will do my best. . . . I have before me a confused mass of partially faded and undated letters which makes the task of selection difficult. The thought that suggests itself to my mind is this – to go through the letters as they lie, give them an appropriate date and send to you such pages as may be useful for your purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Although Lizzie had received Charlotte's weekly letters from 1861 until 1879, when they lived together in Bradford, because they 'were of so intimate and personal a character' she released only about twenty fragments. Having selected some and copied others, she invited Elsie Kitching to her terraced house in Woodbridge, Suffolk, reluctant to reveal too much.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of a Memorial Biography is excellent and will be cherished by all who knew and loved her and will be stimulating to those who knew her work. In regard to the letters, there may be much that is helpful to your purpose. . . . At the same time, they are of so intimate and personal a character, that much of their contents would hardly be suitable for publication. I mean in this way. As a girl she was ever spiritually minded, and the letters reveal the earnest striving of the soul for the light, which in after days she found in full measure. . . . I feel that you will quite understand.

Mrs Groveham added a missive from a former pupil at her Bradford Ladies' School, who obliquely hinted at a major transformation, after reading the memorial recollections in the *Parents' Review*:

In thinking of dear Miss Mason, I always remember her enthusiasm, her true culture and her essential goodness. One can hardly recognise in the printed portraits, the Miss Mason of old days. I think she must have been very happy in her work and evidently found her true sphere.<sup>21</sup>

Mrs Groveham asked Miss Kitching *not* to mention her name and to destroy the few selected excerpts. Both requests were disregarded. Their correspondence lasted intermittently until 1927. Elsie learnt, probably for the first time, that Charlotte had been orphaned as a teenager. She had studied with Mrs Groveham, then known as Lizzie Pendlebury, at the Home and Colonial Training Institution in London before being appointed mistress of the Davison Infantine School in Worthing in 1861. Mrs Groveham inaccurately told Elsie Kitching that the school had nothing to do with the government. She added that Charlotte, affectionately known to her as Lottie, and her parents 'were at times resident in three different places: Dublin – Bangor – Liverpool'. She altered the date given on a postcard from 1841 to 1840, presumably to establish that Charlotte's parents had married in 1840, the year before Charlotte had initially believed she had been born on 1 January 1841. Charlotte's beautiful mother was an invalid. In 1927,

Mrs Groveham unexpectedly added Birkenhead to the list of places where she believed the Masons had lived.<sup>22</sup> Bound to her deceased friend 'by the old kinship spirit', Lizzie did not seriously breach Lottie's sacrosanct confidentiality but sympathised with Miss Kitching's desperate need to learn more.<sup>23</sup> Having obliquely confirmed that Charlotte *had* taught in a government-funded school, Fanny Williams died in 1925 without further revelations.

She desired to hide behind Miss Mason's greater personality and was unwilling that the least thought should be directed towards herself.<sup>24</sup>

Over the next few years, Miss Kitching collected material for a definitive biography. The archive, now held at the Armitage Museum and Library in Ambleside, abounds with the worn, labelled brown envelopes in which she gathered her findings. *The Times*' obituary had stated that Charlotte Mason's father's name was Joshua; his Liverpool death certificate confirmed he was a merchant. This accorded with Mrs Groveham's recollection that the Mason family had lived in Liverpool.<sup>25</sup> Years passed.

After retiring in 1948, Elsie Kitching, known to Charlotte as 'Kit Kit', undertook further researches and visited Worthing. Information revealed in the statutory Davison School log book, kept by the mistress, and local census records must have perplexed and troubled her. Unable to progress, she spent her remaining years reflecting on her leader's educational philosophy, protesting that, by comparison, the biography was of secondary importance.

Her devotion, her self-effacing vigilance guarded Miss Mason literally day and night, year in, year out, even through these later years she has lived with the one purpose of guarding and promoting Miss Mason's work.<sup>26</sup>

'The better part of valour is discretion.'<sup>27</sup> Elsie's flat gravestone, adorned with a 'K' at each corner and set at the foot of Miss Mason's Celtic tomb, proclaims that the subservient Kit Kit laid down her life for her leader as, indeed, she gave her all in thirty years of unremitting service. Having purchased the space in Ambleside churchyard on 1 April 1924, Kit Kit's will directed 'that no headstone be erected and the grave space kept flat as a standing place for the visitors to the grave of the late Charlotte Mason'.<sup>28</sup> With this dramatic gesture of extreme docility, Elsie quelled her curiosity and upheld Miss Mason's mythic status in death.

A definitive biography was long awaited. After the Second World War, Charlotte Mason Foundation members believed that the survival of the PNEU critically depended upon making the acknowledged founder's educational ideas more widely known. They asked Essex Cholmondeley (1892–1985) to complete Miss Kitching's unfinished work.<sup>29</sup>

Essex Cholmondeley was a most suitable choice. Distantly connected to Reginald Heber (1783–1826), the well-known hymn writer and Bishop of Calcutta, she was descended from a line of rural clerics.<sup>30</sup> Essex's father, Reginald Cholmondeley (1857–1941), a former army captain, was wealthy. In 1911, he employed twelve indoor servants, from the butler and two footmen to the cook-housekeeper, children's nurse and seven maids. After a home education, Essex stayed with her aunts in London, enjoying the dances and parties of the Edwardian era, and was presented at court. During the 1914 war she taught sick children in hospital. Helen Wix (1882–1982) (CMT 1903) from Sydney, Australia, had gained a first-class House of Education certificate. As governess to Essex's younger sisters, Hester, aged sixteen, and Joan, aged five, in 1911, Helen clearly demonstrated the benefits of an Ambleside education.<sup>31</sup>

A tall, graceful woman, Essex (CMT 1919) took the training under Miss Mason's rule; it was subsequently termed the Charlotte Mason Training. She admired the principal as a frail but impressive elderly matriarch. Aged twenty-six she was appointed senior monitress and drill monitress, gaining a first-class certificate with distinction. Serious and spiritual, Essex probably understood Miss Mason's quest for holiness better than anyone. She protectively concluded that Elsie Kitching's difficulty in finishing the biography lay in the fact that 'Charlotte Mason's story is one of thought rather than incident.'<sup>32</sup>

Did Essex ever tell Miss Mason that her aunt was Mary Cholmondeley (1859–1925), the well-known author of *Red Pottage* (1899), a daring, satirical, best-selling novel? This popular work, which attacked the self-righteous pretensions of the English middle classes and the bigotry of intolerant clergy, was enjoyed by Queen Victoria and preached on at St Paul's by the Bishop of Stepney. Times were changing; *fin-de-siècle* novels of the *new women* genre challenging the probity of cherished institutions from marriage to religion may have delighted the avant-garde but were, assuredly, forbidden at Scale How as 'twaddle'.<sup>33</sup>

After teaching at Hatherop Castle in Gloucestershire, Essex was recalled to Ambleside to assist Miss Kitching with the PUS in 1924. After world travel with her parents and sister Joan in 1929, she was appointed vice principal at the House of Education in 1930. Ellen Parish (1869–1947) (CMT 1902), another first-class student and Miss Mason's chosen successor as principal from 1923 to 1934, was unwell. Essex briefly succeeded her as an innovatory principal from 1934 to 1937, subsequently serving on the Charlotte Mason Foundation and supporting PNEU schools until she was seventy.<sup>34</sup>

After Elsie died, Essex reluctantly agreed to finish the biography. The pressure to publish must have heightened once it was known that Monk Gibbon (1896–1987), a poet and grand old man of Irish letters, was writing about his friend, the Hon. Mrs Henrietta Franklin CBE (1866–1964), who had dominated the PNEU since 1894. Monk Gibbon brought out his

lively and endearing account, *Netta*, in June of 1960, the year the official biography, *The Story of Charlotte Mason 1842–1923* by Essex Cholmondeley, was published.<sup>35</sup>

Until now, Cholmondeley's biography has been the main source of information about Charlotte Mason's hidden early life. When the book was re-issued in 2000 for a wider, transatlantic audience, Eve Anderson, a former student, stated unequivocally, 'It is an accurate account.'<sup>36</sup> New evidence, presented here, disproves this assertion.

I first discovered references to Charlotte Mason and the PNEU in the journal *Parents' Review* at the round Reading Room of the old British Library in 1981, where Charlotte Mason studied in 1885.<sup>37</sup> I was researching the history of education for parenthood and sought the PNEU archives.<sup>38</sup> A visit to the offices of the World-wide Education Service of the PNEU in London yielded nothing. Introduced to Mrs Geraldine Walton (CMT 1928), I asked about the archives. This impressively stately lady looked me straight in the eyes and said, '*All the records have been destroyed!*'<sup>39</sup>

Mrs Walton put me in touch with Essex Cholmondeley, whom I visited on 5 April 1982 at Nynehead Court nursing home near Wellington in Somerset, a beautiful mansion, previously owned by Edward Clarke. Coincidentally, in 1684 Dr John Locke (1632–1704) had advised Clarke on his son's education via letter and published these letters as *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in 1693. A frail but graciously charming lady of ninety-one, Essex was following doctor's orders by staying in bed that day. She explained that it had been necessary to re-write the biography because Miss Kitching had employed a 'rather unreadable, scholarly style'. Within the loving atmosphere enveloping her elegant room, she revealed next to nothing about Charlotte's early life. Fixing her large and beautiful eyes upon me, she whispered dramatically, '*All the papers were destroyed!*'<sup>40</sup> On a sudden impulse, I telephoned the Institute of Historical Research and learnt that Mrs Walton, as Chair of the PNEU Council, had deposited thirty boxes of PNEU records at the University of London Library a few years earlier!

After carefully scrutinising the two supposedly autobiographical extracts entitled 'Memories' and 'Recollections' opening Chapter 1 of *The Story of Charlotte Mason*, I discovered there were *no* original documents. The 'Memories' excerpt was *not* published in Volume 1 of the *Parents' Review* as stated; no manuscript of 'Recollections' has surfaced. Accordingly, I concluded that they were an artificial reconstruction, compiled by the two biographers, perhaps partly from scraps and hints let fall by Charlotte Mason, to present an appropriate background for the founder of the PNEU.<sup>41</sup> Other letters, cited in the early chapters, were either unreferenced or actually altered.

The 'Memories' and 'Recollections' were charmingly composed, painting tender pictures of Charlotte's isolated childhood, apparently spent mainly

on the Isle of Man, playing with her mother, whose name was not given. The references to 1840s fashions were authentic. Her mother dressed elegantly; Charlotte wore a Holland overall to play on the beach.<sup>42</sup> Mr Mason, said to have been a Liverpool merchant, was inexplicably given the initials J.H. There is no certain evidence that he was a drysalter. Whoever suggested this must have been unfamiliar with the short story *Angelina or L'Amie Inconnu*, by Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849), in which Lady Diana is appalled at discovering the true background of her companion, Miss Burrage:

Daughter to a drysalter, niece to a cheesemonger. Only conceive! A person who has been going about with me everywhere. What will the world say?<sup>43</sup>

By way of compensation, Charlotte's father was described as 'a refined and simple man, very fond of books'. The mention of seaside holidays at Douglas on the Isle of Man suggested that Miss Kitching had discovered Charlotte Mason's 1861 Worthing census return. In 1982, the late Robert Drake was the first to show that Charlotte gave Douglas, Isle of Man, as her birthplace for the 1861 census and recorded her age as twenty. Ten years later, she was twenty-nine and had been born in Bangor, Caernarvon.<sup>44</sup> A copied letter, allegedly sent by Mrs Groveham, underpinned *The Story's* claim that Charlotte was an only child of only children.

As regards family ties Miss Mason's position was unique. From herself I understood that both her parents were only children, of whom she was the only child. If corroboration were needed, it would lie in the fact, that during her period of training, her holidays were spent in College as she had no relations. . . . With my much love, yours affectionately, E. Groveham. 7th May 1924.<sup>45</sup>

Significantly, this note labelled 'COPY' is the only *typed* letter to be found among Mrs Groveham's boldly handwritten screeds in the archives. No hand-written original has appeared. Did Miss Kitching, who typed up many copies of later correspondence, file a fabricated letter with the handwritten others? The phrase 'If corroboration were needed' is telling. What Lizzie really knew about Lottie's family remains obscure.

'Recollections' plausibly traced Charlotte's teaching career, her love of books and some of her educational ideas back to her early childhood. Mr Mason was said to have lost all his money in 1848 and 1849. These years may have been carefully chosen to explain why Charlotte trained as a teacher. Less disgrace was attached to severely reduced circumstances during the 'hungry forties', at the peak of Chartist political unrest, economic downturns and the far-reaching effects of the Irish potato famine. Anne Jemima Clough, one of Charlotte's leading advisers, opened her Ambleside school in 1852 because her father, a respectable cotton merchant, had lost



*Four torchbearers, Agnes Drury, Essex Cholmondeley, Ellen Parish and Elsie Kitching, with the students.*

money through trading with America, where the expanding cotton industry was in direct competition with Great Britain. Mrs Groveham also challenged Miss Williams's incorrect assertion that Charlotte's father had been ruined by the American Civil War (1861–1865), which further curtailed cotton imports to Lancashire factories, causing mass unemployment.<sup>46</sup>

'Memories' and 'Recollections' offer a confusing mixture of stereotype and realism in the lightly sketched picture of an impoverished, lonely childhood, spent with erudite parents who read all the time but probably educated her at home. Both pieces echo aspects of the literary home education recommended by John Ruskin (1819–1900), Charlotte's later Lakeland neighbour, but curiously none of the hallmarks of the Victorian upbringing of home-bred girls familiar to Miss Cholmondeley, such as languages, embroidery, watercolour sketching, singing pretty melodies or playing the pianoforte, are described. Instead, the strange pictures in Austen Henry Layard's *Nineveh* (1848/9), allegedly opened up a 'sort of Milky Way of Knowledge' for little Charlotte.<sup>47</sup> The explanation for these anomalies must surely lie in the difficulty faced by such partial, yet essentially honest, disciples in reconciling the little they knew of her background with traditional veneration for her cultured social standing.

Respectability and gentility were integral to the domestically oriented civilising process during the Victorian age. These concepts helped to pinpoint the different levels of status within a hierarchical social order undergoing rapid change. Respectability was held by the aristocracy, the upper class and

the new middle class to represent the summit of male and female working-class ambition. It was associated with docile industry, orderly family life, cleanliness and godliness. Respectability marked off the deserving from the undeserving poor. In contrast, gentility incorporated subtle nuances, which popular advice manuals were endeavouring to expound to the upwardly mobile. It suggested more gracious social standing than that conferred by industrious respectability. By late Victorian times, when education was everywhere discussed, the 'educated classes' emerged. Differentiated from the bulk of the rising new middle classes by their preference for culture over ostentatious displays of wealth, the educated classes advocated 'plain living and high living', usually because they could not afford conspicuous consumption. Some argued that while a lady could be made, the status of 'gentlewoman' was conferred only by birth. Reduced circumstances did not necessarily destroy gentility, which was thought, by those who laid claim to it, to have slowly evolved after centuries of civilisation. Charlotte Mason was destined to prove, if only to her secret satisfaction, that it was possible to absorb centuries of civilisation within one lifetime and to rise within the rigid society that was opening up by the late Victorian age.<sup>48</sup>

Essex Cholmondeley told me the biography was not very good without explaining why. Her subsequent letters expressed an overpowering desire to learn of any new discoveries: 'I am so glad the work progresses; indeed I can hardly wait for it.' After her death in 1985, Mrs Walton kindly commented, 'Little did her readers realise the long and devoted labour that lay behind this not entirely satisfactory book.'<sup>49</sup> Sadly she died at the age of ninety-three before the more complete story she had quietly expected could be told. Having done her best with her troubling commission, she was not prepared to compromise Miss Mason's reputation by revealing the few secrets that, assuredly, Miss Kitching had discovered. Instead she concluded that any attempt to tell the story of Charlotte Mason must lay stress on that 'life hid with Christ in God' upon which she based her teaching.<sup>50</sup>

The time has come to cast aside the earlier anxieties and subterfuge that have obscured Charlotte Mason's secret past and early education. Since the 1980s, her educational ideas have been embraced with enthusiasm across the Atlantic, in America, Canada and in Australia and other lands. Led astray by the Cholmondeley biography, which misrepresented her early life out of misplaced loyalty, Charlotte Mason has been lifted out of her Victorian historical context and family background. Painstaking research, described elsewhere, has thrown fresh light on her secret early life before the PNEU, revealing her remarkable spirit and determination to overcome all obstacles.<sup>51</sup>

Who *was* Charlotte Mason? Thanks to gaining access to meticulous records kept by the Religious Society of Friends, I learnt that she was *not* the only child of only children. Charlotte was the thirteenth child of her ageing

Irish Quaker father, Joshua Mason, and her young Roman Catholic mother, Margaret Shaw, about whom little has been discovered. On her father's side, Charlotte was descended from a multifarious family, solidly rooted in the egalitarian, puritan ethos of the Religious Society of Friends, reaching back to the seventeenth century in Westmorland and the eighteenth century in Ireland. By uncovering the hidden backdrop to Charlotte Mason's life and the emergent picture of her father's life and times, subtly transformed in the Cholmondeley biography, we surely gain a better understanding of the roots of her personality. These were expressed by her earnest searching for the Light, her capacity for immensely hard work and her bold business acumen, which powered her educational aspirations and dreams of validation as a writer and philosopher. Respected for their honest business dealings, Quakers valued education and endeavour in all walks of life, as shown by Charlotte's family history. Joshua Mason's own rise from a mundane apprenticeship to the status of gentleman miller foreshadowed Charlotte's arduous journey to high standing. Accordingly, the unfolding of Charlotte's interesting paternal Quaker background and her parents' problematic relationship and religious differences sets the scene for her remarkable rise and unexplained break with all family ties.