

Mary Baker Eddy

New England in the first quarter of the nineteenth century was little different from what it had been at the time of the revolution. Life was relatively simple; “the dark satanic mills” had not yet marred the charms of the rural landscape, as they were to do as the century progressed. Traditional Calvinist belief still probably dominated much of the thinking although challenged by Unitarianism and Transcendentalism.

The village of Bow in New Hampshire could readily serve as the model community for later writers seeking to evoke, in a more worldly age, the charms of the simple life. Orthodox religious thought determined the moral character of the community, but the relative rigidity of belief was leavened by the ideas of progress and democracy. The Yankee denizens with such concepts could regard themselves as the *beau idéal* citizens of the republic.

Mary Morse Baker was born in 1821. She was the sixth and youngest child of Noah and Abigail Baker. (“Eddy”, which is the name most commonly associated with her she assumed upon marriage to her third husband.) As a child Mary Baker was somewhat frail, but her ailments were never precisely defined. Her general malaise was such that she was indulged by her parents and brothers and sisters. Her attendance at school was irregular, but her second brother, Albert, took it upon himself to encourage her general reading. He introduced her to such compilations as *The English Reader*, which ensured that she became acquainted with the accepted best prose and poetry of the day.

Like many of her contemporaries in the 1830s and 1840s, she amused herself in writing poetry or what passed for poetry. These literary effusions, of no great merit, were decidedly typical of the period. One brief example will serve to illustrate this fact.

Love, Lady Love
There is a joy in loving
But sigh not when you find
That man is fond of roving
He like the summer bee
Takes wings through beauty’s bowers
And knows not where to choose
Among so many flowers
Love, Lady Love

Laetitia Elizabeth Landon or Marguerite Blessington would have appreciated such sentiments and written in a not dissimilar fashion.

Although she was accepted as a full member of the Sanbornton Congregational Church – the family had acquired a new home in Sanbornton when she was fifteen – she was somewhat unorthodox in her personal beliefs. She declined to accept the generally assumed Calvinism, and found it impossible to believe that salvation was the privilege of the few. It was not the stern judgemental Jehovah but rather the loving Father that appealed to her.

When she was twenty-two she married George Glover. The latter, although born in New Hampshire, had business interests in South Carolina. Glover, according to report, was friendly and gregarious with a positive and optimistic outlook on life. Mary Baker knew that her new life would be very different from that previously experienced.

Following their marriage the young couple made their home in Wilmington, North Carolina. The bride's health improved, and good prospects for the future seemed to be assured. Sadly, such was not to be the case. Glover's business interests fell into difficulties, but far worse the young man caught yellow fever and expired. He died in June 1844 after only six months of marriage. His widow was left virtually penniless, and, moreover, she was pregnant. The obvious solution was for her to return to New Hampshire where she could expect to be supported by her family.

Mary Glover's child was born on 12 September 1844. He was christened George Washington Glover after his late father. The infant was put into the care of Mabola Sanborn since his mother was too frail to care for him properly. The subsequent story of George Washington Glover is a somewhat melancholy one. Mary Glover was not really a maternal person. The boy was farmed out for much of the next decade. When he was aged eleven it was decided that he should accompany his foster parents when they moved to one of the western states.

Although in later years Mary Baker Eddy seems to have convinced herself that she had been duped by others into agreeing to this arrangement, this was not true. In fact, this was a most satisfactory situation for her. Mother and son were not to meet for some two decades.

Mary Glover's own life took a turn for the better when she met Daniel Patterson. He was handsome, gregarious and appeared reasonably prosperous. He was a dentist with a decent practice, and marriage to him would ensure a happy and secure future. His financial situation was, however, not what it seemed, and under a façade of respectability the newly married couple were very impoverished. Since she was unable to participate as an equal in the local society, she became something of a recluse. To occupy her time she entertained herself reading the Bible and

she, like the mediaeval contemplatives, fixed her mind on other-worldly matters to escape from the miseries of her present situation.

Whatever the exigencies of her existence she experienced at this time, she seems to have retained a generally orthodox theology. She had no doubts about the eternal life in the hereafter being convinced that she would rejoin her deceased mother and favourite brother. She was not attracted to spiritualism, but she was uncritical about the Fox sisters. At no time was she tempted to attempt contact with “the other side”, and later, in fact, she was to reject spiritualism totally.

In September 1859, the fortunes of the Pattersons reached their nadir, their furniture went to auction and their property was sold. They were reduced to the indignity of boarding house life. In an attempt to alleviate the situation, Mary Patterson made modest contributions to various newspapers. Her endeavours had some success and she received a little money for her efforts.

The outbreak of the Civil War brought her in contact with her son. She had heard nothing from him for a decade. He wrote that he had joined an infantry regiment in Wisconsin. She seems to have been relatively pleased to have news of him, but was not overly encouraging and did little more than to acknowledge receipt of his letter.

She continued to be a semi-invalid and, in an attempt to find a cure, took an interest in homeopathic medicine of various sorts. One form of treatment that she tried was to place herself in the care of a hydropathic practitioner. His efforts on her behalf were not particularly successful. While experiencing the hydropathic treatment, she learned about the work of Phineas Quimby who, according to what she read, seemed to have almost miraculous powers.

What was Quimby’s method exactly? He asserted that patients were not cured by drugs or any medicines but through something quite different. He noted that “Disease is the name of the disturbance of the fluids in the mind.” Initially he had believed that cures could be effected through mesmerism, and that his patients would need to be hypnotised, but ultimately he rejected this idea. Rather he used suggestion and a sort of physical manipulation which embodied what he called “animal magnetism”. Apparently a force passed from Quimby to the patient, and that in consequence he could explain the nature of the illness. By so doing he could effect a cure by ensuring the patient knew “the truth” of the particular malaise. A later writer noted that Quimby seems to have cured disease through the mind. To be effective the patient had to have implicit faith, and to believe there was no pain. Quimby was to play a special role in the ultimate teachings of Mary Baker Eddy.

It appeared as if Quimby were able to bring about an improvement

in Mary Patterson's health after she had visited him in Portland, Maine. She had no doubts of the effectiveness of his "method". She collected Quimby's ephemeral writings, and enthusiastically wrote and even delivered some lectures to popularise his activities. She even attempted to use his so-called "transference" practice herself on some friends and acquaintances with considerable success. She did not feel totally secure in these activities, and was in constant contact with Quimby to ensure that somehow she herself did not fall into ill health. This relationship came to an end when he died in January 1866 and she felt very bereft indeed.

However, a month later an event occurred which was to change her life. She had a serious accident, and fears were expressed that she would die. She did not die, but apparently experienced something very unusual for it was from this time forward one can date her special mission. She now believed that fear, pain and death were irrelevant and that "this life being the sole reality of existence" and that everything in it being "spiritual, divine, immortal and wholly good".

Her domestic life did not reflect her renewed vigour. Patterson was notoriously unfaithful, and she finally informed him they would have to part. He agreed to the separation possibly in the belief that it was only temporary but he was wrong, and they were divorced seven years later. He lived until 1896 and made nothing of his life. His wife's decision was perhaps somewhat unforgiving, but she gained a freedom without which she could never have undertaken the great mission for which she became so famous.

With no husband and no further contact with her son, Mary Patterson was able to occupy herself as she chose. She began to put her thoughts into an organised form. She rejected Quimby's idea that the human mind healed and replaced it with the concept that God was the healer; that it was a divine principle not a human one. Man, she said, was made in God's image, a spiritual idea that is perfect and that in his likeness of God "wholly good and wholly spirit".

Her first convert was Hiram Cofts. He and his wife were impressed by her seeming healing powers, and he asked to become her pupil. Initially she was reluctant to accept him, but in due course she did so. He became a professional healer. The agreeable relationship between teacher and student did not long continue. The two parted in an acrimonious fashion.

After moving to Amesbury Mary Glover, as she now called herself, was to acquire two new disciples. One, Sarah Bingley, was to practice as a healer using her teacher's method for some three decades. The other was Richard Kennedy. He was to be the first of a series of youthful male protégés, almost all of whom were to have disagreements with their mentor. Richard Kennedy became an accomplished healer, and his

success brought her to the attention of other potential pupils. Inevitably, not all were satisfied with her tuition. For example, Wallace Wright, initially a success, had doubts of the efficacy of her instruction and when reproved by her he became angry. The upshot was that he wrote a letter to *The Lynn Transcript* declaring that her so-called “moral science” was but a form of mesmerism. The matter might have ended there – she totally rejected his remarks – but Richard Kennedy himself agreed with Wright and therefore all contact between Mary Glover and her erstwhile protégé ended. Such schisms were to become part and parcel of the whole development of Christian Science. Mary Glover was to require a total commitment to her teachings, any deviation meant disloyalty and ultimately expulsion.

The one positive result of the quarrel was that she was able to cast aside permanently any influence Quimby might have had on her formerly, magnetism and mesmerism were to be replaced by her own very personal religious beliefs. It was obvious that some sort of corpus evolve for the future. She began to write what was to be her major opus under the title *Science and Health*. It was published in October 1875. By then she had bought a house in Lynn, Massachusetts, had some real adherents and had received a form of approbation from Bronson Alcott. The reviewers in general seem to have greeted her book in a favourable fashion. She could congratulate herself on her modest successes.

What was she like? She was in her early fifties having retained her good looks and her girlish figure. She was noticeable for her attractive appearance and general stylishness. Not for her were the drab colours generally associated with middle-aged females; rather she selected blues, mauves, pinks and shades of green. Her dresses were not plain and severe but embellished with bows and flounces with touches of lace at the neck and wrists. Her hair was not yet grey but a light brown in colour and always handsomely coiffed. Middle-aged women, particularly if they have good looks and intelligence, are very attractive to younger men. Mary Glover was to be no exception.

At this juncture, three relatively youthful admirers entered her life. The first was Daniel Spofford who ultimately became a most successful healer. He was to fall in love with her, and would have liked to marry her if he had been able to divorce his wife, which he could not do. The second was George Barry who unlike Spofford was content to exist in the role of “son”. He appears to have been useful acting as an amanuensis, and coping with domestic affairs. He always addressed Mary Glover as “Mother”. The third individual was Asa Gilbert Eddy, and he was to have a role much more important than the other two.

In March 1876 Asa Gilbert Eddy enrolled in one of her classes. He

quickly became totally committed to a belief in Christian Science. Indeed, on a later occasion, Mary Glover was to say that he was the first person other than herself to designate himself as such. He was apparently a thoroughly nice person with an endearing character. He could under no circumstances be thought scintillating, but he was sociable and kind. He proposed to her and she accepted, and they were married on 1 January 1877 in a quiet and unostentatious fashion.

The reaction of the other two swains was mixed. Barry was quietly accepting while Spofford was deeply wounded. While Barry's position in the domestic life of the household was necessarily lessened, Spofford continued, despite his jealousy, to be in favour, and he was charged with the responsibility of the publication and sales of *Science and Health*. Financial difficulties ensued and the anticipated new edition did not appear. On 20 December 1877 he was formally expelled from the Christian Science Association. He was given a month to submit to direction and to admit error, but he declined to do so. A second vote was taken which re-affirmed the first, he was officially expelled for what was called "immorality". This word in the vocabulary of Mary Baker Eddy meant "immorality of belief". Attempts were made by friends of both parties to patch up the quarrel, but without success.

In the summer of 1879 Mary Baker Eddy formally established the Church of Christ Scientist. The basic tenets of the church can be summarised under the general title "Scientific Statements of Being". Firstly, "There is no life, truth, intelligence nor substance in matter." Secondly, "All is infinite mind and its infinite manifestation, for God is all in all." Thirdly, "Spirit is immortal truth; matter is mortal error." Fourthly, "Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal." Fifthly, "Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness." Lastly, "Therefore man is not material; he is spiritual." She was to write, "erring finite human mind has an absolute need of something beyond itself for its redemption and healing." This "healing" is from sin primarily and disease secondary; healing is not just a bodily change but an aspect of full salvation from the flesh as well. She rejected the idea that healing was an end in itself, healing was one essential aspect of salvation.

Certain words, which she used in her correspondence and writings, served to express ideas in a sort of shorthand form. The first was "chemicalise", which meant an individual's behaviour was irritating, obdurate and tactless, and it required admonishment. The second was "immorality", which implied opposition to the ideas and leadership of Mary Baker Eddy. Individuals who were deviationists were expelled from the society under the term "immorality". The third word was "malpractice". This was a sort of mesmeric or animal magnetism

expressed and directed to another to cause acute distress. Mary Baker Eddy was to aver that “malpractice” was the cause of her husband’s death.

In June 1882 her husband Gilbert Eddy died. It was a devastating blow; she was convinced that he was the victim of mesmerism and malicious malpractice all emanating from the machinations of those who opposed her leadership. A medical practitioner, Rufus King Noyes, one who was not opposed to the idea of metaphysical healing, was convinced rather that Gilbert Eddy had succumbed to a fatal heart attack. She rejected Noyes’s opinion completely. She believed that mesmeric poison had murdered her husband.

After a brief sojourn away from Boston, she returned, determined to continue her teachings. She had asked her son to come and stay – they had met again a few years previously though the encounter was only marginally successful – but he declined to accept her invitation. The orthodox religious bodies initially had paid scant attention to her teachings, but with success, criticism and attacks became more common. One critic’s comment annoyed her particularly in that he associated her with Madame Blavatsky. As a result, she gave a public lecture in Boston in which she firmly rejected such an idea. To promote and protect her teachings, she would have to define her ideas specifically. She would recruit persons who could carry the message. The potential teachers were carefully selected by Mary Baker Eddy herself, and were to be the recipients of the message in twelve lessons. The neophytes were to study the writings of the leader and to heal since they had experienced truth and could set others free. Mary Baker Eddy inspired her pupils, as a mentor she praised and admonished. Of course, there were those who failed, who fell into “malicious mesmerism” or “malpractice” and per force became separated from her society. Her *Journal of Christian Science* became the principal source for the dissemination of her ideas and precepts. Her close assistant and editor was James Harvey Wiggin who never himself became a Christian Scientist, but he was able to revise her writings in a professional fashion, thereby to ensure that her ideas were expressed in a more cogent manner.

Although George Washington Glover had rejected his mother’s request to come to Boston when his stepfather Gilbert Eddy died, he and his wife and children came for a lengthy sojourn in 1887. Like the earlier visit, this present one was not overly happy, and he and his family were easily persuaded after some six months to return to South Dakota. His mother provided the funds for the journey; indeed, over the years she continued to augment the resources of her son, which enabled him to live comfortably. However, after this visit contacts between Mary Baker Eddy and George Washington Glover continued but in a restrained fashion.

In 1889, she closed the Massachusetts College of Metaphysical Science, which she had established a few years previously. She also officially dissolved the Christian Science Association, and declared that she had ceased all pastoral duties. She announced that she was retiring from Boston. Had her critics triumphed and driven her into exile? The crucial clue to the future had they but known where to look was the fact that she had acquired land in that part of Boston known as “Back Bay” where in the fullness of time she was to build the great edifice, “The Mother Church”.

She moved to Concord in New Hampshire establishing herself in a pleasant rural situation. She was now 68 years of age, still attractive and stylish in dress. Her special air of serenity made her most agreeable company. She proceeded to produce a new and revised text of *Science and Health*. This was to become the authoritative version. Her life was comfortable, friends ensured that she had an adequate income and the household consisted of Calvin Frye, her secretary, a cook, a housekeeper and a gardener. In addition, from time to time her adopted son Ebenezer – she called him “Benny”-Foster Eddy – lived with her.

This young man had followed another protégé, William Gill, in her affections. Gill was essentially a person of little real understanding and after the most inevitable quarrel was expelled from the Society for the usual reasons. Benny Eddy regarded Mary Baker Eddy – “Mother” as he called her – with obvious affection. Initially the relationship was a happy one, but almost inevitably there was to be friction between the two of them. He began to act as if he were the anointed successor, and implied that “Mother” was a fragile being, mildly senile who required his directing hand. In fact, she allowed him little real power, real authority other than her own was vested in the three associates or trustees in Boston.

At the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, there was a world congress of Christian Scientists. Some four thousand people attended. She did not personally address the assembly preferring to have a chosen friend, Judge Septimus Hannon, deliver the speech which she had written. The Christian Science congress was part of a larger body, the Parliament of Religions, which was convened at the same time. The significance of this joint assembly assured that Christian Science could be seen as part of a global movement; it was no longer an isolated and obscure sect.

The decision to erect what was “The Mother Church” was taken early the next year. Forty friends – students, teachers and believers – each contributed one thousand dollars to defray expenses. The building was completed by late December of that year and the first service was held on the thirtieth of the month. She, herself, was not present, and on the formal dedication she was again absent. The speech which she had written for this occasion was read on her behalf by Henrietta Clark, a professional

elocutionist. Her adopted son was much displeased by this procedure as he had hoped to be the centre of attention himself. By excluding him in this fashion “Mother” knew precisely what she was doing and why.

Her initial visit occurred in April and it was a moment of triumph. The huge building was the visible proof of her success. On this occasion she conducted a form of service incorporating a favourite hymn and the ninety-first psalm. To add to the sense of occasion she actually arranged to sleep in one of the side rooms in the church. Two months later on a second visit she delivered a short homily. The topic of the discourse was not one of self-congratulation, but rather on repentance and sin. There never seems to have been much humour or lightness in her public commentary. Perhaps the only occasion was when she decided to have the Westminster chimes shut off at night as she observed the purpose of Christian Science was not to give the neighbours sleepless nights.

In the midst of these triumphs the relationship between Foster Eddy – “Benny” – and herself was to end. Initially she tried to keep something of the earliest affection for him, but finally recognised that he did not have the necessary capacity to sustain any real position in the church or in her life. She banished him from Concord and observed, “Flattery and pleasure seeking.” He ceased to be regarded as a son, and only emerged from the shadows a few years later and in a somewhat despicable fashion. Each protégé, and they were inevitably younger men, brought to her a sense of renewal, each must owe everything to her and if the individual attempted any form of independence for whatever reason, he was cast into outer darkness. The fall of Lucifer could not have been more complete.

Christian Science was no longer just a North American phenomenon. In 1897, a church was formally inaugurated in England and soon after in Australia and New Zealand. Branches were to be found also in France and Germany. In the latter, a somewhat nationalistic organisation was to develop which was not entirely in keeping with the announced precepts of “The Mother Church”. There were few inroads made in the Latin countries as the Roman Catholic hierarchy regarded Christian Science as a most dangerous heresy.

Success brought more critics inevitably. One of her most famous opponents was Mark Twain. His hostility arose in no small part because he had hoped that through Christian Science he might find a cure for his daughter’s infirmities. Sadly this did not occur. In his anger, he felt that Mary Baker Eddy had traded on hope for her own nefarious purposes. He decided she was a charlatan who had acquired wealth and power through devious means. He felt it was hypocritical that she allowed herself to be addressed as “Mother” thereby usurping the Virgin Mary herself. He regarded her as being intellectually pretentious, her writings superficial

and he observed, “She has no more intellect than a tadpole, until she comes to business she is a marvel.”

The turn of the century saw the First Church of Christ Scientist in a situation of almost euphoric prosperity. The Church did not however participate in social, cultural or philanthropic activities, the membership were to be active in such matters as individuals not as the Church itself. She herself was relatively generous with donations to selected charities; she lent her name to promote international well being such as The Hague Peace Conference, but always as herself alone. She did, however, allow the French government to name her as an *officier d’Académie*.

Public admiration brought her to the attention of the gutter press. Articles that appeared in *The New York World* implied that she was either senile or worse, that the person who purported to be “the Concord Saint” was an impostor. She actually allowed herself to be interviewed, but when the reporters were received, they were very chagrined to find her very much in charge of herself and the church. *McClures Journal*, a well-known muck-raking periodical, also published some very negative commentary. These articles were written by the author Willa Cather and ultimately appeared in a book. The church in due course acquired the manuscript and arranged also that a number of copies of *The Life of Mary Baker Eddy and the History of Christian Science* were deliberately destroyed.

A further attack on Mary Baker Eddy was conjured up by William Chandler, who declared she was incompetent to handle her own affairs. He enlisted the support of George Washington Glover. Ebenezer Foster Eddy also joined this camarilla. A judicial suit ensued. The court-appointed witnesses reported that she was totally sane and totally able to manage her own affairs. Chandler, Glover and Eddy gained nothing, and were regarded by the public at large as villainous schemers preying on an old woman. They also had to pay all of the court costs.

Mary Baker Eddy surprisingly forgave George Glover and Ebenezer Foster Eddy. To the former she gave nearly a quarter of a million dollars and to the latter some fifty thousand. Both had to agree that neither would contest her will. Sensibly, they accepted her proposition. George Washington Glover returned to South Dakota, Foster Eddy retired to rural Vermont. Neither played any further role in her life and both were extremely lucky to receive anything from her, considering their behaviour.

After the conclusion of the case, she abandoned her home in Concord and bought a mansion in Boston. At the same time she decided to become the publisher of a newspaper that was to cover international affairs and intellectual and cultural matters. *The Christian Science Monitor*, as the newspaper was called, was to become one of the most respected in the United States. The editorial board over the years were to maintain the

highest standards, and the paper was recognised as being intellectually stimulating.

Her final year was one of unusual calm. She had rejected all efforts from her followers to write her memoirs, saying, “As Mary Baker Eddy I am the weakest of mortals, but as the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science I am the bone and sinew of the world.” She retained to the last her stylish outward appearance. Death *per se* meant nothing to her, she was totally serene. She died on 3 December 1910 and was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her detractors asserted that in her tomb was a telephone so that she could communicate with the world on some occasion upon her return.

Mary Baker Eddy was a curious individual. She had what might be described as a sort of “divine madness”. That she was paranoid cannot be denied; that she was despotic and autocratic can be seen in her treatment of her church and her protégés. Disobedience to the orders of the leader was followed by instant punishment, the ultimate being banishment from her presence. Her role as “Mother” allowed her to express herself in the pretence of moral and intellectual justification. She was able to disguise personal hostility in the guise of mentor. She frequently was purely whimsical in her metaphysical pronouncements and the logicity of her commentary quite lacking. She used the language of the philosopher or the scientist but tended to put her own gloss on whatever she wrote. *Science and Health* contained all that one needed to know; through its author’s writings one became aware of the truth.

At the time of her demise there were some 50,000 members of the Church, a quarter of a century earlier there had been about 60. The Church came to be regarded as a comfortable billet of the middle classes but how does one account for Lady Astor, the actress Joyce Grenfell, Lord Lothian, sometime British ambassador to the United States, and Sir James Butler, an eminent Cambridge historian?

Christian Science has a minor role in feminist history. Activity in the church is one in which women have taken a major role. Mary Baker Eddy was often commended in her own day for her brilliant organisational skills which were generally assumed to be masculine attributes. Her successes were not due to “sweetness and light”. Revolutionaries, and she was a revolutionary, do not object to destroy the deviant in the name of the cause. The latter is more important than any individual, except perhaps for the leader, and she was always the leader.