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The Decent Church that Topped the Neighbouring Hill:

C. M. Yonge and the Parish Church — Constructing a Conservative Community¹

Abstract. — This paper, as part of a broader project of the character of the conservative imagination in the works of lesser-known writers and painters including Lord John Manners, Daniel Maclise, and Alfred Austin, will consider Yonge’s representation of the parish church as a site for the construction of a Traditional Tory community, particularly in a natural setting. Key themes will be: 1) *Naturalising the social order*: how Yonge linked the religious rituals and practices of the Church to the natural rhythms and cycle of the agricultural calendar, and represented the natural world as symbolic of religious truth and social order. 2) *Historicising the social order*: how Yonge represented the church as a continuous presence in rural lives and landscapes, eliding or reversing discontinuities such as the Reformation. 3) *Situating the social order*: how Yonge figured the parish church as the physical heart of the community and its spaces as the site for the reiteration of the “chain of being”: quite literally the place where social order was built.

Keywords. — parish church, religion, social order, natural order.

¹ The quotation in the title derives from Oliver Goldsmith’s poem, *The Deserted Village* (1770).

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The Decent Church that Topped the Neighbouring Hill:

C. M. Yonge and the Parish Church - Constructing a Conservative Community

Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901), a committed Tractarian spinster best known as the writer of domestic fictions such as *The Daisy Chain* (1856), has recently been the subject of much scholarly reassessment. Critics such as Gavin Budge, Tamara Wagner, and Susan Walton have demonstrated both the intellectual sophistication of her work, and its significance in the shaping of gender, religious, disabled, and national and imperial identities in the nineteenth century.² Despite recent scholarly re-considerations of Yonge's political stance (broadly defined), there still remains much work to do in exploring how it is mediated through her works. In particular, Yonge's Romantic Toryism – shaped by the works of the Romantic poets and Walter Scott, the early nineteenth-century cult of chivalry, the Oxford Movement, and the publications of John Ruskin, among other influences – calls for further examination. This article, therefore, aims to situate her as an influential minor figure in the political culture of Victorian Conservatism. While scholars exploring the development of Conservative ideology and cultures in the nineteenth century have turned to focus on high profile (and largely male) figures such as Walter Scott and John Ruskin, not to mention Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Anthony Trollope and Benjamin Disraeli, the intention here is to

² G. Budge, *Charlotte Mary Yonge: Religion, Feminism, and Realism in the Victorian Domestic Novel* (Oxford, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 2007); T. S. Wagner, ed., *Charlotte Yonge: Rereading Domestic Religious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2012); T.S. Wagner, 'If he belonged to me, I should not like it at all': Managing Disabilities and Dependencies in Charlotte Yonge's *The Two Guardians*', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 4/2 (2005), n.p; Susan Walton, *Imagining Soldiers and Fathers in the Mid-Victorian Era: Charlotte Yonge's Models of Manliness* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

enrich and expand our understanding of how Tory ideals of community were articulated and promoted by focusing on an author who was both highly popular, *and* capable of greater intellectual sophistication than we have previously thought. The centrality of the Anglican church in the thinking of Tory Romantics is perhaps underplayed in our own secular age, so this article also aims to reassert its importance for authors such as the highly committed Anglo-Catholic Yonge. This article will consider Yonge's representation of the parish church as a site for the construction of a traditional Conservative community in both rural and urban contexts. By this I mean a community in which the 'chain of being' functions effectively, with the social elite of the gentry and the clergy exercising a paternalistic care over the lower orders, who respond with deference and respect, and both human beings and the rest of the natural world find their rightful place in the divine order.³ Here it will be argued that Yonge adopts three strategies to represent the Anglican parish church as one of the central foci for, and a key agent in, the construction of an ideal Tory community. Firstly, she naturalises the social order, and the parish church as part of it. I will demonstrate that Yonge links religious rituals and practices of the church to the natural rhythms and cycle of the agricultural calendar, and represents the natural world as symbolic of religious truth and social order. Secondly, she historicises the social order, representing the church as a continuous presence in rural lives and landscapes, eliding or reversing discontinuities such as the Reformation. Thirdly, she situates the social order, both physically and sociologically. Yonge represented the parish church as the physical heart of the community and its spaces as the site for the reiteration of the 'chain of being': quite literally, the place where social order is built. A chronological and generic range of Yonge's works will be used to examine her representation of the parish church, including *Abbeychurch, or Self-Control and Self-Conceit* (1844), *The Herb of the Field* (1853), *Heartsease; or the Brother's Wife* (1854), *The Daisy Chain* (1856), *Hopes and Fears* (1860), *English Church History, Adapted for Use in Day and Sunday Schools* (1883), *The Pillars of the House* (1873), and *An Old Woman's Outlook in a Hampshire Village* (1892).

The Strategies at Work: The Clever Woman of the Family

As an example of these strategies at work, I will begin with a close reading of a passage from *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865). In this novel, Rachel Curtis - who has overreached

³ The classic definition of the 'chain of being' is to be found in E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943: this ed., Harmondsworth, Peregrine Books, 1966).

herself by trying to be too clever and independent and is responsible for the death of a child - has had to fall back on a conventional marriage with Alick Keith, a Crimean War hero. She is too broken down and ill to enjoy a honeymoon tour of the waterfalls of Wales, so the couple decide to go and stay with Mr Clare, Alick's uncle, the Rector of Bishopsworthy, somewhere in the south of England. *En route*, they pass through a nasty new suburb of 'cottages of gentility' – aptly called Littleworthy – before arriving at the rural village of Bishopsworthy, which is (as Alick puts it) 'defended by a Dukery' (Yonge, 1865: 289). In other words, it is controlled by the local aristocrat – an old College friend of Mr Clare – who prevents the intrusion of buildings expressive of social mobility and the *nouveau riche*.

“... coming to the end of the villas they passed woods and fields, a bit of heathy common, and a scattering of cottages. Labourers going home from work looked up, and as their eyes met Alick's there was a mutual smile and touch of the hat. He evidently felt himself coming home. The trees of a park were beginning to rise in front, when the carriage turned suddenly down a sharp steep hill; the right side of the road bounded by a park paling; the left, by cottages, reached by picturesque flights of brick stairs, then came a garden wall, and a halt. Alick called out, 'Thanks,' and 'we will get out here,' adding, 'They will take in the goods the back way. I don't like careering into the churchyard.'

Rachel, alighting, saw that the lane proceeded downwards to a river crossed by a wooden bridge, with an expanse of meadows beyond. To her left was a stable-yard, and below it a white gate and white railings enclosing a graveyard, with a very beautiful church standing behind a mushroom yew-tree. The upper boundary of the churchyard was the clipped yew hedge of the rectory garden, whose front entrance was through the churchyard. There was a lovely cool tranquillity of aspect as the shadows lay sleeping on the grass; and Rachel could have stood and gazed, but Alick opened the gate, and there was a movement at the seat that enclosed the gnarled trunk of the yew tree. A couple of village lads touched their caps and departed the opposite way, a white setter dog bounded forward, and, closely attended by a still snowier cat, a gentleman came to meet them, so fearlessly treading the pathway between the graves, and so youthful in figure, that it was only the "Well, uncle, here she is," and, "Alick, my dear boy," that convinced her that this was indeed Mr. Clare. The next moment he had taken her hand, kissed her brow, and spoken a few words of fatherly blessing, then, while Alick exchanged greetings with the cat and dog, he led her to the arched yew-tree entrance to his garden, up two stone steps, along a flagged path across the narrow grass-plot in front of the old two-storied house ...”⁴

This passage immediately both situates and naturalises the social order of this Conservative rural community, establishing the church, its spaces, and its priest at the heart of it. Rachel and Alick move through the physical space of the village: the park paling belongs to Earlsworthy

⁴ Yonge, *The Clever Woman*, 289-90.

Park, the home of the local landowner, Mr Clare's college friend, while the cottages represent the lower orders. In case we have not got the point, labourers and village lads appear in person, too, doffing their forelocks respectfully to Mr Clare and Alick. In turn, Alick shows appropriate reverence for the sacred space of the church and its churchyard, as the young couple approach: their baggage is taken round 'the back way', to avoid 'careering' into the churchyard, which they enter on foot. Here they find Mr Clare in the churchyard, which is presented as a pastoral idyll. Note how the natural world is domesticated and contained in this passage, so it reinforces and harmonises with the social order. The hedges are 'clipped', and the trunk of the yew tree is 'enclosed' by a seat. Two domestic animals, a dog and a cat, attend Mr Clare, in a further naturalisation of the social order by a quiet assertion of human authority over the animal world. Both animals are white, expressing the purity of the sacred space and person with whom they are associated. Although the age of the church is not stated, the age of the rectory is, quietly historicising the church as the centre of this traditional community. Later in the chapter, Mr Clare passes his evening carving a boss for the roof of his church – 'the last stage in its gradual restoration' – which both reinforces the age of the building, and shows the rector quite literally constructing the social order of the community (Yonge, 1865: 291). As the rector also mentions giving one of his carvings to a young girl in the village, his work is also expressive of the social bonds of the community (Yonge, 1865: 299).

This passage and the rest of this chapter, therefore, show Yonge's three strategies for situating, naturalising, and historicising the natural order at work, with the parish church playing a central function here. I will now consider each in turn across a range of works.

A Part of the Landscape: Naturalising the Parish Church

Like many deeply religious Victorians influenced by Romanticism, the Anglo-Catholic movement, and the early works of John Ruskin, Yonge interpreted the natural world as symbolic of religious truth in a way which George Landow has termed typological (Landow, 1980). Additionally, Yonge linked religious rituals and practices of the church – especially her own local ones - to the natural rhythms and cycle of the agricultural calendar, naturalising and harmonising the economic activities and the social order of the community around her. This approach clearly shows the influence of *The Christian Year* (1827), a highly popular collection of religious poems celebrating the central Christian festivals and saints' days, published by her

spiritual guide and mentor, John Keble, the vicar of nearby Hursley and one of the three leading figures of the Oxford Movement.⁵ While Keble's poetry focuses emphatically on the church rather than the agricultural calendar, he also represents the natural world as a vehicle of divine revelation, reflecting his own debt to Romantic poets such as Wordsworth. Of course, Yonge was also influenced by her passion for botany, one of the several branches of science in which she showed a healthy and informed interest.⁶

Yonge's linkage between the natural and agricultural year and religious calendar of the parish church is particularly apparent in her 1853 publication, *The Herb of the Field*, a collection of a series of monthly discussions of common and garden flowers for young children, with supplementary studies. In her preface, Yonge reflected that: "Surely [there is] no means better suited for showing to young minds at once the mercy and the majesty of the Creator than the display of the exquisite loveliness and perfect contrivance of those minute plants, so common that they have hitherto passed them by without heed" (Yonge, 1853: vii).

The 1887 edition shows her discarding the Linnaean system, but not the spiritual and ecclesial associations of the plants. When discussing March plants, she describes the daffodil as the 'Lent lily', and recalls that 'the first Christian flock in England were enclosed within hazel walls' (Yonge, 1853: 7, 12). She tells her readers that May flowers include the marsh marigold, formerly used to decorate churches for the feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, and that the July lupin is 'sometimes called Lady's fingers, in honour of the Blessed Virgin', while the lotus 'stood for immortality, and old painters sometimes put it into pictures of scenes after the Resurrection' (Yonge, 1853: 18, 42). Meanwhile the September sunflower – 'one of the brightest, clearest lessons written in God's great book of nature' – teaches the Christian to keep his or her eyes on 'the Sun of Righteousness in heaven' (Yonge, 1853: 52). Yew branches, she notes, are 'the Easter deckings of churches, and sometimes are carried on Palm Sunday, as the nearest approach we have to the palm. And they have from very old times been grown in churchyards' (Yonge, 1853: 205). Elms too, she reminds her readers, often border a churchyard, 'making a sort of outer church, with pillars and arches, where the

⁵ For more on Keble and *The Christian Year*, see K. Blair, ed., *John Keble in Context* (London: Anthem Press, 2004). The final chapter in this collection, by Ellen Jordan, Charlotte Mitchell, and Helen Schinske, briefly considers the influence of Keble on Yonge.

⁶ There does not yet seem to be a full scholarly exploration of Yonge's botanical publications, but for her interest in geology, see Mia Chen, "'To face apparent discrepancies with revelation': examining the fossil record in Charlotte Yonge's *The Trial*", *Women's Writing*, 17/2 (2010), 361-379.

thoughts of the living may be sobered, and where the dead may rest within the shadow of the church' (Yonge, 1853: 219). The December chapter, naturally, dwells on the 'solemn pleasure of beautifying the place of the sanctuary, of dressing the church with beautiful green boughs ... work fit for angels'. Yonge improves the occasion by reminding her readers that, even if they are not chosen to help with this task, they must endeavour to grow up as 'young plants ... bearing the fruits of righteousness' (Yonge, 1853: 79). The theological lesson here is often aligned with a social one. A passage on the lilac allows Yonge to make a comparison between this blossom and the daisy, comparing the first to the 'high-born child' and the second to 'the lowly cottage child', and finding a moral lesson in how each does 'their own duty where their Maker has placed them' (Yonge, 1853: 183-184). The continuity and interconnectedness of the natural, social, and divine orders is here fully exemplified – as well as the role of the parish church as at the heart of this interplay.

An Old Woman's Outlook in a Hampshire Village (1892) also exhibits Yonge's naturalisation of sacred spaces and church rituals. An engaging journey through the calendar year, it is unclassifiable in terms of genre: Yonge mingles sociological observation, folklore, botany, astronomy, historical reflection, and memoir in this text. Although her primary focus is on the seasonal changes in the natural world around her, this is clearly married to the ecclesiastical calendar. In March for instance, she comments on the appearance of the 'Easter moon', and she adds that 'here, too, preparing for the Holy Week, are the withies [willows], the silver buttons of their catkins expanding into the full, fragrant yellow tuft of stamens protruding from tiny scales - pussies and goslings, as happy children call them. They furnish the substitutes for palms, which our village children still wear on Palm Sunday' (Yonge, 1892: 43-45). March confirmations are also described, with Yonge commenting ambivalently on the introduction of the veils (Yonge, 1892: 53-55). April provokes reflections of the behaviour of birds that come in to the church, with the robin being commended for behaving with 'great propriety', while blackbirds and starlings 'get hopelessly confused, but happily their visits are rare': it is clear that this offers an admonitory comment on the conduct of human church-goers too (Yonge, 1892: 76-77). In May, Yonge muses on May Day celebrations in northern parishes, suggesting that parades featuring a doll in a flowery arbour are the 'remnant of honour to an image of the Blessed Virgin on the opening of the month of Mary'. She adds that it is best to arrange a May Day celebration for the children of the parish, under the rule of an

‘efficient guardian’ and featuring a ‘general tea’ (Yonge, 1892: 90-92). The guelder rose, popularly known as the ‘snowball provokes a prolonged reminiscence of the Whit-Monday procession, an expression of social cohesion.

Snowballs are among the delights of country childhood. To me they always recall the remembrance of the ecstasy it used to be to see the Whit-Monday procession of the village club, when the two tall banners, one of pink, the other of blue, glazed calico, were decked at the summit each with a peony and a snowball, and the Friendly Society ‘walked,’ as it was technically called. Each member carried a blue staff tipped with red, and had a blue ribbon round his tall hat, and almost all wore the old white round frock. The big drum was beaten lustily at their head, a few wind instruments brayed, all the rabble rout of the village stepped after them, and it was certainly a picturesque specimen of genuine village sports, perhaps the more so because the procession was, at the best, straggling and knock-kneed and often unsteady. Yet it filled the childish mind with an exultation and delight which is droll to recollect now, and the enthusiasm of singing the 133rd Psalm, Old Version-

“133rd Psalm, Old Version

O what a happy thing it is,

And joyful for to see,

Brethren to dwell together in

Friendship and unitee ...

And oh! the odour of the church—a mixture of beery and tobaccoey human nature together with that of the fading young greenery of infant beech and larch boughs ...⁷”

In July, she discusses the glories of a beech forest, recalling that ‘Mr. Keble used to call the Ampfield beeches Hursley Cathedral; and verily they are like ‘the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault’ (Yonge, 1892: 148). In September, she reflects on appropriate decorations in church for harvest festival:

⁷ Yonge, *An Old Woman’s Outlook*, 97-99.

“The harvest feast in church is ... a modern invention, but is thoroughly enjoyed by the people, if they are encouraged to make their offerings in kind for the sick in hospitals. Very queer things come, and difficult to dispose of—enormous pumpkins, great pieces of honeycomb, apples enough to make the church smell like an apple-chamber, onions which have to be relegated to the porch ... Sometimes it is the best way to have a week-day evening for these substantial offerings, which are afterwards sent to a hospital; and a Sunday when beauty is alone consulted, and the staple of the decorations can be the three sorts of corn, assisted by grasses stored since summer, together with dahlias, scarlet geraniums, the brilliant, waxy berries of the wild guelder-rose, and the grand dark sceptres of the reed maces ... ⁸”

Yonge’s December reflections inevitably dwell on the decoration of the church for Christmas – ‘An honour and privilege it is still to work for the house of God and beautify the place of His sanctuary’ – including a long explanation of why mistletoe, with its pagan associations, should not be used in the Christian sacred space (Yonge, 1892: 276-279). The text finishes, naturally, on Christmas Day, with a final reflection which unites the description of the natural and social landscape of Yonge’s community with the Christian rituals of her church:

“The harvest feast in church is ... a modern invention, but is thoroughly enjoyed by the people, if they are encouraged to make their offerings in kind for the sick in hospitals. Very queer things come, and difficult to dispose of — enormous pumpkins, great pieces of honeycomb, apples enough to make the church smell like an apple-chamber, onions which have to be relegated to the porch ... Sometimes it is the best way to have a week-day evening for these substantial offerings, which are afterwards sent to a hospital; and a Sunday when beauty is alone consulted, and the staple of the decorations can be the three sorts of corn, assisted by grasses stored since summer, together with dahlias, scarlet geraniums, the brilliant, waxy berries of the wild guelder-rose, and the grand dark sceptres of the reed maces ... ⁹”

For Yonge, the Christmas dressing of the church, a development principally owed to the innovations of the Tractarian movement, is a key motif in her naturalising strategy. In *Henrietta’s Wish* (1850), the Christmas church-decoration scene is mainly intended to contrast the devout attitude of Henrietta with her cousin Beatrice’s flirtatious and light-minded one. But it also represents a naturalising of the sacred space of the parish church. Yonge tells her readers that church decoration is ‘work fit for angels ... it is work like that of the children who strewed the palm-branches before the steps of the Redeemer!’ (Yonge, 1850: 88). Henrietta’s contribution in particular marries the natural world with theological doctrines, as she creates a monogram of I.H.S. surrounded by a ‘large circle of holly, plaited and twined together, the

⁸ Yonge, *An Old Woman’s Outlook*, 198-99.

⁹ Yonge, *An Old Woman’s Outlook*, 198-99.

many-pointed leaves standing out in every direction in their peculiar stiff gracefulness' (Yonge, 1850: 94-95).¹⁰ Only afterwards does she realise with awe that 'It is like Good Friday!'. Going out from the church, the party of decorators walk home to the sound of carols bourne on the 'still frosty wind' and under 'large solemn stars' (Yonge, 1850: 95-97). Christmas church decoration makes the parish church a site at which the harmony of natural and divine orders is experienced by the participants. The compliments which the young ladies receive on Christmas Day for their decorations from 'old women' and 'school-children', as well as their families and the local vicar, also reflect the role of the parish church in reinforcing social order and cohesion (Yonge, 1850: 99-100).

Ancient and Modern: Historicising the Parish Church

The parish church is, however, not only naturalised; it is also historicised, further reinforcing its central role in the construction and validation of a Conservative ideal community. As continuity, allied to gradual, careful change – what was often described in the nineteenth century as the development of a living tradition – was central to Victorian Conservative ideology, Yonge, like many other Tractarian Anglicans, was anxious to stress that the Church of England was a natural progression from the medieval Catholic church and a branch of the universal Christian church. This meant minimising the disruptive break with the medieval past which had taken place during Reformation – while also supporting the return of the Anglican church to acceptable aspects of Catholic doctrine, practice, and organisation which had been lost at the time of the Reformation. Miriam Burstein has recently demonstrated the preoccupation with the Reformation and its effects which is apparent in the fictions of writers of every Christian denomination in Victorian Britain (Burstein, 2014) – and Yonge was no exception. She adopted a combination of the strategies identified by James Kirby as characteristic of Anglican historians in the late nineteenth century in their interpretations of the Reformation:¹¹ she stressed continuity with the medieval Catholic church and the value of *some* of the Protestant reforms, but she also emphasized the damage perpetuated by it – such

¹⁰ The echo of Ruskin's essay on 'The Nature of the Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice* (1853) is apparent: here, Ruskin declares that 'rigidity' is one of the defining principles of Gothic style.

¹¹ See James Kirby, *Historians and the Church of England, 1870-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Kirby suggests that it is 'Broad Church' historians who minimised the disruptive effects of the Reformation and saw it as a matter of gradual reform, while 'High Church' historians stressed the break and the amount of damage caused by the Reformation. But 'High Church' Anglicans were, of course, anxious to stress that the Victorian Anglican church was still a branch of the universal church (particularly once it was suitably reformed and more 'Catholic' in its doctrines and practices).

as the ‘theft’ of church property, and the abolition of monasticism – and the need to reverse such changes by (for instance) the restoration of *some* Catholic liturgical and devotional practices.

Yonge’s *English Church History* (1883) allows us to understand the broader historical framework in which she sets the English parish church and its congregation, as the work stresses historical as well as natural continuity. ‘Adapted for use in day and Sunday schools, and for general family reading’, this was clearly a text intended to instruct children – including, no doubt, her own Sunday school children at Otterbourne – in the history of the Anglican church.

“... the essential fact [is] that our own [church] is a branch of the one Catholic and Apostolic Church, built on the One Foundation. The continuity of the church and the origin of the Prayer Book have therefore been special subjects ... Some of the greatest difficulties of our times have been caused on the one hand by the loyal assumption that what *is* is right, and on the other by the belief that whatever is *old* must be better than the new, both parties alike being ignorant of the principle and cause of the customs which they attack and defend, and thus not knowing whether they are, or are not, important.”¹²

The theme of the continuity of the church is apparent in Yonge’s choice to start her narrative with the conversion of St Alban, and to give a full and detailed picture of the development of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon churches, the history of Becket’s controversy with Henry II, and the establishment of the order of the Dominican and Franciscan friars, among other events (Yonge, 1883: 1-77). Clearly the medieval Catholic church is seen as the foundation of the Anglican, and the many illustrations of medieval cathedrals and churches reinforce the message here (Yonge, 1883: 10, 39, 43, 46). The continuity of physical structures is asserted (and it is interesting to note that there are not, for instance, illustrations of the ruined abbeys featured in the post-Reformation chapters of the book). Yonge is ambiguous about the development of Lollardy, and critical of the extreme Protestantism of the 1530s-1550s, crediting Elizabeth I with restoring the church to the *via media* which she has described in her preface (Yonge, 1883: 78-129). Thus Yonge’s *English Church History* allowed its readers to identify old and new Gothic churches in their parishes as an expression of Anglican continuity with the medieval Catholic church. In her conclusion, she stresses the presence of two parties in the church ‘one caring much for her Catholicity and oneness with the primitive church, and therewith for the dignity and beauty of her services’, and ‘the other fearing lest in these

¹² C. M. Yonge, *English Church History* (London: National Society’s Depository, 1883), preface (n.p).

outward things, the inward spirit would be lost, and setting the reading of the Bible, and the sense of being personally atoned for, above all else'. These two need to 'unite' to keep the church in balance, she argues (Yonge, 1883: 216). Thus she negotiates a *via media* in her own historical text, admitting the developing insights of Reformation and later Evangelical theology, while calling for adherence to older Catholic Christian traditions in liturgy and worship.

Yonge's latter history of her own locality, *John Keble's Parishes: A History of Hursley and Otterbourne* (1898), places the parish church – or rather churches – at the centre of the narrative about the creation of an ideal Conservative community. This begins, for Yonge, in the medieval period, when Hursley was a bishop's peculiar. Yonge imagines the bishop's visitation, offering us a romantic vision of the church's role in the construction and maintenance of medieval communities:

“Riding forth with his train of clergy, chaplains, almoners, lawyers, crossbearers, and choristers, besides his household of attendants, the bishop entered a village, where the bells were rung, priest, knight, franklins, and peasants came out with all their local display, often a guild, to receive him, and other clergy gathered in; mass was said, difficulties or controversies attended to, confirmation given to the young people and children, and, after a meal, the bishop proceeded, sometimes to a noble's castle, or a convent, but more often to another manor of his own, ... and took up his abode, the neighbouring clergy coming in to pay their respects, mention their grievances, and hold counsel with him ...¹³”

To match with this, she also describes the transformation of the two parishes in her own day, under the dual influence of the local landowner, Sir William Heathcote of Hursley Park, and the vicar of Hursley, John Keble. Squire and vicar are ably assisted by her own father, William Crawley Yonge, and together, this trio transform Hursley and Otterbourne, with frequent church services, school teaching, and cottage visiting.¹⁴ At the centre of this revitalised Conservative community are the churches. Hursley church is remodelled, but – significantly – 'along the lines of the old church' (Yonge, 1898: 115). The refurbishment of the interior is funded by the local gentry and sundry Tractarian clergymen, Yonge tells us - but while the fittings are new, they are paradoxically also historical. The lectern is copied from one in Corpus Christi chapel in Oxford, and the inspiration for the series of new stained glass windows is the scheme in the medieval church of Fairford (Yonge, 1898: 117-119). New

¹³ C. M. Yonge, *John Keble's Parishes: A History of Hursley and Otterbourne* (London and New York, Macmillan, 1898), 18-19.

¹⁴ Yonge, *John Keble's Parishes*, 92-145.

corbels are carefully chosen to express the belief of Keble (and his disciple, Charlotte Yonge), in the continuity of this parish church and the Anglican church as a whole, with the universal Catholic church. They include the heads of Peter and Paul; two local medieval bishops of Winchester, Wykeham and Waynflete; two seventeenth-century High Anglican clergyman, Lancelot Andrewes and Thomas Ken; the Empress Helena and Queen Victoria; and both the Augustines, of Hippo and Canterbury; as well as the then current archbishop of Canterbury, John Bird Sumner (Yonge, 1898: 117).

Otterbourne church, however, proves too small to contain its population of 700, and the initial attempt of Captain Yonge to enlarge it gives way to a plan to build a new and larger building (Yonge, 1898: 99-100). New it may be, but once again, it is given the appearance and social weight of an old church: Captain Yonge himself designs it to reflect his ‘great admiration for York Cathedral’, and Yonge gives a detailed account of her father’s attempt to further historicise the new church:

“Mr. Yonge sought diligently for old patterns and for ancient carving in oak, and in Wardour Street he succeeded in obtaining five panels, representing the Blessed Virgin and the four Latin Fathers, which are worked into the pulpit; also an exceedingly handsome piece of carving, which was then adapted as altar-rail—evidently Flemish—with scrolls containing corn and grapes, presided over by angels, and with two groups of kneeling figures; on one side, apparently an Emperor with his crown laid down, and the collar of the Golden Fleece around his neck, followed by a group of male figures, one with a beautiful face. On the other side kneels a lady, not an empress, with a following of others bringing flowers. At the divisions stand Religious of the four Orders The idea is that it probably represents either the coronation of Maximilian or the abdication of Charles V ... For the stone-work, Mr. Yonge discovered that the material chiefly used in the cathedral was Caen stone, though the importation had long ceased. He entered into communication with the quarrymen there, sent out a stone mason (Newman) from Winchester, and procured stone for the windows, reredos, and font, thus opening a traffic that has gone on ever since ...¹⁵”

Having established these renovated and newly built churches at the centre of her text, Yonge devotes chapters 11 and 12 of *John Keble’s Parishes* to a description of the local good works of both Sir William Heathcote and John Keble, establishing their roles as the ideal leaders of a Conservative country community (Yonge, 1898: 125-144).

Establishing the historical and physical continuity of the Anglican church with its medieval predecessor could, however, sometimes be a bit of a struggle. Yonge’s 1854 novel,

¹⁵ Yonge, *John Keble’s Parishes*, 101-102.

Heartsease; or, The Brother's Wife exemplifies Yonge's concern about reversing the negative results of the Reformation on the ecclesiastical and social fabric of England, although in this case this is about providing a supplement to the parish church. One sub-plot in the novel centres on Emma Brandon, a young heiress who forms a friendship with Violet, the eponymous heroine, early on in the novel. She invites Violet to visit her estate, Rickworth, where she takes her on a tour of a ruined priory on her estate. Violet is reminded of the almshouse which she had visited at Winchester, St Cross; Emma replies that 'St Cross is alive, not a ruin' (Yonge, 1854: 65). She soon confides in her friend that her intention is to restore it, building 'a sort of alms-house, with old people and children, and we could look after them ourselves' (Yonge, 1854: 66). By the end of the novel, the establishment of the alms-house is underway, with orphans, a widow, and a governess already installed in the church, an architect commissioned to rebuild the rest of the priory, and a search on for a suitable chaplain (Yonge, 1854: 475). This concern for the restoration to the Church of what had taken from it during the Reformation is a theme which surfaces in several of Yonge's other novels, and it is an anxiety shared with other Victorian Conservatives, such as the Young Englanders. As we will see, it is apparent, too, in *The Pillars of the House* (1873).

At the Heart of the Community: Situating the Parish Church

Yonge's third strategy was to represent the parish church as the physical heart of the community and its spaces as the site for the reiteration of the 'chain of being': the place through which Conservative social order was built and preserved. As the passage from *The Clever Woman of the Family* suggests, Yonge is perceptive about the physical expression of nineteenth-century shifts in social class and order, in particular the expansion of town and cities and the growth of suburbia. Many of her novels feature the building of churches as a response to the development of new, potentially, unchurched communities which seemed to be developing outside the control of the traditional social and clerical structures. Yonge was hardly alone in these concerns: many of her contemporaries, from a range of different political affiliations and religious denominations, were equally bent on providing spiritual provision for the new urban and industrial communities.¹⁶ Sharing Yonge's Conservatism and her

¹⁶ For Victorian church building, see C. Brooks and A. Saint, eds., *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) and William Whyte, *Unlocking the Church: The Lost Secrets of Victorian Sacred Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Anglo-Catholicism, the Tory Radical, Lord John Manners, for instance, in *The Monastic and Manufacturing Systems* (1843), strongly urged the restoration of the role of the clergyman as alms-giver in parishes, and the provision of ‘urban monasticism’ in the cities to ensure care for the bodies and souls of the manufacturing class.¹⁷

In one of her earliest works, *Abbeychurch* (1844) – the very name of which focuses on the attention of the reader on ecclesiastical buildings – the central focus of Yonge’s fiction is the consecration of a new church. Abbeychurch St Mary’s – ‘a respectable old town, situated at the foot of St. Austin’s Hill’ has its own historic church and almshouses, which are both conversions from a monastery of Augustine friars. This, of course, is a classic example of Yonge’s historicising strategy, in this case an attempt to partially discount the disruption of the Reformation by suggesting a continuity between the medieval and modern churches. ‘Scarcely more than a large village’, Abbeychurch has been threatened by a new railway line through the courtyard of the alms-houses, a disaster which has been averted. But the arrival of the railway on the outskirts of the town leads to the ‘erection of various rows of smart houses’ for retiring ‘London tradesmen’ on the hillside, doubling the local population (Yonge, 1844: 19-20). The vicar, Mr Woodbourne – adverse to the building of a new gallery in the old church to accommodate new parishioners – makes ‘every effort to raise funds to build and endow an additional church’ on the hill, where the ‘tall white spire’ of St Austin’s is soon raised (Yonge, 1844: 20-21). This church therefore accommodates the new social residents of the suburbs. As it is built by an alliance of clergyman and squire – Sir Henry Morton, the brother-in-law of Mr Woodbourne – it extends the authority of the traditional social order to the new middle classes of the suburb - despite the fact that Elizabeth, the vicar’s daughter, ‘could almost grudge that beautiful Gothic church to those regular red-brick uniform rows of deformity’ (Yonge, 1844: 44-45).

A more celebrated example of a church built to accommodate and contain a new population is in one of Yonge’s most famous fictions, *The Daisy Chain* (1856). In this case, the new population is decidedly working class, a community which has grown up around a slate quarry on a heath outside the old market town of Stoneborough. Etheldreda, one of the many daughters of Dr May, visits the ‘colony of roughly-built huts’ to give some food and provisions to a family of a quarryman brought into the town’s hospital, and is distressed by the

¹⁷ See John Morrow, *Young England: The New Generation* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), for more on Lord John Manners and the Young England group.

absence of material and spiritual provision for the community (Yonge, 1856: 23-24). Walking home with her brother and sister, she resolves to build a church for the community. Imagining herself raising the funds for it by secretly publishing her writings, she indulges in a daydream: “Spire and chancel – pinnacle and buttress rose before her eyes - and she and Norman were standing in the porch, with an orderly, religious population, blessing the unknown benefactor, who had caused the news of salvation to be heard among them” (Yonge, 1856: 25). This vision obviously situates the church not only physically in the heart of the community, but also socially, as she and her brother preside from the porch over the now domesticated and Christianised residents of the once lawless miners’ settlement. In fact, Ethel succeeds in her aim, establishing not only a school at Cocks Moor, but eventually contributing to the building of the new church of St Andrew’s, at which her elder brother, Richard, serves as curate. The gentry of the whole area eventually end up contributing to the erection of the church, with Dr Spencer – Dr May’s old friend – designing it; the Rivers family contributing the wood furnishings, ‘beautiful carved fittings’ from an old French chapel; the Ernescliffe brothers, the land and the cost of the building; and the Mays some of the windows (Yonge, 1856: 628-630). The novel closes with Ethel standing in the church porch, waiting for her brother Richard, and musing on her future destiny as a single gentlewoman working in her community: ‘Someone there must be to be loved and helped, and the poor for certain’ (Yonge, 1856: 666-667).

Hopes and Fears (1860) is interesting, because it features both metropolitan and country churches, demonstrating how Yonge imagined that the church as the centre of the rural community could be transposed into an urban setting. It opens with a brief description of the London city church of St Wulstan’s, clearly described as a seventeenth or eighteenth-century Neo-Classical church, which is in close proximity to the London home of the heroine, Honoria Charlecote (Yonge, 1866: 1). It is significant, of course, that Yonge begins with a description of St Wulstan’s, a narrative privileging of the church which expresses her belief that Christian virtues must be central to the life of the city as well as the country community. Even the choice of saint may have significance too – Wulfstan of Worcester played a key role in bridging the gap between the old Anglo-Saxon world and the new Norman regime at the time of the Conquest, suggesting the potential for Conservative visionaries such as Yonge to do the same in the new industrial age. He was also known for his compassion to the poor, his opposition to the slave trade, and his enthusiasm for church-building, which may suggest that Yonge is alerting the reader to the necessity for

social and moral reform of the growing industrial and commercial cities, and the provision of new parish churches.¹⁸

St Wulstan's is contrasted with the parish church of the Charlecote country estate, the Holt at Hiltonbury, where Honoria's cousin, Humfrey, is squire. Early on in the novel, Honoria rejects a proposal from Humfrey, which – it is clear to the reader – is a big mistake. Humfrey is, in fact, the perfect Tory country gentleman, benevolent and hospitable to all, a good magistrate and a benefactor of charities. 'In his own parish he was a beneficent monarch; on his own estate a mighty farmer', Yonge tells us (Yonge, 1866: 13). Fittingly, therefore, it is at the altar of the parish church that this Christian country gentleman dies suddenly at harvest time, to the grief of the village community. Yonge's description is worth quoting at length, as it establishes the church and the squire as the central pillars of this rural community:

"It was the first Sunday in the month, and there was full service. Hiltonbury Church had one of those old-fashioned altar-rails which form three sides of a square, and where it was the custom that at the words 'Draw near with faith,' the earliest communicants should advance to the rail and remain till their place was wanted by others, and that the last should not return to their seats till the service was concluded. Mr. Charlecote had for many years been always the first parishioner to walk slowly up the matted aisle, and kneel beside the wall, under the cumbrous old tables of Commandments. There, on this day, he knelt as usual ... It was not till the rest were moving away, that the vicar and his clerk remarked that the squire had not risen ... The vicar hastily summoned the village doctor. ... They lifted him, and laid him along on the cushioned step where he had been kneeling. ... There he lay on the altar step, with hands crossed on his breast, and perfectly blessed repose on his manly countenance, sweetened and ennobled in its stillness, and in every lineament bearing the impress of that Holy Spirit of love who had made it a meet temple.

What an unpremeditated lying in state was that! as by ones and twos, beneath the clergyman's eye, the villagers stole in with slowly, heavily falling tread to gaze in silent awe on their best friend, some sobbing and weeping beyond control, others with grave, almost stolid tranquillity, or the murmured 'He was a gentleman,' which, in a poor man's mouth, means 'he was a just man and patient, the friend of the weak and poor.' ...

No, bewail him not. It was glory, indeed, but the glory of early autumn, the garnering of the shock of corn in full season ... The funeral, according to his expressed wishes, was like those of the farmers of the parish; the coffin borne by his own labourers in their white round frocks; and the labourers were the expected guests for whom provision was made; but far and wide from all the country round ... came

¹⁸ See Emma Mason, 'Wulfstan [St. Wulfstan]', H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 -).

farmers and squires, poor men and rich, from the peer and county member down to the poor travelling hawker—all had met the sunny sympathy of that smile, all had been aided and befriended, all felt as if a prop, a castle of strength were gone.¹⁹

The parish church of Hiltonbury soon makes another appearance, though. Honora first meets Robert Fulmort when, as a boy, he is accidentally locked in the church and takes shelter under Humfrey Charlecote's newly-erected monument, appealing for the dead squire's protection against ghosts (Yonge, 1866: 67-69). Robert is the younger son of a newly gentrified local family, whose wealth is built on gin manufacture. Under the influence of both the living and dead Charlecotes, Robert grows up to become conscious of the evil of the family business – and he eventually becomes a clergyman working in the fictional London district of Whittingtonia, where the family's business is based. As he has a private fortune of his own, he decides to dedicate it to the building of an ecclesiastical complex, 'a range of buildings round a court, consisting of day-schools, a home for orphans, a crèche for infants, a reading-room for adults, and apartments for the clergy of the Church which was to form one side of the quadrangle' (Yonge, 1866: 256). Robert is clearly modelled on the Anglo-Catholic missionary clergymen who began working in the East End in the 1850s and 1860s, such as Alexander Mackonochie (1825-1887) and Charles Fuge Lowder (1820-1880). Similarly, his ecclesiastical complex – St Matthew's, Whittingtonia - is probably modelled on similar missionary establishments at, for instance, All Saints', Margaret Street. Here we have exactly the sort of urban monasticism in action which had been advocated by the Young Englander, Lord John Manners, in his 1843 publication, *The Monastic and Manufacturing Systems*. Yonge has recorded here the new sort of parish church for the East End of London which was actually emerging in the later nineteenth-century, situating the church once again at the centre of a Conservative community.

A Concluding Example: The Pillars of the House (1873)

I will finish with the example of the depiction of the parish church which illustrates Yonge's three strategies at work most clearly. This is the parish church of Vale Leston in *The Pillars of the House* (1873). In the backstory to the novel, we learn that Edward Underwood had been denied the family living at Vale Leston many years before, and has become a humble curate in the parish church of the busy town of Bexley (Yonge, 1873: I, 3-4). Some years after

¹⁹ Yonge, *Hopes and Fears*, 57-59.

Edward's death, Yonge sends his eldest son, Felix, on a visit to his childhood home of Vale Leston, and the church and the family mansion are clearly at once historicised and naturalised. Set in an idyllic valley between two rivers is 'an almost collegiate-looking mass of grey buildings', with lawns and flower-beds, 'surrounded by park-like grounds and trees'. The church 'and the remnants of the old priory' are connected by a cloister to 'a big family mansion, built of the same grey stone with the rest, but in the style of the seventeenth century, and a good deal modernized on that' (Yonge, 1873: I, 430-431). The church and the squire's mansion are thus physically linked, with the Prior's Room on the first floor even having a window into the church interior. In this description, there is a clear promise that Vale Leston could become the site of an ideal Conservative community growing organically out of the pastoral landscape. Yonge also creates an historical continuity in the landscape, eliding the disruptive effects of the Reformation: she clearly implies that the Anglican order of church and mansion also grows naturally out of the priory of the past. Revealingly, the mansion is 'of the same stone', even though it is 'modernized' (Yonge, 1873: I, 430).

Fulbert Underwood, the disreputable relative who earlier denied Edward Underwood the family living, repents in old age. Accordingly, he offers one of Edward's younger sons, Clement Underwood – a curate in St Matthew's, Whittingtonia – the family living (Yonge, 1873: II, 244-270). This allows for the promise of an ideal Conservative community to be fulfilled, but it is not an easy transition. Clement, a budding Ritualist, accepts the living reluctantly, and finds his path to revitalising the neglected parish an extremely difficult one. Four devout Low Church spinsters, the Miss Hepburns, dominate the parish, representing the only real religion hitherto to be found in the village – and they exhibit distrust of Clement's innovations. These include reclaiming the sacred space of the church by moving the Sunday school out of the Lady Chapel and into the vicarage. Clement's only unimpeded sphere of operation is the quarry community at Blackstone Gully, where he finds as much real poverty as in his former East End parish in London (Yonge, 1873: II, 277-286). The redemption of the parish is made certain however, when Felix Underwood inherits the family estate of Vale Leston. Now both neglectful vicar and squire have been replaced with the self-sacrificial and upright Underwoods. Felix has clearly thought about giving the priory back to the Anglican Church in an attempt to reverse the effects of the Reformation, but does not 'feel bound to restore it'; however, he will not allow Clement to give him the rents of the Glebe farm to

support his large family in the priory (Yonge, 1873: II, 289-290). On his first Sunday as squire in Vale Leston, he stands ‘forth surpliced’ to read the Lessons, and takes the vicar’s Sunday School (Yonge, 1873: II, 292-293). This is a clear sign that squire and vicar will unite to make the parish church the natural, historical, physical and social centre of their Tory community. And, indeed, this is exactly what they do in the concluding chapters of the novel.

Conclusion

In his recent book, *Unlocking the Church* (2017), William Whyte has stressed that historians of church architecture need to explore, not just architectural styles, but how people of all classes and conditions experienced ecclesiastical buildings. Certainly we need to develop a more profound understanding of how the parish church worked both practically and symbolically in Victorian Britain. This article has shown how one Tory Romantic writer utilised the parish church in her texts to articulate a Conservative ideology of community. The parish church was represented by Yonge as the natural, historical, and social heart of the community – and the vicar as one of the two pillars of Conservative community, the other being the squire. The church year was naturalised through her identification of its feasts and festivals with the natural and agricultural calendar; it was historicised through her representation of it as a local branch of the universal church, rooted in the history of the English church; and it was celebrated as the heart of the local community and the embodiment of social order. Yonge’s popularisation of this vision of the parish church as a key component of the ideal Conservative community went beyond the written word, as she both contributed to local church-building and actively worked as, for instance, a Sunday school-teacher in her own parish.²⁰ As such, her writings and her related activities show Tory Romantic ideals at work in the culture and society of Victorian Britain, and suggest how politics could be practised and performed by a lesser-known woman writer who rarely left the provincial community in which she was born, lived, and died.

²⁰ See Georgina Battiscombe, *Charlotte Mary Yonge: The Story of an Uneventful Life* (London: Constable, 1943). There is no comprehensive recent biography of Yonge.

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