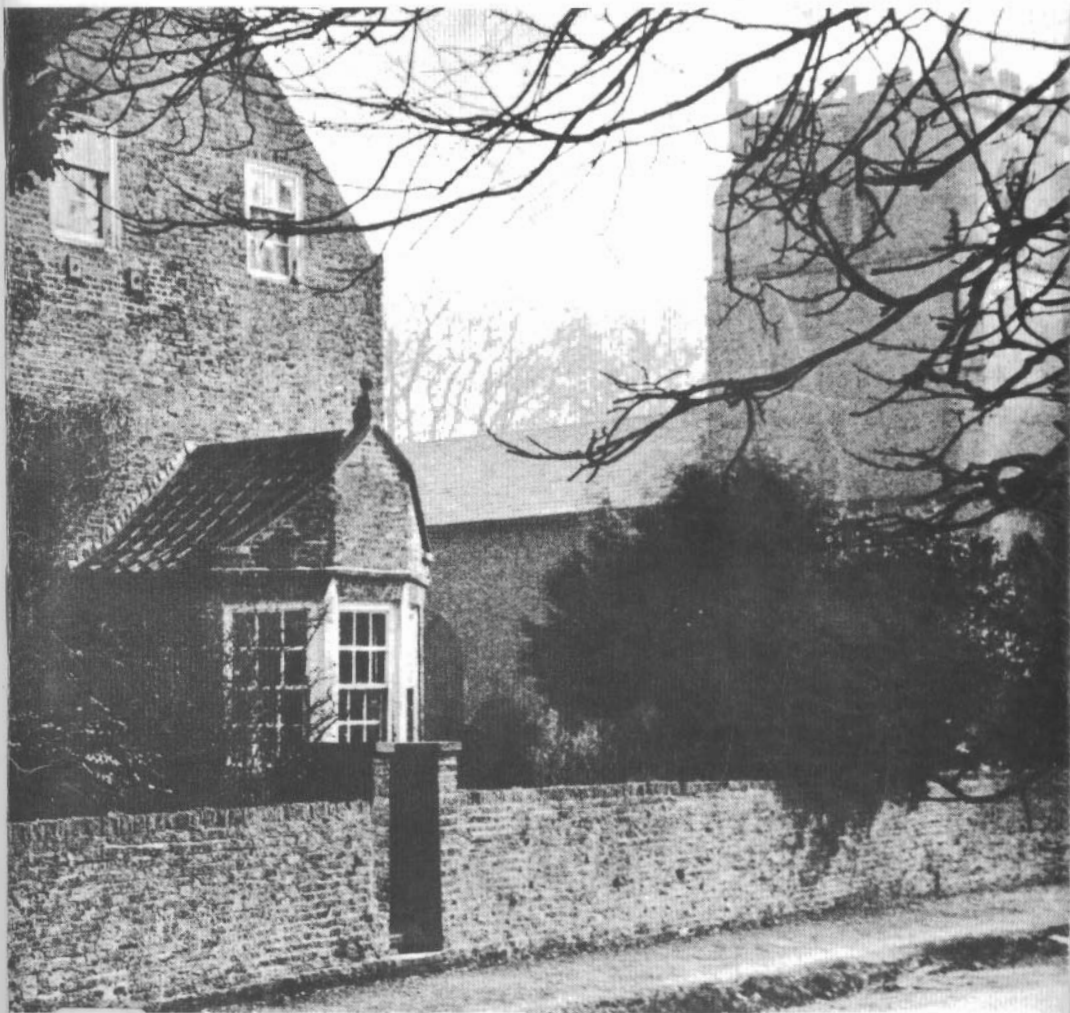


MARY SIMPSON
OF BOYNTON VICARAGE

TEACHER OF PLOUGHBOYS
AND CRITIC OF METHODISM

by
CLIFFORD B. FREEMAN



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*Cover Illustration: The former Vicarage and the church, Boynton
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PREFACE

The formation of voluntary night schools during the middle period of the 19th century was largely an urban movement. Amid a scattered rural population it was much harder to get and hold a sufficient number of pupils. Of the village schools which survived their reething troubles, there can scarcely be any on which as much information exists as those sponsored by Mary Emily Simpson at Boynton and Carnaby during the years 1856-69. This fact alone gives value to her writings, but it is worth noting that the full sub-title of her book *Ploughing and Sowing* is 'Annals of an Evening School in a Yorkshire Village, and the work that grew out of it'. Her unique contribution is the way in which she talked to the ploughhoys during their breaks at work, or walking alongside them as they ploughed or harrowed, and the way in which she kept in touch with them by tireless correspondence when they had left the neighbourhood. This distinctive extension of her educational work makes it all the more worth reording.

One consequence of her becoming the friend and mentor of her pupils, seeking to 'humanize' them, and to give them religious and moral training in accordance with her Anglican principles, was that she was constantly brought up against the fact that the prevailing religion of the workers in that area was dissent, and that such religious notions as they had were mainly derived from Methodism. As a result, her books are a valuable (but apparently unknown) source for discovering how rural Methodism appeared to a devout Anglican in one of the areas of its greatest strength.

Almost all that we know about Mary Simpson and her work derives from her two major books, but unfortunately they are not easy to come by. There are copies of *Ploughing and Sowing* (1861) in a number of libraries open to the public, but only one in the area of the East Riding and York. *Gleanings* (1876) is much scarcer. When I wished to read the copy in the British Museum, the pages had to be cut for me. I was informed that the copy in the Bodleian Library was in the same 'unopened' state. Of the three public copies, that in the National Library of Scotland was the only one which could have been read. It is because access to these books is so limited that so much of the space in the present booklet is devoted to the quotation of passages from them.

I wish to thank all those who have helped me by making suggestions or answering requests for information, including Dr. John C. Bowmer (Methodist Archives Centre), Dr. Frank Baker (Duke University), the staff of the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research (York), Mr. S. T. Thompson (Borough Librarian, Bridlington), Mrs. Jennifer Stanley (formerly of Hull City Libraries, Local History Department), Mr. Robert J. Key (Bodleian Library), Mr. John Lawson and Dr. S. H. Atkins (Hull University), Mr. J. M. Meadley, of Hull, the Rev. F. Hines (Claybrooke), and especially Dr. K. J. Allison, editor of this series.

CLIFFORD BALL FREEMAN

Part 1

MARY SIMPSON AND RURAL ADULT EDUCATION

The Movement for Village Night Schools

The deplorable state of education in the agricultural districts of England in the middle of the 19th century is amply attested. Joseph Kay in 1850 compared it most unfavourably with the provision made in various continental countries¹. By that time many of the village clergy were only too well aware that the education afforded in their National Schools² was a far from adequate preparation for life, if only because nearly all the pupils left school at the age of ten, or earlier, to work on the land or in domestic service. Attempts by clergymen and their families to remedy the deficiency in some degree, by the establishment of night schools, were numerous. That Mary Simpson was by no means the first woman to be active in this clerical movement is clear from some of the literature cited in this connexion by J. F. C. Harrison³ (e.g. *Hints to a Clergyman's Wife*, 1832; *Hints on the Management of Female Parochial Schools*, by a Clergyman's Wife, 1848).

Charles Kingsley conducted a village night school at Eversley from 1848 to 1856. A little earlier, the Rev. John Gregson had started a night school at Sutton Courtney in Berkshire, and published in 1847 a sermon in which he stressed to his village congregation the practical advantages to be derived from education. A note appended to the sermon reads:

The Night School at Surton Courtney, has been opened for about six months, and has been attended by about fifty-five men and boys. Adults have learnt to read; and boys have paid for themselves out of the scanty earnings of "Team-driving", and "Scaring birds".

None of the pupils have time to attend the day schools, so this is the only resource available for them.

The last sentence suggests a *pis aller*, but this was not the view taken by the Rev. F. W. Naylor, of Upton in Nottinghamshire, in what

¹ *The Social Condition and Education of the People in England and Europe* (1850), esp. vol. 1, pp. 582-4; vol. 2, p. 475.

² For a picture of the schools c. 1840-50 in a large Yorkshire Wolds village (Nafferton) before the voluntary societies reached it, see M. C. F. Morris, *The British Workman, Past and Present* (1928), pp. 6-8.

³ *Learning and Living, 1790-1960* (1961), p. 372.

Professor Thomas Kelly calls 'a remarkable volume'—his *Continuous Education* (1858):

We seem to think that elementary education alone is to remedy the evils of society, and that the more we have of it, the more complete and sure that remedy will be . . . If education is to do anything towards the reformation and improvement of society, it is not to the elementary stage we have to look but to some means whereby to promote the *profitable use* of the elements that have been implanted.¹

Turning to Mary Simpson's own county, we find the Rev. Frederick Watkins,² Her Majesty's Inspector for church schools in Yorkshire (writing in 1860) similarly doubtful whether much could be achieved by aiming at an extended period of elementary schooling. He stressed the importance of night schools, which were inadequately provided in the towns, and added that 'the difficulties of the Night School are much greater in a thinly populated district, along bad roads, to bucolic minds.' Incidentally, he ventured the opinion that Yorkshire had 'a body of clergy . . . as deeply and intelligently interested in the education of the working-classes, as any body of men in England.'

As early as 1843 Sir Francis Doyle, reporting on Yorkshire to the Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture, not only noted that infant schools were helping children to derive more lasting benefit from a school life which ended at ten years of age, but went on to say, 'Night schools also, where a few—a very few—of the grown-up labourers struggle gallantly with the difficulties of their position, and endeavour to maintain what they have learned, seem to be on the increase.'³ A less optimistic view was taken six years later by the Rev. W. J. Kennedy in a report on the schools of the North-western District. Pleading for government grants, he wrote: 'The voluntary system has done a vast deal, but it has nearly, if not quite, run to the end of its tether.'⁴ Kennedy wrote in 1849, but in 1861 we find the Rev. James Fraser declaring that evening schools were 'only in their infancy' and 'capable of immense development.'⁵

The voluntary work was a long time in dying. The York diocesan visitation returns of 1865 record the answers of the clergy to the following question: 'Have you adopted any other mode of retaining [your young people] under instruction by Adult Evening Schools? And, if so, what success have you found to attend such

¹ Quoted in T. Kelly, 'Continuous Education: a Nineteenth-Century Pioneer', *Journal of Librarianship*, vol. 1 (1969), p. 63.

² *A Letter to his Grace the Archbishop of York, on the State of Education in the Church Schools of Yorkshire* (1860).

³ *Reports . . . on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture* [510], p. 292, H.C. (1843), xii.

⁴ M. E. Sadler, *Continuation Schools in England and Elsewhere* (2nd edn. 1908), p. 34.

⁵ *Report of Commissioners on the State of Popular Education in England* [2794-II], p. 51, H.C. (1861), xxi(2).

Schools?' The late W. P. Baker¹ has analyzed the replies for the Archdeaconry of the East Riding, of which 43 indicated the existence of an evening school, 48 indicated that an evening school had been discontinued, and 119 gave no indication that an evening school had been tried. The individual replies show agreement with the Rev. Frederick Watkins about the difficulty of such work in rural areas, and confirm what the Rev. F. Exton described in the same year in his contribution to *More about Farm Lads*, and what Mary Simpson had stressed a few years earlier in *Ploughing and Sowing*—namely, the hindrance caused by the long hours of work and the unco-operative attitude of many farmers. At this point, it is rime to go back to the beginning of her experiences in this field.

Mary Simpson comes to Boynton (1856)

Boynton is a small village a few miles from Bridlington. When Mary Simpson came there in 1856 she did not come as a stranger. She had lived before in the large vicarage (now a private house) which stood hard by the church, adjoining the grounds of Boynton Hall. Her mother had been brought up at the Hall, for she was the daughter of Sir William Strickland, Bt., lord of the manor and patron of the living. Mary's father, the Rev. Francis Simpson, had been presented to the living in 1832, as Perpetual Curate of Boynton and Vicar of Carnaby. He had resigned at the end of 1840, but was now to hold his former incumbency once more—until his death in 1869. In 1840 Mary had been nineteen years old. Returning to her old home as a mature woman of thirty-five, she would naturally look upon the life of the neighbourhood with new eyes, and see many features of it which would attract no particular notice from a young girl. That is certainly the impression she gives in the earliest of the extracts from her diaries and correspondence collected in *Ploughing and Sowing*. Her father's combined parish was a scattered one, including Boynton, the larger village of Carnaby, with its own church, and the little village of Fraisthorpe, near the coast, with a chapel-of-ease. The book begins with a description of the agricultural employment system there, which is dated July 1856, and reads as if it was taken from a letter to a friend:

Every farm (there are twelve in the parish) comprises in its household from six or seven to twenty plough lads, according to the size of the farm; their ages varying from about fourteen to four-and-twenty, but the greater part in their teens. These are all changed every year at Martinmas (i.e. the last week in November).

Their masters, as you may suppose from such a system,

¹ *Parish Registers and Illiteracy in East Yorkshire* (East Yorkshire Local History Series, no. 13) (1961), pp. 19-23.

have very little control over them, the clergymen still less, and they are sadly ignorant and lawless; a large proportion can neither read nor write. One Sunday, seeing ten or a dozen of them together, lounging about a farmyard in their working dress, as if unconscious that it was Sunday and the church bells were ringing, the sight made an impression which has never left me; and since then my thoughts have been constantly bent on schemes for elevating and improving them. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 1-2).

She thus strikes, at the very beginning of her written observations, the note which was to characterize all her work—a vivid sense of the intellectual, moral and spiritual impoverishment of the ploughboys. She was familiar with the idea of night schools, and remarks on the fact that she knows of none in the immediate neighbourhood. One thing she did know was that a family friend, the Rev. Francis Digby Legard, who at that time was in Lincolnshire, had attempted night-school work, and she wrote to him on the subject a few months later, as he mentions in his preface to *Ploughing and Sowing*. It was he who, in due course, persuaded her to let him edit her papers for publication in *Ploughing and Sowing and Gleanings*. For the first book (based largely on her diary) she obtained permission to quote from the letters of farm lads and other correspondents, but in the second 'all that is said and all that is told is contained in letters of [her] own', written when she was at Boynton. Both were described as 'by a Clergyman's Daughter', and the three villages were referred to in them as B, C, and F. Legard, as editor, received 'many cordial words of thanks and approval' after the publication of the first book. One correspondent took it as a work of fiction, in which (Legard writes) 'the ingenuity of my inventive powers was praised at the expense of my truthfulness'. (*Gleanings*, p. iii).

Mental Impoverishment and Social Handicaps

'A large proportion of them can neither read nor write', said Mary Simpson, in describing the plough lads at the beginning of her book. Yet W. P. Baker, discussing literacy in the period 1851-70, writes, 'I have taken and received samples from many parts of rural England and have rarely found better figures than these for East Riding villages'.¹ At first sight, these statements look irreconcilable, but it must be pointed out that the literacy figures collected by Baker were obtained from the evidence of marriage registers and relate only to the ability to sign one's name. On this basis even the best counties had no cause for complacency. In the East Riding villages surveyed, in the decade 1851-60, 24 per cent of the bridegrooms and 37 per cent of the brides did not sign their names. For the following decade the percentages were 21 and 26. Among the ploughboys, the

¹ *Parish Registers and Illiteracy in East Yorkshire*, p. 9.

proportion who could not sign their names must have been higher than this overall figure, and the proportion who could not do anything more than this in the use of letters must have been very much higher. One could not expect to find many like the best pupil in Mary Simpson's first evening class. Aged seventeen, he had never had any schooling, having been in service from six or seven years old, but he had taught himself to read and write.

Evidence given to the Newcastle Commission (Royal Commission on Popular Education) in 1858 showed that the problem of poor attendance was nationwide. About 39 per cent of pupils attended for less than a year. Mary Simpson mentions a youth of sixteen who had had no more than one quarter's schooling. 'He could make out little words, and could say the Lord's Prayer, but hardly seemed to attach any meaning to it'. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 27). Matters were little better with those who had regularly attended elementary schools, since they usually left to take employment at the age of nine or ten, and sometimes as early as eight. The evidence of the Hon. E. B. Portman to the Royal Commission on the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children in Agriculture included a letter from Mary Simpson, in which she wrote:

Any knowledge, whether religious or secular, acquired in early childhood, if it is not kept up, fares too inevitably in most cases like the seed that fell by the wayside. If, then, we cannot hope to add greatly to the small stock of knowledge gained before the age for working begins, let us at least aim at keeping it together till the mind is capable of retaining and valuing it.¹

The closing words of this passage are reinforced when read in conjunction with a footnote in Legard's preface to *Ploughing and Sowing*: 'It is almost amusing, were it not so sad, to mark the pride with which a young man will tell you that he once could read any book, and write too, "but it's all gone now."'

It was not a matter of the odd case of unexpected ignorance. Knowledge which one would have expected a child in Victorian England to have acquired almost as naturally as he learnt to walk was replaced by great blanks in the minds of all too many of the youths whom Mary Simpson met on the farms of the parish. In the early part of 1858 she wrote in a letter to a friend:

A large class of them that I gathered together yesterday (Sunday) nearly all assured me that they had never before heard the story of Judas Iscariot or of Peter's denial, and they were equally in ignorance of the stories of Abraham and Joseph. One told me the other day he did not think he had ever heard of Adam; he had heard of Abraham, and thought he was the first man . . . Nothing has surprised me more than to find that those who can read and write, (which perhaps nearly half can more or less), are almost as ignorant of the Bible, and of everything else, as those who have learnt nothing! (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp.28-30).

¹ 1st Report of Commissioners . . . App. Pt. II [4068-I], p. 382, H.C. (1867-8), xvii.

Even more surprising was the case (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 26) of the new boy on one of the farms who did not know what she meant when she asked him his Christian name. At about the same time she had met only two lads who knew what the word 'heathen' meant.

'In many', she wrote, 'there is at that age a longing for light, an eager desire for knowledge, which soon dies of starvation; and if left as they are, by the time they are married men with families, they will value education as little for their children as their own parents valued it for them'. (*Ploughing and Sowing* p. 12). The fact that ignorant parents had little sense of the benefits of education was not to be wondered at. What shocked Mary Simpson was the complete indifference of so many farmers to the responsibility of being *in loco parentis* for the greater part of the year to the youths and girls whom they employed, and who lived in their farmhouses. She was to remark later (*More about Farm Lads*, pp. 77-8) that their attitude was less surprising when one saw what minimal educational provision satisfied them for their own sons. Meanwhile she wrote:

Seeing is believing. I had heard all my life, with the hearing of the ear, that farmhouse life was 'so demoralizing'. I had also heard pretty much what were its evils and dangers, but till I saw it with my own eyes last Thursday evening, at seven o'clock, I never really believed it; not that I doubted it, but I never believed it in any true sense, till I saw it. This was how it happened:— I went into a farmhouse parlour, and stayed for a few minutes talking with its inmates; then down a passage to the farmhouse kitchen, to talk to its inmates, consisting of seven young men and youths, and three young women, who had all just finished supper; the girls were "washing up", the lads were sitting on benches about the kitchen or near the fire; there was no housekeeper, no older person with them; that is just what I saw, and just what takes place every evening of their lives, except that my coming amongst them on this occasion made a little difference, perhaps even a great difference, and something of a sensation. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 3).

The farm lads' supper-time varied from six to seven p.m., and for eight months of the year (until the horses were put out to grass about the beginning of May) they were precluded from any constructive use of their evenings by the fact that the horses had to be fed at eight o'clock. When summer brought a little more leisure time, Miss Simpson found that 'if they once begin a habit of going over to Bridlington after their work, there is little more good to be done with them,' whereas in her evening school they were 'at any rate out of harm's way.' (The reader is left to speculate what evils lurked in Bridlington). She also found many instances of boys being kept at work for the whole of almost every Sunday in the year. (*Gleanings*, p. 112). It was her conviction that, despite the difficulties inherent in it, the existing farmhouse system 'might assuredly in good hands be made a source of blessing to the community, instead of being the curse that all admit it is now'. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 67). Those words were written in November 1857. At first she

tried hard to awaken farmers and their wives to a sense of their responsibility, but by 1863 she could think of only one instance where such endeavours had produced any result. (*Gleanings*, p. 86). Nevertheless, she went on to say of the farmers: 'They are very good to me, however, in letting me work in my own way among their lads.'

Schools for Ploughboys

We must now describe what was her 'own way' of working among the farm lads—how it started, and how it developed as time went on.

Not many days after her first visit to a farmhouse kitchen, we find Mary Simpson writing down a note headed 'A Bold Plunge'. She describes how once more she walked into a kitchen, and told the assembled lads that she would teach them if they would come. The response produced in her both pleasure and trepidation.

I was much pleased by the way my offer was met; the grateful surprise, the shy but earnest thanks, the fears that I should find them so dull, etc.; and this when I had half expected only surly or insolent replies. It almost took from me the power to speak. But I have not yet girded on my armour, and can hardly think but that these first promising appearances are deceptive; but how unthankful, how distrustful, to fear it! (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 5).

Totally inexperienced in adult teaching, but reinforced by her father's encouragement, she ventured into the unknown. Her pupils were soon working with copybooks and spelling-books, but those who turned out to be rather more advanced were judged to need practice in reading, and (if they were to profit from reading) instruction in the meaning of words. In order to extend the pitifully small range of words in common use that they understood, their teacher found Johnson's *Rasselas* a very suitable reading-book, because it contained so many words of Latin origin. One cannot help wondering how the book would fare if subjected to modern tests of 'reading age' and 'interest age'. These more advanced pupils had their own copybook work, but in their case the material copied also provided lessons in geography.

Resting from her first 'term' of night school while the farm-workers were busy with the harvest, Mary Simpson had time for reflection, and she put down on paper what might be called the first draft of a philosophy of education.

I have serious doubts of the desirability of teaching much arithmetic to those who have as yet so very little knowledge, and so few general ideas. I know it would sharpen their wits, but that is not the first thing to be thought of; they have hearts that must be touched; consciences that need awakening; minds to enlarge and elevate. I had rather teach something of

geography, history, poetry, and (if I could) of music, first. I know that arithmetic would help them more 'to get on in the world'; but neither do I think that the thing most to be desired.

We ought all to contend against the notion that seems creeping in more and more—that the great end of education is to enable us to improve our circumstances in life, and not rather to give us sources of higher enjoyment, which will make us more independent of such things . . . Let us beware, lest education should be made to increase and foster covetousness—the crying sin of the age—instead of counteracting it. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 10-11).

Knowing what kind of education she wished to give was important, but the overriding question was whether the horse could be persuaded to drink—or even to come to the water. It was encouraging that a few of the boys insisted on having lessons even during the period of harvest, when this meant getting to bed late after the long hours of work. On the other hand, discouragement was supplied in plenty by clergy and others in the district who knew (sometimes from their own experience) how similar experiments had failed in face of jeering and defiant youths. Mary Simpson was inclined to agree with one such person who attributed her initial success largely to her sex, though she sometimes had 'serious doubts about its being the place of a woman at all to teach men, for some of my scholars are verging on manhood'. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 15). In spite of such remaining doubts, she was able to write: 'My evening class has become, and I hope and pray may continue to be, the one absorbing interest in my life'. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 14).

How difficult were the conditions to which she had to adapt her teaching strikes the reader forcibly when, after about four months of patient work, she writes: 'My late scholars are all dispersed.' The annual Martinmas hirings had come round, and, in accordance with the local custom, all her pupils had moved to fresh employers, although three of them were within a distance of a mile and a half, and still in Mr. Simpson's parish. She had reflected on this problem at harvest-time, and decided that the annual exodus might in some ways have a good effect: by compelling her to 'put them in the way of learning for themselves'; by giving the boys an additional spur to learning while the opportunity was there; and by scattering the influence of the class further afield—for I shall hope not quite to lose all connection with the most intelligent and promising, when they leave the parish.' In the event, she soon heard from her best pupil (whose letter began, 'My friend'), and resolved to write to him often, and send him books occasionally. Thus began her remarkable work in keeping up an extensive correspondence with former pupils, offering them help, advice and exhortation which were based on personal knowledge of the individual's character and needs.

Meanwhile, there was the problem of recruiting a class from the newcomers to Boynton's three farms, and at first she was puzzled by the lack of response, and disappointed that the boys seemed to be

making excuses. This was when she discovered the facts mentioned above about the hours of work throughout eight months of the year, and realized that they genuinely had no time for an evening class. She accordingly invited them to meet her on Sundays, and the response to this encouraged her to think that they would come for weeknight classes when May Day came round, and the horses were out in the fields again. There was also an encouraging development at Carnaby, where eleven farm lads 'joined together in an attempt to get themselves some instruction, in consequence of what they had heard of the class at Boynton.' With this we may compare the hunger for knowledge of a boy working in another parish who begged her to find him a place at Boynton, that he might 'have some learning', and was prepared to come for low wages. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 23). A Sunday class was therefore started at Carnaby too, and Miss Simpson also got some of the lads to meet her after the church service there, and walk with her part of the way home through the squire's parkland—'which gives opportunity for saying many things to them which I could not so well in the actual teaching.' The Sunday lessons themselves were doctrinal and Biblical, and her father instructed the boys in the Old Testament, showing how it linked up with the New. A curious feature was that the boys had always thought of 'the Bible' as meaning the Old Testament.

Mary Simpson must now have had her hands fairly full, and when a new schoolmaster came to the Church school at Carnaby arrangements were made for him to start a night school, two evenings a week, from January 1857¹—'those whose wages are under £5 to pay nothing, those who have under £7 a very trifle, and others in proportion to their wages.' (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 25-26). A reference under the year 1857 shows that on Sundays the schoolmaster was taking a children's Sunday school, while Mary Simpson had farm lads reading with her.

'It may surprise some who read this little book', she wrote in the Introduction to *Ploughing and Sowing*, that the teaching given was at first so entirely secular, and of such a different character afterwards.' She goes on to explain how unexpected was the state of 'heathen ignorance and deadness of most of my poor scholars', and adds: 'I may at first have thought of knowledge too much as a good in itself; but I now value secular instruction mainly as affording means and opportunity for gaining the hearts of the young, that I may be enabled to mould their characters and influence their conduct . . .' Even for teaching them reading from the beginning, she used such books as the Sunday School Union's *Lesson Book for Adults*, Part 1, and *Easy Lessons from the Psalms* (S.P.C.K.). To follow these she used elementary books on Old Testament history

¹ If he was paid, it could not in 1857 have been through the government grants. Later, 'under the Revised Code of 1862 certificated teachers were permitted to teach in both day and evening school, and Government grant was payable subject to strict regulations . . . but it seems improbable that many of the evening schools which we are considering were in receipt of grant': Baker, *Parish Registers and Illiteracy*, p. 22.

and 'sacred history'. 'I am not very fond of using secular lesson books,' she wrote in 1860, 'for those who have everything to learn. It is beginning education at the wrong end, or in a wrong way.' (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 255-6).

About two years earlier, in a letter to a friend, she had written: 'Our evening teaching and reading always begins and ends with prayer.' In the same letter she had, during the welcome holiday which harvest brought, given a charming picture of herself at work, part of which deserves to be quoted at length.

The afternoons I generally spend in an arbour (as now) or under the shade of the lime-trees that bound our garden, writing (always till today in their behalf) things that I think they will not remember sufficiently if only said to them, or that I could not say so well in talking. I often write* many copies of the same papers, or lessons, for dispersion . . . often in printing letters; and when it is only mechanical copying, one of my sisters will often read to me, which is all the reading for my own exclusive pleasure I ever get now. After tea, three evenings in the week, I have had till this week my quiet little evening school here at home of only six or seven from the farms close by. I thoroughly enjoy teaching them; they are such a very nice set this year, coming so regularly, and so attentive and affectionately respectful. Three of them (all turned twenty) could not read at all when they came.'

*This letter was written before I got a printing press.

(*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 114-5).

The phrase 'quiet little evening school' was apparently still applicable in June 1860 when, in a letter to a former pupil, she described its composition as 'two of twenty, and one younger, from Mr.——'s, and the blacksmith's lad, who is fifteen, and two or three from the Hall, and one from my father's stables, and on Sundays generally a few more'; but there was a bad spirit among the much larger number at Carnaby, where she was 'almost, if not quite, beat this year.'

Even to reach an amenable group needed infinite patience, as well as a great deal of ingenuity in finding suitable methods and materials to teach them what they needed to know without robbing them of all sense of achievement as they plodded through it. The laborious practising of syllables as a preparation for reading and of pot-hooks as a step towards the distant goal of writing a letter (as practised in the elementary schools) would only have discouraged lads who had so much to learn and so little time to do it. Hence they were encouraged to start reading and writing sentences as soon as possible—and sentences which meant something to them. Anyone who has seen Victorian copybooks will see the type of them all in a sentence which one of the stable-boys had copied in his old school book: 'Hope stimulates men to diligence.' He had no idea what it meant until Mary Simpson gave him a rough translation: 'Hope stirs men up to work hard'; whereupon he smiled broadly and said 'There's sense in that.' (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 257-8). Her own

methods were somewhat different. Giving a brief account of her work in a letter to the wife of a gentleman farmer in 1864, she writes:

I have written out a number of "Narrative" and other hymns, that seem particularly suitable for them, in good sized clear writing. Those who can write, copy these while I am teaching the beginners to read. After that, while these last are making letters on a slate, or copying, as best they can, little words out of a book, I read with the others, usually from the Bible. First they read a chapter or passage, taking the verses by turns, then we all go over it again, reading a few verses at a time in chorus. I explain and comment on them, then we have a few verses more, and so on. (*Gleanings*, pp. 166-7).

Thirty pages earlier, we learn from a casual reference that in January 1864 arithmetic was being taught—at any rate at Carnaby, where the schoolmaster took one group for sums while Miss Simpson dictated to the rest. This was not the case, however, when she gave the following account of the evening classes in the evidence she prepared in 1867 for the Royal Commission on the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children in Agriculture:

There is an evening school for males; it is open for twenty-eight weeks in the year, in the months of December, January and February, and from the middle of May to the end of August, on three nights a week for two hours in summer and one hour in winter. There are none under 12 attending the school, but 26 in the summer and 10 in the winter on the register, of whom six attend in winter, and 14 in summer. In summer the evening school is at Carnaby, where there are seven farm-houses; in the winter at Boynton, where there are only three farms. In winter, owing to stable work, the time available for teaching is usually from 7 to 8 p.m., and in summer from 7 to 9 p.m. They are taught reading, writing, knowledge of the Bible, rudiments of geography and history, with a very little composition and no arithmetic.¹

In the last chapter of *Ploughing and Sowing* she had dwelt at some length upon the work with those who could read and write tolerably to start with, saying, 'The great thing to aim at is to exercise their minds, and yet not puzzle them.' Whatever taught the meaning of words was valuable for this purpose, and her principal method of doing this was to read a passage or tell a story, explain the more difficult words, and give them exercises to fix in their minds what they had heard. In 1860 her reading with such groups was certainly not 'usually from the Bible.' She would tell them stories designed to convey some rudimentary notions of geography, and read to them from such books as *The Life of Columbus*, in short words, *Kings of England*, and *The Chosen People*. Sometimes she would read 'simple and touching pieces of poetry.' When it came to stories, suitable material for her kind of pupils was difficult to find,

¹ *1st Report of Commissioners . . . App. Pt. II*, p. 382.

but some was available from the Religious Tract Society and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and sometimes suitable 'stories of daring exploit' could be found in magazines. Concerning the S.P.C.K. she writes:

I grieve to add, that the tales published by that society are for the most part too stilted, and *Latin* in their language, too artificial and conventional in their modes of thought and views of the world, and have too little spirit and life—in short, too little reality—to be attractive to such children of nature; but their language is their worst fault. Why for instance, in the name of common sense, is a story to be called a narrative? (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 262).

In 1862 she wrote to the Secretary of the S.P.C.K., suggesting a prize for the best book in simple English, and added, 'Might it not be worth the consideration of the Committee whether some of the books now on the Society's catalogue could not be translated into pure Saxon, or, perhaps better, the meanings of all the hard words simply explained in the margins?' (*Gleanings*, pp. 85-6). Experience must have modified her views, since in the early days she had found *Rasselas* a very suitable book for her work precisely *because* it contained so many words in common use which came from Latin.

Be this as it may, she had realized from the beginning that one of the factors undermining the value of elementary education was that, after leaving school, boys and girls who had been taught to read had no access to books suitable for the practice of this skill. Indeed, this must have been the case in rural areas until the county libraries came into being in the 1920s and 1930s. Accordingly she turned the village schoolroom at Carnaby into a sort of evening reading-room, with a good supply of books. During the summer months she was able to go there herself on three evenings a week and help the young people to find suitable books. Sometimes she would read to them, and on occasion as many as thirty would be listening. It is not clear whether girls were included.

It can well be imagined that amid all these activities she was forced to forget wider issues. We have already seen how she had no time for any reading for her own pleasure, except when one of her sisters read to her while she was engaged in mechanical copying. In a letter to a friend in June 1857 she wrote:

I know nothing about the educational discussions you speak of, much indeed as they would interest me, as you rightly say; but I have no time to read the papers, and I do not regret it: I should be interested far too much... I am far happier working on alone, with all my soul and with all my strength, with eyes so fastened to the plot of ground I have to till, that I see not the vast field beyond, where the labourers are not few, but none. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 59-60).

In her opinion, it was useless to aim at great things in this kind of work, and might even be harmful, by leading to loss of the necessary patience with stumbling pupils and amid so many petty hindrances.

To an imaginary interlocutor she says in the concluding chapter of *Ploughing and Sowing*:

Will you then give up the attempt in despair, and say, as has been said, 'I too have tried a night school, but I have failed, where you have succeeded.'

Could you only see what you call success!

I might answer, 'The only difference is, that when you failed you left off, and when I failed I went on, and by God's help will still go on, while I have life and strength and opportunity granted me . . .' (p. 251).

A good many years after these words were written, Sir Michael Sadler, in a chapter on 'Continuation Schools in Rural Districts of England,' summarized a written statement by the East Riding Inspector of Schools:

Everything depends, he continues, upon the teacher. Personal interest on the part of the teachers will do much. Some arrange a social evening once or twice during the session, others provide a supper at the close, but the best rely chiefly on making the teaching worth coming for.¹

In 1849 the Rev. W. J. Kennedy, as already noted above, had expressed a fear that the voluntary system of evening schools had nearly run to the end of its tether.² Mary Simpson's work (then hidden in the future) was still going on twenty years after this comment. The example she set in the East Riding may well have been partly responsible for the fact that, after the County Council was set up in 1889, it built up such a system of evening schools that Sadler was led to choose the East Riding as one of his examples of further education in rural areas.

The stress laid by the East Riding inspector on the importance of the teacher and his personal interest in his pupils had been anticipated in the early years of the 19th century by Thomas Pole (who is believed to have been the first to use the term 'adult education'), when he wrote:

In the instruction of adults, it is not only necessary that we should feel a consciousness that Christian kindness and benevolence are the spring of our actions, but the whole of our conduct and deportment should be such as will demonstrate to them that we are their sincere friends. A softness of manners, a patient forbearance with the weakness of some of their capacities, or the occasional slowness of their comprehension . . . will gain their regard, and at the same time encourage their best efforts to overcome the difficulties they may meet with.³

Although the modern reader may detect in Mary Simpson an over-earnest piety which might tempt him to dismiss her with the

¹ Sadler, *Continuation Schools in England and Elsewhere*, p. 235.

² The passage will be found in context in *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education, 1848-50, Vol. ii* [1216], p. 191, H.C. (1850), xlv.

³ *A History of the Origin and Progress of Adult Schools* (2nd edn. 1816), p. 35. Quoted by T. Kelly in *Studies in Adult Education*, October 1969, p. 177.

unflattering epithet 'do-gooder', there is abundant evidence that she possessed in no common measure the qualities described by Pole, and that this was the secret of her success in evening-class work. As Legard writes in his editorial preface to *Ploughing and Sowing*, 'I could not but feel, as I read these pages, the magic power of sympathy.' One senses a feeling of personal attachment in the way in which the lads referred to her as 'our missis', and even more in the letters of those who had gone away, which often began with 'My Friend' or 'My Dear Friend'. To quote her editor again: 'Ladies sometimes succeed where men have failed; and so why should not a lady venture something for the sake of a class that needs it much—the plough-boys?'

What Legard calls 'the magic power of sympathy' in this kind of work is stressed by a clergyman quoted by the Rev. Francis Exton in his contribution to *More about Farm Lads* (p. 42). Exton sent a questionnaire about the extent, causes and remedies of religious ignorance in village lads to clergymen in many agricultural areas. The replies show that the conditions in the Wolds were by no means unique. Exton writes of seeing boys who have received Christian instruction up to the age of nine or ten 'turned into heathens before your eyes!' by the hindrances involved in the common pattern of farm work (p. 36).

If Mary Simpson had more success than most in overcoming these hindrances, it is clearly because the effort and devotion which she put into her evening-class work were but part of what she ventured for the sake of the ploughboys. The more truly original part of her work remains to be described. Others could help with the school work, and at one stage not only the schoolmaster, but also his wife and a curate who had come to the parish, were involved. (*Gleanings*, pp. 150-1). But it is very doubtful whether anyone else could have helped with Mary Simpson's fieldwork and correspondence.

The Ploughboys' Friend and Mentor

In June 1857, in a letter already referred to (p. 18 above), she shows how much importance even then she attached to her 'field work'. After discussing the difficulty of teaching the children of the rural poor, when their schooling ends so early and is so subject to interruption, she continues:

There is only one way to meet the difficulty, namely, to teach them after the age when they leave school; while they are actually at work, to go to the fields, and walk alongside of ploughs and harrows, talking and teaching—your talking being

teaching, and your teaching, talking. You may thus impart much by word of mouth to those who are mechanically guiding the plough, with nothing to occupy their thoughts. You may excite such a desire for knowledge, that they will be eager to study the books you supply, in the precious hour or so of leisure that is usually wasted in idleness or something worse. You may show to the quite untaught, that to learn to read at their age is not impossible, and much to be desired. More than all, you may elevate, soften, humanize—in one word, Christianize them . . .

The opening words about 'only one way' are surprising. It seems almost an afterthought when she adds:

If, in addition, you can have an evening school after working hours, of course you may do more, but not so much more as at first sight might be supposed. An agricultural population is generally so scattered, that in the short time after working hours it is not a great deal you can do, though of course the field talking and the evening school may materially help each other.

Here we find Mary Simpson—less than a year after arriving in Boynton and starting her evening class—writing as if she valued such work only as an optional supplement to her field-teaching. It is a little difficult to take this passage at its face value. For instance, what would be the use of awakening in the ploughboy an ambition to learn to read if there were no class where this desire could be fulfilled? One could hardly put a blackboard before him while he ploughed—still less an exercise book and a pencil. There can be no doubt that, having an evening school, she used her talks in the fields to stir up a thirst for the knowledge which was to be acquired there¹, and also as a means of deepening the impressions made there upon the boys who already attended. On the other hand, she was clearly convinced that field-teaching unassociated with evening-class work could be of great value. Early in the following year she wrote to a friend:

I find the best or only hope of influencing for good those that I cannot have on week-day evenings, is to go out to the fields where they are at work, and walk alongside the different ploughs and harrows, trying all I can by exhortations (which from being so heartfelt, seem to make some impression) to induce them to come on Sunday and hear some of the Bible read and explained. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 29).

Such phrases as 'elevate, soften, humanize—in one word Christianize them', and 'influencing for good' speak of aims that were at the heart of Mary Simpson's work. There was a great deal of Bible teaching, and every evening of secular instruction ended with

¹ 'These long talks I hope help to humanize them. I am rather glad when they tell me they cannot read, as the promise to teach them to read is often a bait to lure them' [and leads on to much-needed religious instruction]: Letter to a Clergyman, 1862 (*Gleanings*, p. 78).

prayer. 'A school under clerical influence, yet wholly secular, would be a monstrous thing', she wrote in a letter of 1864. (*Gleanings*, pp. 150-51). But for the exertion of moral and spiritual influence upon the individual according to his needs, the field-teaching obviously presented much greater opportunities than the school.

Her approach to the newly hired lads in the parish is outlined in a letter written just before Christmas 1861. Most days since Martinmas she had gone into the fields after an early breakfast and spent four or five hours talking to them, and had encouraged them to come to her Sunday Bible class and to church.

To those who cannot read I give a little book in short words to start with, and persuade them to try and learn, and I lend books of different kinds to those that can read. Even if they will not come to the Bible class or to church I lend them books, unless they seem badly disposed and only likely to waste them. (*Gleanings*, pp. 60-1).

She also invited them to come to her own evening class at Boynton or to the schoolmaster's at Carnaby.

In an earlier letter, in 1858, she says that the first few months of such fieldwork are mainly spent in getting to know the lads, and that this leads on to 'exhorting, instructing, warning, counselling, consoling, encouraging, as the case may be.'

But this summer time till harvest began, there was always an hour's rest after dinner, and sometimes I have read with a group of them sitting under a hedge, or in a great empty barn half-way between here and C., which is very high and cool, and so dark, that first going in from the sunshine you are hardly able to see, which is very pleasant this weather. When I go in they will be stretched out at rest on a great heap of chaff at the further end, but rouse up, and G.M., who deserves to be signalized by name for his gallantry, will heap up the dry chaff to make a comfortable seat for me, and spread his great coat at the top; and there I sit reading and commenting on the words of life to listeners in various attitudes, generally ending with some hymns. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 113-4).

For the most part, however, the fieldwork was carried out on an individual basis. Once there came to the parish a boy of 'bright and rapid mind,' of whom Mary Simpson said that she would not exchange his friendship for that of any educated man or woman. She was able to help him in his thirst for books, and yet at the same time enjoyed feeling her own inferiority 'to that unspoilt child of nature, and sincere humble Christian.' (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 186). More often she was dealing with lads who needed almost unlimited patience. They were constantly exhorted to be regular in prayer, Bible-reading and church attendance, but did not always keep (or even make) promises. Some of them were very conscious of their moral imperfections of various kinds, but others found it difficult, for example, to think of what they euphemistically called 'sweet-hearting' as being such a heinous sin as it appeared to be when Miss

Simpson declaimed against it under the name of fornication. 'To one who had been led astray by a pert young miss she sent a copy of *A Word of Exhortation to Young Men* (one of Parker's Parochial Tracts), which dealt with the subject. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 241). She herself had written some words of warning, with references to appropriate Biblical texts, and had had them printed as a leaflet. Inevitably some of the lads were not prepared to be preached at, and occasionally a parent or an employer resented her interference, but many youths who had never had anyone to guide them in learning or conduct clearly regarded her as the best friend they had ever had.

Mary Simpson's profound concern for her pupils as individuals did not allow her, when Martinmas came round, to dismiss them from her mind and concentrate on the incomers. In 1859 she writes:

The beginning of November was warm and fine, and almost every day I rode on our pony to some distant village, or lone farmhouse, to see someone or other who had lived at C. or at B. the year before; for neither they nor I knew where they would be hired to at Martinmas, and it might be my last chance of ever seeing them, or of ever saying a word in the way of warning or encouragement. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 191).

When one tries to imagine the stresses of this mobile and uncertain way of life, and the fact that many of the youths did not see their families more than once a year, it is not surprising that the majority were very glad to see her, and that in most cases she 'left them feeling hopeful and happy, and sometimes inexpressibly thankful that I had ever known them.'

The majority of Miss Simpson's former pupils were too far away to be reached by pony, but she did not shrink from a heavy burden of correspondence. We have already seen how she would sit in her arbour, before she bought a printing press, writing out copies of lessons 'for dispersion.' Sometimes in her letters she enclosed tracts, or promised to send books. She explained why Church was better than Chapel, and sent words of exhortation, warning, guidance and encouragement, in relation both to conduct and reading. Occasionally she would copy out a letter, or part of it, and send it to someone else whose needs were similar. Some of these letters fell on stony ground, but others evoked replies expressing heartfelt gratitude. Many of the correspondents she was unlikely ever to see again.

But this summer [1858] I have had a good many Sunday visits from those who were in the parish last year, and are now at farms within ten or twelve miles from this; and some I have seen from even a greater distance, who have walked all the way. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 113).

It must have given the teacher particular pleasure when one of her pupils, emigrating to Australia, asked his brother 'to tell Miss S. he would keep the books she had given him to the last day of his life, and read them as long as a leaf of them would hold together'. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 40).

Mary Simpson's Character and Influence

In a 'letter to a Working Man in another County', about 1863, Mary Simpson wrote: 'This is, or has been, a much-neglected part of the country, much like what your Mendip Hills were before good Mrs. Hannah More and her sisters started schools,¹ and did so much, that by God's blessing, did great good in your part of the country.' (*Gleanings*, p. 119). In contrast to Hannah More, Mary Simpson is an unknown figure today, but from the point of view of doing good in her own part of the country it is not unreasonable to mention her in the same breath. 'It is not one in ten thousand who could have done what she did, even if they had the will to do so,' says the Rev. Marmaduke Morris, who graduated at Oxford in 1867 and over sixty years later wrote down what he knew of Mary Simpson in his youth. He continues:

If I remember rightly, it was about the time I went to Oxford that I had the pleasure of meeting her, which I did on one or two occasions at the house of another good lady who was then living at Whitby Abbey. Miss Simpson at that time appeared to be a middle-aged woman; she was strongly built, of medium height, and looked the picture of health, being fresh-coloured, and full of vigour and animation. In disposition she was cheerful, and was possessed of a keen sense of humour. Her mental gifts were much above the average. But what struck me perhaps most was the deep interest she took in her work with the farm servants, and the interesting way in which she spoke of it. She seemed quite absorbed in her mission, as if her whole heart and soul was in it, as in truth it was.²

We have already seen something of the outward obstacles against which she had to contend in this work, but she has also left on record an account of the inward difficulties which she had to overcome. Writing in 1862 to a friend who complained of shyness, she says:

I used to be unusually shy and should doubtless have been so all my days, had not the strong desire to do something for those uncared for farm lads enabled me so to overcome it that now I am never afraid of them. As a girl I had a Sunday-school class, and could seldom eat my breakfast on Sunday morning, so much did I dread facing those poor children, especially the great boys of ten or twelve years old. Afterwards I gave the Scripture lesson to a class in a town National School three mornings in the week, and have sometimes stood many minutes on the steps of the school before I could summon courage to

¹ Even so, it was in Somerset that the Rev. James Fraser found 'an utterly neglected village' where 'the people seemed to feel that they were perishing for lack of knowledge', and so came in good numbers when a night school was started: *Report of Commissioners on Popular Education in England* [2794-II], p. 53, H.C. (1861), xxi(2).

² *The British Workman, Past and Present*, p. 124.

enter. Once or twice I went away without going in, but found that self-reproach was worse than the effort would have been. Since those days I have stood as long at the gate of a field before I could make up my mind to go up to one of the lads ploughing, but a talk once begun I soon forgot everything else. Once or twice however it has been such an effort to begin that when I have done so at last it has been trembling, hesitating and with tears, but this has been so far from causing failure that it has added to the effect of the words and softened one that perhaps nothing else would have softened. Like you I always await my scholars now quite calmly. (*Gleanings*, pp. 72-3).

My own sisters do not half know what there is to contend with, nor the tears I often have to shed. For all that, it is a very happy way of life. (*Gleanings*, p. 79).

Although her work was almost entirely done on the personal level, and although she had had to struggle so hard against her own diffidence, she was not unaware of the underlying social issues, and did to some extent become involved in more public matters. The Martinmas hiring of farm servants, with lads and girls paraded in two lines in the open market-place, was a matter of concern to many people. The Rev. Frederick Watkins described it as 'the Saturnalia of the agricultural year', and 'disastrous in its consequences to the young of either sex.'¹ Hiring in a public house could be even worse. More suitable arrangements had already been made at Driffield and Beverley when, in 1862, Miss Simpson played a leading part in bringing about a change at Bridlington. That year the girls were hired in the Corn Exchange, and the mistresses remarked 'with surprised satisfaction how much better behaved the girls were than when hired in the streets, where all was confusion and rude joking and jostling among the lads.' (*Gleanings*, pp. 103-6).

In her educational work Miss Simpson could hardly fail to be aware of a much bigger social problem. In a letter dated 1857 she glances at the problem but sees no hope of change. She is referring to the fact that the need for her work arises from the short and broken period of elementary schooling, adding: 'and among those who have to labour for their daily bread, (unless the whole system of labour and wages throughout the country could be put on a new footing, which of course is not to be looked for), I cannot see but that it must always be so.' (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 60-1). Her views were typical of mid-century attitudes. Thus Owen Chadwick has written: 'Priests and pastors of the slums cried for better houses, better drainage, better education . . . They did not cry for better wages, because no one believed the level of wages to be controllable.'²

About ten years later (when her work had attracted a good deal

¹ *A Letter to His Grace the Archbishop of York*, p. 6. Cf. the comments of E. B. Portman in *1st Report of Commissioners on the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children in Agriculture, App. Pt. I* [4068-I], p. 99, H.C. (1867-8), xvii.

² *The Victorian Church*, Part I (1966), p. 347.

of attention among those interested in the education of the farming population in Yorkshire), her views were incorporated in the evidence presented by the Hon. E. B. Portman to the Royal Commission on the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children in Agriculture.¹ In a letter to Portman she writes much more forcefully about the hindrance to better conditions which springs from the need to keep large families on minimal wages. She goes so far as to point out that the landowners have benefited from the growing prosperity of agriculture, but not the labourers. This was a somewhat radical standpoint for one whose mother was the sister of a large landowner, the patron of her husband's living.² She goes on to say: 'It would be a blessed result of legislation if it puts a check on mothers going out to work, and children kept from school, and along with that tends to increase the agricultural wages.'³

In the absence of such legislation, she had earlier in her evidence proposed comprehensive development of night schools by government action. She denies that boys who have been working in the fields all day are unfitted for the mental labours of the night school, and challenges those who strenuously oppose compulsion.

Who are those we should have to compel?—Not the parents . . . Parents would be the last to object to their boys who are 'off' [i.e. away from home] getting some schooling of a night. Is it the employer? . . . I hope and believe that very few would be unwilling that they [the lads they employ] should be taught if others would be at the trouble of teaching them. I believe also that there is hardly a parish in which the clergyman and schoolmaster would not provide night-school teaching, if they could be assured of a demand for it. It is then only the boys themselves who would need compulsion . . .⁴

She had already remarked that few boys actually love learning, and the most untaught least of all, but towards the end of her letter to Portman she qualifies the proposal of compulsion by saying that 'As regards boys above 13, doubtless "inducement" and "aid" are far better than compulsion, and would cause the idle and refractory to punish themselves by deprivation.'

The first report of the Royal Commission was published in 1867-8. In the following year Mary Simpson's father died and there was a domestic upheaval. Her editor tells us that she left her Yorkshire home, but does not tell us where she moved to. Inevitably, however, her work among the ploughboys of her East Riding parish came to an end. Her papers and memoranda, many of them undated, were bundled together and put on one side. It was not until some

¹ Set up to investigate further the problems revealed in the 6th report (1867) of the Children's Employment Commission.

² Sir George Cholmley, Bt. (who had changed his name from Strickland in 1865) held 20,503 acres, with a rental of £26,365 in 1875: J. T. Ward, *East Yorkshire Landed Estates in the 19th Century* (East Yorkshire Local History Series, no. 23) (1967), p. 72.

³ *Ist Report of Commissioners . . . App. Pt. II*, p. 383.

⁴ *Ist Report of Commissioners . . . App. Pt. II*, p. 382.

years later that she found time to put them in order, and the resulting book, *Gleanings*, was not published until 1876.

Mary Simpson died in Leicestershire in 1884, aged 64. In due course, as a memorial to her valiant labours, a fund was raised to restore the chapel-of-ease at Fraisthorpe (then in the parish of Carnaby), and the subscribers included Gladstone and many other eminent churchmen.¹ The inscription on the brass tablet to her memory reads:

This chapel of Fraisthorpe . . . was rebuilt in 1893, by the offerings of churchmen and churchwomen in all parts of England, as a memorial of the missionary work among farm servants, wrought by Mary Emily Simpson, Authoress of "Ploughing and Sowing"; which in the words of Dr. Christopher Wordsworth, sometime Bishop of Lincoln, has made the parishes of Boynton and Carnaby with Fraisthorpe, "memorable in the parochial annals of the Church of England."

A further memorial to Mary Simpson is to be found in the parish church at Claybrooke, near Lutterworth, where she had lived with two of her sisters—probably from the time of her departure from Yorkshire. It takes the form of a stained-glass window, given by relatives and friends in memory of Mary and her twin sister, Emma. Their graves, together with that of their sister, Louisa, are side by side in the churchyard, and the headstones state that Mary and Emma were born on 8 September 1820. Since Mary's death certificate states that she died on 20 September 1884, it is presumably wrong in giving her age as 63.

¹ *The British Workman, Past and Present*, p. 132.

Part 2

MARY SIMPSON ON RURAL METHODISM

The Background

Victorian England has been described by Professor G. F. A. Best as 'a land with a politically established protestant church and with an all but universal determination among its public men to preserve what they understood to be their country's Christian character.'¹ This determination was fully shared—to the point of being taken for granted—by Mary Simpson. Christianity was the norm for the country. Not only so, but the Established Church was the norm of Christianity, and the guardian of the people's education. The prevalence of dissent—mainly Wesleyan and Primitive Methodism—was seen by her as an anomaly and as a constant hindrance in her work. 'You can hardly understand what it is like to live in a district where dissenting notions are universal,' she wrote about 1863 in a letter to a friend, Miss B——. (*Gleanings*, p. 89).

Wesleyan Methodism had long been well established in the East Riding. John Wesley's *Journal* records ten visits to Bridlington from 1770 onwards, and he frequently visited Hull. When William Clowes returned from the Potteries to Hull in 1819, that town soon became also one of the two main centres of the Primitive Methodist movement,² and the rate of growth remained rapid for a long time. In the town itself, in 1864, the large Jubilee chapel in Spring Bank was added to those already existing. In 1878 another of similar size (Ebenezer) was opened a few hundred yards along the road, to take the overflow. By this time, the early missions to the surrounding villages had produced a well established organization in the countryside. In the Wolds area, the first circuit had been set up at Driffild in 1837 and the Bridlington Circuit had originated as a branch of this. It was only gradually that the Primitive Methodists, and indeed the Wesleyans, were able to erect buildings in all the villages where they had 'societies'. The Rev. Henry Woodcock says of them:

Storm-battered cowsheds, barns, stables, haylofts and coachhouses, were not despised. Blacksmiths' smithies, dark and dusty, and wheelwrights' shops, damp, ruinous, and dirty,

¹ R. Robson (ed.), *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain* (1967), p. 120.

² In 1850 the Primitive Methodists had 104,762 members, the Tunstall District coming first with 16,715 and the Hull District second with 13,272: R. F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Struggle of the Working Classes, 1850-1900* (1954), p. 101. From Hull missions were sent as far afield as Tyneside and Cornwall.

were welcomed; cottages, with mud walls and thatched roofs, were their most common meeting-places; while lonely farm-houses, where, in kitchen or parlour, little knots of farmers and farm labourers listened, with kindly attention, to the words of life . . . *were their cathedrals.*¹

Mary Simpson wrote to a farm lad about 1864: 'I hear that your master has a meeting and preaching at his house most Sundays now.' (*Gleanings*, p. 148). There is no evidence that either the Wesleyan or Primitive Methodists had a purpose-built place of worship in her father's parish during the time that she lived there, although the Wesleyans were strong enough in Carnaby to open a chapel, seating 190, in 1876. Returns of accommodation for 1873 (at the Methodist Archive Centre) show that at that time they were using premises—probably a rented room—seating 40 people.

It is related of King Edward VII that, on a tour of the Isle of Man, he asked what were those little square buildings that he kept seeing in all the villages, and was told that they were Methodist chapels. If he had visited the East Riding, towards the end of his mother's reign, he would have seen one such building in almost every village, and two in most of them. In most cases both buildings still stand today, and there are a few villages where both are still in use. There is even a Primitive Methodist Continuing Circuit, based on Hull. It is unusual to find a group of three East Riding villages where no Methodist services are held, although Boynton, Carnaby and Fraisthorpe form such a group today.

Going back to the mid 19th century, we can find some statistical evidence of the prevalence of dissent (I cannot recall that Miss Simpson ever uses the terms 'nonconformist' and 'nonconformity') in the religious census of 1851.² The returns for the Bridlington Registration District are the source of the statistics given in Table 1. It should be noted that the attendance figures are for 'number of attendants at public worship on Sunday, March 30, 1851 (including Sunday scholars)'.

TABLE 1

Places of worship	Church of England 24	Wesleyan Methodist 26	Primitive Methodist 14	Independent 2	Baptist 2	Total nonconformist 44
No. of sittings	4,790	4,472	1,500	610	360	6,942
Attendants (morn.)	2,029	1,717	216	240	0	2,173
Attendants (aft.)	1,455	1,122	217	94	180	1,613
Attendants (eve.)	715	2,991	786	316	70	4,163
Attendants total	4,199	5,830	1,219	650	250	7,949

¹ *Piety among the Peasantry: Sketches of Primitive Methodism on the Yorkshire Wolds* [1889], p. 179.

² *Census, 1851, Religious Worship England and Wales, Report and Tables* [1690], H.C. (1852-3), lxxxix.

The proportion of Anglican to nonconformist attendances in the whole of the East Riding was very similar, and again the Methodists had a very high figure for evening attendances. Apparently few of the Anglican churches held evening services, and the hours of Sunday work on farms were a sore point with Mary Simpson, as she shows in a letter to a friend, dated May 1859:

First, there is the fact, which for a long time seemed incredible, and which I would willingly doubt now, that for eight months in the year the farm-lads are prevented from going to church in the morning, and very often in the afternoon also; the hours fixed for feeding the horses and cattle being almost universally just at church time! A lad told me last week that he had been used to going to church as a Sunday-school hoy, and tried to go on with it after he went to service, till he got flogged for it by a foreman, and then he gave it up. The Wesleyan services are at such hours that they can go if they like, and the notion of there being any sin in doing so would seem to them preposterous indeed. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 161-2).

Nevertheless, the census figures for 1851 suggest that the position in the Bridlington area from an Anglican point of view must have deteriorated considerably in the next ten years if Miss Simpson could make a statement as emphatic as the following in her reply (dated 29 May 1861) to a letter from an archdeacon:

The only church-goers, yes, I may really say in many East Riding parishes, the *only* church-goers are those among the dissenters, who spend the Sunday in going from one religious service to another, taking one at church between two at chapel or meeting. Of week day services at the churches in the East Riding there are none; though I believe an evening service would often be well attended if late enough, and the hour varied with the time of year. (*Gleanings*, p. 28).

Possibly the position in 1851 was similar, but the dissenters' church attendances prevented the Anglican figures from sinking lower.

In his letter, the archdeacon had spoken of another method by which the Church could reach the agricultural workers, but Mary Simpson was constrained to reply:

There would, I think, be great difficulties in the way of establishing such a 'farm brotherhood' as you speak of in this part of England, chiefly owing to the prevalence—I had almost said the universality of dissent. This is the more to be regretted because it is just what it seems to me, the people have themselves felt the want of, and indeed have carried out in ways of their own in their Wesleyan and other 'Religious Societies.'

A great many already are (to use their own phrase) 'Members of a Religious Society' . . . which if you substitute the words 'Class Meeting and Chapel' for 'Church', would be very nearly described in the following words of your letter:—

'Have a few rules which should bind each member of the brotherhood to regular acts of prayer daily, to attend church,

to preserve in his work a religious spirit, and try to put down swearing and other sins. Give each a card, or something like a badge of brotherhood.' (*Gleanings*, p. 26).

The reference to what the people have 'felt the want of' and 'carried out in ways of their own' suggests a view of Methodism as an endeavour among the workers to provide for their own needs in their own way. On the other hand, Miss Simpson's writings give no hint that this extended beyond spiritual needs, as in County Durham, or in the trade union activities of the Primitive Methodist Joseph Arch on behalf of the farm-workers.

The Special Character of East Riding Dissent

A few years earlier, in opening chapter 4 of *Ploughing and Sowing* (dated Martinmas, 1858), Mary Simpson had summed up three characteristics in which she thought that the dissenting spirit in her area differed from that of the south of England:

First, in being now the only real religion of the working classes.

Secondly, there is hardly a trace anywhere as yet of rancour or ill-will towards those from whom they have separated.

And thirdly, some among them seem at times to look back to the Church of their forefathers with something of regret as to a spiritual home that they have deserted.

With reference to the first point, she speaks of a farmer who was a good Christian and church-goer being referred to by his poorer neighbours as 'very good for a worldly man', and when she inquired the reason for the last epithet, it was that 'he never goes to chapel'. Similarly, she conversed with a young woman who said that her parents had always been regular churchgoers, tried to live by their reading of the Bible, and prayed. 'But', she added, 'they're not religious', and this turned out to mean, 'Well, Ma'am, they've not joined a society.' Elsewhere, Mary Simpson writes to one of her farm lads who had moved, and of whose way of life she had heard good reports:

I heard it said of you at C[arnaby], that you would make a fine preacher if you could ger religion. I wonder what these people think religion means? They have strange wrong notions; but no wonder if they forsake the safe guidance that God has given them, and 'heap to themselves teachers having itching ears.' (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 230-1).

There was one lad who said that, when he was at school, he could not pray at home even though he attended church because he was not allowed to go to chapel. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 118). To another Miss Simpson said, 'But do you think there are no good Christians who are not Wesleyans?'

He considered before answering, and said thoughtfully, 'I think there isn't,' adding after a pause, 'there's Primitives.' I said, 'I know there are a great many very good Christians among both Wesleyans and Primitives; but when I talk to them I am always sorry they are Methodists.' But it was such a new idea to him, he seemed only puzzled... (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 139).

From these and other conversations it is clear that they identified 'religion' with Methodism. Moreover, the possibility that anything that went on in the parish church could be of relevance to them was a strange new notion—somewhat as if Miss Simpson had been asking why they had not been present at a function in Sir George's drawing-room at Boynton Hall.

To illustrate the dissenters' lack of rancour or ill-will, Mary Simpson instances the fact that they carefully arranged the hours of their services so as not to clash with those in the church.¹ In the same connexion she describes a chance encounter on her way to church with a man who joined in discussion with her about such questions as making divisions *in* or *from* the Church, and the nature of conversion.

However, he walked with me to church, and as we entered the porch together, said, with a smile of such peculiar sweetness, it has dwelt on my memory ever since, 'I hope you see we don't differ so very much after all?'

Later, she realized that the 'stranger' in his Sunday suit was a repairer on the local railway—'a man highly esteemed among his neighbours, a pattern husband and father, and a Primitive Methodist class leader, and in the habit of holding meetings in his house.' A few weeks later, after two further conversations, she wrote:

We had the Sacrament at C[arnaby] the Sunday after, and I do not know that I ever felt a more humbling sense of my own unworthiness in comparison with another, than when I saw him stay to partake of it, which I knew he had never done in his life before. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 142).

One of Miss Simpson's illustrations of her impression that some of the dissenters looked back on the Church of their forefathers with something of regret is this:

One whom I had always looked on as a strong dissenter, said one day, 'No doubt the Church would be best if the old discipline was kept up.' 'What do you mean by that?' I asked. 'The clergy visiting from house to house, and talking to the people, to know the state of their souls,' was the reply. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 143).

In summing up the situation as she saw it in 1858, Miss Simp-

¹ Yet elsewhere she says how wrong it is 'if the church is sometimes nearly empty on Sunday, because one half of the parish have gone to chapel or meeting, and the other half never think of going to any place of worship at all'. In the same letter she writes of people at Carnaby being 'at "meeting" when the bells are ringing to call them to church'. *Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 63.

son felt that there was a distinct possibility of winning the East Riding Methodists back to the fold of the Church:

In short, I do not think the dissenters in the agricultural parts of Yorkshire are such decided separatists generally, as they appear to be in other parts of the kingdom. This is no reason for leaving their dissent alone to develope into a greater and more positive evil, but only a reason for dealing with it in the most kindly spirit and with the utmost tenderness and caution; for I am persuaded that nothing but real earnestness on the part of the clergy, guided by such tact and discernment as ought surely to belong to the educated classes, is alone needed, with the blessing of God, to gain them all; but if once a spirit of opposition is roused, there will be, humanly speaking, no hope of effecting a reconciliation; and a spirit of strife among Christians is far worse than passive dissent, under the mitigated form in which it at present exists among the simple-minded peasantry of the East-Riding. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, p. 144).

Objections to Methodist Teaching

Yet though Mary Simpson might feel that the Methodists bore no ill-will, and even had some yearning towards the Church, she had decided objections to what they taught, and especially to their emphasis on conversion as the beginning of the religious life. In 'a sort of cottage lecture'¹ to mainly Primitive Methodist youths and their elders, she urged them to date their regeneration from the time of their baptism as infants: 'We have had in Baptism a second birth . . . Why go to get *brought in*, when Baptism has already brought you in?' She bade them shudder at the thought of the children of Baptist families, whose tenets forbade them to administer this sacrament to those who were too young to take the solemn promises for themselves: 'It is only by God's mercy that you or your parents did not join the Baptrists, instead of the Ranters or Wesleyans, and you might have died unbaptized; and Jesus says, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God".'

Since the young people with whom she was in contact *had* been baptized, she exhorted them not to entertain the notion that they were unable to lead a Christian life until they had undergone some sudden emotional experience. In conversation with a boy as he worked in the field, she said:

You were brought up with very different notions from what I was. I was taught that because I was a Christian and a child of God, I was bound to love God and live to Him. The Ranters and Wesleyans teach people, that till they get con-

¹ *Why Church is better than Chapel or Meeting . . .* By M.E.S. (1863), pp. 10, 12.

verted at some chapel or camp-meeting, they are children of the devil. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 286-7).

Though few Methodists would agree with Miss Simpson that being baptized automatically makes them Christians, probably the vast majority of them today would accept her criticism of the view that it is impossible to enter upon the Christian life without going through a sudden emotional experience. On this she writes:

I think the Wesleyans' mistake is thinking that the change is made, not only consciously at some particular time, but all at once. We know how many speak of such a change in themselves as being sudden, but probably they had never very carefully watched the workings of their own minds before the supposed sudden change, or they would have known that the Spirit had been striving with them long before they had willingly and consciously yielded to the holy influence. (*Gleanings*, pp. 248-9).

So great was the emphasis on being 'brought in' that the best efforts of the Church seemed only to foster a harvest for societies and camp-meetings. One can feel Mary Simpson's pain in a letter to a friend, dated July 1858:

There was a great camp-meeting at C[arnaby], and nearly all those who had lately been confirmed, instead of, as I had hoped, preparing themselves to receive the Lord's Supper in church, joined the Primitives! . . . I shall always remember what M.W. said last year: 'W.J. has grown so good, he's joined the Primitives, and I believe it's a deal from your talking to him'; and if that was the case in one instance last year it has been so in twenty this. When any impression is made on them, they feel a great desire to be 'brought in', or 'converted'; so they go to a camp-meeting, are wound up to a strange state of excitement, 'brought in', made 'joined members', and then they think they can begin to be good—it was no use trying before. (*Ploughing and Sowing*, pp. 106-7).

The concomitant of this is the effect on those who, strive as they will, cannot by frequenting chapels and camp-meetings contrive to get 'brought in':

These last are kept away from God, or from all peace and joy in believing, not so much from want of faith, as from not knowing what the right faith is . . . I knew one such who went mad.¹

Miss Simpson seems here to have failed to notice the distinction between the New Testament concept of faith as an attitude of mind and the common use of the term 'the faith' to mean a body of doctrines; but one can well believe that the linking of the former concept with a rigid insistence on instantaneous conversion could produce the effects she describes upon those who could neither brush the teaching aside nor attain the experience prescribed.

Equally Mary Simpson deplored the effect on those who,

¹ *Why Church is better than Chapel or Meeting*, p. 14.

having equated religion with a certain state of feeling, become despondent when this mood evaporates:

God never changes. His Word endureth for ever; but men and their feelings are always changing. They cannot always feel as they did when they were *brought in*, and then they think they have lost their religion, and they *have* lost it.¹

Methodists and Morals

More surprising, perhaps, is Mary Simpson's charge that Methodism encouraged immorality, particularly in sexual matters. When the Duke of Plaza-Toro, in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Gondoliers* (1889), tells how the King of Barataria 'became a Wesleyan Methodist,' we are accustomed to the amusing by-play of voice, face and gesture which suggests a very strait-laced person indeed. It is interesting to contrast this with some views expressed by Mary Simpson in *Gleanings*, beginning with the statement: 'If a professing Churchman is known to be immoral, no one counts him religious—it is not so among Wesleyans'. (pp. 93-94)². Other references, however, concern rather the attitude to the unconverted. In a letter to E.B. in October 1861, we read:

Wherever Wesleyanism prevails it is taken for granted that young people generally are unconverted. Where this is the general notion, it need cause no surprise if immorality is very general also. (p. 44).

Little more than a year later, writing to a farmer about a girl in his employ, Miss Simpson suggested that 'masters and mistresses were never altogether blameless when they took into their houses knowingly a girl who had lost her character.' Having received his reply, she writes from Whitby in January 1863:

You say that my letter surprised you, yet I think I have more cause to be surprised than you. You say that Ruth — 'made one very serious lapse from virtue'—yet in the next page you tell me: 'So far from having lost her character, we never had a girl who received so excellent a one from her late master and mistress, and after I had hired her Mr. — said to me, "You never had so good a girl in your lives."' (*Gleanings*, p. 107).

The same subject had cropped up in her earlier book:

A farmer's wife (I wish there were more like her) told me that a girl she was reproving and warning, only replied contemptuously, 'One would think, to hear you talk, it was as

¹ *Why Church is better than Chapel or Meeting*, p. 13.

² E. P. Thompson (writing about the period 1780-1832) considered that in Wesleyanism 'the repressive inhibitions upon sexuality carried the continual danger of provoking the opposite—either in the form of a characteristic Puritan rebel (the forerunner of Lawrence) or in the form of Antinomianism': *The Making of the Working Class* (1963), p. 391.

