

MARCHMONT

ASSOCIATION

Background information relating to a Marchmont Association commemorative Blue Plaque for Charlotte Mew (1869-1928), Poet, who was born at 30 Doughty Street, London, WC1 in 1869, where she lived until 1890.



Nicholas Murray, the author of the recent book *Bloomsbury and the Poets* (2014), approached Ricci de Freitas (MA Chair) with the suggestion that there was 'a major gap in the local blue plaque provision', namely 'the poet and fiction writer Charlotte Mew (1869-1928)'. He noted that Charlotte Mew's reputation

has been steadily climbing – marked, for example, by the re-issue of Penelope Fitzgerald's biography of her with an introduction by the novelist, poet and feminist writer, Michèle Roberts who is very knowledgeable about literary Bloomsbury and keen to help with this project. I also devoted a short chapter to her in my *Bloomsbury and the Poets* (2014). Another example of how her reputation is growing is the appearance of some of her poems in a new Oxford University Press anthology of poems of the First World War edited by Tim Kendall. I think it would be fair to say that as far as the literary world is concerned the absence of any memorial to her in Bloomsbury – where she was born, lived, and died unlike many of the more famous names associated with the patch – is starting to look like a serious omission.

There can be no doubting the high regard with which Mew was held in her day by a number of her fellow poets. Virginia Woolf referred to Mew as 'The greatest living poetess.' Siegfried Sassoon wrote of her: 'One who surely stands with Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti . . . many will be on the rubbish heap when Charlotte's star is at the zenith where it will remain.' Her foremost champion Thomas Hardy wrote: 'Miss Mew is far and away the best living woman poet – who will be read when others are forgotten.'

Following a long period of neglect, the feminist press Virago edition of her work, published in 1982, played a major role in her renaissance. The Penguin Classic *Complete Poems* edition was

published in 2000. There have been a number of other editions of Mew's work since 2000, the most recent of which (Pastore, 2014) included yet more previously unpublished material.

Mew's most well-known poem 'The Farmer's Bride' (1912) regularly features in UK English Literature GCSE syllabi. Indeed, this poem was featured in a 2008 *Guardian* 'Poem of the Week' column which, as follows, made many of the pertinent points about Mew's life and work:ⁱ

Mew's poems amount to a slender but remarkable body of work. She brings to Georgian poetry not only a distinctive technique but an unusual, in many ways un-English, sensibility . . . The intense, hopeless romantic love that she often depicts reflects her own emotional entombment. Both a sister and a brother had been confined to mental hospitals. Charlotte and her artist sister, Anne, vowed never to marry, because of the fear of hereditary insanity. Most of Mew's romantic attachments were to women, in fact, but she moved in a Bloomsbury less liberated than that of the Woolfs, enclosed in a shabby gentility where lesbian longings were hardly likely to be fulfilled.

Most recently, the contemporary poet Julia Copus, whose collection *The World's Two Smallest Humans* was shortlisted for the 2012 T. S. Eliot prize and Costa Book Awards, is writing a new biography of Charlotte Mew. We might, perhaps, expect a film to follow.

Her previous biographer Penelope Fitzgerald made an application to English Heritage in 1992 for a blue plaque for Charlotte Mew at 30 Doughty Street which 'The Commission was unable to adopt' (English Heritage, 11 October 1993). Mew's reputation as a major poet has increased considerably since that date, as is evidenced above. Moreover, a Marchmont Association plaque is particularly appropriate in that Mew's connections with Marchmont and Bloomsbury are exceptional. 30 Doughty Street falls within the MA area of benefit and that address is the most convincing candidate for a blue plaque. Specifically, **Mew was born at 30 Doughty Street, Mecklenburgh Square, in 1869, where she lived with her family until 1890. This house still stands.** She then moved with her family to 9 Gordon Street, Gordon Square, in February 1890, where she lived until 1922.ⁱⁱ 9 Gordon Street was destroyed by German strategic bombing in September 1940. Only from March 1922 until her suicide in March 1928 did Mew live outside Bloomsbury, first at 86, Delancey Street, NW1, and, subsequently, at the Hogarth Studios, 64 Charlotte Street, W1. Mew committed suicide, by drinking Lysol, in a nursing-home at 37, Beaumont Street, W1, on 24 March 1928, having been placed there some five weeks earlier after she had declined the offer of admittance to an asylum as a voluntary patient.

The Marchmont Association considers that Charlotte Mew's past and present esteem is established beyond doubt.

ⁱ Louis Untermeyer included the poetry of Charlotte Mew in his *Modern American and British Poetry* from 1922 onwards. In consequence, argues Andrew Roberts, 'American schoolchildren grew up knowing her and so American visitors to Bloomsbury, where Untermeyer said she lived as a recluse, might expect to find a plaque on her house.'

ⁱⁱ Research by Richard Ekins, with the assistance of street directory research by Ricci de Freitas, has established the errors in much of the relevant literature in regards to placing and dating. The influential Virago edition of her poems and prose, for instance, wrongly states the house number as 10 Doughty Street and wrongly dates the move to Gordon Street as 1888. The Penguin Classics edition wrongly places the Mews' residence at 10 Doughty Street. Penelope Fitzgerald, both in Fitzgerald (2014) and in her *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Charlotte Mew (2004-2015), wrongly dates the move to Gordon Street as 1888.

References:

Charlotte Mew Chronology with mental, historical and geographical connections [linking with her own words](#), and listing her essays, stories, poems and friends.



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Adapted from a paper produced by Richard Ekins for the Marchmont Association Commemorative Plaques Scheme and History Project sub-group.

<http://www.marchmontassociation.org.uk/>.

<http://www.marchmontassociation.org.uk/news-article.asp?ID=124>

<http://www.marchmontassociation.org.uk/news-article.asp?ID=115>