MENA

DAUGHTER OF OBEDIENCE

NOEL VOSE

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FOREWORD

Heather Vose (1931–90) was one of the finest scholars to emerge from that remarkable generation of Australian women who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, having married and brought up children, pursued the opportunities opening up to them as mature-age students at university. In her youth, girls, when they left school, were often not encouraged, or could not afford, to think of themselves as university students with postgraduate potential. Opportunities for careers as writing historians were in any case limited. A few women from the older generation, such as Alexandra Hasluck and Mary Durack, were comfortably off and, as their children grew up, could devote time to historical research, usually Australian in content. They worked without much in the way of institutional support, and their achievements were considerable. A few of Heather's contemporaries, myself included, were very fortunate in winning overseas scholarships and proceeding to university lectureships, but most of us were male. It could hardly have been imagined that a young woman who left school to work as a secretary at the University of Western Australia and married in her early twenties would win distinction in two diverse fields. One was the religious history of sixteenth-century Europe. The other was the colonial history of Western Australia, seen not from a narrow or parochial perspective but as part of Britain's imperial outreach in the nineteenth century.

In the course of her undergraduate studies at the University of Western Australia, Heather Vose developed the skills of a meticulous researcher.

In the last twenty years, computer technology has taken enormous strides in widening historians' access to sources and creating shortcuts in amassing and filing research material. Heather worked without these aids. In her keyboard skills she was of course highly proficient, but many of her research notes are handwritten, showing the results of hours of patient research in archives. Fortunately, her handwriting was admirably clear and seldom if ever showed traces of tiredness. The same cannot be said for some of her sources in the sixteenth or nineteenth century. It required great qualities of skill and patience to decipher them and record them accurately. Heather possessed those qualities.

John Tonkin, who worked with Heather on the European Reformation, has left an appealing picture of her routine as a researcher exploring the archives in Paris: living frugally, enjoying the parks and buildings of the city, befriending younger fellow students, and constantly in touch with her husband Noel, then in Cambridge. Noel was consistently supportive in all that she undertook. Theirs was a model partnership. It pleased him as during the 1980s she started to gain professional recognition, at first locally, then increasingly on the international stage. And then in 1990 all was cut short by her sudden and unexpected death.

Heather and I had been collaborating on an edition of the diaries and letters of John Wollaston, the first Anglican Archdeacon of Western Australia and an observant commentator on colonial society, and this eventually appeared in three volumes. I was also aware that she had been working on the career of Mena Weld, the wife of a successful nineteenth-century colonial Governor. The Welds came from one of the old Catholic families of England whose loyalty to their Church survived long periods of discrimination. Uniquely among the nineteenth-century inhabitants of Government House, Perth, they incorporated a Catholic chapel into their household. But Heather was nothing if not ecumenical in her sympathies, and it was no cause for surprise that the wife of a leading Baptist minister, having worked on the feuds of Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth-century France and entered deeply into the life

and thought of an Anglican clergyman of the early Victorian period, should address herself to the devoutly Catholic Mena Weld.

Since the 1960s women's history and gender studies have become established as flourishing branches of the historical profession. In the early years of the discipline there was perhaps a tendency to concentrate on the pioneers of feminism, the agents of change, the radicals, even the rebels. Women such as Lady Hester Stanhope, Jane Digby and Isabel Burton, who had defied the narrower conventions of their age and adventured in remote and exotic climes, found their biographers – and their biographers found appreciative readerships. In embarking on the life of Mena Weld, Heather Vose was to show that a life of domesticity and piety need not be dull or unadventurous. Although she was brought up in the comfort of the English landed gentry, Mena Weld was a woman of spirit. Without neglecting her responsibilities as wife and mother of a numerous family, she could resolutely tackle the pastoralist's life in pioneer New Zealand or, when travelling with her children in a sailing ship threatened by the stormy waters of the Great Australian Bight, take over the leadership from a drunken and irresolute captain, and all this in addition to her duties as Governor's lady in places as diverse as Perth, Hobart and Singapore. But in addition to being a woman of spirit, she was also the daughter of obedience. Nine years after her husband, Frederick Weld, died (in 1891) she cheerfully committed herself to the life of the convent, there to give scope to the contemplative side of her being that had perhaps had to take second place during her years of active public life.

Heather Vose researched the story well, but at her death the manuscript had not yet been started. It fell to her husband, Noel Vose, to finish the story and he has performed the task with admirable care and fidelity to Heather's intentions. This book appropriately completes the work of a respected member of the historians' community in Heather, but it also stands as a memorial to the partnership of wife and husband.

Professor Geoffrey Bolton, AO
May 2012

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The Weld Family

Ambrose Phillips de Lisle
= Laura Clifford 1833
|

N.	N.	Filumena = Frederick Weld 1859	N.	N.	[16 children in all]

Humphrey = de Poer	Everard = Dillon	Frederick = George	Joseph priest	Raymond priest	Osmund	Christina = Druitt	Cecily = Mayne	Mary d.inf.	Filumena Aug. nun	Edith Abbess, Kilcumein	Magdalena = Radcliffe	Angela nun

AUTHOR'S NOTE: HOW MENA'S STORY CAME TO BE WRITTEN

When Frederick Weld ended a career spanning forty-five years, his niche in British colonial history was secure. He had been Premier of New Zealand, Governor of Western Australia, then of Tasmania and finally, Governor of the Straits Settlements and Protected Malay States. His life had created enough interest to generate two biographies. In these, however, his wife Filumena was dismissed as a nonentity and described as 'a gentle retiring creature, noted for her extreme piety'. When all the Weld documents – letters, diaries, and portraits – were completely destroyed by fire in 1997, her total obscurity would have been permanent except for an unusual series of events in the mid-1980s. Here is what happened.

Professor Gordon Reid became Western Australia's twenty-fifth Governor in 1984. With his wife, Ruth, he took up residence in Government House, Perth, the home of Western Australia's governors since it was built by convict labour in the early 1860s. In the long gallery leading from the ballroom to the private apartments, hung the portraits of Reid's twenty-four predecessors.

Mrs Reid, a student of history, wanted to know more about the previous occupants. 'Where can I see portraits of the wives?' she asked.

'There aren't any'.

'None at all?'

'No, Mrs Reid, none at all'. She was astonished.

'How many were married?'

'We don't know'.

Mrs Reid persisted. 'Surely there were some families here. Would you show me the records, please?'

'There are no records'.

The new Governor's wife was not prepared to leave it at that and, with the help of the J. S. Battye Library, began her own research. It appeared that all but the second Governor had been married. Furthermore, children had been born in 'The House'. Stories emerged. Mrs Reid's interest grew and was contagious.

Over occasional morning teas, Mrs Reid shared her interest with a friend, Dr Heather Vose, at that time a member of the History Department at the University of Western Australia. Various 'first ladies' were discussed, but one early occupant of the house captured Heather's attention. Her name was Mena Weld.

As some of the stories filtered into the Vose household, Heather was urged to put Mena's story on paper. She agreed and a research grant from the university made this possible. Her long search for further information commenced, beginning with a journey to New Zealand. Heather was welcomed there by Mrs Cecily Petre, Mena's great granddaughter, whose father, Simon Scrope, possessed a jealously guarded handwritten memoir composed by Mena's daughter, Edith. Cecily managed to 'borrow' it and Heather sat up all night making notes before it had to be surreptitiously returned early the next morning.

Sixty-five closely written pages confirmed the hints already gleaned in Perth, that Mena was more than 'gently pious': she was a lively, adventurous and romantic personality, with a sturdy will of her own.

The search continued in Perth, Hobart and Singapore, but with little success. There were ample data concerning Governor Weld, but his wife remained more or less invisible until 1989, when Heather visited Chideock Manor in Dorset, the seat of the Weld family. This yielded a small but rich find of diaries and letters. Contact was also made with Mena's family, the de Lisles, in Leicestershire. This was followed

by a visit to Fort Augustus, Scotland, in an effort to locate the long-abandoned priory where Mena ended her days.

As yet nothing was written.

In June 1990, Dr Vose was at a conference in Indiana. In passing, she commented that she would be glad to be back in Perth: 'I'll have the Weld book written before Christmas'. That same day, while addressing a meeting, she suffered a brain haemorrhage which ended her life.

Apart from the title and three or four chapter headings, nothing had been written, but photocopies of letters, diaries and memoirs, together with a collection of photographs, were filed in her study. The original Chideock materials had all been destroyed in a disastrous fire; only the few selected photocopies remained.

Having shared initially in my wife's research in Tasmania, Singapore and Fort Augustus, I retained an interest in the project and, after her death, decided to continue her research. Well aware of the frustrating scarcity of primary resources, I made my own journey to Chideock, and to Leicestershire, where I gained a few more facts. I was able to see Mena's childhood home, Grace Dieu, and have a brief look at her mother's diaries, in the home of Mr Everard de Lisle at Quenby Hall, Hungerton. Despite the many commitments that have delayed the completion of this work, it is a fragment of social history too valuable to be lost. It attempts to 'recapture the past, both as a picture and a story'. Mena is one of many worth knowing but largely forgotten. This account is intended to provide her with her own niche in history.

I: The shape and limitation of this piece of social history

Any discussion of Victorian figures playing their part in the zenith of Britain's nineteenth-century Empire, arouses both questions and conflict for the twenty-first-century reader.

The darker side of colonialism, with its attitude towards subject races as 'lesser breeds without the law',[1] together with rigid and sometimes overbearing structures of class and gender, are familiar themes among modern historians. They are not part of the purpose of this book,

which is simply to let Mena's story speak for itself (as far as Mena will allow us).

In the area of religion, the visions and vapours of searching souls who sit on the edge of Mena's life will arouse curiosity. They don't have to lie in the distant past to seem strange. The well-loved Salvation Army bonnet, reluctantly discarded by General Booth's descendants, is as strange to some as is the Gregorian 'chaunt' to others. Variegated expressions of Victorian Christianity may appeal to some or be repugnant to others, according to taste. It is not the purpose of this encounter with an upper-class Catholic woman to judge either her views or her expression of the Christian faith: the reader is invited to look at her experience as an observer rather than a judge. We may enjoy a sympathetic glimpse of her life by way of historical excursion without condoning what some regard as objectionable features of Victorian society.

On another matter, some readers would like to question Mena's views and experiences of prolific and unrestricted motherhood. Did she embrace it or resent it? Was it a duty or joy? One more son for the Empire or daughter for the cloister? She would probably have found the question as strange – even repulsive – as many find the possibility of human cloning in our generation. But one thing we do know: when her children teased her for having such a big family, she replied that she loved them all and would not wish to have even one less!

As the story unfolds, some facts may appear slightly bizarre: Ambrose de Lisle's visions as a boy; Mena's own vision or, as she herself admitted, 'perhaps a dream'; as well as the passionate oddities of Augustus Pugin and the eccentric behaviour of Kenelm Digby.

Are the facts credible? Part of the answer lies in the overarching mood at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the somewhat superficial, historical name for which is Romanticism. The educated class had suffered a surfeit of Reason from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and wanted a place for the heart as well as the mind.[2] But it was more than a mood: it was the spirit of the age. Poetry, novels, politics, philosophy, religion and art were all affected. Feeling,

mystery and wonder were uppermost. In the words of historian Jacques Barzun: 'The one link between the temper of the period, and the original meaning of the word, is that Romanticism validated passion and risk'.[3] Mena herself was described in her New Zealand days as a 'little pre-Raphaelite'. The characters in Mena's story exemplify and illumine Romanticism to such an extent that, against that background, they become eminently believable.

The mood of the age also provides a clue to the extraordinary resurgence of religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, during the mid-nineteenth century. Sir Walter Scott's historical novels had recaptured the Middle Ages for the reading public. The young intelligentsia were captivated by the glamour of crusading chivalry and Gothic architecture. Continuity with the past through the Catholic Church proved irresistible. In this, our central characters, Frederick Weld and Mena de Lisle, were perfectly matched. Romanticism coloured their lives and shaped their destiny. Looking at the Victorian era through their eyes, we glimpse a world now vanished.

A question has arisen which, while not directly related to the book's subject, has aroused some interest and even surprise. It concerns my own public face and faith and how I as author, with a very strong Protestant heritage, can present here, with obvious sympathy, the fervent Catholic convictions of my subject. As the foregoing explanation of the book's origin states, the study began with no other thought than to record the life of a remarkable woman whose story was worth telling. In the event, she proved to be a particularly ardent English Catholic of the nineteenth century whose faith was the key to her life. To be true to the facts, as a piece of history, it had to be a genuinely Catholic story, but, I hope, with general appeal for those who enjoy the record of past events.

If, in the telling, Mena's story adds a link to the ecumenical understanding between two major sections of Christianity, sharing the same faith in Jesus Christ as the ultimate meaning of life, so much the better.

Noel Vose

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Various members of the widely scattered Weld family have been uniformly helpful. My wife's first point of contact was Mrs Cecily Petre of New Zealand, Mena's great grand-daughter. The late Colonel Humphrey Weld and Mrs Weld of Chideock were generous hosts to my wife in 1989, and later to me, as also was their son Charles Weld.

Major Everard de Lisle provided access to the diaries of Mena's mother, and offered photographs.

My secretary of many years, Mrs Freda Giblett, patiently typed many drafts. From the time I took up my wife's research, Mrs Anne Bloemen has been an enthusiastic and persistent encourager. My daughter Valerie Sorensen provided invaluable assistance in the last few months. I would like to thank all at St. Charles Seminary for encouragement and help. More recently, Professor Geoffrey Bolton, Mr Denis Cullity, Father David Barry, OSB, and Mr Michael Walsh have provided both significant support and encouragement.

Miss Geraldine Byrne generously accepted the task of providing the index. The photograph of Singapore's Government House is from Dr Ernest Chew's private collection. Members of the Benedictine

Community readily made their records available. The photograph of the jarrah forest was provided by David Osborne, www.walkgps.com.

Others have helped, including the late Dr Frank Broeze (shipping information), Mrs Jane Ajduk for photographs of Fort Augustus Monastery and Priory, and Mrs Valerie Wild (research of Fremantle Government House). Dr Jeanine Graham, author of the 1983 Frederick Weld biography, offered helpful background information to Dr Heather Vose.

To others who have not been mentioned the author begs indulgence in the light of a memory that has passed its 91st year of service.

Prologue[4]

Loch Ness, Scotland, Maundy Thursday, 8 April 1903…

Pausing at the door of the cell, the Prioress watched the old nun's laboured breathing as she lay, eyes closed, facing the window. It would not be long now. The Reverend Mother sighed. The convent would not be the same without her. What a remarkable person she had been: a blend of mysticism and worldly wisdom, devotion and laughter, self-effacement and authority, all held in place by a will of iron.[5] The Prioress smiled as she remembered the occasion when each of the sisters had added her own 'intention' to the communal prayer slate and, as it became the old nun's turn to make her request for intercession, she had taken the chalk and written firmly:

> That the enemies of the Church may be overthrown.
> Our dear Lord is far too patient with them;
> I would destroy every one of them.

Forbidding?[6] In fact, her intensity and devotion had never been grim. The Prioress remembered her sense of humour. Only the other day she had opened her eyes after a spell of great weakness to express disappointment at still being there, adding with a laugh, 'I only want to go when our dear Lord wishes. If I went before, He would say to me, "What are you doing here?" and I might have to stand at the door, which would be worse than lying here on my bed'.

Dr Johnstone, the Protestant physician, prescribed a regular dose of brandy which she detested but swallowed obediently. It helped. The doctor later commented that the brandy must have something supernatural in it to sustain her strength in such a manner. She made no response, but when the next dose was due she took it with a laugh: 'Well certainly, supernatural brandy is very nasty stuff!'

The Prioress moved silently into the room and sat beside the bed. Through the window she could see the large cross on the hill in the convent cemetery and in the distance the Abbey of Fort Augustus. The 'Calvary' had been erected with the dying nun's own money. She had been impatient to see it raised. 'It will draw many hearts to him', she had said.

Other events from the past rose to comfort and trouble the Prioress as she watched and waited.

She remembered the day when the 64-year-old woman had presented herself as a postulant at the priory gates, seeking admission – Saturday, 3 March 1900, three years ago. The novice met all the convent requirements with exemplary obedience. The Rule was her joy: to clean the lamps, tidy the chapel and take part in the daily chores were all gifts to offer up to her blessed Lord. The watcher remembered the deep reverence with which the old nun – almost twice her age – had made her vow of obedience to her as Prioress, addressing her as 'Mother'.

Her mind went over the dates: 15 December, when the doctor ordered her to bed; then that great day, Friday, 6 March, following

the telegram from Rome, when she was permitted to take her vows, no more an oblate, but a fully professed nun – Gertrude Dolores OSB.

A faint sigh brought her attention back to the face on the pillow. The breathing was shallow. It would not be long now. The whole community had been quietly gathering. The Prioress looked up. A priest entered the room. It was her brother Joe, who had arrived from the nearby abbey. She watched him as he opened his breviary. The dying nun would be glad that Joe was there at her side, saying the office which commended the departing soul: '*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison…*'

* * *

Who was this nun, removed by vocation from the highways of the world and now ending her life within the tranquil walls of a Benedictine convent?

The tiny figure in the cell was, in truth, a strong-willed and complex personality with an adventurous spirit, a woman who had once been as happy camping in the unexplored bush as welcoming princes in vice-regal splendour.

She had been an excellent horsewoman with a keen eye for the best points of horseflesh. At sea she had been a competent yachtswoman, capable of handling a brigantine in a Southern Ocean storm. In her luggage she always carried a treasured box of carpentry tools; in her heart she carried a fierce pride of Empire and the strongest sense of military glory.

Once she had been a fun-loving girl, affectionate and romantic, who loved music, dancing, horseracing, opera, and grand-scale entertaining. She had fallen passionately in love with a man thirteen years her senior, borne him thirteen children, and now, with husband dead and children grown, she had turned her back on public life and a family she loved, to accept the discipline of

a ‘life of obedience’ according to the ancient Benedictine Rule. Strangest of all was her relationship of devout submission to the Mother Superior, who was in fact her own daughter!

Gertrude Dolores, OSB (Order of St Benedict), is a woman worth knowing. Her colourful life tells its own story. But in that story she has another name – Mena Weld.

The Cross, still standing in Priory Cemetery, Loch Ness, Scotland. Erected by Gertrude Dolores (Lady Weld) as a gift to the community.

Chapter 1

Mena's world

> The time is long past when Victorian meant everything prudish, sentimental and conventional.
>
> G. S. Haight

Change was a feature of the nineteenth century. 'The country', wrote one historian, speaking of Britain, 'was in the grip of change more fundamental than it had ever known before in its history'.[7] The first half of the century witnessed a population explosion that has been soberly described as 'one of the most startling facts in [British] history'.[8] Between 1801 and 1851 the population leapt from nine to eighteen million. By 1871 it had reached twenty-two million and by 1881 almost twenty-six million.[9]

Changes in transport and communication were dramatic. Coach travel at the turn of the century was still slow, difficult and cumbersome. By 1830 the advent of rail opened a new era of travel. Communication by medium of telegraph rather than horseback reinforced the spectacular sense of progress that dominated English life. These, of course, were only two aspects of

the enormous changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution which was to make Britain 'the workshop of the world'.

With increasing wealth came great poverty. In 1832, out of a population of approximately thirteen million, one and a half million – more than ten per cent – were paupers. Conditions among the poor were unbelievably bad. A social conscience began to emerge. Many reforms – often hotly contested by vested interests – found their way into the statute books. The political process itself underwent a major change to a more democratic form of government. Slavery was abolished, child labour regulated, free education introduced, and penal liabilities lifted from Catholic and Protestant dissenters. As far as women were concerned, the nation was still aggressively male-dominated. Female emancipation still lay far ahead.

In religion also, change was evident. Popular religion became an important factor of nineteenth-century England.[10] The growth of an extraordinary religious sensibility touched all aspects of life, from a renaissance among Roman Catholics to the formation of the Salvation Army. The Church of England experienced a powerful evangelical renewal, and Protestant dissenters displayed a new vitality. In sum, religion is an indispensable factor in assessing the culture of nineteenth-century England.

International relations simply provided a larger stage for the drama of change: the century began with Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 and Wellington's triumph at Waterloo in 1815, both portents of later battles and victories which were to create an empire Englishmen believed could last a thousand years. Kipling's 'Recessional' of 1897 said it all:

God of our fathers, known of old
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine.

Lord God of hosts, be with us yet
Lest we forget; Lest we forget.[11]

But the carefully crafted humility was also matched with a proud sense that the God of their fathers had made the British far superior to 'lesser breeds without the law'. Mena's fervent sense of Empire, service and military glory matched Kipling's sentiments, perhaps all the more because of her pride in her two brothers killed in battle, one at Delhi, the other at Khartoum.

Thus was created the mind-set of many nineteenth-century Britons, especially among the squirearchy, where noblesse oblige, humanity, English pride and proper sense of one's station in life were paramount. And this was Mena's world.

I: Mena's father

When Mena Weld's father, Ambrose Lisle March-Phillipps,[12] first opened his infant eyes on 17 March 1809, his world was well mapped and secure. As a Phillipps, he would be baptised into the Church of England and cherished in her bosom, Cambridge would be his alma mater, and the milieu of county gentry would mark the boundaries of his life.

But Ambrose was no ordinary child. Of delicate constitution, his tendency to introspection and visions hid a robust personality and strong will – strong enough to change both his name and his religion, and to make him a leading figure in the new wave of Roman Catholicism which shook the bulwarks of Protestant England. It will be important later to examine this phenomenon.

Through his mother, Ambrose inherited Huguenot blood from the Ducarel family, refugees to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. But whatever French Protestant convictions may have shaped his mother's thinking, she did not live long enough to influence her son; Ambrose was only

three when she died. There are indications that he combined a certain outward quickness and curiosity with a contemplative and somewhat mystical disposition. It is obvious even from his father's laconic diary entries that the care of young Ambrose was a matter of some concern. In February 1814, before the boy turned six, the diary recorded: 'At Garendon Park, A. L. P. delicate, with pains in his chest'.

At age five, Ambrose began his formal religious instruction under the supervision of his 'high-church' Anglican uncle, the Reverend William March Phillipps. This was later supplemented with teaching of a distinctly different style from his evangelical 'low-church' uncle Edward March Phillipps, rector of Hathern. Having a settled dislike of 'Popery', as he termed it, Edward taught Ambrose that Rome was the Babylon of the Apocalypse and the Pope 'Antichrist'. It was Uncle Edward who had baptised Ambrose four days after his birth.

When he turned nine, Ambrose was sent to a private school at South Croxton, Leicestershire, and two years later to Maisemore Court near Gloucester, a private establishment run by the Reverend George Hodson. He spent each Sunday with another Anglican uncle, the gifted Dr Ryder, bishop of Gloucester,[13] an outstanding leader of the Evangelical Party and known for his great sincerity and devotion. It was during these impressionable years that he was taught French by an émigré priest, Abbé Giraud, each Saturday morning. At fourteen Ambrose visited France and was captivated by Catholic architecture. His attraction to French culture was more than superficial. Ambrose's maternal grandfather held titles of Marquis de Chateaunuy and Vicomte de Bonnemar in France.[14] Back in England he persuaded his Anglican rector to place a small oak cross on the communion table. Its removal was promptly ordered by the Bishop of Peterborough. His tutor, George Hodson, must have become alarmed at these Catholic predilections in his pupil and administered a strong dose of

anti-Roman literature. The result was the reverse of what he had hoped.

Everything in Ambrose's early childhood should have cemented his Anglican faith. Unhappily the Church of England 'was in a bad way'.[15] A number of factors – class privilege, money, patronage, certain destructive elements of continental theology – all contributed to decadence. However, the Church's parlous state produced a ferment of contending remedies. Some – dubbed 'high church' – moved closer to old Catholic roots; others – named 'low church' – combined strong anti-Catholic views with a fervent evangelical faith. A third party – named 'broad church' – viewed state and Church as two sides of the one coin. Religion was seen as the social cement binding civic life through appropriate parliamentary control.

In a boy of fervent religious imagination, the combination of Huguenot forebears, mixed signals from avuncular sources, and the Catholic influence of a French priest, proved highly combustible. In 1823 Ambrose had an experience which proved decisive for his future. Its importance may be measured by the fact that he recounted details to his biographer, E. S. Purcell, fifty-three years later.

> One day in the year 1823 I was rambling along the foot of the hills in the neighbourhood of the school…I saw a bright light in the heavens and I heard a voice which said 'Mahomet is the Anti-Christ for he denieth the Father and the Son'. On my return home in the next holidays I looked for a Koran and there I found those remarkable words, 'God neither begetteth nor is begotten'.[16]

So Uncle Edward was wrong! Not the Pope, but Islam was the AntiChrist. Uncle was answered and Ambrose's Catholic sympathies grew.

In 1824 his evangelical Uncle Henry was translated from Gloucester to the See of Lichfield. It seemed time to settle any fears concerning Ambrose and he was confirmed in the Anglican Church at the cathedral. But any sighs of relief were premature.

Another experience completely dismantled his Anglican faith. This time it was a vivid dream in which the Lord seemed to reproach him with neglect in not responding to the light already given. The impression was so startling that as soon as he was fully awake, Ambrose wrote to Father MacDonnell, parish priest in Loughborough, requesting a meeting 'at a Certain Cottage' in order that he might be received into the Communion of the Roman Catholic Church. These adult recollections of early spiritual experiences are straightforward enough even if, as is often the case, reminiscence has produced its own holy glow.

Family response was immediate. He was withdrawn from school and tutored privately at his home in Garendon Park. His father insisted on his attendance at Anglican services. All was to no avail. Whatever the vehement attitudes of his episcopal and reverend brothers, Charles Phillipps eventually accepted the inevitable: his son's Catholicism was sincere and well entrenched. The father was not going to allow religion to make a permanent breach between them. It was not a matter of indifference or complacency; Ambrose's father was very distressed by his son's departure from the Anglican faith. His diary entry for 8 June 1825 has this to say:

> On entering Ambrose' room I saw a gold looking cross tied to a ribbon, price 2s. 6d. Upbraid him with the absurdity and broke it into pieces, for which I was very sorry afterwards; repented of my passion – he remained quite quiet.

Later that month, when Charles Phillipps was informed of his son's total apostasy from Protestant to Roman Catholic faith, his diary read: 'a heavy aggravation to my other sorrows'.[17]

Plans were made in 1826 for Ambrose to enter Oriel College, Oxford, but there was no vacancy. Arrangements were then made for him to enter Trinity College, Cambridge, in the Michaelmas term, though as a Catholic he would be unable to take a degree. There he found another young Catholic convert, Kenelm Digby,[18] whose romantic zeal for the 'ancient faith' matched his own. A close friendship developed. A recent study of English Catholicism expresses the view that 'the conversion of Ambrose Phillipps and Kenelm Digby represented the beginnings of the Catholic revival in the universities'.[19] The latter was of an intensely romantic disposition. Like many others he was captivated by the chivalry of Sir Walter Scott's mediaeval characters. One anecdote from his undergraduate days describes Digby as hiding himself in King's College Chapel before the doors were locked so that he could spend the night keeping a chivalric vigil at one of the vaults. It appears that the young enthusiasts were the only Catholics in Cambridge at that time.[20] Sunday Mass at St Edmund's College in Hertfordshire became a regular feature of their life. In order to receive Holy Communion at Mass they had to fast from midnight, which meant a 25-mile ride on an empty stomach: fair measure of their youthful devotion. Digby, like his contemporary the architect Augustus Pugin, had a consuming sense of the holiness of beauty,[21] a passion increasingly shared by Ambrose, whose Catholic faith began to take on the distinctive character which shaped the rest of his life, and that of his future family.[22]

While these events were taking place in Cambridge, a very different kind of movement, known in history as the Oxford Movement, was also taking shape some miles away in Oxford University.

It began when a group of young scholars from Oriel College became deeply dissatisfied with the spiritual apathy of their Anglican Church. With passionate zeal, they determined to cultivate holiness in themselves.[23] It is a quirk of history that

Ambrose had applied unsuccessfully to enter Oriel College in 1826, at a time when the brilliant John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman was still an ardent high-church Anglican. What might their meeting and friendship have meant to English history? Almost certainly celibacy, for Ambrose Lisle March-Phillipps already inclined towards monastic life.

In 1828, Newman was appointed vicar of St Mary's, Oxford. Five years later he began a famous series, *Tracts for the Times*, originally intended to *defend* high-church Anglican principles. Tractarianism, as it was called, eventually changed direction, with the result that in 1845 Newman and fifty followers were received into the Church of Rome.

Back in Cambridge in 1828 – the same year that Newman began in St Mary's, – life suddenly changed for Ambrose. Spring of that year brought his university studies to an abrupt end. On 10 April the senior Phillipps received news that his son was seriously ill at St Edmund's College, haemorrhaging from the lungs. When sufficiently recovered, Ambrose spent a lengthy convalescence in Italy, accompanied by his father. He was still only nineteen years old when he was presented to Pope Leo XII in January 1829 in Rome.

His return to health was matched with a growing interest in monasticism. He often spoke of celibacy as the highest life, to the considerable unease of his Anglican father, who wanted heirs to maintain the family name. The elder Phillipps was therefore relieved when romance blossomed between Ambrose and Laura Mary Clifford, grand-daughter of the fourth Lord Clifford. The marriage, which took place in London on 25 July 1833, was to prove a lifelong love match, resulting in a family of sixteen children, an alternative to celibacy which must have greatly comforted Ambrose's father.

II: Mena's mother

Mena's mother, Laura Mary Clifford, who like her husband was motherless, had been educated in a convent in Essex. A contemporary description of her makes the comment: 'Everyone loved her with her fair complexion and blue eyes, bright and full of life, but always aiming at high things'.[24]

A letter she wrote to Ambrose on 7 June 1833, just six weeks before their marriage, reflects mutual devotion and also the deeply pietistic note which was a feature of English Catholic life:[25]

> My dearest Ambrose,
>
> I have received your very dear dear letter by your sister who came about half past three…I shall always keep [it] as one of my most precious treasures.
>
> My dearest Ambrose you cannot be more anxious than I am that there should be no delay to our marrying as soon as possible, and as our Bd [Blessed] Lady has already given you so many instances of her special protection over you, I hope she will obtain for us both what we both so earnestly desire…We both, however, have a kind of claim on her protection as neither of us has an earthly mother, so that I sincerely pray she may ever prove a mother to us; and that we shall prove ourselves her true children. I am so much obliged for your dear prayers for our safe journey which I suppose we must attribute to them. I am so happy there is only one more day before we shall again meet, and I trust we shall ere long be united, never again to part…
>
> I remain dear Ambrose, your affectionate and attached
>
> Laura Mary Clifford.

Chapter 2

Old faith – new face

> It might not be too extravagant to say of the nineteenth century that probably in no other century, except the seventeenth and perhaps the twelfth, did the claims of religion occupy so large a part of the nation's life, or did men speaking in the name of religion contrive to exercise so much power.
>
> George Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England*

During the life span of Mena (1836–1903), changes in the character and strength of English Catholicism were more striking than at any time since England became Protestant in the sixteenth century. From her childhood in Grace Dieu Manor to her last days in St Scholastica Priory, religion provided the background against which Mena's interior devotion and public life took form. Thus the dramatic but convoluted story of nineteenth-century Catholicism[26] is not only worth telling but essential for an accurate portrait of this remarkable woman.

As the daughter of an enthusiastic convert to Catholicism, Mena had been brought up to understand something of the difficulties which many of her father's adopted faith had experienced in the past. The Test Act of 1673, which compelled all who held public office to reject the doctrine of transubstantiation,[27] brought severe political and civil disabilities to many. For example, there were

barriers to the entry of Catholics into public life; supplementary land taxes on Catholic proprietors; and no legal form of Catholic marriage allowed. Catholics in the armed forces were compelled to attend Protestant worship. The saying of Mass was an offence liable to prosecution, though the law was not often enforced. The pulse of Roman Catholic life in England slowly weakened. Towards the end of the eighteenth century there were even signs that English Catholicism was dying. One source[28] suggests that there were no more than 60,000 Catholics left in England by the year 1800. At that time they were commonly classified as a sect.[29]

Viewed from afar at Rome, future prospects for 'the old faith' in England must have appeared bleak indeed. And for good reason. Sanctions under which generations of Catholics had lived produced an inward privatised religion, especially among the squirearchy, where Catholicism was most stable and enduring. Although they were English to the core, loyal to sovereign and country, Catholics were inevitably conscious of barriers religion imposed between them and their Protestant neighbours. So, without any disloyalty to their faith, they settled into a reserved quietism. And this was understandable. Denied full access to the universities, refused any part in political life, with no possibility of public office and restricted in their entrance to the professions – notably law – their world was increasingly confined to the narrow circle of a carefully proscribed social and religious environment. They were glad to be left in peace.[30]

But a new era was dawning. The French Revolution of 1789 with its resulting flood of French Catholic refugees from across the Channel,[31] together with a more politically tolerant stance on the part of the government, produced an atmosphere in which centuries-old restrictions could be removed. The Relief Acts of 1791 and 1793 were harbingers of the much more comprehensive Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Freedom, however, did not bring fervour. With bonds removed, the Catholic body remained

for some time semi-paralysed.[32] The 'old Catholics' maintained a sense of reserve and privacy concerning their cherished religion. But not for long.

One factor contributing to Mena's faith which must not be overlooked was the strong and pervasive reaction to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment's rationalism, with its emphasis upon science and its optimism concerning the power of reason.[33] In the nineteenth century many began to feel that this emphasis had become sterile and left no place for 'reasons of the heart'. During the period in which Mena's life was being shaped, the world of intellect entered a period known as Romanticism. The importance of Nature, feeling, imagination, art and beauty dominated. In England, Wordsworth and Coleridge stressed a religion of Nature, and Walter Scott, with his poetry and novels of mediaeval chivalry, captured the imagination of a new generation, profoundly affecting religious thought and especially, among some, Catholic thought.

From an unexpected quarter with distinctly disturbing implications there emerged a small group of enthusiastic converts who were determined to bring England back to the Catholic fold. Their leader, Mena's father, was Ambrose Lisle March Phillipps, whose conversion took place exactly twenty years *before* that of the more famous Newman. When few English Catholics understood the significance of Newman's first *Tract for the Times* published in September 1833, Phillipps and his friend George Spencer recognised its importance and persuaded Lord Shrewsbury and the architect Augustus Pugin that 'a new religious force had come to life'.[34] It was also Phillipps who, in 1841, persuaded Dr (later Cardinal) Wiseman to make his first open appeal to the Oxford men whose leader was Newman. Thus, while the latter was still a devout, though troubled, Anglican, Phillipps had already gathered around him a group – converts like himself – whose enthusiasm matched his own: Kenelm Digby, Augustus Welby Pugin and

the Honourable George Spencer. They were on fire to restore the 'ancient faith'. A modern diluted form simply would not do. They demanded a renewal of the rich tapestry of high mediaeval Catholicism with Gregorian chant[35] (Pugin insisted on spelling it cha*u*nt) and rood screens,[36] and the old liturgical forms with vestments to match. Temperamentally, these 'new Catholics' were far removed from the loyal but low-profile Catholic gentry whose recusant forebears had kept the faith alive across three centuries. Conflict was inevitable. One of the key centres of discussion, and dispute, as well as fervent propagation of the faith was the home of Ambrose Lisle March Phillipps.

When Ambrose married Laura Mary Clifford, his father settled £1,200 per annum on the newlyweds and built them a fine residence in Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire, just a quarter of a mile from the ruins of the ancient thirteenth-century Grace Dieu Abbey. From it their home took its name,[37] meaning 'God's grace'. Rising again after 700 years, it was a vivid symbol of the old faith with a new nineteenth-century face.