INTRODUCTION:
PERFORMING A PUBLIC LIFE

‘Baby determined to hold her head up in the world’ Charlotte Carmichael Stopes (1840-1929) wrote of her infant daughter in her diary of Marie’s early intellectual development.¹ A first-time mother of undaunted maturity at forty years of age, Charlotte may have been projecting her own desires onto her daughter, but her 1881 observation was prophetic. As a sex educationalist and birth control advocate, Marie Stopes (1880-1958) was to become one of the most prominent women of the twentieth century. Embracing the access to higher education for women, made possible by Victorian activists like her mother, in turn Marie was part of the vanguard of early twentieth-century social change. As the figurehead of a sustained and far-reaching birth control campaign she significantly expanded choice and opportunity for women. Ultimately, both Charlotte and Marie Stopes gained public recognition for their achievements as writers, reformers and scholars, although in Charlotte’s case acknowledgement was hard won.

Written as a biography of two interconnected lives, this book explores the ways in which women writers, scholars and social reformers entered the public cultural sphere of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and reshaped the attitudes of their time. Their ideas were contested, even dismissed as the inconsequential and stereotypical utterances of repressed blue-stockings eccentrics,² or in terms of the ‘threatening otherness’ of female desire.³ At the same time, as this biography will show, Charlotte and Marie Stopes each drew widespread attention for their work. Their adroitness with techniques of public performance, combined with remarkable personal persistence, helped them to succeed in publishing and promoting their writings. In very different ways they both created controversy and recruited the popularity of drama and the theatre to promote their causes. Their achievements were partly driven by the competitiveness and affection between them, and by the recognition that social and cultural change for women could only be effected through active participation in public cultural and political
debates. In each case, however, it was a problematical success. Attacked or dismissed in their own time by those who disagreed with them, many later accounts of both women have been partial, distorted or gendered; representing them in terms of neurosis or immorality rather than in terms of academic achievement or social benefit. This work will discuss these accounts and aim to reframe them in terms of their contributions as public writers, academics and social activists.

The theatre of public opinion was a crucial field of operation for early twentieth century writers and reformers, but debates about social responsibility and change were, of course, also carried out in the actual theatres of the time. Charlotte and Marie Stopes both pursued specific interests in drama and performance. Marie’s involvement in the theatre was more direct. While Charlotte assumed the role of Shakespearean critic and public educator her daughter saw the theatre as a vehicle for promoting social change. As an aspiring dramatist Marie promoted discussion about the sexual knowledge and reproductive choice for women through her plays. Only one of these, *Our Ostriches* (1923-1924), was successfully staged as a professional West End production in London but six of her dramatic works were reached the public in book form. The press attention that Marie Stopes attracted for her work in the realm of the theatre and beyond enabled her seemingly outlandish ideas to become gradually accepted within mainstream, middle class British society.

**Public Personae: Charlotte and Marie Stopes**

History has not been kind to Charlotte Stopes. Her achievements as a scholar and activists have been overshadowed by her reputation as the marginally influential mother of a famous and controversial daughter. Yet Charlotte made significant contributions to the history of British drama and to the women’s emancipation movement. This book shifts the perspective, exploring the life and work of both Charlotte and Marie Stopes in the context of their relationship. Parodied in *Punch* as one of the quintessential New Women of the 1880s and 1890s, Charlotte Carmichael was the first woman in Scotland to take a university qualification. She gained a Certificate in Arts with first class honours.
from the University of Edinburgh in 1878, the highest qualification then available to a female student.⁶ Women had by then entered the fields of writing and popular journalism in large numbers, but inclusion within the rigid enclaves of academe remained harder to attain. Charlotte worked as a teacher and wrote stories for children through the 1870s.⁷ She married the brewer, engineer and scientist Henry Stopes in her late thirties and raised two daughters,⁸ continuing with her intellectual and political pursuits after her marriage.

Charlotte’s voice was first heard in 1889 when she attracted widespread press attention as an advocate for dress reform after staging a program coup at the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. With the support of a group of Rational Dress activists, and without the imprimatur of the conference organizers, she commandeered a venue and recruited an audience of British Association members to hear a panel discussion, which included Charlotte herself on the ‘Psychological and Physiological Aspects of Women’s Dress’.⁹ Well over a hundred newspapers reported the event, around the nation and abroad.¹⁰

She went on to write a radical history of women as public leaders and citizens in Britain and appeared regularly for over two decades on the campaign platforms of women’s suffrage reform. Charlotte became a widely published Shakespearean expert. Her first book, *The Bacon/Shakespeare Question*, came out in 1888; a refutation of the theory that Francis Bacon was the actual author of William Shakespeare's plays.¹¹ She believed that performances of Shakespeare’s plays should take account of their historical context and the language in which they were written, and not be abridged or distorted by an excess of Victorian theatrical grandeur; a view shared by younger theatre directors of the time, such as William Poel. Charlotte was also a friend of Emma Cons who helped to popularize performances of Shakespeare’s plays for working people at the Royal Victoria Hall in London, better known as the ‘Old Vic’.¹² As a ‘famous Shakespearean authority’,¹³ Charlotte produced nine scholarly studies on Shakespearean themes and numerous articles for journals such as the *Athenaeum*. She was awarded the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize by the British Academy in 1916. It was her study of the role of women as citizens
and leaders in British history,\textsuperscript{14} which proved the most popular and influential of her numerous publications.

Largely regardless of her many achievements, Charlotte’s later-life reputation as an eccentric dress-reformer and elderly acerbic blue-stocking has defined her legacy. Shakespearean aficionado Sir George Greenwood’s 1925 discussion of the controversy surrounding the Droeshout engraving, patronizes her as an ‘ardent and orthodox worshipper at the Stratfordian shrine...!’\textsuperscript{15} The American literary scholar Samuel Schoenbaum referred to her as a ‘Hampstead matron’.\textsuperscript{16} Two years after her death, in 1931, Boas assured his readers that despite her heroic public endeavours, ‘Mrs Stopes neglected none of the domestic duties.’\textsuperscript{17} Decades later Charlotte had not shrugged off her fusty Victorian lady’s mantle, even in the context of feminist historical recovery, described as eccentric, sexually repressed and as an embarrassment to her daughter.

Any biographical study of Charlotte Carmichael Stopes must acknowledge the references given in her famous daughter’s twentieth-century biographers. Aylmer Maude’s flattering \textit{Authorized Biography of Marie Stopes} was the first of these. A close friend of the subject his account perhaps most closely reflects Marie’s subjective view of her mother as an exemplar of Victorian religious repression.\textsuperscript{18} Keith Briant’s \textit{Passionate Paradox} was published in 1962, a by-product of his youthful flirtation with Marie in 1938, at the time of his editorship of the literary magazine \textit{Isis}. A sympathetic account, Briant portrays Charlotte as the survivor of her husband’s preoccupations and obsessions.\textsuperscript{19} Ruth Hall’s \textit{Passionate Crusader}, written more than a decade later, depicts Charlotte as a ‘born old maid’, distant towards Marie and preoccupied with her feminist and literary interests, repelled by Henry’s physical ardour and afflicted with the shame of her Victorian religious upbringing.\textsuperscript{20} June Rose presents a more balanced portrait of her subject and a kinder view of Charlotte but rehearses the view that Marie’s exaggerated sense of self was a construct of her peculiar childhood.\textsuperscript{21} Following the temper of Marie’s biographers, one reference work of feminist history declares that Charlotte ‘never ceased to find sex repellent, and inculcated guilt in her daughter.’\textsuperscript{22} Yet more recently, William Garrett goes so far as to remark that Charlotte was ‘a psychological burden to her illustrious daughter
– jealous of her fame, greedy for her wealth, endlessly critical’, reflecting Ruth Hall’s view that Charlotte was frequently didactic rather than affectionate with her eldest daughter.

In these portraits, Charlotte Stopes is rarely shown as a ground-breaking historian, successful freelance writer or passionate turn-of-the-century emancipationist, although arguably she was all of these things. Her endeavours are instead obscured by conventional post-Victorian representations of the obsessive, unfeminine intellectual woman, with only a handful of references by feminist historians to lighten the view.

As this book will argue, key factors about Charlotte’s situation have been overlooked in earlier accounts. Through the 1890s, the Stopes family fell increasingly into debt and Charlotte’s efforts to achieve publication and foster their daughter’s education was essential to her family’s survival. The interpersonal distance that developed between Charlotte and her husband Henry was complex, fuelled by anxiety about sexual consequences without reliable birth control as much as by sexual distaste. In Chapters One, Two, Three and Five I give attention to her work as an advocate for female higher education, feminist historian and Shakespearean scholar. I provide an account of her education and early activism, her marriage, her part in the popularisation of the women’s suffrage movement in Britain and her eventual, if partial, recognition as a Shakespearean scholar.

In her conclusion to *British Freewomen* Charlotte wrote of the feminist movement as she might have written of herself: ‘if they have not yet reached the Promised Land they can clearly see it ahead, and they know the way to get there’. Although she embarked on the journey toward female emancipation, however, she never quite reached her destination. She continued working well into the twentieth century as a feminist activist, Shakespearean scholar and writer. Her recognition in these fields culminated during the first two decades of the twentieth century, when she was in her sixties and seventies, overlapping with her daughter’s emergence as a significant public figure in Britain. Although she was never awarded a full university degree, she was proud that her
daughter could gain two doctoral qualifications. Shortly before her death, the legislation of the equal vote was passed in the British parliament in 1928.26

One of the most prominent women of the early-mid twentieth-century, Marie Stopes established herself as a pioneer at an early age. She is best known as a contraception advocate, sex-educator and, more troublingly, as an advocate of eugenics. She began her academic career as a palaeobotanist and became an internationally celebrated social reformer, founding health clinics around the world. By the age of twenty five she had already become a figure of popular interest: recognized as an outstanding palaeobotanist, adventure traveller in remote East Asia and model of feminine achievement. When Charlotte attended a women’s suffrage movement demonstration in Edinburgh during 1905 her friend Sarah Mair spoke on the topic of ‘Suffrage in Regard to Education’ and concluded, ‘I feel sure you would like to know that the daughter of Mrs Stopes, whom you all know, is now assistant lecturer in Botany in Owens College Manchester’.27 Marie wrote three books based on her experience of living in Japan where she carried out palaeobotanical research during 1908 and 1909. In 1916 she dissolved her first marriage to the Canadian geneticist Reginald Gates on the grounds that she was still a virgin after three years of marriage.28

Her scientific research was well-respected, but her books on sex, marriage and parenting brought Marie Stopes phenomenal international success. They also drew sustained enmity from those who disagreed with her views. She courted controversy, not least through her writings on sexuality, which included pamphlets, handbooks and drama. When one of Marie’s plays, Vectia (1926), was banned from a West End theatre on the grounds that it dealt too frankly with scandalous sexual themes, she attacked censorship and promoted her cause by publishing the play in book form with a long, polemical preface.29 As Sos Eltis observes with reference to women and early twentieth century drama, ‘few subjects were as divisive as that of sexual morality’ even though a surprising number of plays dealt with female sexuality at this time.30 Almost no other playwright, however, confronted issues of male sexual inadequacy and female desire as directly as Marie Stopes. As well as plays which addressed a variety of social themes, Marie
published volumes of poetry and a novel, *Love's Creation*, in which Virginia Woolf sought in vain for the culmination of a tradition of feminist writing. ³¹ For all Marie’s scandalous frankness about sex, *Love’s Creation* was thoroughly imbued with the gendered conventions of romance fiction. ³²

The events of Marie Stopes’s life have been well-documented through biographies and scholarly investigations. Some of her views are now regarded as singular, even pernicious. In concert with many political leaders, intellectuals and scientists of the day, as Donald Childs points out,³³ she participated in the Eugenics movement. Her use of Eugenist rhetoric in her advocacy of birth control continues to shadow discussions about her work as a social reformer.³⁴ While the proliferation of references to her name in the public sphere, before and after her death, reflects a continuing process of re-invention with respect to her public persona. This has intensified since the advent of astonishingly fervent internet debates about her inclusion in a series of postage stamps by Britain’s Royal Mail.³⁵ As a popular writer and educator, however, her work placed her at the forefront of powerful transformative improvements in women’s daily lives.

This book considers the role of women in the public culture of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain. In giving an account of the life and work of Charlotte and Marie Stopes, it sets out first to introduce an important voice left unheard for almost a century and second to give new perspective to a perhaps misunderstood daughter. This account offers a reconsideration of some of the assumptions of earlier writers, exploring the way in which Marie’s identification as a figure of sexual and reproductive reform has discursively framed the treatment of her early years. Also addressed will be the public attention that accompanied Marie’s highly performative public appearances – on the town hall platform, in the courts, the press, and via the theatre – as an advocate of sex education and contraception as a reflection of the extraordinary level of recognition and influence that she was able to achieve. Chapters Three, Four, Six and Seven of this work address Marie’s educational development, her relationship with Charlotte, first efforts as a writer, the impact of her difficult first marriage and subsequent relationships on her career. Central to this aspect of the project is an understanding of Marie Stopes’s
contradictory contribution to early twentieth century discourses of sexuality and gender identity, presenting stereotypical women and situations in her drama, yet striving for the validation of women's desire. Equally important are her changing attitude to women’s suffrage and suggested tensions within her private and public opinions and beliefs. Her evolving contribution towards social change will be explored, as will her interest in the theatre as a strategy to legitimize female desire and to promote contraception and reproductive choice for women.

‘Every Woman’s Chief Passion’

A biographical study of Charlotte and Marie Stopes offers a rich opportunity to explore changing representations of gender and the ways in which women both rehearsed and contested established practices and identity traditions in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain. Through the lives and work of Charlotte and Marie Stopes, this book explores evolving expressions of feminine identity within the public sphere of this period. It contends that women working as scholars and activists succeeded against the prevailing views of their time through persistent and sustained engagement in a changing public field. More specifically, it considers the ways in which these two remarkable women were able to employ techniques of public performance as a means of producing social and cultural change.

The theme of public performativity will be advanced with reference to the emerging role of women in social life, which evolved out of mid-Victorian feminist advocacy and the cultural negotiations surrounding the identity politics of late-Victorian culture. This will be advanced, in part, through the theatre as a medium for social, cultural and political dialogue. It will also be addressed in terms of other modes of public interjection and spectacle which set out to contest accepted views, including speech-making, the courts and the periodical press.

Both Charlotte and Marie Stopes made incursions within the official public culture of their time was successful in unsettling the terms of current discourse. The engagement by an interlocutor with the voice of authority may be related to the notion of ‘heteroglossia’.
This idea is employed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his studies of narrative to show where the textual voice of authority is contested through dialogue or mediated by minor characters, or non-authoritative speakers. Bakhtin also uses the term ‘dialogical’ to explain a similar process of inter-subjectivity in the linguistic production of meaning. Language is not neutral and impersonal, he writes: ‘rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions.’ Voices of alterity or marginal opinions uttered within the theatre of public opinion may invite or provoke a dialogue amongst citizens, including with figures of authority and power. Through this form of discourse, he suggests, social values and practices may be gradually transformed. In the story of Charlotte and Marie Stopes, dialogism offers a key point of reference for how these two women entered a highly gendered public sphere, addressed the issues that concerned them, influenced social change, and were in their turn both accepted and subsequently challenged as authoritative voices.

The concept of the public sphere has been elaborated by Jurgen Habermas as a feature of advanced civil societies in which a majority middle-class, ‘set free from productive labour’, has attained enough leisure and education to participate in social issues and debates of common concern. It is represented in Habermas’ writings as a space within which citizens gather to converse about the issues of the day in a free and unrestricted fashion, either literally, as in the town square, or through various kinds of publication. The notion of the public sphere thus offers a fruitful approach to the study of cultural and social change in Britain during the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, albeit with some qualifications. Michael Gardiner argues, however, that the dualism of the Habermasian public sphere excludes ‘particular realms of social activity and forms of discourse’ and is unable to account for exclusions and discriminations such as those of gender, class, geography, economy, religion or cultural perspective. It is Bakhtin, Gardiner suggests, who calls into question the demarcations of social engagement, ‘as fluid, permeable and always contested, and alerts us to the power relations that are involved in any such exercise of boundary maintenance.’ Dialogism entails an acceptance of difference, regarding all social communication as a kind of performance, whether oral or textual, enacted on the metaphorical boards of a public stage where established meanings, including those attached to the gendered voice and the
reproductive body, are engaged by a constant process of assertion, negotiation and contest.

To the extent that Victorian women could participate actively in the public sphere of their day, they did so: not as professionals within the systems of power – the judiciary, the parliament or the university – but as readers, writers, editors and with increasing public prominence, as public speakers, lobbyists and reformers. By the early twentieth century, when Marie Stopes began her career as a scientist, women were beginning to enter higher education and the professions. They still did not have equal voting rights with men or access to economic and cultural capital. Women achieved cultural and political change by speaking up against the policies and attitudes that constrained them, through the press, on the streets and in the parliament. This was a partial, piecemeal and seemingly lengthy process of partial gains and losses which nevertheless produced substantive transformations in how women could and did engage as citizens.

About this book

The central impetus of this work is to provide a narrative account of the lives and work of Charlotte and Marie Stopes in the context of their participation in relevant historical and social developments. The book therefore explores the interplay between their public achievements and personal experiences with reference to the politics of gender, performance and the public stage in late-Victorian and early twentieth-century Britain. While it proceeds in roughly chronological order, some time shifts and overlaps are necessary for the playing out of individual strands within the broader narrative and to ensure thematic coherence within chapters. Because my key protagonists share the same last name, for the most part they will be identified within the body of the work by their first names.

This is the first substantial biographical account of Charlotte Carmichael Stopes. For that reason I have provided information about her formative years and her marriage, never previously published, as a way of preparing the ground for an examination of her later
achievements and her influence upon her much more famous daughter. A considerable body of work already exists about the life and work of Marie Stopes. I have chosen to approach my study through the perspective of her conflicted relationship with her mother and their common ground as social change pioneers. The book therefore concludes with Charlotte’s death in February 1929, although her daughter lived – as always colourfully and controversially - for another thirty years.

A few weeks before the manuscript of this book was due to be submitted to its publisher, Marie’s son, Harry Stopes-Roe, wrote to tell me that a box had been found in a corner of his attic which he thought would interest me. The box contained 300 letters, mostly written to Charlotte Carmichael Stopes between 1880 and 1926. This posed a common researcher’s dilemma. I had already undertaken months of research in British and Australian archives, including two previous visits to the Stopes-Roe family archive. I was then in Australia, in the middle of a busy teaching semester. But, what if some crucial piece of information was held in that mysterious cache of unread letters that I now had the chance to discover? I found someone who could make copies of the letters for me and tried not to clench my teeth while I waited for them to arrive. As it turned out, there was no single revelation or contradictory evidence to unearth, although I did find proof for one or two speculative forays. My strongest impression from this new cache of letters, however, was the affectionate regard in which Charlotte Carmichael Stopes was held by so many of her prominent and long-standing correspondents, the scope of her engagement in the public culture of her time and the care that her daughter, Marie Stopes, took to preserve the evidence of her mother’s legacy.


26 Parliamentary Archives, United Kingdom, Representation of the People Act (Equal Franchise) HL/PO/PU/1/1928/18&19G5c12, 1928.

27 CCS to MCS, BL MS Add. 58449, f. 280, 22 October 1905.


42 Gardiner, p. 30.