



**“The most accomplished liar in literature”?
Uncovering Marie Corelli’s Hidden Early Life**

Joanna Turner

Abstract

This article presents newly uncovered archival materials which necessitate a rewriting of the early life of Marie Corelli. The many biographies on her are focussed on rumours surrounding Corelli being illegitimate, her eccentricities, and the exposure of lies she told about her age. The most recent biographies, the latest of which was published in 1999, reformulated what had already been written about her and additionally employed analogue genealogical research methods to investigate Corelli’s parentage. They created an account of Corelli’s life which has been subsumed into twenty-first century scholarship. However, the digitisation of genealogical records, as well as of nineteenth and twentieth-century newspapers, has enabled research which renders the twentieth-century biographers’ findings inaccurate and incomplete. This article uncovers Corelli’s working-class origins; it reveals that she spent a lengthy period in America; it finds the likely location of the convent school she attended; and details that she had a fuller performing career than previously understood. It finds truth in the stories that Corelli told about herself, forcing a re-evaluation of her character and her motivation for the concealment of her early life, paving the way for future study.

Keywords

Marie Corelli; class; biography; self-fashioning; genealogy; digital humanities; newspaper archives; acting.

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“The most accomplished liar in literature”? Uncovering Marie Corelli’s Hidden Early Life

Joanna Turner

For the longest time, the popular Victorian and Edwardian author Marie Corelli (c.1855-1924) has been viewed through the lens of falsehood. Be it kindly academic scrutiny of the “self-fashioning” of her authorial personality (Scott 2019) or as a feature of a biographical narrative arc, where her deceit is exposed as part of a wider project to cast her as eccentric and “perhaps the most accomplished liar in literature” (Masters 1978: 5), Corelli fascinates because she obfuscates. Words like *Legend* (Bigland 1953), *Mysterious* (Ransom 1999), and *Extraordinary* (Masters) accompany her name in the titles of some of the eight biographies written about her, all of which were produced during the course of the twentieth century. Her biographers, whilst exploring various theories about her origins and shadowy early years, have ultimately settled on a narrative which appears to favour Corelli’s own representations of her upbringing. Her self-penned entries within twentieth-century society directories inform readers that she wished to be perceived as being “of mingled Italian and Scotch (Highland) parentage and connections, adopted in infancy by Charles Mackay, the well-known song writer and litterateur, and brought up during childhood in England” (*Who’s Who* 1904: 328) and that she was “educated in a French convent and studied for a musical career” (*Who’s Who* 1912: 313).¹ Biographers have accepted this sparse history, albeit largely discounting Corelli’s Italian heritage as fabricated. Works completed after Corelli’s death in 1924 imply that native Scotsman, Mackay, was probably her birth father, with the adoption tale covering for her illegitimacy. The Rev. Stuart-Scott observed in 1955: “better be the ‘adopted’ daughter of Charles Mackay than his by-blow...” (85), noting that Corelli’s suppression of the details of her early life was easily explained by a wish to avoid being tainted by the scandal of illegitimacy, given the descending levels of respectability in the Victorian era regarding origins. Stuart-Scott’s opinion has certainly influenced succeeding biographers in how they have pieced together Corelli’s early years from her own accounts and the little they could discover about her using analogue

¹ Since 1897, *Who’s Who* entries have been informed by responses to questionnaires. Corelli would have provided the content for her entry, enabling her to control the narrative of her early life. See <https://www.ukwhoswho.com/page/about>. Thanks go to Nick Freeman for suggesting *Who’s Who* as a resource early in my research process.

genealogical research methods. But what if the adopted Corelli was aware of gossip around Mackay being her birth father, and accepted the speculation because it acted as a further veil of respectability over her real origins? What if there was more at stake for her reputation than her being the product of a middle-class dalliance? What if her obfuscation of her early years, infamous lies about her age, and ferocious control of her public image concealed something of which she was ashamed?

My research reveals that Marie Corelli had, in fact, working-class origins. It challenges theories established within biographies and, using digitised genealogical and newspaper archives, it gives credence to a previously underrated line of enquiry. Corelli has been located in official records ten years earlier than previously proven. A gap in her history, which has been compressed in the biographies, has been filled – finding grains of truth in what she said about herself at later points in her life. This article begins with the re-examination of a key piece of documentary evidence and works to demonstrate how and why this re-evaluation of Corelli's early life is urgent and necessary. The uncovering of Corelli's working-class background offers scholars a new way to think about her later life and work, prompting reconsideration of her reasons for the concealment of her early years and the fierce protection she exercised over her public persona. Furthermore, this new research has confirmed a previously suspected residency in America; discovered the likely location of her school; and found new information about Corelli's performing career which has previously been alluded to as merely short-lived with little acclaim (Masters 1978: 49). Corelli's concealment of these periods of her life is revealed within this article to be part of a wider strategy of obfuscation designed to deter any prying eyes from looking further back into her history and happening upon the truth of her humble origins. She was desperate to be thought of as cultured and refined and thrived off her upper-class and regal connections (7-11). Corelli may very well have lied about herself, but it is important to understand what she was truly concealing, and her motivations for doing so. The creation of an authorial persona and the shaping of her life-story ensured that, despite rumour and speculation continuing for nearly a century after her death, Corelli's suppression of her working-class beginnings and early life has held sway, allowing it to remain hidden until now. It is time for us to get to know her better.

The Established Story of Marie Corelli's Early Life

On 27 April 1855, Isabella Mary Mills was born to Mary Mills in the London district of Turnham Green (Ransom 1999: 225 and Record 1).² Corelli's lawyers and her life-companion were later convinced that the mother was Mary Elizabeth Mills, widow, the mistress of editor and writer Charles Mackay, and that Isabella was their illegitimate daughter (Masters 1978: 313). In 1861, just over a year after his first wife died, Charles Mackay married Mary Elizabeth Mills (Record 2). It is also assumed that, upon their marriage, Mackay adopted the child he had fathered illegitimately, renaming her using the affectionate Scottish diminutive of Mary, 'Minnie' (Ransom 1999: 225). Adoption was then not the legal process it is now, with the assumption of an adopted parent's name enough to effect the change. The early years of Minnie Mackay's life and whereabouts are classified by biographers as a mystery. After the 1861 marriage, the Mackay family (Charles, Mary Elizabeth, and Minnie), are assumed to have lived mostly in Fern Dell, near Box Hill in Surrey, apart from a mooted short spell abroad that may have taken place for twenty months between 1862-3, during which Mackay had a journalistic post to cover the American Civil War (Ransom 1999: 11-13).

² An appendix to this article contains genealogical records used, as located via ancestry.co.uk.

In 1871 Minnie Mackay appears in the census as a sixteen-year-old scholar (Record 3). At some point before this it is believed that she attended a French convent. This has been assumed to have occurred for an indeterminate period between 1866-70 (Ransom 1999: 14). Her childhood education was sporadic, provided by a succession of governesses and through her extensive unsupervised reading from Charles Mackay's reportedly comprehensive library (18). Corelli later stated that she had received musical training (*Who's Who* 1912: 313). Whether this was in the convent, or elsewhere, has not been determined. Mary Elizabeth Mackay died in 1876 (Record 4), and there is very little information about her, or her relationship with her adopted daughter Isabella/ Mary/ Minnie (Ransom 1999: 22). Soon after the death, Minnie's childhood friend, Bertha Van de Vyver, came to stay with the Mackays. The reason for her presence in the house is unknown, but it was most likely to help the family. From that moment Vyver never left, remaining a devoted companion to the woman who would become Marie Corelli throughout her life (22). Biographers state that Minnie Mackay tried her hand as an improvisational concert pianist under the name "Signorina Marie di Corelli" in 1884 (Vyver 1930: 50, quoted in Ransom 1999: 26), with the Signorina's first significant piece of writing (on Margate's 'Shell Grotto' tourist attraction) published in *Temple Bar Magazine* in 1885 (52). Minnie Mackay's first novel, written as Marie Corelli, was *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886).

Who Was Marie Corelli?

With eight biographies on Corelli written over the course of a century (Carr 1901; Coates and Warren Bell 1903; Vyver 1930; Bullock 1940; Bigland 1953; Stuart-Scott 1955; Masters 1978; Ransom 1999) it would initially appear foolhardy to embark upon another investigation of her life. Indeed, in 2012, Julia Kuehn warned scholars against taking further approaches of this kind to Corelli, commenting that, "the positivistic search for answers in biography and personality has been exhausted" and, in that moment, she was right (581). The difficulty lies in whether the understanding we have of Corelli now is built upon strong foundations. Current scholarship has been constructed upon layers of twentieth-century biography, with the most recent biographer, Teresa Ransom, using the sparse results of analogue genealogical research methods to craft a narrative of mystery (1999: 226-31). The only way to test the robustness of established biography is to re-examine it, and, in so doing, one thread of Corelli mystery can be definitively unpicked.

New digital research proves that she was not born as Isabella Mary Mills, as explored in Masters (1978: 313) and Ransom (1999: 225). That particular child was the victim of the all-too-familiar Victorian narrative and passed away at the age of eight months in the parish in which she was baptised: she was never destined to become Marie Corelli (Record 5). Although treated with suspicion by biographers, the birth of Isabella Mary Mills has influenced them in assigning a birth-year of 1855 to Corelli, leading them to reason that she was probably born illegitimately to the people who raised her. Masters goes as far as to suggest that Charles Mackay was "hiding behind an alias" of "Charles Brown" at Isabella Mary Mills's baptism, proposing that this was done to cover for illegitimacy – without contemplating that this was simply the wrong child (1978: 313). Once this birth is removed from consideration, and the established narrative disrupted, it becomes necessary to recommence the search for the birth of a child to Mackay and Mills to ascertain if there is some truth in them being Corelli's birth parents. The Corelli biography most informed by direct knowledge of her personal life was written in 1930 by her life-companion, Vyver, and supported the story that she was the product of Mackay and Mills's "romantic love union" (39), thus validating this investigation. Now,

search fields on genealogical websites that can be opened to up to ten years either side of an assumed birth year of 1855, along with the ability to search digitised records for permutations of all possible surnames and forenames (including just starting letters appended with an asterisk) and the opportunity to search internationally, have made it possible to determine that a child of Mackay and/ or Mills is nowhere to be found.

The online census of 1861 helps to resolve mysteries perpetuated by Ransom. Firstly, Charles Mackay is framed as having an “other address” (1999: 230). This is in addition to his census entry of 18 Avenue Road in Marylebone (Record 6). By locating him on Post Office records (229-30), Ransom decides that Mackay resided at this alternative home in 1859 and at times during the 1860s. She is unable to locate the pages of the 1861 census relating to this “other address,” insinuating possible interference in official records for the purpose of hiding a young (and illegitimate) Corelli from investigation (230). It transpires that Mackay’s “other address” was in the legal district, in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and therefore set up for business and correspondence (Record 7). The same address was used by architects and solicitors. As no one resided there, the address was exempt from the census: there was no mysterious cover-up. As far as Corelli is concerned, the second mystery resolved by the 1861 census is part of the same theory of concealment that Ransom cultivates. Mackay and Mills had been married in the February of that year (with the census date being 7 April 1861), and the couple are not listed as living together at Avenue Road. Ransom’s theory is that they were probably living apart due to Mackay fulfilling mourning conventions after the death of his first wife at the end of 1859, but she was not able to locate Mary Elizabeth Mills within the returns (230-1). Thirty-five-year-old charwoman, Mary Mackay, has now been found; she was living two streets away from Avenue Road and her new husband, Charles Mackay, in Williams Cottages, Marylebone (Record 8). There is additional information within the census suggesting another reason for their separate living arrangements – residing with the new Mrs Mackay is four-year-old Mary Mackay. The return for the Williams Cottages address is convincing evidence that this is a young Corelli, given the proximity to Charles Mackay and the fact that this child does not appear again on subsequent censuses, or in death, baptism, or birth records. The inaccuracy of the recorded ages on the entry, and Corelli’s adoptive mother’s Spanish nationality (Record 3) being recorded as Scottish, may be explained by reference to Mary Elizabeth Mills’s lack of education (Masters 1999: 19) and the likelihood of a returning officer completing the entry on her behalf, based on observation (Jenkinson 2002: 1). Corelli appeared to be younger than her years for much of her life and had a tiny stature (Ransom 1999: 4), and her adoptive mother would have been assumed to be Scottish. The 1871 guide for enumerators states that they may obtain information about household occupants from “another competent person” in the vicinity (“Instructions” 1871: 26, 3b), meaning residents did not even have to be present for the completion of the return. It appears that Ransom’s theory that Mackay installed his wife and child near to him was correct. Little Mary Mackay is, in all probability, Marie Corelli as a child. But she appears to be undetectable before this point. It is now worth turning to the other theories circulated about Corelli’s origins in the twentieth century.

Ransom toys with the idea that Corelli could have been Mackay’s granddaughter by his natural daughter who died in Italy (fulfilling the *Who’s Who* assertion of Italian and Scotch heritage). This supposition is invalidated by searching the *British Newspaper Archive* database. Rosa Jane Mackay died “after a few days’ illness” in 1859, rather than in 1855 from the childbirth-related issues that Ransom insinuates. This is proven by a *Times* obituary (“Deaths” 1859: 2). A signed painting gifted to Corelli by the Queen of Italy is used by Ransom to persuade her readers as to Corelli’s potentially aristocratic Italian forebears (1999: 231). This was not an heirloom, but instead was sent to the author in 1887 in reciprocation for Corelli sending over a complimentary copy of her first novel. Corelli wrote about it in an article for

The Idler (1894: 246). Ransom finds evidence for her ‘concealed granddaughter’ theory in one of Charles Mackay’s draft poems. A crossed-out line including a “daughter’s daughter” was replaced with a reference to a “maiden” (1999: 228-9) but Ransom overlooks the simile of “like” which precedes the phrase. Corelli stated in an interview that she reminded her adoptive father of the girl he lost (Adcock 1909: 61). The line was almost certainly crossed out for scansion rather than for Corelli’s protection: reading Mackay’s poetry against his song writing, it becomes clear that adherence to metre was a feature across his work. Where layers of mystery abound in twentieth century biography, re-examining them with fresh eyes has permanently uncovered some of the mystery surrounding Corelli. Moreover, it is now possible to identify the most probable explanation from all the stories of her origins.

Caroline Cody

Corelli was, in all likelihood, born as Caroline Cody on 1 May 1854, despite this theory being mooted and rejected by biographers. Ransom devotes no more than six lines to the idea, stating that it is “suspect” (1999: 206), and Masters, in less than a page, speculates that the Cody “association” likely originated in them providing refuge for Charles Mackay and Mary Elizabeth Mills’s illegitimate child (1978: 312).³ The story that Corelli began her life as Caroline Cody was initially reported in the *Daily News* after her death in 1924, and was one of several different accounts of her origins circulated in the wider press at the time: it suggested that Corelli was born as Caroline to Thomas and Harriet Cody, a labourer and charwoman residing in Marylebone, London (“Who was Marie Corelli?” 1924: 1). The story originated from Corelli’s self-declared niece “Miss Cody” (Masters 1978: 312), who was prepared to swear an affidavit that she was a relative and that her family was in regular contact with the author until the late 1880s:

The second wife of the late Dr Charles Mackay, the famous songwriter, was a personal friend of Marie Corelli’s mother, and begged to adopt the child. The mother agreed, and Caroline went to live with the songwriter and his wife [Mary Elizabeth Mills] when she was five years old, and until she became famous with her first novel, used to frequently visit her parents.

(“Who was Marie Corelli?” 1)

So very little was known of Mills at the time of Corelli’s death, apart from her being “an imperfectly educated person” assumed to have met Mackay through his employing her (“New Light” 1924: 2). Knowing now of her 1861 occupation as a charwoman, living in the same vicinity as Harriet Cody and likely working in the same circles, the *Daily News* story becomes credible. Mills’s living arrangements (in Williams Cottages) prior to, and just after her marriage to Mackay should also be considered, along with the fact that, by 1860, Mills was approaching forty without a child of her own. Her adoption of a five-year-old at this time, whilst anticipating her not-yet-permissible marriage to a man with a profession requiring periods away, seems plausible. It also fits with the fact that has only now come to light, that little Mary Mackay (as listed on the 1861 census) cannot be detected on official records for the first years of her life. The follow-up story in the *Daily News* produced Caroline Cody’s baptismal entry, revealing a birthday of 1 May, in line with what Corelli always stated about herself, with a birth year of 1854 (“Marie Corelli’s Secret,” 1924: 1). It appeared that Corelli could have been within days of reaching her seventieth birthday when she died and this is

³ This theory was established by Bullock (1940: 3, 8).

significant when considering established documentary evidence. A birthday of 1 May 1854 tallies with her being sixteen on the 1871 census, and it also corresponds with a much-cited letter sent to a publishing house by Corelli, wherein she declares herself to be nineteen in January 1874 (“To Blackwood’s”). It therefore seems highly plausible that Corelli was born as Caroline Cody in May 1854 and adopted and renamed Mary at the age of five by Mary Elizabeth Mills. Indeed, in one of her earliest interviews, Corelli told the *Ladies Home Journal* that she had been adopted “by the second wife of Dr Charles Mackay, the author” (McKenna 1895: 2).

Biographers speculate that the Cody family’s confessions of their being Corelli’s relatives reached her in her lifetime, pointing to the fact that the usually litigious Corelli never sought to quash any stories about her origins via the courts (Bullock 1940: 3, Masters 1978: 312). This reluctance could well have been because, in suing, the ordinarily guarded Corelli would have had to open herself up to public scrutiny. But it could have also pointed to her knowing the Codys’ story to be true, and a resulting fear about exposure of her working-class origins. New research reveals that, when Caroline was born, the Codys were living with their two children, Henry, six, and William, two (Record 9,10) after having suffered the loss of a second son, James, in 1852 at the age of two (Record 11). Another baby boy, Alfred, was born to them in 1855, just over a year after Caroline’s birth (Record 10). There is a gap before they extend their family in 1860 (when Caroline was six), with the birth of Sidney, followed by Frederick in 1863, and Eleanor in 1865 (Record 12). Could this later blossoming of the family have been the result of increased income resulting from a pecuniary adoption of Caroline around 1859? At that time, it must have been a considerable financial burden on the labourer and charwoman to have had four young children. The story of Mary Elizabeth Mills/ Mackay successfully begging to adopt from them seems even more credible if the financial considerations of the Cody family are brought into question. It would also explain why they would have been prepared to give up their less economically viable girl-child and retain their three surviving sons. Caroline Cody never appears in census or death records, and I have been able to trace all other Cody children within official documentation. Despite the untimely death of Caroline’s elder brother William in 1872 (Record 13), the family see a radical change in circumstances in the 1860s and 70s, with elder brother Henry able to emigrate across the Atlantic (Record 14); Alfred marrying in 1878 (Record 15); Sidney gaining a PhD then becoming a schoolmaster (Record 16); Frederick training as a civil servant (Record 17); and Eleanor marrying a bank clerk (Record 18). It is unquestionable that their fortunes as a family and class status rose substantially after 1860.

Most interesting of the other Cody children is the sad tale of eldest child, Henry. This has been unearthed via digital newspaper archives in the US, where Henry emigrated in 1871 before becoming naturalised as a citizen in 1903. After running his own business, but suffering a bankruptcy, Henry took his own life, a fact which was reported in the *New York Times* (“Miss Corelli’s Brother” 1906: 1). He had seemingly always described himself to neighbours as Corelli’s brother, and amongst his posthumous possessions a letter was found from Sidney, one of his younger siblings, confirming their relationship to the famous author. It gave Henry the news that Sidney had named his schoolhouse in Southsea after Corelli “in honour of our illustrious sister” (1). The *New York Times* approached Sidney to corroborate the brothers’ claims for a further article. Sidney stated of Henry, “why should he desire to claim a relationship with her unless she was his sister? How could it benefit him one way or the other?” (“Marie Corelli’s Origin” 1924: 6). It must be considered that the unearthed correspondence was personal; the information did not come via an interview or exposé, and there was no discernible benefit to Henry in making his assertions. Most touching is his grave, in Maple Grove cemetery, New York which bears the legend “Brother of Marie

Corelli the Novelist” (Record 19). This final claim upon her has a poignancy and earnestness that deserves critical attention.

Masters discovered that Charles Mackay had preserved a business letter from Thomas Cody which he had passed onto his adopted daughter. She had kept it secretly at her home where it remained until twenty years after her death (1978: 312). The letter was dismissed as evidence in a probate enquiry in 1944, so is not locatable. With the limited information available to him in the 1970s, Masters only briefly contemplates the possibility of Caroline Cody being Corelli before dismissing it as “conjecture” (312) and instead exploring the theory that she was Mackay’s illegitimate daughter (312-4). Ransom reports that there were nineteen applicants to what remained of the Corelli estate in 1944 who were denied (1999: 218).⁴ It was impossible to identify the applicants after the fact, as they were unsuccessful claimants, and Ransom does not speculate further on their identities. Considering later census data about the offspring of Sidney (Record 20) and Eleanor Cody (Record 18) and their children (assumed, as census data is sealed for 1930s and 1940s), it is possible to infer that Cody descendants were some of the applicants. They would, of course, have been refused, as Corelli’s will made clear her status was as an adopted child with no dependents (Bullock 1940: 275).

There are further clues to Corelli’s working-class background in her speaking voice. Eileen Bigland quotes Sir Sidney Colvin calling Corelli “a rather common little thing with a Cockney twang” (1953: 127), where Arthur Severn openly mocked Corelli’s pronunciation of owls as “ouwels” (Masters 1978: 262). Mrs Tom Kelly said Corelli’s voice was “very winning, and her enunciation distinct and refined” (1898: 305). Distinct is different from clear, suggesting idiosyncrasy, where refined can suggest good training but also something reigned in. It could be read as a polite way of saying Corelli had been ‘finished’. If her background had been among labourers and charwomen, and Mary Elizabeth Mills was not the social equal to Charles Mackay to which Masters alludes (1978: 19), it is highly possible that Corelli’s acquired early speech and language and her “residual vowels” never quite left her, despite education and training (312). This analysis, genealogical research into the Cody family, and work within online newspaper databases, all point to Marie Corelli beginning life as Caroline Cody. Furthermore, it now becomes credible that her working-class origins were her motivation for the obfuscation of her childhood, as her self-fashioned persona was one tied to a middle-class and refined literary upbringing.

Corelli’s Travels and Education

In his *Memoirs*, Charles Mackay states that the family passed a twenty month stay in America from March 1862 to October 1863:

I engaged a passage to Boston on the 22nd February. The prospect being one of a long-continued residence in New York, I took my faithful and dearly beloved wife and infant daughter along with me.

(1877, II: 216)

In the October of 1861, Mackay’s publication *Robin Goodfellow* had failed, and this professional disappointment coincided with the late formal announcement of his marriage to

⁴ See also “Marie Corelli, Deceased” (1924) for the report in *The London Gazette*.

Mills appearing quietly in the regional press (“Marriages” 1861). With young Mary and her adoptive mother residing separately from Mackay in Williams Cottages in April 1861, it could be inferred that the opportunity to live abroad finally united the family, removing them from prying eyes. Ransom tells us that, despite Mackay’s memoirs recording it, Corelli denied ever having travelled to America (1999: 11). Brian Masters brushes over the fact that, in 1885 when Corelli was new to fame, she told the editor of *The Independent* that she ““was educated partly in America,”” commenting that it “is just within the realm of possibility” that Corelli was there due to Mackay’s career (1978: 309). It is now certain that Corelli travelled to America as a child. Digitised passenger records for transatlantic travel prove that she journeyed to Boston from Liverpool on the steamer ‘Canada’ at age seven, arriving on 7 March 1862 (Record 21). Minnie has been transposed incorrectly onto the database as ‘Minna’ (making her hard to locate) but her identity is confirmed as she is travelling with her adoptive parents. Her recorded age tallies with a birth date of 1 May 1854.

Further to this, Charles Mackay is reported by biographers to have left his young family behind in England when he again travelled to America in December 1863. This was after returning home with them for two months leave at the end of October, the information about the second trip again coming from Mackay’s *Memoirs* (1877, II: 277). Contrary to biographical speculation, transatlantic crossing records show that when Mackay returned to America, he took Mary Elizabeth and Minnie with him (Record 22). Most importantly, Minnie Mackay has been discovered on the New York State census for June 1865 (Record 23). She is recorded as being eleven, confirming a birth year of 1854, with the nationalities of all the family corresponding with those given on travel records, and the following UK census of 1871. This research has uncovered that Corelli lived in America for almost four years of her early life. This is interesting when read in conjunction with her denial of ever having visited the US, and her attitude to Americans during adulthood. She praised them when she needed their money for restoration work in Stratford-upon-Avon (Ransom 1999: 168), but is also reported as saying “I think Yanks are the trickiest and most unscrupulous people on earth... I abhor Americans” (Masters 1978: 231). This attitude, and her denial of ever having visited the country, could be due to her experiences there. It is possible to understand a residency of this nature creating a sense of instability and estrangement for a young child. The Atlantic boat crossings alone would have been arduous, but the uprooting to a foreign country in her formative years, the designation of a new name by her new family, and the experience of a sudden rise in social status chimes with Corelli’s definition of herself as a “lonely and miserable girl” with only adults for company (“To William Meredith” 1905).

The family returned to the UK in November 1865, after Mackay’s Civil War correspondence assignment with *The Times* ended. Corelli was nearly twelve, which puts into doubt the chronology of the so-called ‘autobiographical fragment’ that Vyver reproduces in her biography (1930: 19-34). Here, Corelli depicts herself as a young child in a home which Post Office records show she did not inhabit until 1868, when she was fourteen (Record 24). On their return from America, it is likely that the Mackays lived in Avenue Road, London, which had been Charles Mackay’s address before their departure (Record 25). The home that Corelli recalls in the fragment is Fern Dell in the village of Mickleham, Surrey. With George Meredith as a neighbour and a romantic rural setting, it is no wonder that this is the childhood home that Corelli fictionalised. Her recollections present a precocious child able to direct her own reading and get the better of an at-home weekend governess. In the autobiographical fragment, the young child begs her father to be able to go to school, but the narrative closes without revealing more (Vyver 1930: 25). Corelli always stated that, after having a succession of governesses, she had been educated in a French convent (*Who’s Who* 1912: 312). She varied her story of convent education during her life, telling the *Ladies Home Journal* that her childhood was “a very uneventful one and was chiefly passed in a French convent” (McKenna

1895: 2); but also telling W.B. Northrop that she spent two years there (1904: 54). This latter version was corroborated by Charles Cooper (editor of *The Table* and Charles Mackay's friend) who was quoted in a newspaper article after Corelli's death, saying that from 1868-9 she was "most of the time at school" ("New Light," 1924: 2). Ransom uses this report in conjunction with a Corelli letter stating she attended a "convent in Paris... from the ages of 11-15" (1999: 14) to argue for her having a four-year education.

Bigland asserts that a Roman Catholic school was a likely destination for Corelli because they were invariably cheap to attend, and the Mackays were not particularly affluent in the late 1860s (1953: 41). George Bullock, in his biography, speculates that just because something was French it didn't have to be in France (1940: 19) and Corelli's *Who's Who* entries support this theory in showing a semantic change of "France" (1904: 328), to "French" (1912: 313). It transpires that Corelli's close friend, Coulson Kernahan, revealed in a 1931 article in the *Quarterly Review* that Corelli had once confided in him that she had been educated as Minnie Mackay "for a time at a school in Isleworth" (1931: 75). Gumley House has been located in the district, founded by the Faithful Companions of Jesus as a Catholic boarding school in 1841. Offering a "continental education," as the sisters were from France, pupils were schooled in French but also offered Italian lessons (*The Catholic Directory* 1858: 207). Corelli only achieved a basic grasp of both languages (Masters 1978: 11), which is commensurate with a two-year period of schooling, rather than four. The Gumley House archives are not available, so it is impossible to determine the period in which Corelli attended. However, it is intriguing to compare her recollections of "a high wall and cemetery garden..." and "a great shadowy convent... [with] the great chestnut under which we used to sit" (Masters 1978: 33) with photographs of the school and its grounds, which included a cemetery and an ancient horse chestnut tree exactly fitting her description ("History" 2-3). If Gumley House was the school that Corelli described, it means that she was truthful in saying she had enjoyed a French convent education. Her concealment of her school's location, in addition to her denial of her ever having visited America, covered a trail that led directly to the backstreets of Marylebone.

Performing and Songwriting

In later life Corelli boasted of a musical education, and her first *Who's Who* entry recounts her composing an opera at the age of fourteen (1904: 328). In the 1871 census, Minnie Mackay is recorded as a sixteen-year-old scholar. It is likely that she was in receipt of quality musical instruction at this time, as digitised nineteenth-century musical press and newspaper reports reveal her composing music in the 1870s. Masters's assertion that Corelli "had no idea how to set music" (1978: 48) was inaccurate because, under her adoptive name of Minnie Mackay, she wrote and composed the popular song "Away to the North" in May 1875. It was inspired by the British Arctic expedition which was dominating the news ("Music" 1875: 4), and the *British Newspaper Archive* for this title produces multiple returns for the song, including within adverts for her sheet music publisher, Messrs Moutrie and Son. In early 1877, a collaboration with her adoptive father on "May He Ne-er Have the Chance Again" has Minnie Mackay composing music to his poetry ("Charles Mackay's New Song" 1877: 40).

The discovery of Corelli's song writing abilities can be re-evaluated against what biographers construe as her limited time as a performer (Masters, 1978: 46-9, Ransom 1999:25-7). The information derives from Vyver's *Memoirs* of 1930, from which we understand that the name of Marie Corelli was used for her musical performances (48-52). Vyver's source was highly curated clippings stuck into Corelli's scrap book, and successive

biographers paint a picture of a negligible period where she passed time on the stage, with two musical performances in Edinburgh, one at St James Hall, London, and a piano improvisation evening of 4 December 1884. This performance is generally agreed to be the inspiration for the unnamed improvatrice protagonist of Corelli's first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886) and Vyver reproduces a review of the evening in her biography (1930: 49-50).⁵ Masters, without providing dates, states that Corelli "gave some piano recitals in Edinburgh" under the "prosaic" name of Rose Trevor (1978: 46), and Ransom does not pursue a lead from a *Daily Mail* article, written after Corelli's death, which included the same professional name (1999: 19). This is despite the article's interviewee saying he had attended a concert in which Corelli had performed as Rose Trevor ("Who Was Miss Marie Corelli?" 1924: 9). Both biographers largely ignore the idea of Corelli as Trevor, each allotting only a couple of sentences to this performing identity (Masters 1978: 46, Ransom 1999: 19).

Corelli had told Stuart-Scott "I was destined for the stage. I should have been there today had it not been that Dr Mackay fell ill" (1955: 112). Masters says that Corelli wanted to try for an acting career, but Mackay's belief was that the "profession was not suitable for a lady" so he cowed her into writing (1978: 36). Information has come to light which not only reveals Corelli as performing and singing under the name of Rose Trevor between 1879 and 1882, but additionally uncovers that she was an amateur provincial actress. This places Corelli in the interesting company of Florence Marryat and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, whose talents also extended beyond writing and onto the stage.⁶ The idea of Corelli as an actress expands the idea of a late-nineteenth-century interdependent relationship, regarding women as artists, between popular entertainment and popular fiction. Trevor is reported in the regional press as performing in a South Norwood theatre in two charity productions in the May and June of 1879 ("Grecian Amateur Dramatic Society" 5). The Norwood/ Croydon area of London was named on Minnie Mackay's adoptive parents' marriage certificate as Mary Elizabeth Mills's family home and is a close London district to the Mackay residence in Surrey. Trevor's next performance in Norwood, as Keziah Mapletoft in *A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing*, was described as "very effective," and her portrayal of Lady Plato in *A Rough Diamond* revealed her to be "gifted with considerable dramatic instinct... performing in a quiet, unobtrusive and natural style, delivering herself with clear articulation, without labouring after effect" ("Entertainment at The Grecian" 1879: 6). In the October of the same year, Trevor performed in a farce called *Batchelor's Hall* in a theatre close to Charles Mackay's Holborn business address, and within easy distance of the family's prior London home in Marylebone ("Royal Connaught Theatre," 1879: 10).

Vyver's reproduction of Minnie Mackay's childhood mock playbill for family entertainment, suggests a child's creativity (1930: 35), and Masters picks up on this, suggesting Mackay "concocted" a farce called *Ici on Parle Français* which was included on the bill (1978: 35). The play was actually a well-known piece, with Rose Trevor playing 'Julia Rattan' for the South Norwood Dramatic Society in the May of 1880 ("Surrey Country Club" 1880: 7). She had unknowingly prepared for the role several years earlier. Corelli's reported talent for public speaking around the turn of the twentieth century can now be traced back to her early experiences on the stage as Rose Trevor, and her participation in the dramatic arts challenges the assumption reiterated in biographies that Charles Mackay curtailed his adopted daughter's performing aspirations. It was more likely that acting gave way to singing, as the vocal performances that Vyver attributes to Marie Corelli were all accomplished under the guise of Rose Trevor, who received plaudits for her solo performance at the Edinburgh Choral

⁵ For the original review, see "Our Omnibus-Box" (1885).

⁶ See Beth Palmer (2011) for her discussion on Victorian women writer/actresses.

Union on 12 January 1880, as reported on in the *Illustrated London News* (“Music” 1880: 166) and the *Edinburgh Daily Review* (“Musical Gossip” 1880: 2). The first article calls Trevor “a young lady bearing a name honoured in literature,” whereas the Scottish article explicitly identifies Rose Trevor as the daughter of Charles Mackay, showing that she was not averse to nepotism in advancing her stage career. Trevor participated in a Saturday morning ballad concert at St James Hall on 8 May 1880 (“Front Pages” 1880), but the much-cited Corelli performance at the same venue in the December of that year was, in fact, sung as Rose Trevor (“Talk” 1880: 4). Conducted in front of the Robert Burns Club, this performance, and the Edinburgh Choral Union solo, suggest that Corelli-as-Trevor was happy to play on Mackay’s Scottish connections.

In November and December 1881, Trevor performed in Dorking, close to the Mackay family home at Fern Dell. So popular was the November concert that the *Surrey Advertiser* reported that an extra five rows of seating were added on the night, these additional places being required to accommodate the local gentry and the “poet Dr Charles Mackay,” whose lyrics were sung by Trevor, and who closed the evening with a reading of his poem “Good Night” (“Ballad Concert” 1881:12). Trevor is described as “belong[ing] to a family of distinction – the name of Rose Trevor being assumed for the purposes of art” (12), alluding to the familial connection with Mackay. The article comments on the “amount of study required to arrive at the excellence displayed by Miss Trevor,” suggesting substantial voice control and musical training, commensurate with Corelli’s *Who’s Who* claims to a musical education (1912: 312). Trevor received much local praise and support, and one of these events was likely to have been the concert that the Surrey locals remembered after Corelli’s death.

Rose Trevor is announced in advance of making her solo “Surrey debut” in a “Grand Ballad Concert” at the Borough Hall, Guildford, on 12 January 1882, under the patronage of the highly decorated Lieutenant General Sir Garnet Wolseley (“Advertisement” 1882: 4). This was an event with an entry fee and was well-publicised event in the local press. The review in the *Surrey Advertiser* suggests that after a nervous beginning, Trevor triumphed, demonstrating “careful training” and a “voice of rare culture” (“Miss Rose Trevor’s Ballad Concert” 1882: 3). This is again contrary to Masters’s biographical picture of Corelli as an untrained performer in 1884, with “limitations of her technique [...] and] a distinctly amateur voice.” The “ungentlemanly” critics he describes are uncited and not quoted (1978: 49). Trevor’s Surrey debut was followed a week later by a series of three concerts over the Surrey/ Kent border at ‘The Maywood.’ Here, in the week leading up to them, the *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kent Advertiser* heavily publicised the events (“Local intelligence” 1882: 5) and the reviews were again glowing (“Entertainment at Maywood” 1882: 5). The last mention of Trevor in the press comes in an advertisement for the song “The Scent of the Limes” in *The Illustrated London News* in June 1882, her name appearing amongst other singers, as a recommendation to potential purchasers of sheet music (1882: 17). After this point Rose Trevor disappears from the national and regional press, making way for Marie Corelli. Corelli told *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1892 that she chose the pseudonym because of “her love for Italy and all things connected with it” (“Personal” 711), and perhaps she was moved to select the name in reminiscence of the time she sang alongside a young violinist in her hometown – one “Madlle [sic] Adelina Dinelli” (“Dorking” 1881: 4). It is curious to consider why she didn’t pursue her novel-writing career as Trevor, given the minor success that she already gained under that name. Several factors could have influenced this decision: the confining nature of Charles Mackay’s fame overshadowing her and the opportunity to be free of aspersions of nepotism; the chance to create herself anew (perhaps more understandable given her status as an adopted and previously renamed person); or, conceivably more likely, the opportunity to further compartmentalise her early life and distract attention from the nature of her origins and subsequent adoption.

Understanding Corelli Better

In 1895, when she was forty-one, Corelli told an interviewer that her 1886 authorial debut had taken place “before she had passed her twentieth birthday” (McKenna 1895: 2), effectively deducting a decade from her true age. Corelli was believed because of her tiny stature and baby-faced appearance. Masters says she “never wavered” from telling even her close friends that she was seventeen at the time of first publication (1978: 5). Shaving years from her age worked on several levels. It created a narrative of inspired genius; it placed her in her eligible thirties, rather than her forties, at the height of her fame and interactions with society; it likely served her vanity; and, most importantly, it enabled the total concealment of both her working-class past and performing career, creating a temporal barrier to their discovery. Corelli was able to manipulate the personal paragraph articles of the time to suit her ends and maintain control of her own narrative. However, celebrity journalism had altered by the time she died. The press had already published less-than-flattering photographs of her (“Marie Corelli Smiles” 1905: 1), often insinuating a manipulation of age, but never going beyond hinting at vanity as the cause. On Corelli’s passing, the stories that emerged speculated about her origins, casting her as a liar and figure of egotistic ridicule. Biographers of the mid-to-late twentieth century took up this mantle but relied upon the sparse childhood narrative provided by Vyver (who was very much honouring Corelli’s wishes in her own compression of the author’s early life), focussing on the Victorian scandal of illegitimacy in the 1850s and Corelli’s lie about her age rather than considering the implications it had in creating a missing period in her history. New research has enabled this oversight to be addressed, as the previously compressed period 1872-82 is shown to contain Corelli’s performing career.

Digital scholarship has the effect of changing the way we see Corelli. It is undoubtable that she lied but astonishing to find truth in some of the things she said about herself. Corelli’s recollection of her childhood as a period of “intense and bitter suffering” (“Letter to William Meredith” 1905) makes sense when considered in relation to her removal from her birth family at a young age, her relocation halfway around the world, her renaming, the erasure of her working-class identity and the change in all that she had known. The transient nature of her early existence, which included her return to the UK, house moves, and time at boarding school, contributes to a narrative of upheaval, but also of resilience. Corelli shouldered a huge amount of criticism in her professional life and was unafraid of taking on her detractors. Perhaps, in knowing more about her upbringing, we can understand her renowned defensiveness and egotism as the products of life experience: Corelli was used to depending upon, and protecting, herself. Her fame occurred at a time when the obfuscation of her prior singing and acting career and pseudonym was possible; the publicity she gained as Trevor was minor and fleeting, and despite newspaper reports linking Trevor to Charles Mackay, no memories of the performer appear to have been stirred once Marie Corelli emerged as a writer. Her time as an actor prepared her well for public speaking (something that she undertook with vigour in the first decade of the twentieth century) but could also have been formative for her renowned self-confidence, an attitude which has historically been interpreted as obstinacy and her being difficult.⁷

In creating an authorial persona and obfuscating her past, Corelli must have had the intention of creating a narrative about herself that would shift attention away from her person and onto her work. Indeed, she stated that she could not understand journalistic interest which prioritised the celebrity of authors over their writing (Coates and Warren Bell 1903: 333) and

⁷ These findings also support the work of Morrissey (“Girl Alone” 2019), who uses Corelli’s correspondence to challenge how her personality has been portrayed.

was famous for avoiding her likeness being taken in either portrait or photographic form. When an official photograph was provided for the frontispiece of *The Treasure of Heaven* (1906), Corelli famously controlled the image. She had it doctored, which biographers have concluded was done in order that she would appear younger than she was (Ransom 1999: 149). Annette Federico has speculated on the reasoning behind Corelli's attitude to photography, arguing for it potentially being a manifestation of Louise DeSalvo's interpretation of Virginia Woolf's "looking glass complex" (2000: 33), suggesting Corelli could have been sexually victimised by her stepbrother, George Eric Mackay, and thereby fearful of having her likeness taken. Federico concedes, however, that this is based on uncited rumour, supposedly circulated by Edmund Gosse and reported in Masters' biography (1999: 155). It is now more plausible to deduce that Corelli sought to limit access to her image, and to ameliorate the instances of it being reproduced, as an act of self-protection. The idealised portraits certainly reflected her romantic vision of herself, but they also ensured no one would recognise an aged Rose Trevor, or even a grown Minnie Mackay. The adjustment to Corelli's age further confused the issue for viewers. After her death, biographers focussed on the mysteries of Corelli's life and on eccentricities like the doctored images, these issues largely overshadowing any discussion of the vast popularity of her novels or the content of her work. Now, as much of the noise around the mystery of Corelli's early life can be silenced, it is possible to cease the search for answers, and instead read a chronological account of her life against her oeuvre. Urgently, there needs to be an alteration of biographical information about her within scholarship (which will begin with the Corelli volume of the VPFA Key Popular Women Writers series). These discoveries also bring opportunities to reconsider how her working-class origins, performing career, and time in America, can be read against her writing. This research catalyses a new understanding of Corelli by lifting the veil of mystery that has, for too long, stood between the woman and her work.

Appendix – Genealogical Records

- 1 *England and Wales Civil Registration Birth Index 1837-1915*, London: Brentford, 1855, Apr-May-Jun 1855 Volume 3a, 64.
- 2 *England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index 1837-1915*, London: Marylebone, 1861, Jan-Feb-Mar, 1a, 700.
- 3 *1871 Census*, Registration District: Dorking, Parish: Mickleham, Surrey, Ed. 15, Household Schedule number 56, folio 122, 12.
- 4 *England and Wales, Civil Registration Death Indexes 1837-1915*, Dorking, Surrey, March 1876, Jan-Feb-Mar, 2a, 95.
- 5 *Church of England Deaths and Burials 1813-2003*, Parish Register, St Mary, West Kensington and Fulham 1814-1889, January 1856, 442.
- 6 *1861 Census*, Registration District: London, Marylebone Parish: St Marylebone, Ed. 13, Household Schedule number 47, folio 10, 14.
- 7 *UK City and County Directories 1600s-1900s*, London City Directories 1736-1943, Post Office London Directory for 1860, Lincoln's Inn.
- 8 *1861 Census*, Registration District: Marylebone, Parish: St John, St Marylebone Ed. 11, Household Schedule number 292, folio 64, 44.
- 9 *1851 Census*, Registration District: London, Marylebone, Parish: St Marylebone, Ed. 09, Household Schedule number 443, folio 454, 18.

- 10 *1861 Census*, Registration District: London, Marylebone, Parish: St Marylebone, Ed. 14, Household Schedule number 30, folio 34, 5.
- 11 *England and Wales, Civil Registration Death Indexes 1837-1915*, Marylebone, London, September 1852, Jul-Aug-Sep, 1a, 250.
- 12 *1871 Census*, Registration District: London, Marylebone, Parish: St Marylebone, Ed. 24, Household Schedule number 185, folio 54, 44.
- 13 *England and Wales, Civil Registration Death Indexes 1837-1915*, Marylebone, London, December 1872, Oct-Nov-Dec, 1a, 351.
- 14 *US and Canada, Passenger, and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s*, Index to the 1871 Census of Ontario: Ottawa, Carleton, Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, p. 257, 1823.24.
- 15 *England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index 1837-1915*, London: Kensington, 1878, Jan-Feb-Mar, 1a, 87.
- 16 UK, City and County Directories, 1766-1946, Hampshire, Kelly's Directory 1889, Portsmouth, Southsea.
- 17 *1911 Census*, Registration District: London, Islington, Parish: Islington, Ed. 14, Household Schedule number 120, piece 789.
- 18 *1911 Census*, Registration District: London, Islington, Parish: St Marylebone, Ed. 24, Household Schedule number 185, piece 789.
- 19 *Henry Cody's Grave*. Maple Grove Cemetery, Kew Gardens, Queens County, New York USA. South Border Reserved Lot 1 Grave 87, 53120552. Grave located at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/53120552/henry-cody> (accessed 16 December 2022)
- 20 *1911 Census*, Registration District: Portsmouth and Mid Southsea, Parish: Portsmouth, Ed. 13, Household Schedule number 120, piece 5605.
- 21 *Massachusetts, US, Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820-1963*, Departing Liverpool, England, 7 March 1862, Canada, roll M277.
- 22 *New York, US, Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957*, Departing Liverpool, England and Queenstown, Ireland, Arriving New York, USA 31 December 1863, Persia.
- 23 *New York US, State Census of 1865*, Richmond, Southfield, Second District, p. 66, Line 26, no 324.
- 24 *UK Poll Books and Electoral Registers 1538-1893*, Dorking District, parish of Mickleham, no. 612.
- 25 *UK City and County Directories 1600s -1900s*, London City Directories 1736-1943, Post Office London Directory for 1865, Avenue Road.

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