

**The Australian Brontë
Association Newsletter
Issue No 15 July 2005**



**THE THIRD
THREE SISTERS WEEKEND**

16th – 18th September 2005

La Maison Guest House Katoomba

**THEME: ARCHITECTURE AND
 THE BRONTËS**

including Emily's preoccupation with architectural detail in *Wuthering Heights* and the
architecture of the Brontë Parsonage



**Details and
Registration
Form are
enclosed.**

OUR CHRISTMAS LUNCH

**The Heritage Belgian Beer Café, in the Rocks.
Saturday 10th December at 12 noon.**

No set menu – choose from their extensive menu and pay for what you eat and drink.
Booking forms will be sent to members later in the year.

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRONTE



from a monograph by Bruno Luigi Spedalieri published in Sydney in 1993

Brontè is a name very familiar to us, as the name of three of our favourite authors. As has been explained in previous newsletters the father of Charlotte, Emily and Anne was born Patrick Prunty but, while at Cambridge, he adapted it to Brontè after the title of Lord Nelson, the Duke of Bronte. (The dieresis over the “e” was Patrick’s own idea, to preserve the correct Italian pronunciation. He had experimented with Bronté and Brontë before settling on Brontè.) So how did Nelson acquire this title?

The City of Bronte was founded by some Greek soldiers from Athens around 413 BC. The name was taken from Greek mythology. It means “thunder” (even in



A panoramic view of Bronte

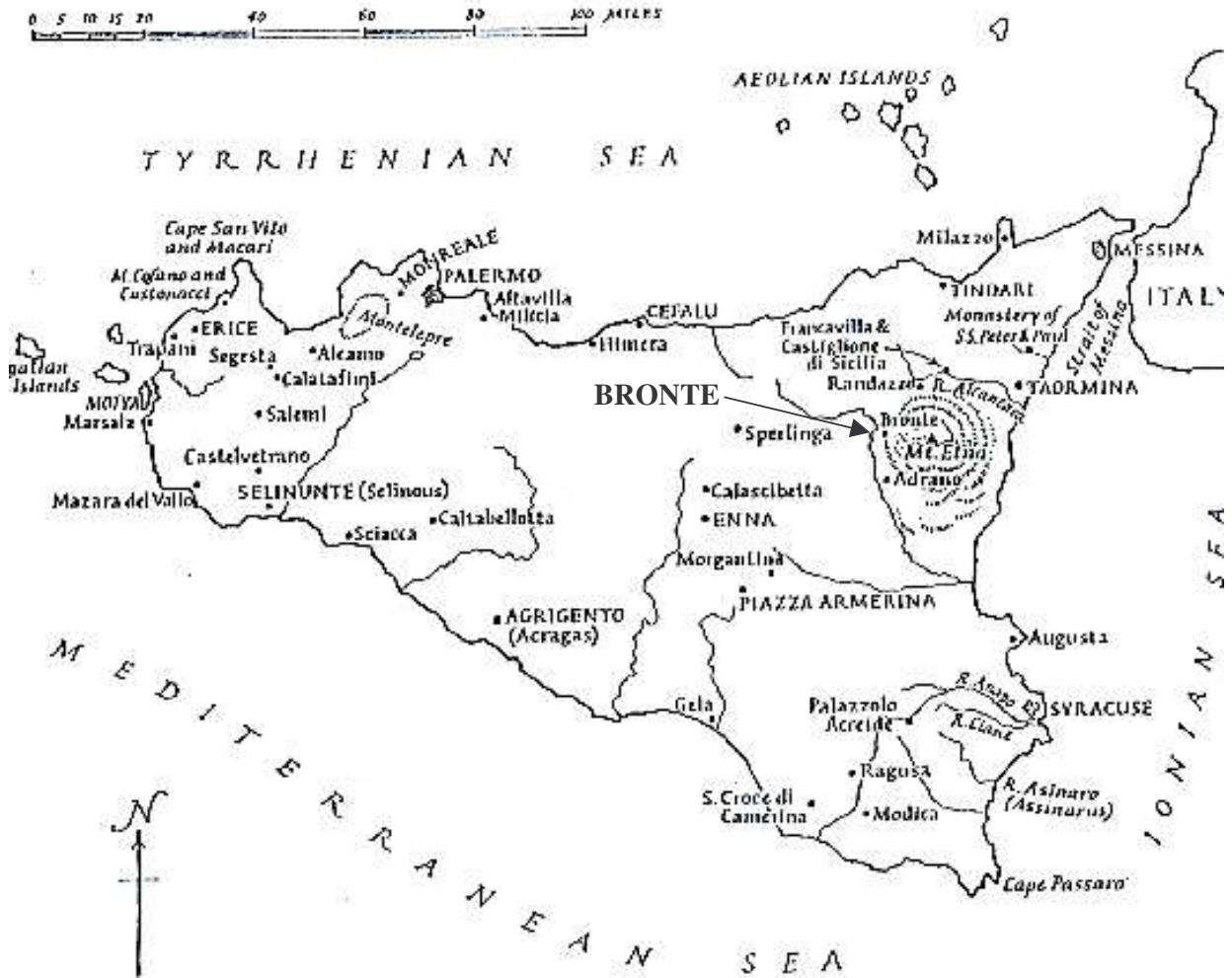
modern Greek) and it was the name of one of the Cyclops believed to live inside the volcano Mount Etna. The founders dedicated a temple to their protective goddess Athena. With the advent of Roman civilization the temple’s name was changed to Minerva. Later, Christians dedicated the same temple to the Virgin Mary, calling it the Church Santa Maria of Minerva. Today it is the Mother Church of the city of Bronte and it is dedicated to the Holy Trinity. This, and 16 other churches, serve the 25,000 inhabitants of the city of Bronte.

At various times Bronte was subject to invasions and occupations from the Byzantines of the East, the Sarazins, the Normans and the Aragonese. Since the beginning of the second millennium the territory of Bronte was claimed by the Benedictine monks of Maniace’s Abbey and its citizens were obliged to pay heavy revenues to their masters. In 1491 the cardinal Rodorigo Borgia, Abbot of Maniace, and future pope Alexander VI, illegally donated the territory of Bronte to Pope Innocent VIII. The Pope, unable to decide about the legality of the donation, gave the territory to the New Hospital of Palermo. This put the territory into the hands of the

King of Sicily. There were protests from the people of Bronte but they were ignored.

In 1799 Ferdinand IV of Naples and Sicily saw a good opportunity to get rid of the problematic territory. Admiral Horatio Nelson, in June 1799, had helped defend him against Napoleon. As a reward, on 13th August 1799, the king conferred on the admiral the title of Duke and made him the owner of the Dominion of Bronte with all its properties and dependencies. Bronte itself was elevated to the title of Duchy on 10th October 1799.

The people of Bronte reacted strongly against the new Duke and Nelson never set foot in Bronte. The Duchy lasted seven generations. The last Duke of Bronte was Alexander Nelson Hood (junior), inheriting his title in 1969. In 1977, at the age of 28, he decided to sell the properties of Bronte. The vast rural land was subdivided and sold to the people of Maniace. The castle, the surrounding garden and the ancient Abbey



Santa Maria were acquired by the Commune of Bronte. Everything was finalised in 1980 and the title "Duke of Bronte" lapsed. As at 1993 the last Duke was living in Rome as the Director of the Bank of England in Rome.

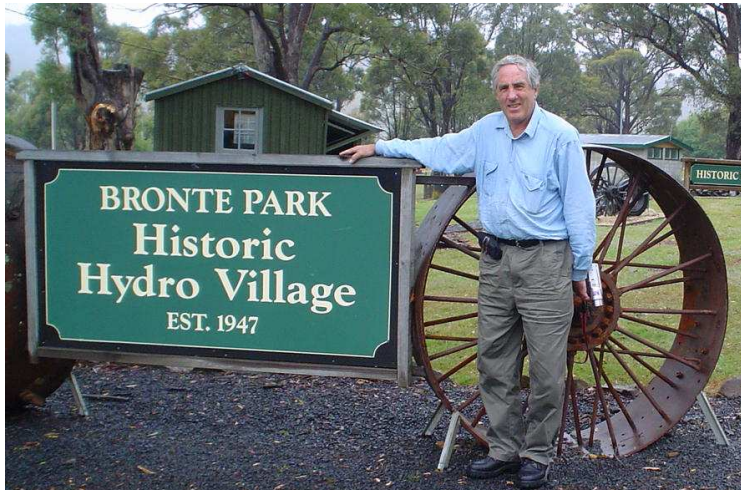
It was Nelson's somewhat dubious connection with Bronte that put the city on the world map. In the 19th century the name of Bronte was given to a vast property acquired by the barrister and politician Robert Lowe 1st Viscount of Sherbrooke on the eastern shores of Sydney.

The same name was given to an extensive property situated in the centre of Tasmania, purchased by Lieutenant Arthur Corbett between 1834 and 1863. Lieutenant Corbett was married to a relative of lady Emma Hamilton, the mistress of Duke Horatio Nelson, and in honour of the great admiral he gave the property the name of Bronte Park.



Admiral Horatio Nelson

In Canada the name Bronte was given, again in honour of Nelson, to a little settlement on the shores of lake Ontario. Nelson and his mistress, are also honoured by the cities of



Christopher at Bronte Park in Tasmania

Trafalgar and Hamilton and by Bronte Creek and Bronte Harbour.

So most of the geographical Bronte's around the world honour the admiral, not the writers. The one exception is a little town in Texas that was built in 1888. It was called Bronte in honour of Charlotte.

In 1993 there were about 200 migrants, born in the Sicilian Bronte, living in Sydney with smaller groups in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. In 1988 the Brontese migrants in Sydney formed an association and they arranged for the mayor of Bronte, Mr Gino Anastasi, to come to Sydney to meet Mrs Barbara Armitage, the mayor of Waverley Municipal Council whose territory includes the suburb of Bronte.



Emily

view of my other passion being canals, to drive over the Bronte Canal that feeds water from the lakes into the turbines. The lady at

reception told me that she thought that the name Bronte was given to the area because of the many Brontese migrant workers who had lived there during the construction. Then she darted away to give me a photocopy of the *History of Bronte* on which this account has been based.

Reading this showed that the name went back to Nelson and that the fact that many of the construction workers were Brontese was just a happy coincidence. She was aware of the literary connection and told me that one of the little cottages was called "Emily".

Christopher Cooper

WUTHERING HEIGHTS (2003)

Starring: Erika Christensen, Director: Suri Krishnamma, Seidy Lopez, Rated M15+ Review from Empire Magazine, January 2005 (contributed by Meg Hayward)

This MTV adaptation of Emily Brontë's classic novel is truly atrocious. The film alternates between taking vast liberties with the story and trying desperately to latch onto exact aspects of the book, forgetting that it was written for an 1850 audience. The result is a simplistic limbo with nothing for anyone – as opposed to something for everyone. The nearly incestuous relationships are made even more unbelievable by the amateurish, impulsive acting, while the musical interludes are pointless and cheesy. The only good thing is the scenery.

“READER, I MARRIED HIM”

Our gala event, earlier in the year, was the one woman show “Reader I Married Him”, performed by Angela Barlow. It was an outstanding success. For a little organization like ours to get 143 people to one event was amazing. Thanks go to all those who helped to make the evening a success. Special thanks go to Ann Lock, who had to send out all the tickets and keep track of the money, to Geraldine Rawlings who coordinated the catering and to Maria-Louise Valkenburg who canvassed everyone she knew, resulting in about 30 of her school colleagues, church contacts, neighbours and family attending. Thanks go too to the rest of the committee and to the many ABA members who brought somebody else along.

Of course all this logistic support would have gone for nothing if the performance itself had let us down. But Angela was superb. It takes a special skill for an actor to be able to move in and out of a multitude of characters seamlessly and in a convincing manner and Angela certainly demonstrated this skill. She used and reused the small number of props to great effect. A letter from one scene was rolled up and used as an offensive weapon by Mr Brocklehurst in another.

Angela’s professionalism was supported by her husband’s behind the scenes stage managing. Andrew paid great attention to detail in the setting up of the stage, the lighting and the music.

A couple of people who attended were so impressed that they wrote to us. One said that she had brought two “very discerning friends” from Queensland who were as thrilled by the evening as she was. She said that their enjoyment of the performance was the only topic of conversation all the way home.

Ann Lock, who had been so thoroughly involved with the ticketing in the weeks leading up to the evening wrote about an odd experience that made her wonder

whether she had “finally succumbed to Brontë mania” and was imagining Brontë connections in everything she did.



The Sunday just after the performance she went to church and was stunned when the priest began his sermon with the words “you would probably

all know the famous English novelist Charlotte Brontë”.

Ann wrote, “Father then talked about Charlotte being a daughter of a Church of England minister and how this week’s reading of the Samaritan woman at the well from the New Testament always reminded him of Charlotte. He talked about her going to confession in Brussels because she was so depressed – adding that people of great intellect and artistic talent usually suffer from depression. He then spoke of the psychological benefits of confession.”

“He mentioned the novel *Jane Eyre* and how it was made into a film. He also mentioned Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* which he considered a far more powerful novel than *Jane Eyre*.”

“I spoke to Father Tom O’Donovan (a Jesuit) afterwards and asked him if he had read *Villette*. He hadn’t. I said I would like his opinion on the religion in *Villette* – particularly thinking of all the Jesuit references. He said he would do his best.”



BRONTË MYTHS

In May I was asked by the Burwood Ladies' Probus Club to give a talk on the Brontës. I began by giving a summary of the "well-known" facts about the family, but nearly every one of these "facts", though widely believed, was in fact wrong, or an exaggeration. The rest of the talk was spent in correcting them! I won't reproduce the full text of the talk, but here is the summary with which I began. See how many errors, or exaggerations you can find. (My answers are on page 19.)

The Brontës have lived in Yorkshire for generations. Charlotte was born, the eldest of three sisters and a brother. This brother, Branwell, was a ne'er-do-well drunkard. Their father was the vicar at Haworth and right from the beginning he was well loved by the Haworth people. The children were born in the Haworth parsonage in a remote

part of the Yorkshire moors. The remoteness, and the fact that the parsonage was built in a churchyard, made it a gloomy household, even more so when they started dying one after the other. The three sisters lived their whole lives in Haworth as three prudish old maids. Charlotte wrote, and published, *Jane Eyre* and this inspired Emily to write *Wuthering Heights* and Anne to write *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Because of the remoteness of their home their view of life was rather parochial and domestic and they wrote romance novels, the Victorian equivalents of today's Mills and Boones. And like most Victorian women's novels, *Jane Eyre* is somewhat puritanical in its style – the sort of book you could safely give to a young girl as a Sunday School prize.

Christopher Cooper

AUSTRALIA TALKS Sunday 27th January 2002

An extract from an interview by Julie Copeland of Michael Berkeley, the composer of the *Jane Eyre* opera that was recently performed in Canberra by Stopera.

David Malouf wrote the libretto for this work. He and Michael Berkeley had previously worked together on *Ba Ba Black Sheep* based on one of Rudyard Kipling's short stories.

Julie Copeland: Of the two works that David Malouf has written the libretto for – one, *Jane Eyre* – I'm trying to imagine how this raw, rhythmic intensity of some of your music would fit with the subject of a Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre*. And *Ba Ba Black Sheep*. Why haven't we seen those works here in Australia, for example. I mean David Malouf's a very well-known Australian writer. Is there any chance that they will be performed here?

Michael Berkeley: Well I hope so. I mean we have been a bit frustrated by it. Especially with *Jane Eyre*, since it's a chamber piece – and you know, five singers and thirteen

players like the Britten chamber operas. So it could be –

Julie Copeland: It would be easy enough and commercially viable to put on a work like that. It wouldn't be expensive.

Michael Berkeley: No, it wouldn't. And there has been talk about it. But you know, and I think – and it's difficult for me to say this, but it was successful and *Ba Ba Black Sheep* actually had a very good review here. So I don't think that's the problem. I tell you what I think is the problem. If anybody's going to manage to put on a new opera, then they want to do an Australian piece. And in England we tend to want to do an English

piece. And I think it's very difficult to make these pieces 'cross over' because there's a kind of feeling that we ought to honour the people we've got here – or there, as the case may be. And so that's the first barrier.

Julie Copeland: And that's specific to new opera, isn't it? Because of course we have no compunction about doing the works of dead foreign composers – Verdi or Wagner – so it's new works you think that people are more inclined to support their local composers.

Michael Berkeley: Well what you've got to remember is that any kind of operatic endeavour does require quite an input of funding. Even a small-scale one. So there is that barrier. Now I just think one has to break through it. I'm quite convinced – David [Malouf] did a wonderful libretto for both pieces. And I'm quite convinced that they would work wonderfully here and be very popular. But we just have to make that leap of faith. Or somebody does. David is a wonderfully modest man in some ways and he's not going to go out and say, 'You should be

doing this.' And I really can't do that. What one has to hope is that the music travels, somebody hears it and says, 'Actually I really love it and I believe in it.' *Jane Eyre's* coming out on a CD later this year. People will be able to listen to it and make up their own minds. I can only agree with you, really, but there's not much I can do about it.

I had been interested in the idea of the strange world of Kipling. And when I mentioned it to David, he said, 'But you know *Ba Ba Black Sheep* the short story,' which I didn't. I think I may have known the story, but he was the one who could see how to make it work. And you see the thing is, both in *Ba Ba Black Sheep* and in *Jane Eyre*, what David and I have done – I mean you can't compete with a great story, if you just do it straight, there's no point in doing that – what you've got to do is to look at it from some fresh angle. So both with *Ba Ba Black Sheep*

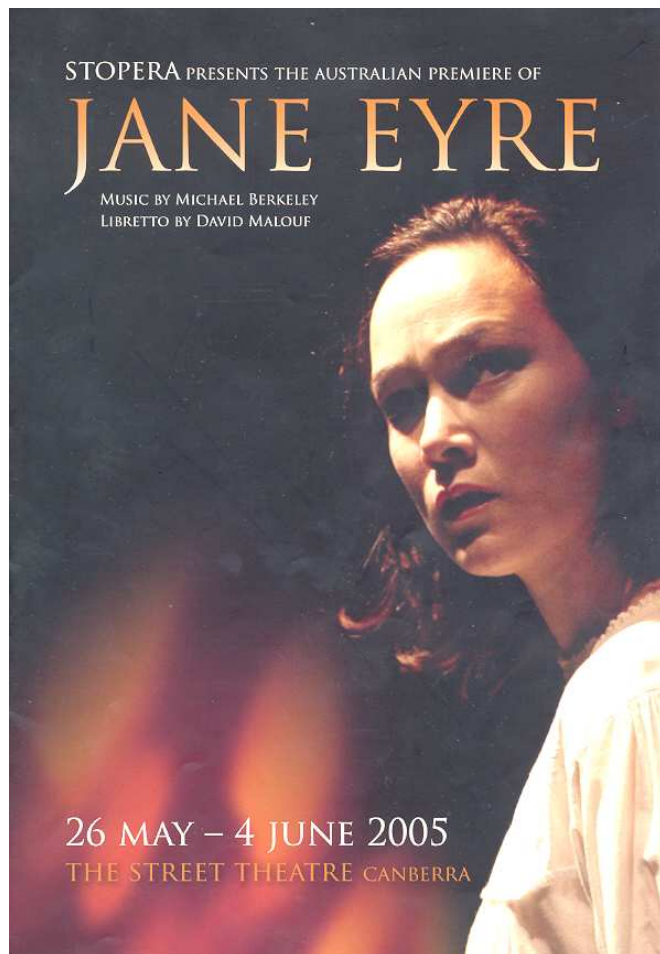
and with *Jane Eyre*, we looked at one aspect of it. The revenge side, if you like – of Kipling-and in *Jane Eyre*, we looked at it very much from the position of the mad Mrs Rochester and the tragedy of her position.

Julie Copeland:

Yes, because *Jane Eyre*, as opposed to the Kipling story, is so well known, isn't it, and has been done in many forms. Many versions. So

you have to come up with some different interpretation or different aspect of the story.

Michael Berkeley: What we did there was to concentrate it right down just to the Thornfield experience. That passage at Thornfield. So there's just the five central characters. It starts with Jane arriving at Thornfield. Rochester falling off his horse



and his first meeting with her, which is very pregnant with sexuality, and her mastering him, if you like. But all the time there is this wailing of this mad-woman upstairs. And we begin to see her position from a slightly different angle, I think. And that was done, unlike *Ba Ba Black Sheep*, on a very concentrated set, done by Music Theatre Wales. And it only lasts 110 minutes, or something, so it's quite a short opera in two acts.

Julie Copeland: Well mad women in opera – the mad woman in the attic – is a particularly apt subject, isn't it, for opera? If you think of well, all the feminist work – feminist studies and analysis of the mad woman in the attic – that's quite a dramatic aspect of the story to concentrate on, for an opera.

Michael Berkeley: Yes, and of course we did it with Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* firmly having been read by both of us. And it uses music from the mad scene from Donizetti, too, from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, because I wanted to bring in these references. But this

is a very lyrical work. You asked about the rhythm, which is interesting and in a way – some people may think it didn't work so well as a result but others think it worked better – I suppressed some of that and it's a much more lyrical piece. I think that opera is not necessarily the palette on which you mix your most innovative colours, because you've got to think of singers. You've got to think of theatre and drama. And I think in opera we all tend to be perhaps slightly more cautious than in orchestral music or abstract music, if you like, where one can take bigger risks and move the music forward. If one looks at quite a lot of great composers there's even an element of that, that they've got to think of how the piece unfolds from a dramatic point of view. The limitations of what singers can do. The singers being heard. All of those things mean that one is perhaps a little bit more cautious about the sort of 'hot end' of one's writing. It doesn't stop great masters in their youth, like Strauss in *Elektra* And Bartok in *Bluebeard*, you know.

JANE EYRE STAMPS

From The Brontë Society Gazette

Six postage stamps to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Charlotte's death were launched in February by the Royal Mail. News releases were sent, appropriate photo-opportunities were created, and as a result the story was taken up far and wide. Inevitably the phrase "stamp of approval" appeared in a number of headlines.

The stamps were all designed by Portuguese artist Paula Rego from the twenty-four lithographic prints inspired by *Jane Eyre* which have been exhibited internationally and which were on show at the Parsonage last summer. In the photograph is an enlarged stamp in which a baleful Brocklehurst glares at young Jane.



JANE EYRE: The Australian Premiere Season

Performed by Stopera at The Street Theatre, Canberra

26th May – 4th June 2005.

Music: Michael Berkeley

Director: Caroline Stacey

Jane: Rebecca Collins

Rochester: Gary Rowley

Mrs Rochester: Maria Danielle-Sette

Libretto: David Malouf

Adèle: Sara Carvalho

Mrs Fairfax: Eleanor Greenwood



Michael Berkeley One can read the works of the Brontës and works about the Brontës in any remote part of the country.

One can watch the Brontës on TV in Timbuktu. But to see Brontë live on stage, even living in Sydney is not enough. One must be prepared to travel. In 1998 I remember travelling to Newcastle to see a performance of Bernard Taylor's musical *Wuthering Heights*. It was exciting coming back on the last train 'on a high' and discussing the evening's performance. Last month I had to travel south – to Canberra – to see the Australian Premiere of the chamber opera *Jane Eyre* by Michael Berkeley and David Malouf.

This time there was no last train back, so Elisabeth and I had to drive down one afternoon and back the next morning. But it was still an adventure. I'm not an experienced reviewer so this does not pretend to be a critical review. These are just some personal observations of my own.

We arrived in the late afternoon and went to the theatre to pick up our tickets. I asked at the box office whether I could buy a program then, or whether I had to wait till we came back for the performance. I wanted to read up on it over dinner. A voice from behind called out, "I'll sell you one now." It was Greg Marginson, the manager of the Stopera.

He was kind enough to take us into the theatre, where they were making preparations for the evening's performance, and to chat to us for ten minutes.

He showed us the set. A couple of piles of bricks and some scorched upright beams, were all that was left of Thornfield Hall. Greg told me that the bricks were from the ruins of the Mount Stromlo Observatory and the scorched beams were from a Buddhist Temple that had also fallen victim to the Canberra fires.



David Malouf

Greg explained that the opera begins at the most dramatic moment of the novel, the moment when Jane hears the voice of Rochester calling to her in the night, across the intervening miles. I later read in the program (from the libretto *Jane Eyre: A Libretto by David Malouf for an opera by Michael Berkeley* Vintage UK Random House 2000), that David Malouf regards this moment 'as perhaps the strongest memory we carry away from the book, the strangest, the most romantic'.

I told Greg that I agreed that it was certainly *one* of the most dramatic moments, and I could see that it was a moment that has great musical possibilities. But I said that in my view the most dramatic moment of all is the aborted wedding. That scene sent tingles down my spine when I first read the novel.

It is missing in the opera. Greg explained that the constraints of a chamber opera required keeping the size of the cast to an absolute minimum and that such a scene would have needed at the very least extra roles for the minister, for Briggs and for Mason. It seemed such a pity, but I wondered if perhaps I was too constrained in

my thinking by having read the novel so many times.

Greg said that the opera has done well in Canberra and he hopes to be able to get sponsorship to bring it to Sydney, perhaps as part of the Sydney Festival, so many of you may yet get to see it.

We then went back to the motel and then to a very good Indian restaurant close to the theatre before returning to the theatre to enjoy the performance itself.

The music, like much of contemporary music, was dramatic and challenging. It seemed to me to be more a vehicle for carrying the drama than something to be enjoyed in its own right, which is probably as it is supposed to be. I'm sure I would get more out of the music if I heard it several times. Perhaps I should buy the CD. Probably I'll just hope that it comes to Sydney. I'd certainly go to see it again.

The singing was excellent. I particularly enjoyed Rebecca Collins performance as Jane, and if I was a professional music critic I'd be able to say what it was about her singing that I particularly enjoyed.

Now quite clearly one cannot attempt to try to tell the whole of Jane's story, from the impossibility of taking a walk that day, to Jane as a mother. David Malouf quite rightly chose to focus on certain key events that create the atmosphere of the whole story.

The opera begins at the dramatic moment when Rochester calls to Jane. Thornfield Hall is in ruins as we in the audience can plainly see. Jane does not yet know this, but as she goes back to the Hall she revisits her memories.

The memories of her time at Thornfield Hall are now dramatised, from the moment of her first encounter with Rochester, an encounter that literally sweeps him off his feet! As Rochester runs around the stage a surreal backdrop of galloping hooves, filmed specially at the Stromlo Equestrian Centre, is displayed. He falls at her feet.

The opera borrows something from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in that Bertha Mason is

not just the shadowy figure she is in the novel, heard but not seen. No, she is very much present on stage and with no Mason to bite and scratch she has to wrestle with Jane. Jane naturally wants to know who this fiend is, and is told by Rochester that this mad woman is his wife.

Jane has to find out this way because of the absence of the wedding scene. While there is much drama in Jane's horror at this discovery I can't help feeling that something is lost. Certainly no shiver ran down my spine as it did when I first read the words "I declare an impediment".

The other great moment that I missed was where Jane brings in the tea to the blinded Rochester, in place of his domestic servant. "Is it really you, Jane?" brings tears to my eyes. Now that's a scene that would not have needed additional singers. One could easily arrange for the servant to be off stage. The real drama just needs Rochester and Jane.

Still, there were probably good reasons for doing it this way. After all the opera doesn't have to be a clone of the novel. Greg Marginson was worried that a Brontë fan like myself would be worried at any departure from what Charlotte wrote. Not at all. A work based on, or inspired by, another stands or falls on its own merits, not on how closely it follows the original. After all a purist would have objected to the bright red wedding dress that Jane was to wear and completely overlooked the fact that red is the colour of passion.

Nor was there was any necessity for the opera to portray Mrs Fairfax as a demure old lady, dressed in black, as Charlotte did. A pretty Mrs Fairfax, who looked no more than 21, added quite a new dimension for me. Never, in reading the novel, had I ever stopped to wonder whether Mrs Fairfax might have been a possible rival for Rochester's affections. Was she perhaps jealous of Jane? True, she was his cousin, but when did that stop a gentleman falling in love in Victorian times?

Christopher Cooper

READER, I SHAGGED HIM

An article by Tanya Gold that appeared in the Guardian on 25th March 2005.

I apologise if I ruffle any of our members' sensibilities by reprinting this item, but it was in the Guardian after all! I reprinted it because, for all its excesses, and extremely vitriolic style, it does contain some grains of truth – along with quite a number of factual inaccuracies. Charlotte knew what it was to be passionate about a man. If we did not know her feelings towards Monsieur Heger we only have to read her novels to see this.

Since her death 150 years ago, Charlotte Brontë has been sanitised as a dull, Gothic drudge. Far from it; the author was a filthy, frustrated, sex-obsessed genius.

Elisabeth Gaskell is a literary criminal, who, in 1857, perpetrated a heinous act of grave-robbing. Gaskell took Charlotte Brontë, the author of *Jane Eyre*, the dirtiest, darkest, most depraved fantasy of all time, and, like an angel murdering a succubus, trod on her. In a “biography” called *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published just two years after the author’s death, Gaskell stripped Charlotte of her genius and transformed her into a sexless, death-stalked saint.

As the 150th anniversary of her death on March 31 1855 approaches, it is time to rescue Charlotte Brontë. She has been chained, weeping, to a radiator in the Haworth Parsonage, Yorkshire, for too long. Enough of the Brontë industry’s veneration of coffins, bonnets and tuberculosis. It is time to exhume the real Charlotte – filthy bitch, grandmother of chick-lit, and friend.

When I first reached the age of 13, I thought she was another boring Gothic drudge who got lucky. When I returned to her 10 years later, I recognised her. Charlotte was an obscure, ugly schoolmistress. Her father Patrick had fought his way from Ireland into Cambridge University and the church. She was toothless, almost penniless and – to Victorian

society – worthless. But she dared to transcend her background and her situation. In her novel *Jane Eyre*, a dark Cinderella tale of a plain, orphaned governess, she dared, badly, to state her lust.

After I had reread *Jane Eyre*, I wanted to know what dark genius created this world. I turned to Elisabeth Gaskell’s *Life*, but I could not recognise the sanitised Charlotte she conjured up. Gaskell befriended Charlotte when the novelist was 34 and already a star. Contemporary critics had been appalled by *Jane Eyre*’s “coarseness”, but the public was thrilled and Charlotte was a celebrity. Gaskell waspishly described her first sight of Charlotte in a letter: “She

is underdeveloped, thin and more than half a head shorter than I ... [with] a reddish face, large mouth and many teeth gone; altogether plain.”

Gaskell described her encounters with Charlotte to friends in long, gossipy, gawking letters. “I have so much to say I don’t know where to begin ...” And Charlotte noticed Gaskell’s need to weaken and infantilise her, writing to her publisher, George Smith, “she seems determined that I shall be a sort of invalid. Why may I not be well like other people?” Gaskell was already hungrily plotting the biography, which she convinced herself was an act of charity. She wanted to rescue her friend from the



accusations of “coarseness” and she did not have to wait long: Charlotte died in 1855, nine months after her wedding to Arthur Bell Nicholls.

Gaskell portrays Charlotte as Victim Supreme. She begins to sew her shroud from her first chapter, when she copies out the Brontë grave tablet in Haworth church, voluptuously listing those who died of consumption: Charlotte’s mother, Maria, her sisters Maria, Elizabeth, Anne and Emily, and her brother Branwell. Charlotte, Anne and Emily were “shy of meeting even familiar faces”. They “never faced their kind voluntarily”. The Brontës are shown, with understated relish, as lonely, half-mad spinsters, surrounded by insufferable yokels and the unmentionable stench of death. Under Gaskell’s pen they become the three witches of Haworth and she hurls on the Gothic gloom; ravaging the moorlands, and the town for appropriate props. She has a particular fondness for the graveyard outside their front door: “It is,” she notes, “terribly full of upright tombstones.” She is bewildered by the Brontës. She could never accept that they were quite simply, talented. There had to be a magical mystery at work on those moors.

Gaskell carefully filters the letters to match her agenda. Any hint of Charlotte’s sexual being is tossed to the historical furnace. Charlotte’s correspondence with the (married) love of her life, Monsieur Heger of Brussels, is ignored, as is her thwarted romance with George Smith. Gaskell could hardly leave out Charlotte’s marriage to Arthur Nicholls – but no doubt she would have liked to. Her biography is the ultimate piece of feminine passive-aggression, a mediocre writer’s attempt to reduce the brilliant Miss Brontë to poor, pitiful Miss Brontë. Gaskell wrote the *Life* as a tragedy, not a triumph. But if Charlotte Brontë’s life is a tragedy, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Let me introduce you to the real Charlotte Brontë. She was not a wallflower in mourning. She always wanted to be famous, she pined to be “forever known”.

Aged 20, she wrote boldly to the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, asking for his opinion of her talents. He replied: “You evidently possess and in no inconsiderable degree what Wordsworth calls “the faculty of verse.” Then he chides her: “There is a danger of which I would ... warn you. The daydreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind. Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be.” Charlotte ignored Southey but Gaskell couldn’t believe it. She concluded the correspondence “made her put aside, for a time, all idea of literary enterprise”.

Charlotte continued in her position as a schoolteacher, which she had already held for a year. But she hated her profession and heartily despised the aggravating brats she was forced to teach. As the children at Roe Head School did their lessons, she wrote in her journal: “I had been toiling for nearly an hour. I sat sinking from irritation and weariness into a kind of lethargy. The thought came over me: am I to spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage, forcibly suppressing my rage at the idleness, the apathy and the hyperbolic and most asinine stupidity of these fat headed oafs and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness, patience and assiduity? Must I from day to day sit chained to this chair prisoned within these four walls, while the glorious summer suns are burning in heaven and the year is revolving in its richest glow and declaring at the close of every summer day the time I am losing will never come again? Just then a dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited.” Note to Mrs Gaskell: Charlotte didn’t want to kiss those children; she wanted to vomit on them.

Charlotte did not only feel passionate hatred for small children; she felt passionate love for men. Unlike the female eunuch created by Gaskell, she was obsessed with her sensuality. She wrote to a friend: “If you knew my thoughts; the dreams that absorb me; and the fiery imagination that at times eats me up ... you would pity and I daresay despise me.” The thwarted lust of a parson’s

daughter? Gaskell dismisses it as “traces of despondency”. In Brussels, studying to become a governess at Heger’s school, the virgin became even more lustful. She wrote obsessive letters to him, begging for his attention. “I would write a book and dedicate it to my literature master – to the only master I have ever had – to you Monsieur.” Later she writes: “Day or night I find neither rest nor peace. If I sleep I have tortured dreams in which I see you always severe, always gloomy and annoyed with me. I do not seek to justify myself. I submit to every kind of reproach – all that I know – is that I cannot – that I will not resign myself to losing the friendship of my master completely – I would rather undergo the greatest physical sufferings. If my master withdraws his friendship entirely from me I will be completely without hope ... I cling on to preserving that little interest – I cling on to it as I cling on to life.”

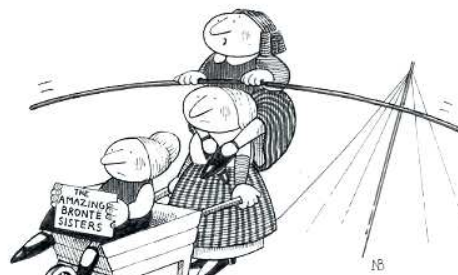
When Gaskell heard of these letters she panicked. “I cannot tell you how I should deprecate anything leading to the publication of these letters,” she clucked to her publisher.

Charlotte’s “master” did not return her love, but Jane Eyre’s did. Charlotte’s fixation with sex could not be realised in truth – so she realised it in fiction. *Jane Eyre* has spawned a thousand luscious anti-heroes, and a million Pills and Swoon paperbacks. Her prose is dribbling, watchful and erotic. It’s much better than *The Story of O*, or *Naked Plumbers Fix Your Tap*. In *Jane Eyre* she created the men she could not have in the sack: rude, rich, besotted Edward Rochester and beautiful, sadistic St-John Rivers. Both, naturally, beg to marry Jane and Charlotte draws every sigh and blush and wince exquisitely. She writes long, detailed scenarios for her paper lovers. Jane loves to argue with them and she always comes out on top. In the throbbing, climactic scene, after Rochester has teased her (lovingly, of course) she pouts: “Do you think, because I am poor, plain, obscure and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! I have as much soul as you and full as much

heart. And if God have gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are.”

Rochester melts. “As we are!” repeated Mr Rochester – ‘so,’ he added, enclosing me in his arms, gathering me to his breast, pressing his lips on my lips: ‘so Jane!’” The St-John fantasies are filthier yet as Charlotte’s masochism oozes on to the page. “Know me to be what I am,” he tells Jane. “A cold, hard man.” Jane watches St-John admire a painting of a beautiful woman and voyeurism excites her: “he breathed low and fast; I stood silent”. I know Charlotte had an orgasm as she wiped the ink from her fingers and went to take her father his spectacles.

Charlotte was not only randy, she was rude. She was sent a copy of Jane Austen’s *Emma* and spouted bile all over it. “[Austen] ruffles the reader with nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound,” she bitches. “The passions are perfectly unknown to her ... the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death – this Miss Austen ignores.” Later she smacks her more firmly over the bonnet. “Miss Austen is not a poetess. Can there ever be a great artist without poetry?” If Charlotte slagged off Austen – her only real rival in the canon of superb, sex-starved writers – what would she have made of Gaskell’s blackwash? I suspect that she would have seen it for what it was – the one parasitic shot at immortality of a second-rate writer.



“It’s no good, Emily – we’re never going to make the Big Time this way”

I decided to visit Saint-Central – the parsonage museum at Haworth – to see if anything of the real Charlotte remains. Might a leg, or an arm or a finger be sticking out from under Gaskell’s smiling tombstone? It doesn’t look good for Charlotte. Just nine months after the 150th anniversary of her wedding (there was a mock ceremony, with a shop manager as Mr Nicholls and the villagers as the villagers) the Brontë groupies are excitedly preparing the “celebrations” for the 150th anniversary of her death. A “light installation” is projecting a shadow grim reaper. Yes – it is Death. It crawls across Patrick’s pillows, returns and crawls again. Pictures of the “Brontë waterfall” are gushing noisily over the front of the parsonage. Inside the house are the relics, pristine and pornographic. Charlotte’s clothing is imprisoned behind glass: her ghastly wedding bonnet, covered with lace; her gloves, her bag; her spectacles. I can see from the dress that she was a dwarf. A genius indeed, but a dwarf.

In the shop, Gaskell again has won. There is every Brontë-branded item the mother of the cult could wish, except perhaps, enormous golden Bs. I choose a gold fridge magnet, a tea-towel that says

“Brontë genius – love, life and literature” and a toy sheep stamped with the word “Brontë”. There is a *Jane Eyre* mouse-mat that says, “I am no bird and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will.” This souvenir disgusts me, but no doubt Mrs Gaskell would love it. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte wrote “independent human being”. She did not write “independent mouse-mat”.

I can find no remnant of the breathing, brilliant novelist in Haworth; it is merely the site of a death cult that weirdly resents its god. I wander up the road to the moors and am surprised that they haven’t packaged the mud – “Real Brontë Mud!” As the taxi bumps down the famous cobbled street, past the Brontë tea-rooms, the Vilette coffee-shop, Thornfield sheltered housing (imagine 50 creaking Mr Rochesters) and the Brontë Balti (Brontë special – Chicken Tikka; It’s true) I yearn to rip the road signs down and torch the parsonage. This shrine needs desecrating, and I want to watch it burn. I want to see the fridge magnets melt, the tea-towels explode and the wedding bonnet wither. Somewhere, glistening in the ashes, there might remain a copy of *Jane Eyre*. That is all of Charlotte Brontë that need loiter here.

Not surprisingly there was a flurry of letters to the editor on subsequent days. Here are a few of them.

All right, I bite. I realise the only possible reason for publishing that disgusting article was to arouse reader outrage. So here is some. I doubt whether a word of Ms Gold’s “writing” will be remembered for 150 minutes, let alone the century and a half that Charlotte Brontë – and Mrs Gaskell – have remained an inspiration to writers and readers. Of course she was unable to find the slightest justification in Charlotte Brontë’s entire oeuvre for her tawdry assertions. As to Mrs Gaskell’s biography, Ms Gold is evidently entirely ignorant of the moeurs of society when the book was written, and that Miss Brontë’s father and husband were still alive. Was she supposed to reveal that Charlotte was in love with a married man?

Lynne Reid Banks, Beaminster Dorset

Tanya Gold provides a far more erroneous characterisation of Elizabeth Gaskell than Gaskell ever provided of Charlotte Brontë. While some of Gaskell’s contemporaries found the subject matter of her fiction scandalous (they certainly did not consider her prim or prudish) few would have characterised her writing as “mediocre” or “second-rate”.

And given that she was a best-selling and widely respected author well before her 1857 *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, it can hardly be described as a “parasitic shot at immortality”. By collecting letters and information from those who knew Brontë in the months immediately following her death, Gaskell in fact did an invaluable service for all subsequent Brontë biographers.

The picture she drew of Brontë was of a passionate and brilliant, if unhappy, woman. And the things that she glossed over were determined by the sensibilities of her age – in fact, we have no reason to believe that Gaskell’s knowledge of Brontë’s love for Monsieur Heger lessened Gaskell’s own opinion of her friend.

Kathrin Levitan, Ann Arbor Michigan

I long ago formed the view that *Jane Eyre* restores one’s faith in the sexuality of Victorian women. This was probably after reading that an eminent doctor once said that

any man should be horsewhipped who believed that women could have sexual feelings.

For Tanya Gold’s exuberant piece to be described as disgusting and tawdry because it discusses her writing in terms of her sexuality demonstrates that Victorian prudery is still alive and kicking – trying to insist that Charlotte be denied effective sexual feelings, actions and fantasies that play such a significant part in the lives of humanity at large.

John Nicholson, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey

NO STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN FOR MAD MRS ROCHESTER

By Martin Wainwright, from the Guardian earlier this year.

A cramped secret staircase winding up to a lonely garret has been rediscovered in the manor house which is credited with launching the literary genre of the “madwoman in the attic”.

Carpeted with dust, cobwebs and a solitary stud, 13 rotten steps lead into a gable end where the 18th century original of Mrs Rochester – the tragic enigma of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* – was allegedly confined.

The discovery is a gift to the reviving fortunes of Norton Conyers, a 16th-century squire’s home whose modest tourist trade benefits from the Brontë connection. The house, near Ripon in the English county of North Yorkshire, spent 20 years on the national register of historic buildings before restoration started in 1986.

The staircase, found when floorboards were lifted in an attic, fills in a missing piece of Brontë’s description of “Thornfield Hall” where Mr Rochester lived with the governess Jane Eyre and – hidden away on the top floor – his “mad” first wife. Brontë visited Norton Conyers in 1839 and knew the story of the mansion’s “madwoman” – probably epileptic or pregnant with an illegitimate child – who had been kept locked in an attic 60 years earlier.

The real and fictional halls both have battlements, a rookery, sunken fence and wide oak staircase. But until this month, only Thornfield had a hidden flight of stairs from near Mr Rochester’s bedroom to his wife’s prison.

“We decided to investigate the tradition” says Sir James Graham, 64, whose family bought Norton Conyers in 1624. He was brought up in the house, and remembered tales of the imprisoned ancestors, secret passages and wooden panelling which rang hollow when knocked. One of these was on the landing outside the Peacock Room, the supposed model for Mr Rochester’s quarters, and it was here the musty steps uncovered in the attic proved to lead. Sir James and his wife crept down and found a disused door with an ingenious spring lock.

“The stairs are only wide enough for one person,” he says. “They are hidden within the thickness of the panelled wall. There is no way you could tell from the outside there was anything there. The door at the bottom would have been visible originally, certainly at the time Charlotte Brontë visited, but it was covered when the landing was panelled – we believe in the 1880’s.”

NEW BOOK

THE BRONTËS' WORLD OF MUSIC

Music in the Seven Novels by the Three Brontë Sisters

by Akiko Higuchi

Yushodo Press Co. Ltd, Tokyo, 2005

9,000 Yen (+ postage/packing)

I have just received a copy of this book from the publishers. There has no been time to organise a proper review so what follows is merely a description of the contents. Perhaps one of our members would like to review it for the next newsletter. Also, I have order forms if anybody would like to purchase a copy.

The book is handsomely bound, in a slip case. It has 390 pages, and includes 32 photographs (many in colour) and 31 musical scores. The introduction touches on The Age of Music, Family and Music, Fashionable Music, Girls' Education and Music and Romanticism and Music.

The first chapter introduces us to the father and his four surviving children: Patrick Brontë "the bringer of music", Ann "one who enjoyed music", Branwell "a boy of extravagant zeal", Charlotte "a connoisseur of music" and Emily "an active pianist".

Higuchi then goes systematically through the seven novels. It is interesting to note the amount of space she devotes to

each as this gives us some idea of the relative emphasis on music in each of the novels.

Villette	54
Jane Eyre	34
Shirley	40
The Professor	20
Wuthering Heights	16
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall	11
Agnes Grey	6

There are also 18 pages devoted to Anne's poems that have become hymns and 3 pages to the hymn *Manorlands*, a setting of Charlotte's "Winter Stores".

Akiko Higuchi has been a member of the Brontë Society for 22 years and has been a member of the Brontë Society of Japan for many years. She is currently at the International University of Kagoshima. She has published *Anne Brontë's Song Book and Branwell Brontë's Flute book: An Annotated Edition*. This book is very thoroughly researched and is well written.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We have had a wonderful first half year. The "Reader I Married Him" performance was a great success for such a small society as ours. Then Kurt Lerps spoke to us about his production of *Wuthering Heights*. Being a man of the theatre his presentation was very entertaining. Kurt has since thanked us for his book token and tells us that it will go towards the next Harry Potter Book. Then Alison Hoddinott from the University of New England spoke to us about the literary and artistic references in the Brontës. As usual her talk was well researched and was quite

informative. She has now joined our society I'm sure she will talk to us again some time.

Jean Warner, one of our members, represented us at the Brontë Weekend in Haworth in June and Elisabeth and I will be taking part in a five day excursion, later in the year, with the Brontë Society. We will be visiting Newcastle and the Border Country, following in Charlotte's footsteps.

Our final "normal" meeting for the year will be on Saturday 6th August (10:30 at SMSA) when some of our members will reveal what Jane Austen might have thought of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* had she

lived to read them. But beyond that there is our Christmas Lunch at the Heritage Belgian Beer café, and our Three Sisters Weekend, to look forward to.

This year's weekend away will focus on "Architecture and the Brontës". When I last read *Wuthering Heights* I was struck by the number of architectural references there are in the novel. We tend to think of *Wuthering Heights* as set outdoors, on the wild moors, but in fact most of it is set indoors and the number of references to architectural detail is amazing.

I hope to have an architect come and assist me in talking about vernacular architecture in the Victorian times (that's domestic architecture, as opposed to the architecture of cathedrals and public buildings). And we'll look at the architecture of the Haworth parsonage and the renovations that Charlotte initiated towards the end of her life. In keeping with the architectural theme, although this might be stretching the connection a little, we will have a dramatic reading of a story that Angela Barlow has written, called *The Key*.

Just a word about the enclosures inside this newsletter. There is the registration form for the Three Sisters

Weekend. Please make your booking with La Maison and register with us so that we know you are going. You will also find a flyer from The Centre of Continuing Education at The University of Sydney. Their course at Elizabeth bay House sounds very good, but the tragedy is that all three dates clash with various literary society events. Still, if you want to go we will reluctantly excuse your absence at our meeting on the 6th August.

Finally there is a flyer from the publishers of Brontë Studies. This is now published three times a year and the articles in it are excellent. It costs £37 per year, which with our exchange rate is not cheap, but it really is worth it. Note that it is very much cheaper if you are a member of the (U.K.) Brontë Society.

This reminds me – our committee has decided to introduce a new membership category, starting next year. It will be called Interstate Membership and will cost only \$5 per year. The idea is to encourage those members of the Brontë Society, or any other Brontë fans, who live in other states and cannot normally get to our meetings to join our association just for the publications.

Christopher Cooper



The Bronte Birthplace in Thornton.

(The room protruding at the front was a later addition – at one time it was a butcher's shop!)

WUTHERING HEIGHTS – FOR AND AGAINST

From the Sydney Morning Herald, 5th March 2005

FOR

Wuthering Heights works because Cathy and Heathcliff don't. Just as good cops make bad crime novels, smiling lovers make for boring literature. Anyone who's been in love knows that romance just doesn't feel right until it has cut your hamstrings and left you whimpering on the footpath.

Heathcliff towers over the novel.

Dark, violent, furious, he unleashes hell against those who have thwarted him. He is cursed, unable to realise that his love for Cathy and his desire to destroy her come from the same place. Brontë's pairing of atmosphere and plot is perfectly executed – blood, thunder, windswept moors and characters whose inner lives are as unruly as the landscape they inhabit. Cathy and Heathcliff torment each other in life and find peace only in death.

Great literature doesn't define new experiences. It articulates common ones. Emily Brontë knew this, although God knows how – the woman barely left the house. Still, in her own morbid way she managed to tell us that before love becomes chicken soup it must first be a kick in the pants.

Paul Waley

AGAINST

Heathcliff? Please. The man is a pig, and the rest of the characters are not much better. So Heathcliff has a rough upbringing. Well, boo-hoo, lots of people have that and turn out all right. Then he falls for Cathy and runs away from home because she is a right little madam who won't marry him, and instead of having the sense to stay away from the whole

unpleasant bunch of them in their nasty, cold houses he goes back for revenge – and their money. Charming.

Then Cathy's sister-in-law Isabella develops a crush on him and he tries to dissuade her with such niceties as hanging her dog, but he marries her anyway and treats her abominably.

He's outstandingly vile to their tiresome son and to Cathy's daughter and nephew, and forces Cathy junior and the son to get

married (so he can have her property). Add to this a housekeeper who can't shut up and a religious nutter of a manservant who bores on endlessly in incomprehensible dialect.

Eventually, Heathcliff turns decent, for no good reason and dies so he can join Cathy's damn noisy ghost. Good riddance to the lot of them.

Harriet Veitch



BRONTË MYTHS

Continued from page 6

(1) The Brontës could not really be called a Yorkshire family. Patrick was born in Ireland and his wife Maria was born in Penzance. They had only been in Yorkshire a couple of years before Charlotte was born. To be considered a Yorkshire family your ancestors had to have lived there for several generations. Also, Patrick was born Prunty and changed it to Brontë when he was at Cambridge.

(2) Though she was older than Branwell, Emily and Anne, Charlotte wasn't the eldest in the family. She had sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who died young.

(3) Branwell did come to a sticky end, but in his early 20's he was a Sunday School teacher and secretary of the local Temperance Society.

(4) Patrick wasn't at all well received by the congregation when he first took up duties at Haworth. It's an amusing story (though I'm sure Patrick didn't think so) which you can find in Juliet Barker's *Biography*.

(5) None of the children were born in Haworth. The eldest, Maria, was born in Hartshead while the other five were born in Thornton.

(6) Haworth was a thriving industrial town when the Brontës lived there. The remoteness was part of a myth created by Charlotte and continued by Mrs Gaskell. True, you could look out of the parsonage over the moors, but if you chose to look in the other direction you looked down into the grimy and dirty town. Haworth was only four miles from Keighley from where, by the late 1840s, you could take a train to London.

(7) The gloominess of the Brontë household is greatly exaggerated. Certainly there were times of great sadness, but there was a period of over 20 years when there was much laughter in the parsonage, especially when Willie Weightman was around.

(8) Far from living at Haworth all their lives, all three sisters worked at various times as governesses and, of course, Emily and Charlotte spent some time in Brussels.

(9) None of the three could really be called prudish if you remember what they wrote (not even Anne). And while Emily and Anne did not appear to have much of a love life, Charlotte was passionately in love with Monsieur Heger and, after having sublimated her passion in her writings, eventually married Arthur Bell Nicholls – a marriage that didn't seem to involve much passion, but which was quite a happy one for all that.

(10) It was *The Professor* that Charlotte wrote, while Emily was writing *Wuthering Heights* and Anne was writing *Agnes Grey*. Anne and Emily's works were accepted, but Charlotte's was knocked back. She set to work writing *Jane Eyre* and in fact this appeared just before her sisters' novels.

(11) *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* caused considerable controversy when they appeared. Many people considered them not "proper" books for a well brought up young lady to read. Even in the 1950's *Jane Eyre* was being awarded as a Sunday School prize in a bowdlerized version.

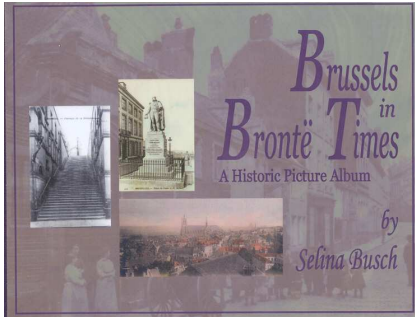
NEW BOOK

BRUSSELS IN BRONTË TIMES

A Historic Picture Album

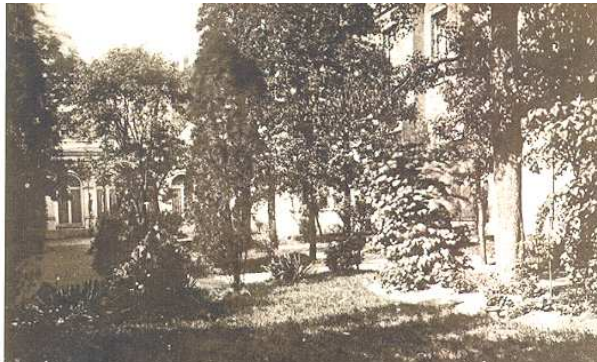
by Selina Busch, 2005

Copies may be ordered from Selina Busch, Ridderstraat 24, 4101 BK CULEMBORG, THE NETHERLANDS

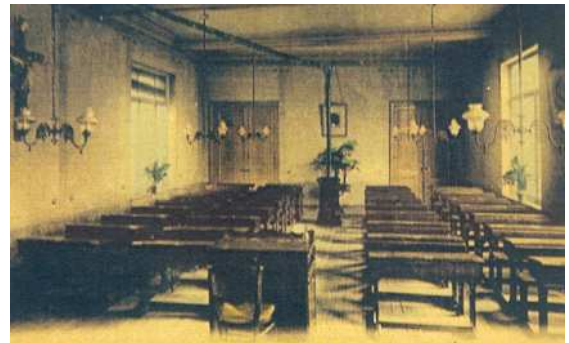


Selina Busch was one of the guides on the 2003 Brontë Society Excursion and for that event she assembled a number of photographs of old Brussels, especially of the Isabella Quarter in which the Pensionnat Heger once stood. Many people encouraged her to continue this work and to publish an album. With the help of the Daphne Carrick Scholarship, awarded by the Brontë Society, she has been able to produce this present volume.

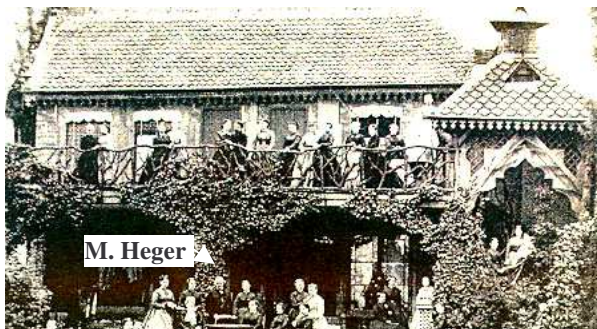
There are over 130 photographs and maps. These are organised into chapters as follows. Chapter One contains photographs of the Pensionnat and its garden. Chapter Two is devoted to the Rue d'Isabelle and the Rue Terarcken, the immediate neighbourhood of the school. These are streets that Charlotte and Emily would have walked along almost every day. Chapter Three takes us a little further away with pictures of the Isabella Quarter of Brussels. In Chapter Four we have pictures of the park and the royal quarter. In Chapter Five we have the churches that Charlotte would have known. Chapter Six is of other streets and sights. Chapter Seven gives some panoramas of the city, and some maps. In Chapter Eight, we have photographs taken of the demolition as the area was being redeveloped in 1910-12.



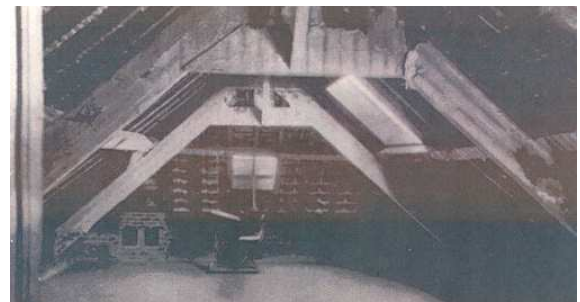
The garden of the Pensionnat in the 1860's



The Salle d'Études similar to the one at the Pensionnat



The Studio of the Pensionnat



The attic of the Pensionnat