

The Australian Brontë Association Newsletter



Issue No 18

Dec 2006

THE BRONTËS' IN INDIA?

A Brontë Christmas lunch at an Indian restaurant? What connection could there possibly be between any of the Brontës and India?

With Charlotte there are certainly two connections – both of them to do with unrequited love. The plot in both stories is identical: Boy meets girl – boy falls in love with girl – boy proposes to girl – girl rejects boy – boy runs off to India to try to forget!

Well, who are these boys and who the girls? The first girl, or rather young woman, is Jane Eyre. St John Rivers proposes to her, probably without going to the trouble of falling in love with her first. He wants to do missionary work in India, and would like to have Jane accompany him as his wife. Not that he particularly wants to marry her – he principally wants her as an efficient co-worker. But, to avoid scandal, it is expedient for them to be married.

I took a seat: St. John stood near me. He removed his hat, let the breeze stir his hair and kiss his brow.

“And I shall see it again,” he said aloud, “in dreams when I sleep by the Ganges: and

again in a more remote hour – when another slumber overcomes me – on the shore of a darker stream!”

Strange words of a strange love! An austere patriot's passion for his fatherland! He sat down; for half-an-hour we never spoke; neither he to me nor I to him: that interval past, he recommenced –

“Jane, I go in six weeks; I have taken my berth in an East Indiaman which sails on the 20th of June.”

“God will protect you; for you have undertaken His work,” I answered.

“Yes,” said he, “there is my glory and joy. I am the servant of an infallible Master. I am not going out under human guidance, subject to the defective laws and erring control of my feeble fellow-worms: my king, my lawgiver, my captain, is the All-perfect. It seems strange to me that all round me do not burn to enlist under the same banner, – to join in the same enterprise.”

“All have not your powers, and it would be folly for the feeble to wish to march with the strong.”



"I do not speak to the feeble, or think of them: I address only such as are worthy of the work, and competent to accomplish it."

"If they are really qualified for the task, will not their own hearts be the first to inform them of it?"

"And what does YOUR heart say?" demanded St. John.

"My heart is mute, – my heart is mute," I answered.

"Then I must speak for it," continued the deep, relentless voice. "Jane, come with me to India: come as my helpmeet and fellow-labourer."

"Oh, St. John!" I cried, "have some mercy!"

"God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary's wife you must – shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service."

"I am not fit for it: I have no vocation," I said.

"Humility, Jane," said he, "is the groundwork of Christian virtues: you say right that you are not fit for the work. Who is fit for it? Or who, that ever was truly called, believed himself worthy of the summons?"

"I am ready to go to India, if I may go free."

"Your answer requires a commentary," he said; "it is not clear."

"You have hitherto been my adopted brother – I, your adopted sister: let us continue as such: you and I had better not marry."

He shook his head. "Adopted fraternity will not do in this case. If you were my real sister it would be different: I should take you, and seek no wife. But as it is, either our union must be consecrated and sealed by marriage, or it cannot exist: practical obstacles oppose themselves to any other plan. Do you not see it, Jane?"

I did consider; and still my sense, such as it was, directed me only to the fact that we

did not love each other as man and wife should: and therefore it inferred we ought not to marry. I said so. "St. John," I returned, "I regard you as a brother – you, me as a sister: so let us continue."

"We cannot – we cannot," he answered, with short, sharp determination: "it would not do. You have said you will go with me to India: remember – you have said that."

"I repeat I freely consent to go with you as your fellow-missionary, but not as your wife; I cannot marry you and become part of you."

"A part of me you must become," he answered steadily; "otherwise the whole bargain is void. How can I, a man not yet thirty, take out with me to India a girl of nineteen, unless she be married to me? How can we be for ever together – sometimes in solitudes, sometimes amidst savage tribes – and unwed?"

"Very well," I said shortly; "under the circumstances, quite as well as if I were either your real sister, or a man and a clergyman like yourself."

"It is known that you are not my sister; I cannot introduce you as such: to attempt it would be to fasten injurious suspicions on us both. And for the rest, though you have a man's vigorous brain, you have a woman's heart and – it would not do."

"I scorn your idea of love," I could not help saying, as I rose up and stood before him, leaning my back against the rock. "I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it."

He had done. As I walked by his side homeward, I read well in his iron silence all he felt towards me: the disappointment of an austere and despotic nature, which has met resistance where it expected submission – the disapprobation of a cool, inflexible judgment, which has detected in another feelings and views in which it has no power to sympathise:



in short, as a man, he would have wished to coerce me into obedience: it was only as a sincere Christian he bore so patiently with my perversity, and allowed so long a space for reflection and repentance.

In a story that closely parallels that of St John is the experience of James Taylor, a reader at the firm of Smith, Elder and Co, Charlotte Brontë's publisher. He proposed to Charlotte, she rejected him and he went off to India where he later died. Now before you think that this might have provided the inspiration for the St John incident, remember that *Jane Eyre* was her first published novel and so this is an example of real life mimicking fiction.

Charlotte remained good friends with James Taylor but could not feel "enough love to accept him as a husband". James went to India, not as a missionary, but as a representative of the publishing firm. Charlotte wrote to him in India. She also wrote about her feelings for him to Ellen Nussey. [The text of the following extracts is from *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë* by Margaret Smith.]

In a letter to Ellen, dated 4/5 April 1851, she says:

Mr Taylor has been gone; things are just as they were. I only know in addition to the slight information I possessed before that this Indian undertaking is necessary to the continued prosperity of the Firm of Smith Elder & Co. and that he – Taylor – alone was pronounced to possess the power and means to carry it out successfully – that mercantile honour combined with his own sense of duty obliged him to accept the post of honour and of danger to which he has been appointed and that he goes with great personal reluctance and that he contemplates an absence of five years.

He looked much thinner and older – I saw him very near and once through my glass –

the resemblance to Branwell struck me forcibly – it is marked. He is not ugly – but very peculiar; the lines in his face shew an inflexibility and – I must add – a hardness of character which does not attract. As he stood near me – as he looked at me in his keen way, it was all I could do to stand my ground tranquilly and steadily and not to recoil as before. It is no use saying anything if I am not candid – I avow then that on this occasion – predisposed as I was to regard him very favourably – his manners and personal presence scarcely pleased me more than 'at' the first interview. He gave me a book at parting requesting in his brief way that I would keep it for his sake and adding hastily "I shall hope to hear from you in India – your letters have been and will be a greater refreshment than you can think or I can tell."

You see dear Nell – we are precisely on the same level – you are not isolated.

I feel that there is a certain mystery about this transaction yet whether it will ever be cleared up to me, I do not know; however my plain duty is to wean my mind from the subject and if

possible to avoid pondering over it – In his conversation he seemed studiously to avoid reference to Mr Smith individually – speaking always of the "House" – the "Firm". He seemed throughout quite as excited and nervous as when I first saw him. I feel that in his way he has a regard for me; a regard which I cannot bring myself entirely to reciprocate in kind – and yet its withdrawal leaves a painful blank.

Ellen replied promptly and a few days later (9th April) Charlotte again wrote to Ellen:

You speak to me in soft consolatory accents, but I hold far sterner language to myself, dear Nell. An absence of five years – a dividing expanse of three oceans – the wide difference



between a man's active career and woman's passive existence – these things are almost equivalent to an eternal separation – But there is another thing which forms a barrier more difficult to pass than any of these. Would Mr T[aylor] and I ever suit? Could I ever feel for him enough love to accept him as a husband? Friendship – gratitude – esteem I have – but each moment he came near me – and that I could see his eyes fastened on me – my veins ran ice. Now that he is away I feel far more gently towards him – it is only close by that I grow rigid – stiffening with a strange mixture of apprehension and anger – which nothing softens but his retreat and a perfect subduing of his manner. I did not want to be proud nor intend to be proud – but I was forced to be so.

A couple of weeks later (23 April) she wrote to Ellen on the subject of James Taylor's proposal as bluntly as Jane spoke to St John Rivers about his:

One does not like to say these things – but one had better be honest – Were I to marry him – my heart would bleed – in pain and humiliation – I could not – could not look up to him – No if Mr T[aylor] be the only husband Fate offers to me – single I must always remain. But yet – at times – I grieve for him – and perhaps it is superfluous – for I cannot think he will suffer much – a hard nature – occupation – change of scene will befriend him.

Some months later Charlotte received news of James Taylor from his employer, George Smith, and on 15th September 1851 she wrote to Mr Smith:

I am truly glad that there is good news of Mr Taylor – that he is so well and that his business energies have so far stood the test of the Indian Sun.

On 11th January 1853 Charlotte wrote to Ellen from London, where she was staying with Mr Smith and his mother. She had received news concerning her absent friend:

Mr Taylor is said to be getting on well in India – but there are complaints of his

temper and nerves being rendered dreadfully excitable by the hot climate; it seems he is bad to live with – I never catch a pleasant word about him; except that his probity and usefulness are held in esteem.

The outpost of Smith Elder and Company that James Taylor had set up in Bombay was not very successful and was abolished by the end of 1856. Taylor died in Bombay in 1874. His obituaries show that he was over independent and single-minded. As secretary to the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society he 'was so fond of doing things in his own way that he almost ignored the existence of the Managing Committee'. He had also been secretary to the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and registrar of the Bombay University.

[See the piece on James Taylor in volume 10 of this newsletter, December 2002.]

BRANWELL BRONTË GIVES A LESSON IN PAINTING



*“Branwell”, Painting on the lawn of the Parsonage
(photograph courtesy of Jean Warner)*

THE DISCOVERY OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

William Smith Williams 1800-1875: A Genealogical Quest

Private Publication – Norman E Penty, April 2006

Review by Ann Lock

This book is, as the title says, a genealogical quest into the life and times of William Smith Williams – the literary editor who discovered Charlotte Brontë. Margaret McCarthy of the Brontë Society told Norman Penty that she was fascinated with William Smith Williams but so little was known about him. So Norman Penty (a retired merchant banker) took up the challenge and spent three years tenaciously and meticulously researching the life of this man.

The book is a very detailed chronological account of his research and findings. Norman Penty's research efforts are an amazing story in itself of determined detective work – for example his search for the chalk hills mentioned in Charlotte Brontë's letter in order to find where the family originated.

Norman Penty writes with warmth and enthusiasm and insight and inspires in the reader much admiration and gratitude for his underrated subject – a refined, intelligent, sensitive and cultured but very humble man. This book is the first to focus on William Smith Williams, and the author has very generously provided an invaluable resource for someone to write a long overdue book on William Smith Williams. Williams was highly esteemed by Charlotte Brontë and was a friend of, among others, Ruskin, Keats and Thackeray. Congratulations and thank you Norman.

Norman Penty has presented a copy of his book to the Australian Brontë Association.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Ann Lock brings us up to date with her research on William Francis Williams (Frank)

I finished my talk at a recent ABA meeting with the statement that Norman Penty (who asked for someone in Australia to research the son of William Smith Williams) had received some exciting information from a descendent of William Smith Williams' wife. I stated at the time that Norman Penty and I thought the information to be 80% correct. It has proved to be only 40% correct. But this 40% enabled me to trace the family of William Francis Williams down to the Galweys. I then wrote to all the Galweys in the Sydney telephone book and was surprised and excited when Erica Galwey phoned me and said that she was the daughter of Erica Thornton.

(Erica Thornton Galwey was the granddaughter of Frank Williams, born 1831). I then visited Erica (88) and her sister Molly (82) at Cronulla. Their sister Ann (90) lives too far away to visit.

Ann, Erica and Molly are the first living descendents of William Smith Williams to be found in Australia or England. They are his great great granddaughters. They didn't know about William Smith Williams and I was able to give them the book on their great great grandfather written by Norman Penty. They are remarkable women. I still do not know when Frank Williams died.



FRANK WILLIAMS – NAMES AND FAMILY HISTORY

by Ann Lock

As part of my research into William Francis Williams – ‘Frank’ – who emigrated to Australia in 1852 and was the son of William Smith Williams, I visited Erica (88) and Molly Wasson (82) the great great grand daughters of William Smith Williams.

Erica told me the story of how she asked her mother, Erica Thornton Galway, why she didn’t have any talents. Her mother would ‘rear up’ and say ‘You have a thousand Sturts in your blood as well as artists and writers.’

My ears pricked up on the word ‘artist’ as I was trying to find out about Frank Williams (1831) the artist son of William Smith Williams.

I asked Erica and Molly who was the artist? Erica then told me the story of how their grandmother, Julia Agnes Vera, wife of Frank Williams (1857), would say to them ‘Alma Tadema was hung!’ She would look at the expressions of horror on their faces and laugh and then say ‘hung in the Royal Academy.’ Ann (90) confirmed the name on the phone.

They were very proud of this Alma Tadema and called him a ‘Royal Academician’. I didn’t recognise the name and did not associate the name with William Smith Williams. (Norman Penty does tell us about him in his book.)

When I spoke to Norman Penty in England he straight away recognised my garbled version of Alma Tadema and told me how he was a famous Victorian artist who painted ancient classical scenes. He had exhibitions at the Royal Academy and was knighted for his contribution to art – Sir Laurence Alma Tadema. He married the sister of William Smith Williams’ daughter-in-law in 1871. She was Laura Epps the daughter of Dr George Epps the half-brother of Dr John Epps whom Charlotte Brontë consulted about homeopathic help for Emily.

There are two Alma Tadema paintings on display in the N.S.W. Art Gallery – ‘Cleopatra’ and ‘The Juggler’ (court 12).

I find it very interesting that of all the famous names associated with William Smith Williams, Brontë, Keats, Gaskell, Ruskin, Thackeray etc, Alma Tadema is the name that survived being passed down through the Frank Williams’ family. But Alma Tadema was not a blood relation. This name could only have come down from Frank Williams born in 1857.

Frank was Frank Williams’ (1831) son and in 1871 he was staying with his grandfather William Smith Williams in England. He probably met some of the above people and could have gone to the wedding of Alma Tadema and Laura Epps in July 1871. Obviously he was very impressed with the fact that Alma Tadema was a famous artist. Frank was 13 at the time and had gone to England from Australia. I wonder if William Smith Williams told him about Charlotte Brontë. Ann, Erica and Molly knew nothing about the Charlotte Brontë connection with William Smith Williams. They do now!

As I said Ann, Erica and Molly did not know anything about William Smith Williams. However I found it interesting how the name Smith Williams came down through the family. Erica told me the story how Ann (the eldest sister) applied to Sydney Hospital for a job as a nurse prior to 1945. Their Aunt Mabel Galway was deputy Matron and they did not want a repetition of the name Galway, so Ann was asked to use her mother’s maiden name. She nominated Smith Williams but dropped the ‘Smith’ because another nurse was named Smith. However Frank Williams was not Frank Smith-Williams. “Smith” was not part of a hyphenated name but the second name of William Smith Williams.

Only 'Frank Williams' was used on the birth, death and marriage certificates. However the name Smith Williams came down through the family.

Erica, Molly and Ann's mother was named Erica Thornton Williams. Erica and Molly just knew the name Thornton as a family name and didn't know why it was used. But Thornton was the name of William Smith Williams' youngest son and brother of Frank Williams (1831) who came to Australia. This Thornton Arthur Williams (1842) was said to be named after Leigh Hunt's son, Thornton.

Thornton Williams (1842) was the one who gave the information for the death certificate of Ellen Williams – Frank's (1857) sister. She was born in Australia and died in England aged 12. He seems to have been responsible for much of the family affairs. He would have been 29 when Frank, aged 13, was in England and was probably a much loved uncle.

It seems to me that the few surviving family stories come from Frank Williams (1857) via his wife Julia Agnes Vera Williams and not from the father Frank Williams (1831).

Frank Williams died in 1893 aged 36. He left three daughters: Amelia (8), Dorothy (6) and Erica Thornton (2½). His wife Julia Agnes married again in 1901. She quite naturally would have told her daughters more about her side of the family. Frank didn't live long enough to tell his daughters his family history. But he saw that his eldest daughter Amelia had the nickname 'Tad' and the youngest the second name of 'Thornton'.

Molly's son is Mark Thornton and his son is Matthew Thornton, born in 1992. Amelia was called Aunty 'Tad' by Ann, Erica and Molly. Molly and Erica knew nothing about their great grandfather Frank Williams (1831) but Julia Agnes knew her father-in-law was an artist when she gave the information for her husband's death certificate.

I now know far more about Frank Williams (1857) but not much about Frank Williams (1831).

William Smith Williams, the friend of Charlotte Brontë, Keats, Thackeray, Ruskin etc was born in London in 1800. In 1826 he married Margaret Eliza Hill, who was born in 1805. They both died in London, he in 1875 and she in 1887.

They had eight children: Margaret, Fanny, William, Mary, Robert, Richard, Thornton and Anna. Young William was William Francis, generally known as Frank. He was born in 1831 and he emigrated to Australia in 1852. In 1855 he married Ellen Williams, who was born in London in 1838. The marriage took place at Scot's Church in Sydney. It is not known when they died.

Frank and Ellen had two children, Ellen and Frank. Ellen was born in 1856 and died in London in 1868. Young Frank was born in 1857 in Ashfield. In 1883 he married Julia Agnes Vera Montgomery in Walgett, born in Tumut around 1864. He was an accountant with the Bank of New South Wales in Walgett. They had three children: Amelia Vera, whom he nicknamed 'Tad' (born 1885), Dorothy (born 1887) and Erica Thornton (born 1891).

Frank junior died at the early age of 36 in 1893 and Julia remarried Alexander Cameron in 1901.

Erica Thornton married Frank Galwey in 1914 and they had three daughters, all alive today. Ann (Agnes) was born in 1916, Erica in 1918. The youngest, Molly, was born in 1924.

ALAN JONES ON BRONTË

Chris Simkin ... once asked Jones for help with *Wuthering Heights*. The classic Brontë tale, one well-known and loved by Jones but not by Simkin's class, was given an outing in an extraordinary Saturday session. After three hours the boys, formerly bored stupid, were passionate Brontë fans. Simkin, still bearing a trace of that enthusiasm in his voice, says Alan Jones has a gift for giving vision to the words. From the chapter "Among Kings (Kings School)" of *Jonestown – The Power And The Myth* of Alan Jones by Chris Masters, Allen & Unwin, 2006. **Spotted by Ann Lock.**

JANE EYRE GOES WEST

On a Friday evening in late July the two of us ventured out to the western Sydney suburb of Werrington to see a performance of *Jane Eyre* by members of the Henry Lawson Theatre Company. The play was being staged at the Henry Lawson Club, a large Leagues-style complex where the pokies were in manic action and the meat tray raffle was in full swing as we recovered from the hour long journey over a pre-theatre meal in the bistro.

It was in this rather unlikely location that we discovered the theatre at the rear of



the club, complete with a chandelier in the small foyer and the traditional red and gold curtains across the stage. It reminded us of the Genesian Theatre in the city, although

this venue was smaller, seating about 100. It was full on the night we attended and indeed, extra chairs had to be brought in to accommodate the crowd. We were pleasantly surprised to find that the programmes were free, as was the tea and coffee served during both intervals.

The dramatization of *Jane Eyre* into a three act play by Constance Cox was enthusiastically acted by the company of 12 players. The standard of the set and the costumes was well on a



par with that of a city theatre production. The play, simply entitled *Jane Eyre*, was set entirely at Thornfield Hall, where the first act opened with the arrival of Jane taking up her post as governess there.

Allowing for the omission of Jane's



childhood experiences and the later episode when she finds refuge with the Rivers family, the play was a faithful adaptation of Charlotte Bronte's novel.

There were some excellent performances among the cast, particularly from the couple taking the lead roles of Jane and Mr Rochester, both of whom were on stage for the majority of the action. Among the minor roles we were particularly impressed by the 11 year old playing Adèle. Her French accent was faultless! The 'over the top' performances of the Ingram family provided a touch of comedy, whilst the dramatic appearance of Bertha Mason had the audience shrieking in horror. When it was revealed on Jane's wedding day that Mr Rochester was already a married man, a collective gasp of surprise went up from the audience, the majority of whom were obviously unfamiliar with the story, but nonetheless were most attentive and appreciative.



We thoroughly enjoyed this performance in this unexpected but delightful setting, and agreed that it was a very pleasant surprise to find *Jane Eyre* alive and well in the outer western suburbs of Sydney.

Catherine Barker and

Patricia Stebbings Moore

JANE EYRE STAMPS



On 24th February 2005 the British Post Office released a series of six stamps designed by Peter B. Willeberg. They featured lithographs by Paula Rego and depicted scenes from *Jane Eyre*. (Thanks to Jan Roden for donating these stamps to the Association.)

WHY PLAIN JANE DESERVES PLENTY MORE EYRE TIME

Times September 2006

*Literature's most famous heroine returns to TV – again.
Carola Long finds there's life in the old girl yet.*

“A love story every woman would die a thousand deaths to live.” That was the melodramatic tagline on the 1944 version of *Jane Eyre* starring Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine. The Mills and Boon-style prose might have rotated Charlotte Brontë in her grave, but it does sum up the romantic power of the classic novel, and the reason why it has spawned more than 20 TV and film productions, plays and another novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The 1944 version is widely regarded as definitive and if no one has managed to improve on it in 62 years, do we really need another *Jane Eyre*?

Well, yes. The BBC's new four part series promises to invigorate the original story, just as the other recent adaptations

have. The series has the dark drama and edgy camerawork of *Bleak House*, the emotional tension and sympathetic heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* and a worthy successor to Colin Firth's Mr Darcy in the form of Toby Stephens, who plays the fiery heart-throb Mr Rochester. The key to the success of this adaptation, however, is the actress playing Jane Eyre herself – a virtually unknown 24-year-old called Ruth Wilson – who finely conveys the heroine's combination of outer stoicism and inner passion.

On meeting Wilson, I am struck by how much prettier she is off screen than as Jane. Instead of a Gothic pallor, she has a light honey glow, while the thick eyebrows

that give her character a fierce aspect have been plucked into fine architectural arches. She's also sporting rather bling, long French manicured nails, the vanity of which would have the pious Jane screwing up those unplucked eyebrows in disapproval. "Lots of people have said to me, 'You aren't plain, so why are you playing plain Jane?'" she says in an animated South London accent. "But I do look pretty drab in the film, I wear hardly any make-up. I have those horrible matted extensions and I had to grow my eyebrows out so they look wild."

In the novel much is made of Jane Eyre's plain appearance and she refers repeatedly to her "want of beauty". Brontë was making a moral statement in creating a proto-feminist heroine who doesn't conform to Victorian standards of beauty.

Brontë's Rochester, too, is coarse looking, with "a colourless olive face ... square massive brow ... firm grim mouth", which makes the debonair Stephens a surprising choice as the gruff anti-hero. Wilson admits that Stephens "wasn't really how I imagined Rochester. I envisaged someone a bit more brooding. Toby is just instantly good-looking, very dishevelled. [But] it turns out he is absolutely perfect for the role."

Indeed, Stephens makes a convincing, sternly seductive Rochester. So did Wilson's heart flutter during those corseted clinches? "Well, I did fancy him, but only as Jane. As Ruth I love him to bits, but as a mate. Toby snarls and sneers a lot as Rochester, but he's actually loud and funny and whenever I felt out of my depth he was really supportive."

The series was filmed in Derbyshire over about 13 weeks. "It was enjoyable but tough", says Wilson. "I've never worked quite so hard. I was in

every scene – even if I was in the background there would be a close-up of my expression at some point." The physical challenge of 12-hour days was hardly eased by cumbersome costumes and tight corsets, but as Wilson explains, "they put you straight into character they give you instant posture." Raising the question of how romance ever flourished in the 19th century before daily showering, she adds: "I did wonder how the hell they used to function in those clothes. Everyone must have really stunk, because they were doing stuff every day on horses, in hot weather. Yuck."

Despite the pressure to conform to the existing image of Eyre that lives in the minds of critics and viewers, Wilson seems undaunted: "If you try and fit into someone's mould of what a character should be then you will never get it right." She declares that she isn't going to read any reviews of the series, but one form of review she has read is the BronteBlog (bronteblog.blogspot.com) "where all these obsessed people post their every thought about the Brontës. They were saying all this stuff like 'She's 5ft 7in: she's too tall to play Jane, she should be 4ft nothing.' I wanted to log on and say, 'Hi, I'm Ruth Wilson', and set them all straight." While the Brontë bloggers might balk at a rogue ouija board scene, it is one of only a few minor changes to the novel.

Wilson has made the point of not watching any of the other versions of *Jane Eyre*. "You can get bogged down in other people's visions," she explains. "I think it's better to consult the bible [she means the original novel]." She has read the book twice, once at the age of 12 and again before her audition, and she seems to be deeply immersed in its characters and themes. "I don't think you can play a



character if you don't like them, and I loved Jane," she says. "She's determined, strong, driven, with an incredible morality. She's the typical British underdog, but she also remains true to herself – it's such a feminist novel."

Given her references to feminism, is Wilson familiar with more academic interpretations? I attempt to fox her with postcolonial and feminist theories, and she muses on them unfazed before saying: "We've also explored the idea that Bertha represents a side of Jane that she hasn't been able to express. There's the question of whether Bertha is real or a figment of Jane's repressed sexual imagination."

Wilson's ease with academic analysis reflects her unusual route into acting. She has a degree in history from Nottingham University, where several lead roles in drama productions convinced her to "give acting a shot". She studied drama at London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (Lamda) and after leaving got the role of the

oversexed teenager Jewel Diamond in the surreal Channel 4 comedy *Suburban Shootout*. Today's footballer's wife manicure is part of Jewel Diamond costume – she has just come from the set of the second series.

Since landing the part of Jane Eyre, Wilson has been exciting a lot of interest from casting agents, but unemployment is a recent enough memory to prevent the attention getting to her head. "I had to develop other skills. I'm quite good at opening an organic cake stall in Waterloo, near where I live." This leads to a literary digression worthy of the Brontë Blog. "If Jane Eyre made cakes", she muses, "they would be organic and definitely sugar, wheat and dairy free. They'd probably look revolting but taste good." When Wilson gets this deep under the skin of her characters, it's a safe bet that Waterloo won't be getting that cake stall.

SHIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

Prior to Charlotte Brontë's novel Shirley, the name "Shirley" was only ever used as a man's name. But Charlotte wanted to give a masculine name to her independent and strong heroine and so she appropriated "Shirley". Ever since it has mainly been used for girls (one exception is the singer John Shirley Quirk). The name was popularised by Shirley Temple in the 1930s and that probably accounts for the large number of Shirleys who were born around that time.

There is a club called the Shirley Club – one of Australia's most exclusive clubs, open only open to an elite coterie: extroverted women of a certain age, called Shirley. Jane Cadzow writes in The Good Weekend about the phenomenon that is Shirl power. [The following is an abbreviated version.]

On a certain weekday morning a mini-bus full of middle-aged women hurtles along a highway in western Melbourne. Shirley Richardson wearing an aqua cowboy hat and devil-may-care smile, is at the wheel. Her passengers are Shirley Deans, Shirley Dartnell, Shirley Shaw, Shirley Chambers, Shirley Skeen, Shirley McLennan and Shirley Vaughan.

Shirley Richardson is the founder of the Victorian division of the Shirley Club, which has branches around Australia and in

New Zealand. The club is open to anyone called Shirley. In theory, the 1000 or so members have only their name in common, but in practice there is a certain similarity about them. For a start, most were born in the 1930s and early '40s. Richardson, aged 60, is a whippersnapper by Shirley Club standards. And most of them are extroverts.

But what's really striking is the Shirley's exuberance. They are all funsters – or so it seems on the bus, where animated conversation occasionally gives way to

rollicking choruses of the club anthem: "Here we are again, happy as can be/We're all Shirls and jolly good company." Noticing I am not joining in, Shirley Vaughan hands me the lyrics on a sheet of paper. "That's for you, Shirl," she says.

Shirley Brown, who started the whole thing a decade ago in Perth, cannot explain why Shirleys are such extroverts. "They are all the same," she says. "They are all chatty and outgoing. It's quite freaky, really."

The club's first meeting was in a Perth restaurant. Brown, now 70, had advertised the event by writing to newspapers and speaking on local radio, but didn't know what sort of response she would get. To her amazement, more than 60 Shirleys showed up. "They just sat down and started talking," she says, "and after about half an hour the noise was atrocious. You'd think they had known one another for years."

The Shirleys have been chatting ever since. "You don't have to organise for them to do anything," says Brown, who is known as Shirley Number One. "You just have to get them together. People who aren't Shirleys don't seem to understand it."

The 2004 edition of Guinness World Records noted that 122 Shirleys attended the club's national convention at Alice Springs in 2001, making it the largest same-name gathering on record. The Shirleys were thrilled to get into the book – and crestfallen when the title was wrested from them a couple of years later by 375 Marias in Madrid. In February 2005, the Marias were themselves deposed by 1096 Mohammeds in Dubai.



The most famous Shirley is undoubtedly Shirley Temple. The Shirley Club tried to get Shirley Temple (now Shirley Black an

American diplomat) to join but she never wrote back.

The idea of getting the Shirleys together came to Brown after studying a 1938 picture of herself, aged three, dolled up to resemble Shirley Temple. Like many Shirleys she had been named after the dimple-cheeked moppet who pranced and pouted her way through many popular 1930 movies. She wondered if all other Shirleys looked the same.

They did. "Quite a few of the Shirleys reckon they hated the name," she tells me, "because they were sent to dancing classes, and they were supposed to be cute and have curly hair like Shirley Temple."

"Shirley" is adapted from "sheer lea", meaning "bright clearing". It was originally an English placename, then a surname, and after that a boy's name. In Charlotte Brontë's 1849 novel *Shirley*, the heroine is given the name because "her parents, who wished to have a son ... bestowed on her the same masculine cognomen they would have bestowed on a boy".

It was rarely used for girls until after 1880, when one Reverend Wilks cultivated a new kind of poppy in the garden of the vicarage at Shirley in Surrey. He called the bloom the Shirley poppy and, when flower names such as daisy, Violet and Iris became fashionable, Shirley began appearing in births columns too.

In Australia it was all the rage in the mid 1930s, when Shirley Temple (born 1928) was



Hollywood's biggest box-office attraction. Shirley was the fourth most popular girl's name in Victoria from 1930 to 1939 (after Margaret, Patricia and Joan). In NSW in 1935 there were 1400 Shirleys registered. In 2005 there were just two. Shirleys will soon be extinct.

BRONTËS' FATHER NOT SO SAVAGE

From *The Times*, reprinted in *The Australian* 5th December 2006,
spotted by John Minnis



LONDON: The father of the famous English writers, the Brontë sisters, has long been pilloried as a Victorian bully, after a damning description by the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell.

Now his image has been transformed by a previously unpublished letter that has come to light among

historic papers in the library of Lambeth Palace, London.

Ten days after the death of his daughter, Charlotte – the sixth of his children to die before him – the Reverend Patrick Brontë gave a deeply moving account of the tragedies that had struck his gifted family.

The 78-year-old parson wrote “I have lived long enough to bury a beloved wife and six children – all that I had. I greatly enjoyed their conversation and company, and many of them were well fitted for being companions to the wisest and best. Now that they are all gone – their image and memory remain, and meet me at every turn – but they themselves have left me.”

The four-page letter was found among papers relating to Charles Thomas Longley, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1862 to 1868, which were donated to Lambeth Palace two years ago by Longley’s descendents.

Brontë scholar Brian Wilks said: “It’s the missing piece of the jigsaw. The letter will delight and startle Brontë enthusiasts. The letter shows dignity, courage and suffering.”

The letter was sent to Longley in 1855, while he was Bishop of Ripon. Thanking him for his words of comfort, Brontë admitted that his grief was challenging his faith.

“The Lord gave and the Lord took away. But I have often found, and find in this last sad trial, that it is often difficult to walk entirely by faith, and sincerely to pray ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’.”

The tone and quality of the letter contradicts the comments made by Gaskell – Charlotte’s first biographer – during Patrick Brontë’s lifetime.



In *Blackwoods Magazine*, which he is known to have read, she described him as “a cassocked savage who ought to have been taken out into the garden and shot.”

The new material will be published in Brontë Studies next autumn.

Catherine Barker will be giving a talk on Patrick Brontë in the new year.

A MOST CHARMING LITTLE BISHOP

From an appendix to *The Letters of the Reverend Patrick Brontë*, edited by Dudley Green, Nonsuch, Gloucestershire 2005.

The Rt Revd (later Most Revd) Charles Thomas Longley (1794-1868) was Bishop of Ripon 1836-1857. He was educated at Christ Church, Oxford and in 1829 was appointed Headmaster of Harrow. When the Diocese of Ripon was created in 1836 Charles Longley was consecrated as its first bishop. He went on to be successively Bishop of Durham (1856-60), Archbishop of York (1860-62) and Archbishop of Canterbury (1862-68). In 1867 he instituted the first Lambeth Conference of bishops of the Anglican Communion. In 1847 Patrick supported the bishop's initiative in appointing subdeacons to assist in all clerical duties apart from administering the sacrament.

When the bishop visited Haworth in March 1853 and stayed overnight at the Parsonage, Charlotte was very impressed by him, writing to Ellen Nussey: 'He is certainly a most charming little bishop – the most benignant little gentleman that ever put on lawn sleeves – yet stately too.' This visit coincided with the rift between Patrick and Arthur Nicholls over Arthur's proposal of marriage to Charlotte. The bishop sensed Nicholls's unhappiness and sympathised with him. Charlotte later reported to Margaret Wooler: 'I saw him press his hand and speak to him very kindly at parting'. In the same letter she referred to him as 'the good and dear Bishop'.


CHURCH REFORM

by P. Brontë, November 1847 – a poem written to celebrate the ban imposed by his curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, preventing the women of Haworth them from spreading their laundry over the tombstones

In Haworth, a parish of ancient renown,
Some preach in their surplice, and others their gown,
And some with due hatred of tower and steeple,
Without surplice, or gown, hold forth to the people;
And High Church, and Low Church, and No Church at all –
Would puzzle the brains of St Peter and Paul –
The Parson, an old man, but hotter than cold,
Of late in reforming, has grown very bold,
And in his fierce zeal, as report loudly tells,
Through legal resort, has reformed the bells –
His Curate who follows – with all due regard –
Though Foil'd by the Church, has reform'd the Churchyard –
Then let all schismatics, look on, in mute wonder
Nor e'er dream the Church, shall in turn, knock under
T'will go on reforming, whate be their clatter
Till cleans'd is the outside, both cup and platter –
The dead all deceased, their ghosts heavy moan.
In shakes to the centre of each slumbering stone –
The females all routed have fled with their clothes
To stackyards, and backyards, and where noone knows,
And loudly have sworn by the suds which they swim in,
They'll wring off his head, for warring with women.
Whilst their husbands combine & roar out their fury,
They'll Lynch him at once, without trial by Jury.
But saddest of all, the fair maidens declare,
Of marriage or love he must ever despair.

ABA PROGRAM FOR OUR 10th YEAR, 2007

The year 2007 will be the 10th year of the Australian Brontë Association. We were formed in late 1998 and held our first meeting in 1999. We have held meetings at the University of New South Wales, Pyrmont Neighbourhood Centre, New College, and now the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, plus other events at many other venues. By the end of 2007 we will have held 36 normal meetings, 10 Christmas lunches and 13 special Friday evening events, including the spectacular one woman show "Reader I Married Him" with Angela Barlow. As well we have held 4 weekend conferences and a Sunday picnic at Ebenezer.

Normal meetings (with the symbol ) are held on level 1 of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, 280 Pitt St Sydney (just around the corner from Town Hall station), with a meeting charge of \$4.

 **Saturday 10th FEBRUARY 10:30am at the SMSA (including a brief AGM)**
Susannah Fullerton: Daphne du Maurier and the Brontës

Daphne du Maurier was a life-long reader of the Brontës. Her novel *Rebecca* was strongly influenced by *Jane Eyre*, but her true sympathy lay with Branwell Brontë and she wrote a book about his short and tragic life. Susannah Fullerton will discuss the Brontë influence on this popular novelist.

 **Saturday 17th MARCH (St Patrick's Day) 10:30am at the SMSA**
Catherine Barker: Happy Birthday Patrick Brontë

The date of this meeting, 17th March, marks the 230th anniversary of the birth of Patrick Bronte, the patriarch of the Brontës of Haworth. It is a fitting day therefore on which to look at the life of this extraordinary man and to examine the influence that he had on his unique family.

Friday 13th APRIL 8pm in a Pyrmont Cellar
BRONTËS IN THE DUNGEON

In their poetry, all three Brontë sisters (but especially Anne) seem to have been preoccupied with dungeons and prisoners. The evening will be held in a candle-lit cellar in Pyrmont. We will listen to readings of this poetry, as well as a dungeon story by Edgar Alan Poe. Space is strictly limited so it is essential to make a booking by ringing Christopher Cooper 9804-7473.



 **Saturday 12th MAY 10:30am at the SMSA**

Professor Christine Alexander: Charlotte Brontë's Engagement Ring and Newly Found Brontë Memorabilia

Christine Alexander has recently uncovered a link between Ireland and Canada and discovered some Brontë relics.

 **Saturday 30th JUNE 10:30am at the SMSA**

Amanda Collins: Gaskell's Gothic Brontë – Fact, Fiction and Function

Dr Amanda Collins will discuss the Gothic myth of Haworth and the Brontës in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. She will argue that Gaskell drew on an established way of viewing the Brontës – one that had served to make sense of their original fiction, mysterious identities and tragic lives.

PTO for the rest of the year

ABA EVENTS FOR THE SECOND HALF OF OUR 10th ANNIVERSARY YEAR, 2007

 **Saturday 28th JULY 10:30am at the SMSA**

Jane Eyre and Friends

Several characters from *Jane Eyre* will be interviewed and will be asked many questions that do not get answered in the novel.

Friday 21st – Sunday 23rd SEPTEMBER

A HIGHLAND WEEKEND at Ranelagh House in Robertson in the Southern Highlands

This year, instead of having a “Three Sisters Weekend” in the Blue Mountains, we will be following Charlotte Brontë into the Scottish Highlands. She made a couple of short trips there and she greatly admired Walter Scott and all things Scottish. One of the highlights for her was a visit to Abbotsford, the “medieval castle” that Scott built for himself.

In July of this year some of our members accompanied Susannah Fullerton on a literary tour of Ireland and Scotland and we visited Abbotsford. There we found, not just one but two, libraries to die for. And the small baronial hall was full of suits of armour, swords, shields and other trophies of battle.

At this year’s Highland Weekend there are no suits of armour, and the library is just an antique dresser with a good number of classics. But we will learn about the much neglected author, Walter Scott as well as other Scottish writers. Also we will find out about Charlotte’s Highland excursions. But above all, we will have a relaxing weekend with convivial company and good food – not to mention the fresh highland air.

We will stay at Ranelagh House, in Robertson. This large house was built in the 1920s as a hotel, but has served as a Franciscan Seminary (there are magnificent stained glass windows dating from this time) as well as being used for other residential purposes, before once again becoming an old world hotel.

Further details, including cost, and a booking form will be included in the June 2007 newsletter.

 **Saturday 6th OCTOBER 10:30am at the SMSA**

JOINT MEETING WITH THE DICKENS SOCIETY

Dr Virginia Lowe: As No-one but a Woman Can

She compares Esther Summerson from *Bleak House* with Lucy Snowe from *Villette*.

Friday 2nd NOVEMBER 7pm in Eastwood

GREENLAND – ‘THAT RESERVOIR OF FROST AND SNOW’

The young Jane Eyre, while looking at the pictures in Bewick’s *Birds*, muses on the arctic wastes that act as a backdrop to some of the woodcuts and refers to Greenland as ‘that reservoir of frost and snow’.

*When the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls,
Boils round the naked, melancholy Isles
Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge
Pours in among the stormy Hebrides.*

Thule is in Greenland. In 2006, Christopher and Elisabeth Cooper and Marloesje Valkenburg visited the remote east coast of Greenland. During this evening we will learn of this country that is like none other on earth. Book by ringing Christopher Cooper on 9804-7473.

Saturday 8th DECEMBER: Christmas Lunch (details later)