



The Australian Brontë Association Newsletter

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THE BRONTËS AT THORNTON

The parsonage at Thornton, where Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne were all born, has recently been acquired as a secondary Brontë ‘shrine’. The following account of the family’s few years there, after before moving to Haworth, is from *The Brontë Family*, by Frances A. Leyland in 1886.



Thornton is beautifully situated on the northern slope of a valley. Green and fertile pastures spread over the adjacent hills, and wooded dells with shady walks beautify and enrich the district. ‘The neighbourhood,’ says Mrs. Gaskell, ‘is desolate and wild; great tracts of bleak land, enclosed by stone dykes, sweeping up Clayton Heights.’ This disagreeable picture of the place, painted by the biographer of Charlotte, is scarcely justified by the actual appearance of the district. The soil is naturally fertile, and the inhabitants are notable for industry and enterprise. Hence no barren land, within the wide range of hill and vale, is now seen obtruding on the cultivated sweep.

The town is somewhat regularly built. In the main street is situated the house where Mr. Brontë took up his abode during his stay at Thornton. The hall door was reached by several steps. There was a dining-room on one side of the hall, and a drawing-room on the other. Over the passage to the front was a dressing-room, at the window of which the neighbours often saw Mr. Brontë at his toilet. Above the door of the house, on a stone slab, there are still

visible the letters:

A.
J. S.
1802

These are the initials of John and Sarah Ashworth, former inhabitants of Thornton; and this residence remained as the parsonage until another was built below, nearer to the chapel, by the successor of Mr. Brontë. The chapel of Thornton is a narrow, contracted, and unsightly building. The north side is lighted by two rows of square cottage windows – on the south side, five late perpendicular pointed windows permit the sun to relieve the gloom of the interior. The diminutive communion-table is lighted by a four-mullioned window, above which, externally, in the wall, appears the date 1620.



The interior is blocked, on the ground floor, with high-backed, unpainted deal pews. Two galleries hide the windows almost from view, and cast a gloom over the interior of the edifice. The area under the pews, and in the aisles, is paved with gravestones, and a fetid, musty smell floats through the damp and mouldering interior. In this chapel, Mr. Brontë preached and ministered, and from the pulpit, placed high above the curate and clerk, whence he
 Around the table polish'd goblets shine,

delivered his sermons, he could see his wife and children in a pew just below him.

The new incumbent of Thornton seems to have taken active interest in his chapel; for in the western screen, which divides a kind of lobby from the nave, is painted, on a wooden tablet, an inscription recording that in the year 1818 this chapel was 'Repaired and Beautified,' the Rev. Patrick Brontë, B.A., being then minister.

While at Thornton Mr. Brontë steadily pursued his literary avocations, one of his books being a small volume entitled, *The Cottage in the Wood, or the Art of becoming Rich and Happy*. This is an account of a pious family, consisting of an aged couple and a virtuous child, whose appearance and education qualify her for a higher position in the world than that of a cottager's daughter. Accident brings to their door a young man in a state of almost helpless drunkenness, whose habits are the most profligate and dissolute, as the sequel discloses; and the object of the book is to show the dire consequences of continued intemperance.

The story is told in prose, but Mr. Brontë gives a poetical version of one event in the narrative. It is entitled, 'The Nightly Revel,' and possesses a dignity of its own. The following extract shows considerable improvement, in diction and verse, upon the style of his small volume published at Halifax, in 1811. For this reason it is well worth reproducing.



Fill'd with brown ale, or crown'd with ruddy wine;
Each quaffs his glass, and, thirsty, calls for more,
Till maddening mirth, and song, and wild uproar,
And idly fierce dispute, and brutal fight
Break the soft slumbers of the peaceful night.

Without, within, above, beneath, around,
Ungodly jests and deep-mouthed oaths resound;
Pale Reason, trembling, leaves her reeling throne,
Truth, Honour, Virtue, Justice, all are flown;
The sly, dark-glancing harlot's fatal breath
Allures to sin and sorrow, shame and death.

The gaming-table, too, that fatal snare,
Beset with fiercest passions fell is there;
Remorse, despair, revenge, and deadly hate,
With dark design, in bitter durance wait,
Till SCARLET MURDER waves his bloody hand,
Gives in sepulchral tone the dread command;
Then forth they rush, and from the secret sheath
Draw the keen blade and do the work of death.

Mr. Brontë also, in 1818, before his appointment to Haworth, published his *Maid of Killarney*. He had not been long at Thornton, where he went about the year 1815, when a considerable increase in his family added to his parental responsibilities. On his acceptance of the living, he probably enjoyed a larger stipend than at Hartshead, but the demands of a young family, perhaps, on the whole, made him a poorer man.



There Charlotte Brontë was born in April, 1816; Patrick Branwell Brontë in 1817; Emily Jane Brontë in 1818; and Anne

Brontë probably just before Mr. Brontë's removal to Haworth, which was on February 25th, 1820, as we are told by Mrs. Gaskell.

Of the life of the Brontës at Thornton we know little. But there were causes of anxiety pressing on Mr. Brontë at the time. The state of his wife's health was a real sorrow, and although he derived solace from his literary pursuits and the society of his clerical friends, his spirits were damped by the contemplation of the season of bereavement and affliction that assuredly threatened him at no distant date.

With six young children, who might soon become motherless, Mr. Brontë's future was dark and discouraging, and he entertained the idea of resigning, at no distant day, the then place of his cure. Here, living within a reasonable distance of Bradford, he had an opportunity of moving in a larger circle of friends than at Hartshead, and it was here that his children received their earliest impressions of local life and character. Old inhabitants of Thornton remembered them playing in the space opposite their father's residence, in the village street, and had often seen them carried, or their parents lead them by the hand, in the lanes of the

neighbourhood. They were children only when they left Thornton; yet, on many grounds, the inhabitants of that village may feel privileged that it was the birthplace of the authors of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.



Shortly an opportunity presented itself to Mr. Brontë for leaving Thornton, a vacancy having taken place at Haworth through the death of the curate, Mr. Charnock. The situation of this chapelry was blessed with a more bracing air, and the curate had a somewhat better stipend than Thornton allowed, and so Mr. Brontë accepted the presentation from the patron.

We are informed, however, that, on visiting the place of his intended ministrations, he was told that while to him personally the parishioners had no objection, yet, as the nominee of the vicar of Bradford, he would not be received. He had no idea that the inhabitants had a veto in the appointment. On Mr. Brontë declaring that, if he had not the good-will of the inhabitants, his ministrations would be useless, the place was presented to Mr. Redhead by the patron, and the village seems to have become the scene of extraordinary proceedings. It appears that, after the Reformation, the presentation to the curacy of Haworth, which had been from time immemorial vested in the vicar of Bradford, had become subject to the control of the freeholders, and of certain trustees who held possession of the principal funds from which the stipend of the curate proceeded, which they could withhold, by virtue of an authority they appear to have been empowered with. In effect, they could at any time disallow or render void an

appointment, if disagreeable to themselves, by keeping back the stipend.

Mr. Brontë, writing later of Mr. Redhead, says of this: 'My predecessor took the living with the consent of the vicar of Bradford and certain trustees, in consequence of which he was so opposed that, after only three weeks' possession, he was compelled to resign.' What this opposition and its immediate effects were, we learn from the pages of Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and they may be mentioned here as illustrative of the pre-eminent resolution and force of character which ever distinguish the inhabitants of the West-Riding and the dwellers on these rough-hewn and storm-beaten elevations.

During the long illness which preceded the death of Mr. Charnock, incumbent of Haworth, his assistant curate, Mr. Redhead, had supplied his place; who, on Mr. Brontë's withdrawal, was presented, as is stated above, to the vacant living by the patron, and he seems to have been determined to hold the chapelry, *vi et armis*, in defiance of the inhabitants. But the freeholders, conceiving they had been deprived of their long established prerogative, or an attempt was being made to interfere with it, protested against Mr.



Redhead's appointment.

On the first occasion of this gentleman's preaching in the church, it was crowded not by worshippers, but by a multitude of people bent on mischief. These resolved the service should not proceed, or that it should be rendered inaudible. To secure this object they had put on the heavy wooden clogs they

daily wore, except on Sundays, and, while the surpliced minister was reading the opening service, the stamping and clattering of the clogs drowned his voice, and the people left the church, making all the noise



and uproar that was in their power, which was by no means feeble.

The following Sunday witnessed proceedings still more disgraceful. We are told that at the commencement of the service, a man rode up the nave of the church on an ass, with his face to the tail, and with a number of old hats piled on his head. On urging his beast forward, the screams of delight, the roars of laughter, and the shouts of the approving conspirators completely drowned the clergyman's voice; and he left the chapel, but not yet discomfited. Mr. Redhead, on the third Sunday, resolved to make a strenuous and final effort to keep the ecclesiastical citadel of which he had been formally put in possession. For this purpose he brought with him a body of cavalry, composed of a number of sympathising gentlemen, with their horses; and the curate, thus accompanied by his supporters, ascended the village street and put up at the 'Bull.' But the enemy had been on the alert: the people were exasperated, and followed the new-comers to the church, accompanied by a chimney-sweep who had, not long before, finished his labours at some adjacent chimneys, and whom they had made half drunk. Him they placed right before the reading-desk, which Mr. Redhead had already reached, and the drunken, black-faced sweep nodded assent to the measured utterances of the minister.

'At last,' it is said, 'either prompted by some mischief-maker, or from some tipsy

impulse, he clambered up the pulpit stairs, and attempted to embrace Mr. Redhead. Then the fun grew fast and furious. Some of the more riotous pushed the soot-covered chimney-sweeper against Mr. Redhead, as he tried to escape. They threw both him and his tormentor down on the ground in the churchyard where the soot-bag had been emptied, and though, at last, Mr. Redhead escaped into the Black Bull, the doors of which were immediately barred, the people raged without, threatening to stone him and his friends.'

They escaped from the place, and Mr. Redhead, completely vanquished, retired from the curacy of Haworth. Mr. Brontë, who had made a favourable impression on the inhabitants, was now accepted by them, and the natural kindness of his disposition and the urbanity of his manners, secured peace and contentment in the village. His responsibilities as a pastor were not light, though the new scene of his labours, in moral condition, was, perhaps, no worse than the generality of similar villages in the north of England. The special chroniclers of Haworth speak of the population of the barren mountains west of York as 'rude and arrogant, after the manner of their wild country.' This is the testimony of James Rither, a Yorkshire esquire.

The celebrated Oliver Haywood, preaching at the house of Jonas Foster, at Haworth, on June 13th, 1672, broke out into lamentations about the immorality, corruption, and profanity of the place. Mr. Grimshaw, in the last century, while curate there, had a conviction that the majority of the people were going to hell with their eyes open! Mrs. Gaskell informs us that at Haworth, 'drinking without the head being affected was considered a manly accomplishment.' A remarkable instance of the loss of reverence and the increase of profanity, in those days, is found in the observance of Palm Sunday at Heptonstall, a neighbouring village, and at Haworth itself this feast was pre-eminently distinguished in ancient times by the out-door processions of people going from the church and returning

to it, bearing palm branches and singing the psalms and hymns appointed for the special festival. It is known, indeed, that this feast was attended by the inhabitants of the surrounding hills and valleys in those times; and, at the period of which I speak, the attendance of the people was not diminished, but increased, though they came for another object.

It is a singular fact that local feuds, if we may call them such, were kept up between the villages of the West Riding. And thus challenges were given alternately by Haworth to Heptonstall, and by Heptonstall to Haworth, for struggles between the champions of the respective villages, to be fought out on Palm Sunday. The inhabitants of these places, therefore, met to pound and pummel each other without any civil or religious cause to give bitterness to the fray: greed of triumph and brutal indifference to injuries inflicted characterized these hostile meetings. On such occasions, at Heptonstall, amidst great drunkenness and rioting, there were 'stand-up' fights from the church-gates to the 'Buttress,' a steep part of the road, near the bridge which crosses the river at the foot of Heptonstall Bank – nearly a mile in extent.

On one of these feasts, a Haworth belligerent, unwilling to return home, although night was drawing on, and looking extremely dissatisfied, when asked by his wife what ailed him, answered, 'Aw 'annot fawhten wi' onny body yet, an' aw'll nut gooa whom till aw dun summat.' His affectionate spouse replied, 'Then gooa, an' get fawhten' an' ha' done wi' it, for we mun gooa.' The West-Riding police, on their institution, put an end to these disgraceful proceedings. Haworth, the new place of Mr. Brontë's incumbency, which has been well and very fully described by many writers, is situated on the western confines of the parish of Bradford, and stands on a somewhat lofty eminence. It is, however, protected in great measure from the western storms by still higher ground, which consists of irreclaimable moors and morasses. The church in which he, for the remainder of his life, performed his religious services, and in

which his more gifted children repose, after their brief but memorable lives, was of ancient date.

A chantry was founded there at the beginning of the reign of Edward III., where a priest celebrated daily for the repose of the soul of Adam de Battley, and for the souls of his ancestors, and for all the faithful departed. The church, which is dedicated to the glory of God, in honour of St. Michael the archangel, has been recently, to a great extent, re-edified. The old structure retained traces of one still older, of the early English style. Invested as it was with the evidences of the periods of taste good and bad through which it had passed, and with the associations which attach to old and familiar internal arrangements, it was endeared to the inhabitants.

Of such associations the present church – though an architectural gain upon its predecessor – is necessarily destitute, and the world-wide interest with which the former structure was invested through the genius of the Brontës has been almost destroyed by the substitution of an edifice in which they never prayed, and which they never saw; though their remains repose, it is true, under its pavement, as is indicated by memorial tablets.

During the existence of the old church, Haworth was visited by continuous streams of people; but, on its removal, little was left to attract pilgrims from afar, and there was a manifest diminution of visitors to the village. In the recent alterations, the parsonage also, in which the children of the Rev. Patrick Brontë lived and won for themselves enduring fame in the path of literature, has undergone considerable changes. It has been found necessary to add a new wing to the house, in order to obtain larger accommodation, and, to beautify the parsonage still further, the old cottage panes, through which light fell on precious and invaluable pages of elaborate manuscript, as they passed through delicate and gifted hands, have given way to plate-glass squares. Altogether the house, both inside and out,

presents a very different appearance from that which it did in the time of the Brontës. The chapelry at Haworth, when Mr. Brontë accepted the perpetual curacy, was much more populous and important than that of Thornton. The stipend of £170 per annum, with a fair residence attached, and a sum of £27 13s. for maintenance, made the change a desirable one on pecuniary grounds; and, with Mrs. Brontë's annuity of £50 a year, anxiety on this head was no doubt allayed. The population of the district was about four thousand seven hundred, and, in the first ten years of Mr. Brontë's incumbency, increased by nearly twelve hundred souls. The chapelry included within its bounds the townships or hamlets of Stanbury and Near and Far Oxenhope, with the extensive moors and scattered houses stretching to the borders of Lancashire. The curacy of Stanbury, a place one mile west of Haworth, with £100 per annum, was in the gift of Mr. Brontë; and there was also the interest on £600, with a house, for the maintenance of a free school at that place, and a sum of £90 per annum for a like purpose at Haworth.

In the year 1849, while Mr. Brontë was still incumbent, the chapelry of Haworth was divided, a church having been erected at

Oxenhope at a cost of £1,500, the curacy there being valued at £150 per annum. Among the considerations which had weight with Mr. Brontë in his determination to accept the curacy of Haworth was, in all probability, the delicate state of his wife's health, and the not over-robust constitutions of his children. He knew, that though from the smoke-laden atmosphere of the busy centres of West-Riding industry, Keighley and Haworth were not wholly exempt, yet the winds which prevailed from the west and the south-west for a great part of the year, and swept over the moorlands from whose heights the Irish Channel itself was visible, would, by their purity, give that invigoration of which his family stood in need.

It is quite possible, indeed, that by Mr. Brontë's removal to Haworth, which gave an almost illimitable range of wild, heathery hills for his children to wander over, an extension of their short lives may have been attained. Mrs. Brontë, however, derived little or no benefit from the change. She had suffered for some time under a fatal malady – an internal cancer – of which, about eighteen months after her arrival at Haworth, she died.

CHAPTER 32A LOCKWOOD IN LONDON

Here continues my project of providing the 'off-stage' material that Emily Brontë chose to leave out of her novel. What happened to Lockwood in London between his two visits to Wuthering Heights? Here is my suggestion – Christopher Cooper

I was glad to get back to London. I never thought I would say this but I missed the noise and bustle of the busy London streets. Besides I had been working on my new book and I needed a good library to check out many things. I had thought of writing about all that I had learnt about the inhabitants of those two houses, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. But I felt unequal to the task. I shall leave that tale in better hands.

My new book was to be an historical romance. That's more in my line. My interest in the American war of independence was

awakened by hearing a little of Heathcliff's experiences. After hearing Nelly's account of what Heathcliff had told her I decided to tackle the source himself. He was unwilling to talk about it at first. I suppose he had seen some things he wanted to forget. But I was patient and, having brought a bottle of Scotch whisky to the Heights I managed to loosen his tongue after a few glasses. But I will refrain from telling you the account of his naval service because you will be able to read it when my second novel, *The King's Shilling* is published.

The first thing I did when I got back to London was to look up my old friend George, in Holborn, to see how his life was shaping up.

“George, it’s wonderful to see you after all these months.”

“The country air seems to have done wonders for you. You careworn features have completely disappeared. Have you been causing any other pretty young creatures any concern?”

“I was staying in such a remote environment that there were no pretty young creatures, as you are pleased to call them. Oh, with the exception of Cathy.”

I must have reddened when I said this because he began to tease me by asking searching questions about her. “Oh, so it’s Cathy this time. What’s she like? As pretty as your Sylvia?”

“She’s a widow with a saucy tongue.”

“Oh, I never expected that you’d fall for a woman of a certain age. Have the years been kind to her face?”

I began to raise my voice at the intrusive questions. “For a start I didn’t fall for her and secondly she was even younger than Sylvia!”

“Aha, a young widow. That’s the best sort of woman. Experienced in love, yet fresh faced and ripe as a cherry. How old is she, exactly?”

“Eighteen.”

“Whish! That’s mighty young for a widow.”

“Yes, and perhaps you could say she was fresh faced and ripe. But I would hardly call her experienced in love.”

“No, I suppose not. She mustn’t have been married for long.”

“Hardly more than a month. And she wasn’t in love with him – she was forced to marry him by the boy’s father.”

“Heavens, do such outrages happen in England today?”

“They did up there, in remote Yorkshire.”

“So did she respond to your love-making?”

“When I first met her she was positively rude to me. I supposed she thawed a bit afterwards but you could never say she was attracted to me.”

I must confess that when I first met her I did find her winsome. Even after being put in my place I dreamt that I might win her some day. But I had to drink my own medicine. As cold as I was to poor Sylvia in the end, was how Cathy was towards me.

“Anyway, she has a sweetheart.”

“I suppose he’s a rich landowner who’s swept her off her feet.”

“Not a bit. He’s a simple boy. She’s teaching him to read. But why all this talk about me? How have you fared in the marriage stakes? Found a winner?”

“You should know that I’m so busy with my work and my scientific research on the side, I have little time for the fair sex. But, as a matter of fact, I did meet someone up in Great Yarmouth when I went fossicking on the sea-shore.”

“What’s her name?”

“Felicity.”

“Not my Felicity I hope. The last I knew she was safely locked up in a convent.”

“No, she’s Felicity-Ann. She’s prettier than your Felicity, and she’s a collector of shells. And, she has a marvellous temperament. Her father is a doctor and that’s where she gets her scientific inclinations. We spend hours talking about augers and limpets and cockles.”

“And periwinkles? My aunt has a tea set decorated with images of periwinkles.”

“Oh, she *loves* periwinkles. In fact that’s the nickname she’s chosen for me.”

“What, she calls you Periwinkle?” I laughed at the thought of my best friend being a periwinkle!

“Well, she mostly shortens it to Perri. I’ll invite you round to tea tomorrow evening and you can meet her.”

We moved from matters of love to more professional topics. I told George about my plan to write a novel set in the American War of Independence. And he told me about his work at Lloyds.

AN 1848 REVIEW OF *JANE EYRE*

by Elizabeth Rigby

From the *Quarterly Review* 84: 167 (December 1848) pp 153 - 185

A remarkable novel is a great event for English society. It is a kind of common friend, about whom people can speak the truth without fear of being compromised, and confess their emotions without being ashamed. We are a particularly shy and reserved people, and set about nothing so awkwardly as the simple art of getting really acquainted with each other. We meet over and over again in what is conventionally called 'easy society,' with the tacit understanding to go so far and no farther; to be as polite as we ought to be, and as intellectual as we can; but mutually and honourably to forbear lifting those veils which each spreads over his inner sentiments and sympathies.

For this purpose a host of devices have been contrived by which all the forms of friendship may be gone through, without committing ourselves to one spark of the spirit. We fly with eagerness to some common ground in which each can take the liveliest interest, without taking the slightest in the world in his companion. Our various fashionable manias, for charity one season, for science the next, are only so many clever contrivances for keeping our neighbour at arm's length. We can attend committees, and canvas for subscribers, and archaeologise, and geologise, and take ether with our fellow Christians for a twelvemonth, as we might sit cross-legged and smoke the pipe of fraternity with a Turk for the same period—and know that at the end of the time as little of the real feelings of the one as we should know about the domestic relations of the other.

But there are ways and means for lifting the veil which equally favour our national idiosyncrasy; and a new and remarkable novel is one of them—especially the nearer it comes to real life. We invite our neighbour to a walk with the deliberate and malicious intent of getting thoroughly acquainted with him. We ask no impertinent questions—we proffer no indiscreet confidences—we do not even sound him, ever so delicately, as to his opinion of a common friend, for he would be sure not to say, lest we should go and tell; but we simply discuss Becky Sharp, or Jane Eyre, and our object is answered at once.

There is something about these two new and noticeable characters which especially compels everybody to speak out. They are not to be dismissed with a few commonplace moralities and sentimentalities. They do not fit any ready-made criticism. They give the most stupid something to think of, and the most reserved something to say; the most charitable too are betrayed into home comparisons which they usually condemn, and the most ingenious stumble into paradoxes which they can hardly defend.

Becky and Jane also stand well side by side both in their analogies and their contrasts. Both the ladies are governesses, and both make the same move in society; in one, in *Jane Eyre* phraseology, marrying her 'master,' and the other her master's son. Neither starts in life with more than a moderate capital of good looks—Jane Eyre hardly that—for it is the fashion now-a-days with novelists to give no encouragement to the insolence of mere beauty, but rather to prove to all whom it may concern how little a sensible woman requires to get on with in the world.

Both have also an elfish kind of nature, with which they divine the secrets of other hearts, and conceal those of their own; and both rejoice in that peculiarity of feature which Mademoiselle de Luzy has not contributed to render popular, viz., green eyes. Beyond this, however, there is no similarity either in the minds, manners, or fortunes of the two heroines. They think and act upon diametrically opposed principles—at least so the author of *Jane Eyre* intends us to believe—and each, were they to meet, which we should of all things enjoy to see them do, would cordially despise and abominate the other. Which of the two, however, would most successfully dupe the other is a different question, and one not so easy to decide; though we have our own ideas upon the subject.

Jane Eyre, as a work, and one of equal popularity, is, in almost every respect, a total contrast to *Vanity Fair*. The characters and events, though some of them masterly in conception, are coined expressly for the purpose of bringing out great effects. The hero and heroine are beings both so singularly unattractive that the reader feels they can have no vocation in the novel

but to be brought together; and they do things which, though not impossible, lie utterly beyond the bounds of probability. On this account a short sketch of the plan seems requisite; not but what it is a plan familiar enough to all readers of novels—especially those of the old school and those of the lowest school of our own day.

For *Jane Eyre* is merely another Pamela, who, by the force of her character and the strength of her principles, is carried victoriously through great trials and temptations from the man she loves. Nor is she even a Pamela adapted and refined to modern notions; for though the story is conducted without those derelictions of decorum which we are to believe had their excuse in the manners of Richardson's time, yet it is stamped with a coarseness of language and a laxity of tone which have certainly no excuses in ours. It is a very remarkable book: we have no remembrance of another combining such genuine power with such horrid taste. Both together have equally assisted to gain the great popularity it has enjoyed; for in these days of extravagant adoration of all that bears the stamp of novelty and originality, sheer rudeness and vulgarity have come in for a most mistaken worship.

The story is written in the first person. Jane begins with her earliest recollections, and at once takes possession of the reader's intensest interest by the masterly picture of a strange and oppressed child she raises up in a few strokes before him. She is an orphan, and a dependant in the house of a selfish, hard-hearted aunt, against whom the disposition of the little Jane chafes itself in natural antipathy, till she contrives to make the unequal struggle as intolerable to her oppressor as it is to herself. She is therefore, at eight years of age, got rid of to a sort of Dothegirls Hall, where she continues to enlist our sympathies for a time with her little pinched fingers, cropped hair, and empty stomach.

But things improve: the abuses of the institution are looked into. The Puritan patron, who holds that young orphan girls are only safely brought up upon the rules of La Trappe, is superseded by an enlightened committee—the school assumes a sound English character—Jane progresses from scholar to teacher, and passes ten profitable and not unhappy years at Lowood. Then she advertises for a situation as governess, and obtains one immediately in one of the midland counties.

We see her, therefore, as she leaves Lowood, to enter upon a new life – a small, plain,

odd creature, who has been brought up dry upon school learning, and somewhat stunted accordingly in mind and body, and who is now thrown upon the world as ignorant of its ways, and as destitute of its friendships, as a shipwrecked mariner upon a strange coast.

Thornfield Hall is the property of Mr. Rochester – a bachelor addicted to travelling. She finds it at first in all the peaceful prestige of an English gentleman's seat when 'nobody is at the hall.' The companions are an old decayed gentlewoman house-keeper – a far away cousin of the squire's – and a young French child, Jane's pupil, Mr. Rochester's ward and reputed daughter.

There is a pleasing monotony in the summer solitude of the old country house, with its comfort, respectability, and dullness, which Jane paints to the life; but there is one circumstance which varies the sameness and casts a mysterious feeling over the scene. A strange laugh is heard from time to time in a distant part of the house – a laugh which grates discordantly upon Jane's ear. She listens, watches, and inquires, but can discover nothing but a plain matter of fact woman, who sits sewing somewhere in the attics, and goes up and down stairs peaceably to and from her dinner with the servants.

But a mystery there is, though nothing betrays it, and it comes in with marvellous effect from the monotonous reality of all around. After awhile Mr. Rochester comes to Thornfield, and sends for the child and her governess occasionally to bear him company. He is a dark, strange-looking man – strong and large – of the brigand stamp, with fine eyes and lowering brows—blunt and sarcastic in his manners, with a kind of misanthropical frankness, which seems based upon utter contempt for his fellow-creatures, and a surly truthfulness which is more rudeness than honesty.

With his arrival disappears all the prestige of the country innocence that had invested Thornfield Hall. He brings the taint of the world upon him, and none of its illusions. The queer little governess is something new to him. He talks to her at one time imperiously as to a servant, and at another recklessly as to a man. He pours into her ears disgraceful tales of his past life, connected with the birth of little Adèle, which any man with common respect for a woman, and that a mere girl of eighteen, would have spared her; but which eighteen in this case listens to as if it were nothing new, and certainly nothing distasteful.

He is captious and Turk-like – she is one day his confidant, and another his unnoticed dependant. In short, by her account, Mr. Rochester is a strange brute, somewhat in the Squire Western style of absolute and capricious eccentricity, though redeemed in him by signs of a cultivated intellect, and gleams of a certain fierce justice of heart. He has a mind, and when he opens it at all, he opens it freely to her. Jane becomes attached to her ‘master,’ as Pamela-like she calls him, and it is not difficult to see that solitude and propinquity are taking effect upon him also. An odd circumstance heightens the dawning romance.

Jane is awake one night by that strange discordant laugh close to her ear – then a noise as if hands feeling along the wall. She rises – opens her door, finds the passage full of smoke, is guided by it to her master’s room, whose bed she discovers enveloped in flames, and by her timely aid saves his life. After this they meet no more for ten days, when Mr. Rochester returns from a visit to a neighbouring family, bringing with him a housefull of distinguished guests; at the head of whom is Miss Blanche Ingram, a haughty beauty of high birth, and evidently the especial object of the Squire’s attentions – upon which tumultuous irruption Miss Eyre slips back into her naturally humble position.

Our little governess is now summoned away to attend her aunt’s death-bed, who is visited by some compunctions toward her, and she is absent a month. When she returns Thornfield Hall is quit of all its guests, and Mr. Rochester and she resume their former life of captious cordiality on the one side, and diplomatic humility on the other. At the same time the bugbear of Miss Ingram and of Mr. Rochester’s engagement with her is kept up, though it is easy to see that this and all concerning that lady is only a stratagem to try Jane’s character and affection upon the most approved Griselda precedent.

Accordingly an opportunity for explanation ere long offers itself, where Mr. Rochester has only to take it. Miss Eyre is desired to walk with him in shady alleys, and to sit with him on the roots of an old chestnut-tree towards the close of evening, and of course she cannot disobey her ‘master’ – whereupon there ensues a scene which, as far as we remember, is new equally in art or nature; in which Miss Eyre confesses her love – whereupon Mr. Rochester drops not only his cigar (which she seems to be in the habit of lighting for him) but his mask, and finally offers not only heart, but hand.

The wedding-day is soon fixed, but strange misgivings and presentiments haunt the young lady’s mind. The night but one before, her bed-room is entered by a horrid phantom, who tries on the wedding veil, sends Jane into a swoon of terror, and defeats all the favourite refuge of a bad dream by leaving the veil in two pieces. But all is ready. The bride has no friends to assist – the couple walk to church – only the clergyman and the clerk are there – but Jane’s quick eye has seen two figures lingering among the tombstones, and these two follow them into church.

The ceremony commences, when at the due charge which summons any man to come forward and show just cause why they should not be joined together, a voice interposes to forbid the marriage. There is an impediment, and a serious one. The bridegroom has a wife not only living, but living under the very roof of Thornfield Hall. Hers was that discordant laugh which had so often caught Jane’s ear; but she it was who in her malice had tried to burn Mr. Rochester in his bed – who had visited Jane by night and torn her veil, and whose attendant was that same pretended seamstress who had so strongly excited Jane’s curiosity. For Mr. Rochester’s wife is a creature, half fiend, half maniac, whom he had married in a distant part of the world, and whom now, in his self-constituted code of morality, he had thought it his right, and even his duty, to supersede by a more agreeable companion.

Now follow scenes of a truly tragic power. This is the grand crisis in Jane’s life. Her whole soul is wrapt up in Mr. Rochester. He has broken her trust, but not diminished her love. He entreats her to accept all that he still can give, his heart and his home; he pleads with the agony not only of a man who has never known what it was to conquer a passion, but of one who, by that same self-constituted code, now burns to atone for a disappointed crime. There is no one to help her against him or against herself. Jane had no friends to stand by her at the altar, and she has none to support her now she is plucked away from it. There is no one to be offended or disgraced at her following him to the sunny land of Italy, as he proposes, till the maniac should die. There is no duty to any one but to herself, and this feeble reed quivers and trembles beneath the overwhelming weight of love and sophistry opposed to it.

But Jane triumphs; in the middle of the night she rises – glides out of her room – takes off her shoes as she passes Mr. Rochester’s chamber; – leaves the house, and casts herself upon a world

more desert than ever to her – ‘Without a shilling and without a friend.’

Thus the great deed of self-conquest is accomplished; Jane has passed through the fire of temptation from without and from within; her character is stamped from that day; we need therefore follow her no further into wanderings and sufferings which, though not unmixed with plunder from Minerva-lane, occupy some of, on the whole, the most striking chapters in the book.

Virtue of course finds her reward. The maniac wife sets fire to Thornfield Hall, and perishes herself in the flames. Mr. Rochester, in endeavouring to save her, loses the sight of his eyes. Jane rejoins her blind master; they are married, after which of course the happy man recovers his sight. Such is the outline of a tale in which, combined with great materials for power and feeling, the reader may trace gross inconsistencies and improbabilities, the chief and foremost that highest moral offence a novel writer can commit, that of making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader.

Mr. Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws of both God and man, and yet we will be bound half our lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honour. We would have thought that such a hero had no chance, in the purer taste of the present day; but the popularity of *Jane Eyre* is a proof how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature. Not that the author is strictly responsible for this. Mr. Rochester’s character is tolerably consistent. He is made as coarse and as brutal as can in all conscience be required to keep our sympathies at a distance. In point of literary consistency the hero is at all events impugnable, though we cannot say as much for the heroine.

As to Jane’s character – there is none of that harmonious unity about it which made little Becky so grateful a subject of analysis – nor are the discrepancies of that kind which have their excuse and their response in our nature. The inconsistencies of Jane’s character lie mainly not in her own imperfections, though of course she has her share, but in the author’s. There is that confusion in the relations between cause and effect, which is not so much untrue to human nature as to human art.

The error in *Jane Eyre* is, not that her character is this or that, but that she is made one thing in the eyes of her imaginary companions, and another in that of the actual reader. There is a perpetual disparity between the account she

herself gives of the effect she produces, and the means shown us by which she brings that effect about. We hear nothing but self-eulogiums on the perfect tact and wondrous penetration with which she is gifted, and yet almost every word she utters offends us, not only with the absence of these qualities, but with the positive contrasts of them, in either her pedantry, stupidity, or gross vulgarity.

She is one of those ladies who put us in the unpleasant predicament of undervaluing their very virtues for dislike of the person in whom they are represented. One feels provoked as Jane Eyre stands before us – for in the wonderful reality of her thoughts and descriptions, she seems accountable for all done in her name – with principles you must approve in the main, and yet with language and manners that offend you in every particular. Even in that *chef-d’oeuvre* of brilliant retrospective sketching, the description of her early life, it is the childhood and not the child that interests you. The little Jane, with her sharp eyes and dogmatic speeches, is a being you neither could fondle nor love. There is a hardness in her infantine earnestness, and a spiteful precocity in her reasoning, which repulses all our sympathy.

One sees that she is of a nature to dwell upon and treasure up every slight and unkindness, real or fancied, and such natures we know are surer than any others to meet with plenty of this sort of thing. As the child, so also the woman – an uninteresting, sententious, pedantic thing; with no experience of the world, and yet with no simplicity or freshness in its stead. What are her first answers to Mr. Rochester but such as would have quenched all interest, even for a prettier woman, in any man of common knowledge of what was nature – and especially in a blasé monster like him? A more affected governessy effusion we never read. The question is *à propos* of *cadeaux*.

“Who talks of *cadeaux*?” said he gruffly: “did you expect a present, Miss Eyre? Are you fond of presents?” and he searched my face with eyes that I saw were dark, irate, and piercing.

“I hardly know, Sir; I have little experience of them; they are generally thought pleasant things.”

This is the great and crying mischief of the book. *Jane Eyre* is throughout the

personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit, the more dangerous to exhibit from that prestige of principle and self-control which is liable to dazzle the eye too much for it to observe the inefficient and unsound foundation on which it rests.

It is true Jane does right, and exerts great moral strength, but it is the strength of a mere heathen mind which is a law unto itself. No Christian grace is perceptible upon her. She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature—the sin of pride. Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless – yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him, for the food and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth – for the care and education vouchsafed to her till she was capable in mind as fitted in years to provide for herself. On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling far short of it.

The doctrine of humility is not more foreign to her mind than it is repudiated by her heart. It is by her own talents, virtues, and courage that she is made to attain the summit of human happiness, and, as far as Jane Eyre's own statement is concerned, no one would think that she owed anything either to God above or to man below.

She flees from Mr. Rochester, and has not a being to turn to. Why was this? The excellence of the present institution at Casterton, which succeeded that of Cowan Bridge near Kirkby Lonsdale – these being distinctly, as we hear, the original and the reformed Lowoods of the book—is pretty generally known. Jane had lived there for eight years with 110 girls and fifteen teachers. Why had she formed no friendships among them? Other orphans have left the same and similar institutions, furnished with friends for life, and puzzled with homes to choose from. How comes it that Jane had acquired neither?

Among that number of associates there was surely some exceptions to what she so presumptuously stigmatises as 'the society of inferior minds.' Of course, it suited the author's end to represent the heroine as utterly destitute of the common means of assistance, in order to exhibit both her trials and her powers of self-support – the whole book rests on this assumption – but it is one which, under the circumstances, is very unnatural and very unjust.

Altogether the auto-biography of *Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian

composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment – there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence – there is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilized society in fact has at the present day to contend with. We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*.

Still we say again this is a very remarkable book. We are painfully alive to the moral, religious, and literary deficiencies of the picture, and such passages of beauty and power as we have quoted cannot redeem it, but it is impossible not to be spell-bound with the freedom of the touch. It would be mere hackneyed courtesy to call it 'fine writing.' It bears no impress of being written at all, but is poured out rather in the heat and hurry of an instinct, which flows ungovernably on to its object, indifferent by what means it reaches it, and unconscious too. As regards the author's chief object, however, it is a failure – that, namely, of making a plain, odd woman, destitute of all the conventional features of feminine attraction, interesting in our sight. We deny that he has succeeded in this.

Jane Eyre, in spite of some grand things about her, is a being totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end. We acknowledge her firmness – we respect her determination – we feel for her struggles; but, for all that, and setting aside higher considerations, the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman – one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess.

There seem to have arisen in the novel-reading world some doubts as to who really wrote this book; and various rumours, more or less romantic, have been current in Mayfair, the metropolis of gossip, as to the authorship. For example, *Jane Eyre* is sentimentally assumed to have proceeded from the pen of Mr. Thackeray's governess, whom he had himself chosen as his model of Becky, and who, in mingled love and

revenge, personified him in return as Mr. Rochester. In this case, it is evident that the author of *Vanity Fair*, whose own pencil makes him grey-haired, has had the best of it, though his children may have had the worst, having, at all events, succeeded in hitting that vulnerable point in the Becky bosom, which it is our firm belief no man born of woman, from her Soho to her Ostend days, had ever so much as grazed.

To this ingenious rumour the coincidence of the second edition of *Jane Eyre* being dedicated to Mr. Thackeray has probably given rise. For our parts, we see no great interest in the question at all. The first edition of *Jane Eyre* purports to be edited by Curren Bell, one of a trio of brothers, or sisters, or cousins, by names Curren, Acton, and Ellis Bell, already known as the joint-authors of a volume of poems. The second edition of the same – dedicated, however, ‘by the author,’ to Mr. Thackeray; and the dedication (itself an indubitable chip of *Jane Eyre*) signed Curren Bell.

Author and editor are therefore one, and we are as much satisfied to accept this double individual under the name of ‘Curren Bell,’ as under any other, more or less euphonious. Whoever it be, it is a person who, with great mental powers, combines a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion. And as these characteristics appear more or less in the writings of all three, Curren, Acton, and Ellis alike, for their poems differ less in degree of power than in kind, we are ready to accept the fact of their identity or of their relationship with equal satisfaction.

At all events there can be no interest attached to the writer of *Wuthering Heights*’ – a novel succeeding *Jane Eyre*, and purporting to be written by Ellis Bell – unless it were for the sake of more individual reprobation. For though there is a decided family likeness between the two, yet the aspect of the Jane and Rochester animals in their native state, as Catherine and Heathfield, is too odiously and abominably pagan to be palatable even to the most vitiated class of English readers. With all the unscrupulousness of the French school of novels it combines that repulsive vulgarity in the choice of its vice which supplies its own antidote.

The question of authorship, therefore, can deserve a moment’s curiosity only as far as *Jane Eyre* is concerned, and though we cannot

pronounce that it appertains to a real Mr. Curren Bell and to no other, yet that it appertains to a man, and not, as many assert, to a woman, we are strongly inclined to affirm. Without entering into the question whether the power of the writing be above her, or the vulgarity below her, there are, we believe, minutiae of circumstantial evidence which at once acquit the feminine hand.

No woman – a lady friend, whom we are always happy to consult, assures us – makes mistakes in her own *métier* – no woman trusses game and garnishes dessert-dishes with the same hands, or talks of so doing in the same breath. Above all, no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane’s ladies assume – Miss Ingram coming down, irresistible, ‘in a morning robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!!’

No lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on ‘a frock.’ They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming too. This evidence seems incontrovertible. Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.

And if by no woman, it is certainly also by no artist. The Thackeray eye has had no part there. There is not more disparity between the art of drawing Jane assumes and her evident total ignorance of its first principles, than between the report she gives of her own character and the conclusions we form for ourselves. Not but what, in another sense, the author may be classed as an artist of very high grade. Let him describe the simplest things of nature – a rainy landscape, a cloudy sky, or a bare moorside, and he shows the hand of a master; but the moment he talks of art itself, it is obvious that he is a complete ignoramus.

We cannot help feeling that this work must be far from beneficial to that class of ladies whose cause it affects to advocate. *Jane Eyre* is not precisely the mouthpiece one would select to plead the cause of governesses, and it is therefore the greater pity that she has chosen it: for there is none we are convinced which, at the present time, more deserves and demands an earnest befriending.

INTRODUCING OUR NEW PRESIDENT, ANNETTE HARMAN

Many of you know that earlier in the year I became our Association's President. My Scandinavian travels completed in May and now a few weeks before our 13th July in person meeting in Sydney, (the topic is *Villette*, the speaker is Sophie Frasier), I am properly introducing myself to you.



I have been involved with the Australian Brontë Association, as a Committee member and Speaker since meetings took place at St Andrew's Cathedral House early in the 1990s, the University of New South Wales, Ebenezer, Sydney Mechanics School of Arts, Weekends Away, Virtual Zoom meetings; to our present meeting place, the Castlereagh Boutique Hotel in Castlereagh Street, Sydney. Three Presidents - Christopher Cooper, Sarah Burns and Michelle Cavanagh have created a legacy to foster, encourage and elevate contemporary Brontë discussions for us all. Our patron, Christine Alexander continues her invaluable support of our Association and regularly shares her wide knowledge and understandings of our favourite topic -The Brontës, from an academic, relatable, accessible and humorous perspective.

My ongoing interest in the Brontë family's writings, Haworth Parsonage museum, Keighley, Yorkshire and British culture began when I was a teenager reading *Wuthering Heights*, in the coastal, beachy and sun-drenched Eastern suburbs of Sydney, marvelling at the Gothic English and their cold, damp, wuthering clime. I remember the cold visceral shock of recognizing Catherine Linton's pregnancy, hidden in plain sight within the text and her expressed state of mind, whilst pregnant before giving birth. Then there was Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights" song in 1978 and the ghostly, ethereal Cathy passionately wailing to Heathcliff "... it's me, I'm Cathy, I've come home it's so cold, under your window", a contrast to hot, humid and then, really brash Sydney, moor less and modern - the New World, linked to England by ancestral and literary ties for me, personally.

I did not formally study *Wuthering Heights* until University and then, only briefly, at postgraduate level. I am currently writing on the first 1847 and second 1850 editions of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* and I hope to present to you my research in due course. To keep your interest in the Brontës fresh, I sincerely hope you are able to attend our already polarising meeting in July, polarising because *Villette* according to some of our surveyed members, is either loved or loathed for a range of reasons.

What are your thoughts on *Villette*? Which Brontë novel did you first read? Why are the Brontës relevant to you now?

Kind regards,

Annette Harman.

President Australian Bronte Association.

NEW MEMBER

A very warm welcome to our new member, Catherine Evans

ABA Meetings for 2024

The Australian Brontë Association meets in Sydney five times a year. Meetings are held at the Castlereagh Boutique Hotel, 169 Castlereagh Street (near Park Street) at 10:30am, though we serve morning tea from 10:00am. Those who wish to do so, have a light lunch together at a nearby cafe after the meeting. At each meeting, a paper on some aspect of the Brontës' life and work is presented. There is a meeting charge of \$5 (members) and \$10 (non-members).

Saturday 14 September 2024, Stephanie Russo

EMILY BRONTË, BIOFICTION AND FILM

Emily Brontë is not only one of the most famous novelists in English history; she is also the subject of novels, television series and films in her own right. However, while novelists write into the gaps of the historical record, the notoriously enigmatic and fanatically private Emily is a particular difficult subject for biofictions. In this talk, I trace how a wide range of novelists and screenwriters have represented Emily Brontë's life, writing career and death over the past century. I focus, in particular, on the persistence of the belief that there must have been a secret romance that holds the key to deciphering *Wuthering Heights*.

Saturday 9 November 2024, Chris Browne

COLLECTING THE BRONTËS

Chris Browne has been a book collector for more than fifty years and during that time has put together a personal library of around 15,000 books. His main interests are early 19th and 20th century English literature and the history of English publishing and printing. Accordingly, he has collected first, early, illustrated and interesting editions of his favourite authors, which include the Brontës. Chris's talk will naturally focus on his own collection of books by and relating to the Brontës from the twin perspectives of both an avid reader and an ardent collector. He will talk about his personal favourites, early editions, illustrated editions and some items of special interest. He will also give his personal reasons for collecting and reading the works of the Brontës, and will reflect on why they are still very relevant today.

Saturday 7 December 2024, 12 noon

**CHRISTMAS LUNCH AT CELLOS RESTAURANT,
CASTLEREAGH BOUTIQUE HOTEL, TOGETHER WITH
MEMBERS OF THE NSW DICKENS SOCIETY**