

Eminent Women Series

EDITED BY JOHN H. INGRAM

EMILY BRONTË

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EMILY BRONTË.

INTRODUCTION.

THERE are, perhaps, few tests of excellence so sure as the popular verdict on a work of art a hundred years after its accomplishment. So much time must be allowed for the swing and rebound of taste, for the despoiling of tawdry splendours and to permit the work of art itself to form a public capable of appreciating it. Such marvellous fragments reach us of Elizabethan praises; and we cannot help recalling the number of copies of 'Prometheus Unbound' sold in the lifetime of the poet. We know too well "what porridge had John Keats," and remember with misgiving the turtle to which we treated Hobbs and Nobbs at dinner, and how complacently we watched them put on their laurels afterwards.

Let us, then, by all means distrust our own and the public estimation of all heroes dead within a hundred years. Let us, in laying claim to an infallible verdict, remember how oddly our decisions sound at the other side of Time's whispering gallery. Shall we therefore pronounce only on Chaucer and Shakespeare, on Gower and our learned Ben? Alas! we are too sure of their relative merits; we stake our reputations with no qualms, no battle-ardours. These we reserve to them for whom

the future is not yet secure, for whom a timely word may still be spoken, for whom we yet may feel that lancing out of enthusiasm only possible when the cast of fate is still unknown, and, as we fight, we fancy that the glory of our hero is in our hands.

But very gradually the victory is gained. A taste is unconsciously formed for the qualities necessary to the next development of art—qualities which Blake in his garret, Millet without the sou, set down in immortal work. At last, when the time is ripe, some connoisseur sees the picture, blows the dust from the book, and straightway blazons his discovery. Mr. Swinburne, so to speak, blew the dust from 'Wuthering Heights'; and now it keeps its proper rank in the shelf where Coleridge and Webster, Hofmann and Leopardi have their place. Until then, a few brave lines of welcome from Sydney Dobell, one fine verse of Mr. Arnold's, one notice from Mr. Reid, was all the praise that had been given to the book by those in authority. Here and there a mill-girl in the West Riding factories read and re-read the tattered copy from the lending library; here and there some eager, unsatisfied, passionate child came upon the book and loved it, in spite of chiding, finding in it an imagination that satisfied, and a storm that cleared the air; or some strong-fibred heart felt without a shudder the justice of that stern vision of inevitable, inherited ruin following the chance-found child of foreign sailor and seaport mother. But these readers were not many; even yet the book is not popular.

For, in truth, the qualities that distinguish Emily Brontë are not those which are of the first necessity to a novelist. She is without experience; her range of character is narrow and local; she has no atmosphere of broad humanity like George Eliot; she has not Jane

Austen's happy gift of making us love in a book what we have overlooked in life; we do not recognise in her the human truth and passion, the never-failing serene bitterness of humour, that have made for Charlotte Brontë a place between Cervantes and Victor Hugo.

Emily Brontë is of a different class. Her imagination is narrower, but more intense; she sees less, but what she sees is absolutely present: no writer has described the moors, the wind, the skies, with her passionate fidelity, but this is all of Nature that she describes. Her narrow fervid nature accounted as simple annoyance the trivial scenes and personages touched with immortal sympathy and humour in 'Villette' and 'Shirley'; Paul Emanuel himself appeared to her only as a pedantic and exacting taskmaster; but, on the other hand, to a certain class of mind, there is nothing in fiction so moving as the spectacle of Heathcliff dying of joy—an unnatural, unreal joy—his panther nature paralysed, *anéanti*, in a delirium of visionary bliss.

Only an imagination of the rarest power could conceive such a *dénouement*, requiring a life of black ingratitude by no mere common horrors, no vulgar Bedlam frenzy; but by the torturing apprehension of a happiness never quite grasped, always just beyond the verge of realisation. Only an imagination of the finest and rarest touch, absolutely certain of tread on that path of a single hair which alone connects this world with the land of dreams. Few have trod that perilous bridge with the fearlessness of Emily Brontë: that is her own ground and there she wins our highest praise; but place her on the earth, ask her to interpret for us the common lives of the surrounding people, she can give no answer. The swift and certain spirit moves with

the clumsy hesitating gait of a bird accustomed to soar.

She tells us what she saw ; and what she saw and what she was incapable of seeing are equally characteristic. All the wildness of that moorland, all the secrets of those lonely farms, all the capabilities of the one tragedy of passion and weakness that touched her solitary life, she divined and appropriated ; but not the life of the village at her feet, not the bustle of the mills, the riots, the sudden alternations of wealth and poverty ; not the incessant rivalry of church and chapel ; and while the West Riding has known the prototype of nearly every person and nearly every place in 'Jane Eyre' and 'Shirley,' not a single character in 'Wuthering Heights' ever climbed the hills round Haworth.

Say that two foreigners have passed through Staffordshire, leaving us their reports of what they have seen. The first, going by day, will tell us of the hideous blackness of the country ; but yet more, no doubt, of that awful, patient struggle of man with fire and darkness, of the grim courage of those unknown lives ; and he would see what they toil for, women with little children in their arms ; and he would notice the blue sky beyond the smoke, doubly precious for such horrible environment. But the second traveller has journeyed through the night ; neither squalor nor ugliness, neither sky nor children, has he seen, only a vast stretch of blackness shot through with flaming fires, or here and there burned to a dull red by heated furnaces ; and before these, strange toilers, half naked, scarcely human, and red in the leaping flicker and gleam of the fire. The meaning of their work he could not see, but a fearful and impressive phantasmagoria of flame and blackness and fiery energies at work in the encompassing night.

So differently did the black country of this world appear to Charlotte, clear-seeing and compassionate, and to Emily Brontë, a traveller through the shadows. Each faithfully recorded what she saw, and the place was the same, but how unlike the vision! The spectacles of temperament colour the world very differently for each beholder; and, to understand the vision, we too should for a moment look through the seer's glass. To gain some such transient glance, to gain and give some such momentary insight into the character of Emily Brontë, has been the aim I have tried to make in this book. That I have not fulfilled my desire is perhaps inevitable—the task has been left too long. If I have done anything at all I feel that much of the reward is due to my many and generous helpers. Foremost among them I must thank Dr. Ingham, my kind host at Haworth, Mrs. Wood, Mr. William Wood, Mrs. Brown, and Mrs. Ratcliffe of that parish—all of whom had known the now perished family of Brontë; and my thanks are due no less to Mr. T. Wemyss Reid, as will be seen further on, to Mr. J. H. Ingram, and to Mr. Biddell, who have collected much valuable information for my benefit; and most of all do I owe gratitude and thankfulness to Miss Ellen Nussey, without whose generous help my work must have remained most ignorant and astray. To her, had it been worthier, had it been all the subject merits, and yet without those shadows of gloom and trouble enjoined by the nature of the story; to her, could I only have spoken of the high noble character of Emily Brontë and not of the great trials of her life, I should have ventured to dedicate this study. But to Emily's friend I only offer what, through her, I have learned of Emily; she, who knew so little of Branwell's shames and sorrow is unconcerned with this, their sad and necessary record. Only the

lights and sunshine of my work I dedicate to her. It may be that I have given too great a share to the shadows, to the manifold follies and failures of Branwell Brontë. Yet in Emily Brontë's life the shaping influences were so few, and the sins of this beloved and erring brother had so large a share in determining the bent of her genius, that to have passed them by would have been to ignore the shock which turned the fantasy of the 'Poems' into the tragedy of 'Wuthering Heights.' It would have been to leave untold the patience, the courage, the unselfishness which perfected Emily Brontë's heroic character; and to have left her burdened with the calumny of having chosen to invent the crimes and violence of her *dramatis personæ*. Not so, alas! They were but reflected from the passion and sorrow that darkened her home; it was no perverse fancy which drove that pure and innocent girl into ceaseless brooding on the conquering force of sin and the supremacy of injustice.

She brooded over the problem night and day; she took its difficulties passionately to heart; in the midst of her troubled thoughts she wrote 'Wuthering Heights.' From the clear spirit which inspires the end of her work, we know that the storm is over; we know that her next tragedy would be less violent. But we shall never see it; for—and it is by this that most of us remember her—suddenly and silently she died.

She died, before a single word of worthy praise had reached her. She died with her work misunderstood and neglected. And yet not unhappy. For her home on the moors was very dear to her, the least and homeliest duties pleasant; she loved her sisters with devoted friendship, and she had many little happinesses in her patient, cheerful, unselfish life. Would that I could

show her as she was!—not the austere and violent poetess who, cuckoo-fashion, has usurped her place; but brave to fate and timid of man; stern to herself, forbearing to all weak and erring things; silent, yet sometimes sparkling with happy sallies. For to represent her as she was would be her noblest and most fitting monument.

CHAPTER I.

PARENTAGE.

EMILY BRONTË was born of parents without any peculiar talent for literature. It is true that her mother's letters are precisely and prettily written. It is true that her father published a few tracts and religious poems. But in neither case is there any vestige of literary or poetical endowment. Few, indeed, are the Parish Magazines which could not show among their contents poems and articles greatly superior to the weak and characterless effusions of the father of the Brontës. The fact seems important; because in this case not one member of a family, but a whole family, is endowed in more or less degree with faculties not derived from either parent.

For children may inherit genius from parents who are themselves not gifted, as two streaming currents of air unite to form a liquid with properties different from either; and never is biography more valuable than when it allows us to perceive by what combination of allied qualities, friction of opposing temperaments, recurrence of ancestral traits, the subtle thing we call character is determined. In this case, since, as I have said, the whole family manifested a brilliance not to be found in either parent, such a study would be peculiarly interesting. But, unfortunately, the history of the children's father and the constitution of the children's mother is all that is clear to our investigation.

Yet even out of this very short pedigree two important factors of genius declare themselves—two potent and shaping inheritances. From their father, Currer, Ellis, and Acton derived a strong will. From their mother, the disease that slew Emily and Anne in the prime of their youth and made Charlotte always delicate and ailing. In both cases the boy, Patrick Branwell, was very slightly affected; but he too died young, from excesses that suggest a taint of insanity in his constitution.

Insanity and genius stand on either side consumption, its worse and better angels. Let none call it impious or absurd to rank the greatest gift to mankind as the occasional result of an inherited tendency to tubercular disease. There are of course very many other determining causes; yet is it certain that inherited scrofula or phthisis may come out, not in these diseases, or not only in these diseases, but in an alteration, for better or for worse, of the condition of the mind. Out of evil good may come, or a worse evil.

The children's father was a nervous, irritable and violent man, who endowed them with a nervous organisation easily disturbed and an indomitable force of volition. The girls, at least, showed both these characteristics. Patrick Branwell must have been a weaker, more brilliant, more violent, less tenacious, less upright copy of his father; and seems to have suffered no modification from the patient and steadfast moral nature of his mother. She was the model that her daughters copied, in different degrees, both in character and health. Passion and will their father gave them. Their genius came directly from neither parent; but from the constitution of their natures.

In addition, on both sides, the children got a Celtic

strain ; and this is a matter of significance, meaning a predisposition to the superstition, imagination and horror that is a strand in all their work. Their mother, Maria Branwell, was of a good middle-class Cornish family, long established as merchants in Penzance. Their father was the son of an Irish peasant, Hugh Prunty, settled in the north of Ireland, but native to the south.

The history of the Rev. Patrick Brontë, B.A. (whose fine Greek name, shortened from the ancient Irish appellation of Bronterre, was so naïvely admired by his children), is itself a remarkable and interesting story.

The Reverend Patrick Brontë was one of the ten children of a peasant proprietor at Ahaderg in county Down. The family to which he belonged inherited strength, good looks, and a few scant acres of potato-growing soil. They must have been very poor, those ten children, often hungry, cold and wet ; but these adverse influences only seemed to brace the sinews of Patrick Prunty and to nerve his determination to rise above his surroundings. He grew up a tall and strong young fellow, unusually handsome with a well-shaped head, regular profile and fine blue eyes. A vivacious impressive manner effectually masked a certain selfishness and rigour of temperament which became plain in after years. He seemed a generous, quick, impulsive lad. When he was sixteen years of age Patrick left his father's roof resolved to earn a position for himself. At Drumgooland, a neighbouring hamlet, he opened what is called in Ireland a public school ; a sort of hedge-school for village children. He stuck to his trade for five or six years, using his leisure to perfect himself in general knowledge, mathematics, and a smattering of Greek and Latin.

His efforts deserved to be crowned with success. The

Rev. Mr. Tighe, the clergyman of the parish, was so struck with Patrick Prunty's determination and ability that he advised him to try for admittance at one of the English universities; and when the young man was about five-and-twenty he went, with Mr. Tighe's help, to Cambridge, and entered at St. John's.

He left Ireland in July, 1802, never to visit it again. He never cared to look again on the scenes of his early struggle. He never found the means to revisit mother or home, friends or country. Between Patrick Brontë, proud of his Greek profile and his Greek name, the handsome undergraduate at St. John's, and the nine shoeless, hungry young Pruntys of Ahaderg, there stretched a distance not to be measured by miles. Under his warm and passionate exterior a fixed resolution to get on in the world was hidden; but, though cold, the young man was just and self-denying, and as long as his mother lived she received twenty pounds a year, spared with difficulty from his narrow income.

Patrick Brontë stayed four years at Cambridge; when he left he had dropped his Irish accent and taken his B.A. On leaving St. John's he was ordained to a curacy in Essex.

The young man's energy, of the sort that only toils to reach a given personal end, had carried him far on the way to success. At twenty hedge-schoolmaster at Drummoland, Patrick Brontë was at thirty a respectable clergyman of the Church of England, with an assured position and respectable clerical acquaintance. He was getting very near the goal.

He did not stay long in Essex. A better curacy was offered to him at Hartshead, a little village between Huddersfield and Halifax in Yorkshire. While he was at Hartshead the handsome inflammable Irish curate

met Maria Branwell at her uncle's parsonage near Leeds. It was not the first time that Patrick Brontë had fallen in love; people in the neighbourhood used to smile at his facility for adoration, and thought it of a piece with his enthusiastic character. They were quite right; in his strange nature the violence and the coldness were equally genuine, both being a means to gratify some personal ambition, desire, or indolence. It is not an uncommon Irish type; self-important, upright, honourable, yet with a bent towards subtlety: abstemious in habit, but with freaks of violent self-indulgence; courteous and impulsive towards strangers, though cold to members of the household; naturally violent, and often assuming violence as an instrument of authority; selfish and dutiful; passionate, and devoid of intense affection.

Miss Branwell was precisely the little person with whom it was natural that such a man, a self-made man, should fall in love. She was very small, quiet and gentle, not exactly pretty, but elegant and ladylike. She was, indeed, a well-educated young lady of good connections; a very Phoenix she must have seemed in the eyes of a lover conscious of a background of Pruntyism and potatoes. She was about twenty-one and he thirty-five when they first met in the early summer of 1812. They were engaged in August. Miss Branwell's letters reveal a quiet intensity of devotion, a faculty of judgment, a willingness to forgive passing slights that must have satisfied the absolute and critical temper of her lover. Under the devotion and the quietness there is, however, the note of an independent spirit, and the following extract, with its capability of self-reliance and desire to rely upon another, reminds one curiously of passages in her daughter Charlotte's writings:—

“For some years I have been perfectly my own mis-

tress, subject to no control whatever ; so far from it that my sisters, who are many years older than myself, and even my dear mother used to consult me on every occasion of importance, and scarcely ever doubted the propriety of my words and actions : perhaps you will be ready to accuse me of vanity in mentioning this, but you must consider that I do not boast of it. I have many times felt it a disadvantage, and although, I thank God, it has never led me into error, yet in circumstances of uncertainty and doubt I have deeply felt the want of a guide and instructor."

Years afterwards, when Maria Branwell's letters were given into the hands of her daughter Charlotte and that daughter's most dear and faithful friend, the two young women felt a keen pang of retrospective sympathy for the gentle independent little person who, even before her marriage, had time to perceive that her guide and instructor was not the infallible Mentor she had thought him at the first. I quote the words of Charlotte's friend, of more authority and weight on this matter than those of any other person living, taken from a manuscript which she has placed at my disposal :—

"Miss Branwell's letters showed that her engagement, though not a prolonged one, was not as happy as it ought to have been." There was a pathos of apprehension (though gently expressed) in part of the correspondence lest Mr. Brontë should cool in his affection towards her, and the readers perceived with some indignation that there had been a just cause for this apprehension. Mr. Brontë, with all his iron strength and power of will, had his weakness, and one which, wherever it exists, spoils and debases the character—he had *personal vanity*. Miss Branwell's finer nature rose above such weakness ; but she suffered all the more from