THE BRONTËS AND THEIR BACKGROUND

Romance and Reality

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Senior Lecturer in English
University of Warwick

Second Edition

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FOR THOMAS

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Bibliographical Note

ALL REFERENCES to the text of the Brontë novels and to Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* have been taken, unless otherwise stated, from the Haworth edition of *The Life and Works of Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters*, edited by Mrs H. Ward and C. K. Shorter (London, 1889–90).

The following abbreviations have been used in the notes:

BST	*Transactions of the Brontë Society*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
SHCBM	*The Miscellaneous and Unpublished Writings of Charlotte Brontë and Patrick Branwell Brontë*, edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, 2 vols (Oxford, 1936–8)
SHCBP	*The Poems of Charlotte Brontë and Patrick Branwell Brontë*, edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (Oxford, 1934)
SHEA	*The Poems of Emily Jane and Anne Brontë*, edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (Oxford, 1934)
SHLL	*The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, 4 vols (Oxford, 1932)
TLS	*The Times Literary Supplement*

In some of the above, the prefix SH means the Shakespeare Head edition.

Preface to the Second Edition

IN REISSUING *The Brontës and their Background*, first published in 1973, although written mainly in 1969 and 1970, Macmillan have shown a heartening confidence in the appeal of the Brontës, a touching trust in me, and an interesting insight into the permanent quality of the arts in general and literature in particular. Textbooks in the sciences and the social sciences date rapidly, but the Brontës have not changed and are not likely to change in spite of temporary movements of critical fashion. My book was an attempt to bring home the message of the Brontës to present generations by making clear the kind of life the generation of the Brontës led. After teaching the Brontës for ten years to students, keenly interested in the present, but only dimly aware of the past, I feel that my attempt has been justified, and I particularly feel this after 1984, a year in which Orwell warned that we might forget the past altogether.

Of course it is possible, even perhaps desirable, to alter one's opinions. I think I was probably unfair to Charlotte in *The Brontës and their Background*, presenting her as a writer of limited outlook and ephemeral interest. Recent critical interest in Charlotte and the reactions of my students have persuaded me that this was a hasty judgement. Also, in trying to disentangle the Brontës' lives from their books, I have given the impression that events such as Charlotte's infatuation with M. Heger and Branwell's alleged affair with Mrs Robinson were of less importance for the creation of the novels than in fact is the case. Nor with inadequate knowledge of the juvenilia and the poetry was I able to do full justice to them in my appreciation of the background to the Brontës' novels.

It is not however my intention to rewrite this book. I have merely contented myself with noting a few errors in the additional notes. Most of these errors have been detected as a result of the immense volume of Brontë scholarship and criticism which has appeared in the past fifteen years, and for the remainder of this preface I will content myself with noting the principal works written since 1973 which have contributed to our knowledge of the areas studied in this book. There are two new bibliographies of the Brontës, by G. Yablon and J. Turner, *A Brontë Bibliography* (London, 1978) and by A. Passel, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë* (New York, 1979). H. Rosengarten gives an excellent survey of Brontë criticism and scholarship in *Victorian Fiction* ed. G. Ford (New York, 1978). K. Blake 'Review of Brontë Studies 1975–80' in *Dickens Studies Annual*, 10 (1982), pp. 221–40 names more critical articles, although some of these might have raised the eyebrow of prudish Victorian reviewers, and perhaps some other eyebrows as well. The *Brontë Society Transactions* now lists each year articles and books on the Brontës, and is a useful means of bringing Brontë bibliographers up to date.

The Oxford University Press has now published three more volumes in addition to *Jane Eyre* for the Clarendon series of Brontë novels, namely *Wuthering Heights*, ed. H. Marsden and I. S. Ewbank (Oxford, 1976), *Shirley*, ed. H. Rosengarten and M. Smith (Oxford, 1979), and *Villette*, ed. H. Rosengarten and M. Smith (Oxford, 1985). E. Chitham, *The Poems of Anne Brontë* (London, 1979), T. Winnifrith, *The Poems of Branwell Brontë* (London, 1983) and T. Winnifrith *The Poems of Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1984) supply proper editions of the Brontës' poetry. The juvenilia of Charlotte are being edited by C. Alexander who has so far produced one volume, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1987) as well as *A Bibliography of the Manuscripts of Charlotte Brontë* (Keighley, 1982) and *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1983). It looks as if essential texts for a study of the Brontës will eventually be properly edited, although there is still no scholarly treatment of their letters.

Without a full edition of the letters it is difficult to write an authoritative biography of the Brontës. Two general compendia by F. B. Pinion, *A Brontë Companion* (London, 1975) and by G. and

B. Lloyd Evans, *Everyman's Companion to the Brontës* (London, 1982) are useful, but not wholly accurate. Two lives of Charlotte Brontë, by M. Peters, *Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1975) and H. Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Self-Conceived* (New York, 1976) are stronger on feminism than facts. There are studies of Emily and Anne, including biography and criticism by R. Benvenuto, *Emily Brontë* (Boston, 1982) and P. Scott, *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment* (London, 1983).

Critical studies of Charlotte Brontë have been more numerous, reflecting the growing interest in her as a novelist rather than as a tragic Victorian heroine. Among the best books are those by H. Bjork, *The Language of Truth* (Lund, 1974), L. Dessner, *The Homely Web of Truth* (The Hague, 1975) and A. Tromly, *The Cover of the Mask: The Autobiographers in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction* (Victoria, 1982). A work on Charlotte combining biography and criticism, while keeping up to date with new scholarly discoveries in the juvenilia and poems, is long overdue.

In the special subjects treated in this book there have been a few additional works. D. Rowell, *Hell and The Victorians* (Oxford, 1974) provides an excellent account of the eschatological beliefs of the Victorian age, while E. Jay, *The Religion of the Heart* (Oxford, 1974) and V. Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against* (Oxford, 1975) deal with Evangelicalism and Dissent in the novel, although the latter's handling of the Brontës is unsatisfactory. J. Maynard *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1984) is an authoritative discussion on the Brontës' handling of sexual matters in particular and the Victorian attitude to sex in general. Contemporary reviews of the Brontës are well treated by M. Allott in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974) and R. Crump, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë, 1846–1915: A Reference Guide* (Boston, 1982) provides a few additional items. There are some good general points on class and the Victorians in T. Tomlinson, *The English Middle-Class Novel* (London, 1976) and R. Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London, 1981). T. Eagleton's *Myths of Power* (London, 1975), in spite of a formidable portrait of Karl Marx on the dust cover, has some sensible things to say about the Brontës' attitude to class and their views on the position of women. Charlotte Brontë's attitude

to France, important for religion, class and sex is well covered by E. Duthie, *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1975), and the same author has also produced *The Brontës and Nature* (London, 1986).

There have also been numerous other articles and books about the Brontës which take no account of their background, and current critical fashion might seem to encourage such a trend. It is not the intention of this book to discourage such articles and books, but the writers and readers of them, as well as the writers and readers of sentimental Brontë biographies, would do well to read my first chapter.

Tom Winnifrith 1987

Introduction

AFTER STRATFORD Haworth is England's most visited literary shrine, with over 100,000 pilgrims to the Brontë Parsonage Museum in 1970, but scholars and critics have generally failed to follow the popular lead in examining the achievements of the Brontë sisters. No doubt the extravagant adulation of amateur writers has acted as a deterrent to professional investigators, but other factors have played their part in preventing us from seeing the Brontës in a true light. It is the first task of this book to reveal some of the obstacles in the way of a proper study of the Brontës; the unreliability of the primary evidence is shown to be equalled only by the fallibility of secondary authorities. It is the second task of this book to examine some of the religious, literary and social ideas of the Brontës, and to criticise the way they expressed these ideas in their novels.

Most Brontë biographers, critics and scholars have paid insufficient attention to the unreliability of the primary evidence on which they have based their theories. The Letters of Charlotte Brontë and the juvenilia were both owned and edited by T. J. Wise; a detailed examination of some of the manuscript evidence shows Wise to have been both dishonest and inaccurate. Thus much of the biographical evidence and the juvenilia are unreliable sources for theories about the Brontës, but we need not, as some literary critics do, build theories on no evidence at all, as we can examine closely the text of the novels, with which Wise did not interfere, and consider evidence on the background of the Brontës which has been insufficiently related to their writings.

Most writers have either given a false account of the Brontës' religion, by for example confusing a belief in eternal punishment with a belief in predestination, or have paid no attention

to the religious element in the works of the Brontës. Yet not only did the Brontës have an obviously religious upbringing, but the country as a whole was vitally concerned with religion. Hell was an ever-present reality in Haworth. But the Brontës had the courage to break away from the almost universal belief that sinners merited eternal punishment. Of the three sisters, Anne is the most obvious and crude in her exposition of her Universalist creed; Charlotte is more tentative and negative; Emily boldly states a problem, but does not offer any easy solution to it.

The theory that the Brontës wrote in an era of comparative freedom from the restraints of prudery is also shown to be a false one. An examination of the fiction to which the Brontës are likely to have had access shows that these books, written in the period 1750–1825, were far less prudish than the fiction of the 1840s which the Brontës because of poverty and isolation were unable to read. Without contemporary models the Brontës were not typical of the age in which they lived and, as an analysis of contemporary reviews shows, their outspoken views and language met with hostile criticism. Anne is again shown to be the most open to attack; Charlotte is hesitant and appears to have made a not wholly successful attempt to meet her critics; Emily is more bold than Charlotte and less crude than Anne.

Finally it is shown that there is a difficulty in finding factual evidence to relate to the Brontës' views on society, as there is no sociologist to give us a complete and objective picture of nineteenth-century society. Instead we have to look at the partial pictures given by other nineteenth-century novelists. One such writer, Thackeray, is shown to be both a denouncer of social distinctions and a believer in them. Charlotte Brontë is very similar to Thackeray, but she does not seem to know much about the society she describes. Anne falls into the same traps, but lacks the vigour of Charlotte; Emily writes with knowledge, vigour and objectivity about the conflict between the eighteenth-century yeomanry and the nineteenth-century capitalist, although it is a mistake to reduce her novel to a sociological treatise.

This kind of investigation into the Brontës' religion, attitude to literary conventions and social views is not as fragmentary as it looks. There are obvious links between prudery and snobbery, between sex and salvation, and even, without being too fanciful, between a belief in the select aristocracy of birth and a belief in the Elect aristocracy of Grace. It can hardly be coincidental that the reviewer of *Jane Eyre* in *The Mirror* for December 1847, linked all three themes in the following outburst:

> *Religion is stabbed in the dark – our social distinctions attempted to be levelled, and all absurdly moral notions done away with.*

Nor is this kind of investigation unconnected with the earlier investigation into the unreliability of our primary evidence and our secondary authorities. Nineteenth-century religion, social life and literary conventions are both sufficiently like their twentieth-century counterparts for a knowledge of them to be too readily assumed, and sufficiently unlike them for a careful and thorough examination of all available evidence to be necessary. Since we have some of Charlotte Brontë's letters only in a bowdlerised form and there are suspicions about the authorship of some of the juvenilia with their accounts of licentious, irreligious aristocrats, we must be aware that religious unorthodoxy, literary prudery and social snobbery are areas in which we have to be peculiarly sensitive to the fallibility of the primary evidence. Because opinion on all three subjects has changed so radically in the last hundred years, we have also to be on our guard against the personal prejudice of our secondary authorities.

Contents

I

Biographers and Critics

MRS GASKELL'S *Life of Charlotte Brontë* is a classic of English biography, and she has immortalised the lives of the three Brontë sisters. Of course her concentration on Charlotte, whom she first met as a famous authoress after her sisters' death, means that we see Emily and Anne through Charlotte's eyes. Of course the restrictions of Victorian decorum meant that Mrs Gaskell had to slur over the love affair with M. Heger. Mr Nicholls and Mr Brontë were alive when Mrs Gaskell wrote, and their relations with Charlotte had to be handled delicately, although Mrs Gaskell's dislike of both men shows itself in an exaggeration of Mr Brontë's eccentricity and Mr Nicholls's lack of romance. For all her delicacy Mrs Gaskell succeeded in falling foul of the Carus Wilson and Robinson family, and we are still uncertain how harsh the regimen was at Cowan Bridge School, or whether Branwell Bronte was more sinned against than sinning at Thorp Green.[1] Finally Mrs Gaskell was not a professional scholar, trained to give an accurate transcription of documents or an objective appraisal of events, but a novelist in her own right; it is not too harsh to blame her for being the prime source of the fatal blurring of fiction and fact which has bedevilled Brontë studies ever since the publication of the first, soon to be hastily revised, edition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Mrs Gaskell's successors in the field of Brontë biography, many of them also novelists, have not altogether succeeded in eliminating the faults of subjectivity, inaccuracy, controversy and even prudery,[2] which characterised the first Brontë biography. It seems likely, however, that the merits of all these biographers have done more of a disservice than their faults to the proper study of the Brontës as writers. For the Brontë story

is a deeply moving one, set in the same sombre setting and with the same note of inevitable tragedy as *Wuthering Heights*, and ever since the publication of *Jane Eyre* it has been all too easy to assume that the life of the Brontës is another Brontë novel, or that the Brontë novels are autobiographical fragments. Thus Thackeray spoke of Charlotte as Jane Eyre, Mrs Gaskell's *Life* is commonly printed in a uniform edition with the novels, a lonely farmhouse near Haworth is generally known as Wuthering Heights, and biographers have produced elaborate parallels between events in the Brontë novels and events in their authors' lives. The lines between fact and fiction are blurred once again.

Naturally the Brontës with their horizons fairly limited to Haworth or at any rate to Yorkshire, apart from their brief sojourn in Brussels, derived inspiration from their background, although it is possible to exaggerate local influence in their writing; none of the novels is set in a village like Haworth, and only *Shirley* has a definitely Yorkshire setting. Naturally too it is obvious that we must be sensitive to the autobiographical element in the Brontë novels; this is especially true of Charlotte's work. But too narrow a focus on Haworth and too great an interest in biography have had an unhealthy effect on the study of the Brontës as writers.

In an ideal world literary biography and literary criticism would be sister sciences, devoted to a common cause, the elucidation and evaluation of great literature. As it is, they have something of the uneasy relationship of sisters-in-law towards each other, possessing nothing in common but their devotion to literature, and squabbling over the best way to serve it. This is particularly true of authors like Byron and the Rossettis, whose lives have a scandalous interest in their own right, but nowhere is the gap between biographers and critics more marked than in the case of the Brontës. When one reads an account in the *Brontë Society Transactions* of what Charlotte Brontë's wedding dress looked like,[3] and then turns to an analysis in *Nineteenth Century Fiction* of the sexual symbolism of *Wuthering Heights*,[4] it is hard to realise that the same Brontës are being discussed.

The biographers have mainly been amateurs, making up in

enthusiasm for what they lacked in scholarly training. Their chief fault has been their eagerness for regarding the Brontë novels as case histories of the Brontë lives. This is dangerous, since if they return to consider the novels their argument is liable to be circular, and if they do not return they have debased the value of the novels to that of mere autobiographical novelettes. It is harmless if misguided to study Keats's laundry lists; the harm comes when we start examining *The Ode to a Nightingale* for information about Keats's shirts.

The other main fault of Brontë biographers has been their unwillingness to probe to the solid facts provided by primary documentary evidence; and they have depended all too often on unsatisfactory printed texts. A failure to examine documents properly has resulted in some wild conjectures like the notorious Louis Parensell, but equally distressing has been the conservative reluctance to admit any new evidence.[5]

Opposed to such biographers have been the critics. Relying on the hostility to biography of the New Criticism they have tended to fight shy of any biographical information. This is of course understandable in view of the unscholarly and purely sentimental nature of so many Brontë biographies, but such an attitude ignores the extent to which the Brontë novels are attached to a particular time and locality. Occasionally such critics betray themselves by ludicrous errors; the suggestion that Charlotte was cocking a snook at Victorian conventions by using an overt phallic symbol in the sentence, 'He was as stiff about urging his point as ever you could be'[6] shows little knowledge of Victorian conventions. This example of a preoccupation with sex points to a basic weakness in much of this criticism. Even if we accept the arguments against the Intentional fallacy and acknowledge the value of trying to penetrate behind the conscious purpose of the novelists, we cannot ignore their intentions altogether. In the twentieth century the marriage bed is openly discussed, and the death bed has become taboo; in the nineteenth century these roles were reversed. It is therefore as narrow to ignore the preoccupation of the Brontës with death and the future life as it is to ignore sexual motifs in their novels. The latter are hidden behind a veil of prudery, even

though by the standards of their time the Brontës were not at all prudish, but the former are obvious, though to explore them we have to know something about the life and background of the Brontës.

Thus a knowledge of the Brontës' lives can help us to elucidate their works. It can also help us to evaluate them. By relating Charlotte's life to her novels we see how narrowly autobiograhpical they are, as opposed to the more universal *Wuthering Heights*. By investigating the various topics in which Charlotte was interested we see how she occasionally allowed the preacher to get the better of the novelist; Emily does not preach and her novel is the better for it, although her contemporaries preferred the obvious message and topical, if ephemeral, interest of Charlotte. In the case of Anne, the preacher outweighs the novelist to such an extent that contemporary critics, baffled by Emily and prepared to forgive Charlotte for her faults, made Anne chief whipping boy for her unpalatable doctrines on eternal punishment, sexual morality and the social hierarchy. Some modern critics do not seem aware that the Brontës had something to say on each of these subjects, and therefore cannot direct our attention to the different way in which they are handled by each sister.

There is obviously room for a fresh attempt to see the fiction of the Brontës in the context of the facts of their lives, while severely separating the fact and fiction in order to avoid the faults of so many Brontë biographers. Unfortunately recent Brontë scholarship has largely been directed into the not very profitable fields of Gondal and Angria. The discovery of the Brontës' juvenilia at first sight seemed a boon both to biographers for the light they shone on the Brontës' lonely precocious childhood, and to critics, able to trace the forerunners of Rochester and Heathcliff in Zamorna and A.G.A. But we know already that the Brontës had a lonely precocious childhood, and it hardly helps our appreciation of either Rochester or Heathcliff to find them translated from their eighteenth- or nineteenth-century background to the less substantial realms of Angria and Gondal. The study of the Brontës' juvenilia provides confirmatory evidence of the sisters' preoccupation with