

A New Life of Charlotte Brontë

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*Senior Lecturer in English and Comparative Literary Studies
University of Warwick*

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A NEW LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

By the same author

THE BRONTËS AND THEIR BACKGROUND

THE BRONTËS

BRONTË FACTS AND BRONTË PROBLEMS

(with Edward Chitham)

NINETEEN-EIGHTY-FOUR AND ALL'S WELL?

(with W. Whitehead)

GREECE OLD AND NEW *(editor, with Penelope Murray)*

ASPECTS OF THE EPIC *(editor, with K. W. Gransden and
Penelope Murray)*

THE POEMS OF BRANWELL BRONTË

THE POEMS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

SELECTED POEMS OF THE BRONTËS

THE VLACHS

For Frances

Acknowledgements

My debt to previous scholars is, I hope, clear in my text. Among libraries which have helped me with Brontë manuscripts I should like to mention the British Library, the Brontë Parsonage Museum, the Henry Huntington Library, the Houghton Library in Harvard University, the Humanities Research Center in the University of Texas, the New York Public Library, the Pierpoint Morgan Library and Princeton University Library. For a travel grant to visit American libraries I have to thank the British Academy. I am very grateful to Miss Frances Arnold of Macmillan for her patience and to Miss Debora Stroud for typing the manuscript.

List of Abbreviations

BB	Tom Winnifrith, <i>The Brontës and their Background</i> (London, 1973)
BCH	The Bonnell Collection, Haworth
BCL	The Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library
BCNY	The Berg Collection, New York Public Library
BL	The British Library
BPM	The Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth
BST	<i>Brontë Society Transactions</i>
CW	Edward Chitham and Tom Winnifrith, <i>Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems</i> (London, 1983)
FWM	The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
G	E. C. Gaskell, <i>The Life of Charlotte Brontë</i> , Haworth Edition (London, 1899)
HLC	The Henry Huntington Library, California
HRT	The Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas
HUL	The Houghton Library, Harvard University
PML	The Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York
PUL	The Princeton University Library
SHBP	<i>The Poems of Patrick Branwell Brontë</i> , edited by Tom Winnifrith (London, 1983)
SHCP	<i>The Poems of Charlotte Brontë</i> , edited by Tom Winnifrith (London, 1984)
SHLL	<i>The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence</i> , edited by T. J. Wise and J. S. Symington, 4 vols (London, 1932)

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Introduction

Writing a new life of Charlotte Brontë is rather like going for a walk on the moors above Haworth. There are familiar landmarks and unexpected views, both of great beauty. There are dreary stretches, hidden pitfalls and sudden squalls which blow up out of nowhere. The twisting paths and the complexities of Charlotte's life have been well covered, but seem still to be insufficiently appreciated. There is a timeless quality about the landscape and about Charlotte's story, but against this one has to balance grim relics from the nineteenth century and garish intrusions from the twentieth.

There is no lack of fellow wanderers on the moors and no shortage of other writers about the Brontës. It is discourteous to condemn the efforts of one's predecessors. Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* is a monument to biography, to Victorian good taste and to her friendship with her fellow author. With Charlotte's father and husband breathing down her neck, with Charlotte's best friend supplying letters in a niggardly and prudish fashion, with the scandal at Cowan Bridge to the left of her, with the scandal of Branwell to the right of her, and the greater scandal of Monsieur Heger in front of her – to be firmly left behind under close wraps – it was a miracle that Mrs Gaskell produced anything at all. As it was she produced a Victorian classic, admired at the time, and admired even now, more perhaps than her own novels. It is true that the scandals to the left and right caught up with her fairly soon, and resulted in a bowdlerised third edition, and that inevitably the scandal from behind came to the forefront of Brontë studies after the discovery of Charlotte's letters to Monsieur Heger in 1914. Nevertheless it is still true that no student of Charlotte Brontë can study her without the help of Mrs Gaskell, just as it is unfortunately true that no student of the Brontës, eager for objective truth and relying on modern scholarly methods, can rely on Mrs Gaskell's account which, for the best of reasons, is partial in more than one sense.

Mrs Gaskell has had many successors; the attraction of her book inspired inferior imitators. The discovery of the Heger letters suggested that, if biographical gold mines lay beneath the cobblestones of Brussels, they could be found elsewhere. No other English author has forged such a close link between the place where he or

she wrote and the places about which they wrote. Shakespeare scholars have not investigated gentlemen in Verona, but Brontë students have combed Yorkshire and Brussels for clues about the Brontës. All too often their findings have been ludicrously unscholarly. Students of Emily Brontë, about whom there is far less evidence than there is for Charlotte, may know a book in which an imaginary lover for Emily is suggested, a Belgian, named Louis Parensell.¹ The whole book is built upon a misreading of a title of one of Emily's poems, 'Love's Farewell'. Books about Charlotte, where there is both more irrefutable evidence and more evidence to be refuted, have tended to follow the same pattern, though in a less eccentric fashion.

Among such books there have been two which have bid fair to rival Mrs Gaskell's *Life* in popular esteem. Margaret Lane's *The Brontë Story* (London, 1953) aimed to bring Mrs Gaskell up to date, both by including the other Brontës, as her title indicates, and by introducing new discoveries about the Brontës, especially the evidence of the letters to Monsieur Heger. She is full of invaluable insights into Mrs Gaskell's difficulties. Her accounts of Branwell, Emily and Anne are made more moving by Joan Hassall's imaginative woodcuts. The book is fair to all four Brontës, but relying as it does principally on secondary evidence does not pretend to be a learned or an authoritative account.

Rather different is Winifred Gerin's *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (Oxford, 1966). This book's length, extensive quotations and impressive format meant that it won scholarly acclaim as well as deservedly attracting popular support for its success in bringing the Brontë legend to life. Miss Gerin, who also skilfully wrote books on the other three Brontë children and on Mrs Gaskell without repeating her material, clearly incorporated a great many facts into her account, and all students of the Brontës are greatly in her debt. It is a pity that on examination many of her facts turn out not to be facts at all, but hypotheses that have been turned into facts in the century since Charlotte Brontë died. These hypotheses are based upon uncertain oral tradition, unreliable manuscripts, an inadequate knowledge of Victorian social and religious history and the habit, almost endemic among writers on the Brontës, of treating their books as if they were autobiographies.

In *The Brontës and their Background* (London, 1973) I pointed out these faults perhaps a little too harshly, possibly not paying sufficient attention to the way in which real events suggested, rather

than dictated, events in Charlotte's novels. I did point out that the major stumbling block in the way of a scholarly life of any of the Brontës was the inadequate way in which the primary manuscript evidence had been handled and edited. The position has now been improved. The novels are now being edited properly, although there was never much doubt about the text of the novels. The poems have also received critical attention, and – though it is even more dangerous to make biographical assumptions from poetry than it is from novels – at least we can now be fairly certain when the poems were written, who was the author, and what they said. The juvenilia, about which there has been much speculation, are in the process of being edited, and Dr Christine Alexander has given us a foretaste of their contents in *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1983). Only the letters await a satisfactory edition. It is true that letters would seem to form the basis of any biography, and both Mrs Gaskell and Miss Gerin quote extensively from Charlotte's correspondence. Once we are aware of the inaccuracy, omissions and incorrect datings which mar such editions as The Shakespeare Head edition (London, 1932, reprinted 1980) we can, by checking available manuscripts, do something to remedy this deficiency.

It is of course possible that somewhere under the fast-disappearing cobblestones of Brussels, or in some remote Irish rectory, or in some rich American library, a new piece of evidence will turn up to shed new and unexpected light on the Brontë story. The indefatigable Brontë Society has produced many small additions to our knowledge of the Brontës, and has recorded them in the *Brontë Society Transactions*. It is unlikely that any shattering discoveries will now emerge; finds like the Heger letters only occur once in a blue moon.

The time would then seem to be right for a new look at Charlotte Brontë, based on all available evidence, carefully sifted for any inaccuracies. It may be asked why a biography is valuable, and this question is pertinent at a time when various critical theories are fairly dismissive about the importance of an author's life in the study of his or her works. The Brontës have always been at the mercy of critics ready to fit them into their own moral, psychological and political straitjackets. Feminist criticism, often perceptive, sometimes far fetched, is particularly fashionable. This book has no axe to grind, but aims to see Charlotte Brontë and to see her whole. Matthew Arnold, a discriminating student of the Brontës, would approve of this aim, even though its apparent objectivity now tends

to be dismissed as yet another partial subjective view.² Too many books on the Brontës have a partial and unsteady air.

We want to know about Charlotte Brontë because she is a writer of famous books, and we want to know about her because she is a human being of singular pathos. It is very difficult to draw the line between these two demands. I have tried to meet them both, but not to blur the distinction between them, as I think Miss Gerin and a host of other writers do when they assume that Charlotte was writing her autobiography in her novels.

Charlotte's life was drab and uneventful. The loss of her mother at an early age, her unhappiness at school, both as pupil and as teacher, her lack of success as a governess, her unrequited love for Monsieur Heger, the disgrace of Branwell, followed by his death and that of Emily and Anne, the loneliness of early middle age, terminated by the tepid courtship with Mr Nicholls, the brief period of marriage, and then Charlotte's own death may seem tragic, but they are not really exciting, nor particularly unusual at a time when life expectancy and expectations in life were considerably less than is the case at the present time. What makes them exciting and unusual is that the person who experienced them was able both to translate and transcend them and become a great novelist. This fact, of course, heightens the pathos of the life; it is especially poignant that Charlotte was at her most unhappy in the early 1850s when, as the author of two successful novels, she could look forward to fame, wealth and security, but for a period of six months was unable to find anyone with whom she could exchange anything but the most basic conversation.³

Charlotte as an authoress makes Charlotte the woman interesting, but Charlotte Brontë is not Jane Eyre, Frances Henri, Caroline Helstone or Lucy Snowe any more than Monsieur Heger is Paul Emanuel, Henry Nussey is St John Rivers or George Smith is John Graham Bretton; the list of identifications both for persons and places is almost as endless as it is useless. On the other hand Charlotte Brontë was the creator of her heroines, and her heroes have, as school masters or Belgians or married men, some points in common with a certain married Belgian schoolmaster. It is because she was an authoress that the events of Charlotte Brontë's life are interesting to us, but we must not forget that the events of her life are sources of inspiration to the authoress.

I have tried to keep these considerations in mind when writing this new life, emphasising those parts of Charlotte's life which have

most bearing on her career as an author. Mr Nicholls, for example, does not play much of a part in the following account: Charlotte wrote but little after she had married him. It is interesting but profitless to speculate what Charlotte might have been allowed to write if she had lived. The juvenilia, although they are beginning to be unravelled thanks to the labours of Dr Alexander, do not figure as prominently as in some recent accounts. They are testimony to Charlotte's apprenticeship as a writer, but not as a good writer. Charlotte's father, brother and two sisters have clearly an important role in Charlotte's story, but I am writing the life of Charlotte Brontë and not a general account of the Brontës. The fact that Charlotte was in her lifetime the most famous of the three sisters, the fact that Ellen Nussey kept her letters, and the fact that Charlotte was the Brontë who in her novels remained closest to her experiences makes the writing of her life easier and more profitable than that of any of her kindred.

The Charlotte that emerges from the following pages is an admirable but not a particularly attractive figure. The tendency to turn biography into hagiography must be resisted. Mrs Gaskell, in spite of the formidable difficulties in her way, was quite good at presenting the oddness, the bitterness, the loneliness and the unhappiness that marred Charlotte's life. Ellen Nussey, who had supplied Mrs Gaskell with much of her material, was angry that a more dutiful and orthodox portrait did not emerge, although Ellen's hostility to Mr Brontë and Mr Nicholls must have made it hard for anyone to see Charlotte as a dutiful wife and daughter through her eyes.⁴ Yesterday's heterodoxy is today's orthodoxy. The biography of Tennyson by Hallam Tennyson is a remarkable piece of Victorian reticence, but makes the poet out to be dull and stodgy. This is not the impression we form after the discoveries of Sir Charles Tennyson who has made the wild, unhappy and more than slightly mad poet infinitely preferable to modern sensibilities.⁵ Without any descendants the Brontës have been more at the mercy of popular whims, and recent biographers and critics have tended to see the sisters as pioneer feminists and revolutionaries, although this attitude is hotly resented by their Yorkshire admirers anxious to protect the memory of their patron saints.

The truth lies probably between these two extremes. It may be a disadvantage to be neither from Yorkshire nor a woman when it comes to writing about the Brontës especially since some of the most famous Brontë biographers have been both. But a detached observer

need not be as purblind as Emily Brontë's Lockwood, and can avoid some of the difficulties of close involvement faced by Nelly Dean. As a writer Charlotte produced two very different masterpieces in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Would we read *Shirley* and *The Professor* without these two greater books in mind? Some of Charlotte's poetry and some of her juvenilia are interesting, and in a few pieces we can see traces of genius. But most of the juvenilia is sad stuff, incoherent and rambling, never being intended for publication. The stories and poems do have a certain relevance for the biographer, but not really for students of literature.

Nor must the biographer be blind to certain faults in Charlotte's character. Her failures as a governess and teacher were largely her own fault. She did not like children and resented her subordinate position. She had difficulty in making friends, although she did retain the loyalty of two very different schoolfellows, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. It is a great pity that the original and courageous Mary Taylor did not preserve her correspondence. The letters to Ellen Nussey are occasionally patronising and sometimes narrow and spiteful, but perhaps Ellen deserved the former response and contributed to the latter.

To her immediate family Charlotte's attitude was not perfect. Few can doubt her devotion to her sisters, although relations cannot have always been easy in their lifetime, and after their death Charlotte does not seem to have been very sensitive to their work. Mr Nicholls and Mr Brontë were, like Charlotte, difficult and lonely individuals, without her redeeming genius. Ellen Nussey may have been right in thinking they did not deserve her, although some might see Charlotte's loyalty to her father and husband as a rather touching weakness. Charlotte's feelings towards Monsieur Heger would, if known, have caused a Victorian scandal; to modern students they cause mild surprise that she did not translate these feelings into action. Here, as in the similar case with Branwell, it is important that we avoid both nineteenth-century prudery and twentieth-century prurience in order to discover, if it is at all possible, exactly what happened before passing judgement.

Like many of us, Charlotte Brontë was muddled by the conflicting claims of reason and emotion, duty and inclination, religion and passion. Unlike most of us she was – in her books, if not in her life – capable of resolving these conflicts. This book explores both the conflicts and the resolution. Matthew Arnold, previously held up for admiration, described *Villette* as full of hunger, rebellion and

rage. Later he relented in 'Haworth Church Yard', perhaps in this poem yielding too much to the tendency to equate biography with hagiography. Charlotte Brontë was both admirable and pitiable; we should not be condescending to her books or be rhapsodic about the trivial details of her life.

1

Origins

Charlotte begins her last novel by talking of the Brettons of Bretton, figures of established position and sources of solid British comfort, to whom the friendless Lucy Snowe turns at moments of crisis, but to whose secure position she realises eventually that she cannot aspire. The Brontës were not Brontës of Brontë. Brontë is in fact the name of a place in Sicily which Lord Nelson took as part of his title when ennobled, and it was no doubt the connection with Lord Nelson, an obvious hero in the Brontë family, that led Charlotte's father to adopt this name in place of the more humble Prunty under which he was born.

It is perhaps fanciful to read too much into this simple change of name, quite common at a time when spelling had hardly been regularised. Even if the change to Brontë does suggest a certain snobbery on Mr Brontë's part, this snobbery seems relatively harmless, and it is not immediately clear to what extent the adoption of the new aristocratic-sounding name is a conscious effort to throw off an obscure and slightly disreputable Irish ancestry. Unfortunately the whole subject of this Irish ancestry is a vexed one, although thanks to the efforts of Dr Edward Chitham many of the obscurities have now been unravelled.¹

It is known for certain that Mr Brontë was born in a poor household in Ireland, and that by his efforts, his learning and his piety he succeeded in entering Cambridge and the Church, thus leaping at one bound a great class barrier in an age when such barriers were much more difficult to leap. Difficult, but not impossible if one had good friends, worked hard and entered the Church. My own great-grandfather, the illegitimate son of a blacksmith, ended his life as a rector of Hythe, a prosperous town in Kent, although Jude the Obscure was a little less lucky.

American readers of the Brontës, used to the transition from log cabin to White House, and modern readers, to whom the whole subject of social class and social snobbery is distasteful, may find the subject of Mr Brontë's social origins boring and irrelevant to a consideration of the life of Charlotte Brontë. But even the most