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THE BRONTË FAMILY IN RELATION TO MANCHESTER.

An Address delivered by the Rt. Rev. J. E. C. Welldon,
D.D., Dean of Manchester, at the Annual Meeting
held in Manchester, Saturday, February 19th, 1910.

The meeting of the Brontë Society in Manchester naturally suggests the relation of the Brontë family, and of Charlotte Brontë in particular, to this city. For while her life and the lives of the members of her family were essentially not urban but rural, yet, if there is any city which may claim a direct and almost personal interest in her biography it is Manchester. Manchester was the home of the accomplished and distinguished lady, Mrs. Gaskell, who not only entertained Charlotte Brontë several times as a guest, but eventually, at the desire of her father, wrote her life. The *Life of Charlotte Brontë* has won a classical place in English literature. So far as I shall be able to supplement it by any letters or reminiscences which have not hitherto seen the light, you and I alike are debtors to the courtesy of Miss Gaskell, who still lives at Plymouth Grove in the house where Charlotte Brontë was wont to stay, and is the one intimate surviving link between her or her biographer and the city of Manchester.

It was in the summer of 1846 that the eyesight of the Rev. Patrick Brontë (the father) became gravely affected by cataract. He was then in his seventieth year. An operation for cataract was a more serious matter in those days than it is now. There was at that time a celebrated oculist named Wilson (an engraving of his portrait may still be seen here in the Royal Eye Hospital) living in Mosley Street, Manchester. To him Charlotte and Emily Brontë resorted some time in July, 1846, with an account of their father's malady. He replied naturally enough that it would be necessary for him to see his patient before deciding whether it was the time to per-

form an operation or not. Accordingly Charlotte Brontë brought her father to Manchester at the end of August. They lodged at 83, Mount Pleasant, in Boundary Street, Oxford Road—a house which has been identified by Dr. Axon's researches although the houses in the street have been renumbered,—and it is a striking fact that Charlotte Brontë wrote the first pages of *Jane Eyre* at that address during the period of her father's convalescence after his operation.

The Rev. Patrick Brontë is an interesting figure not only as being the father of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. No clergyman of the present day could hold so rigid a creed or wear so formidable a cravat as he. Miss Gaskell has kindly put into my hands some private letters addressed by him to her mother, and I will try to make a discreet and scrupulous use of them. One of the letters, dated August 27th, 1855, relates to his own parish and to the affection felt by the parishioners for his daughters. It will be recognised as being Mrs. Gaskell's authority for a touching incident that she tells about Charlotte Brontë's funeral.

"The people here (says Mr. Brontë) are poor, but whether rich or poor they have always been not only civil to me and mine but friendly when an opportunity offered for showing their disposition. On a solemn occasion I saw this clearly exhibited. My children generally, and my dear daughter Charlotte in particular, were both kind, liberal, and affable with the inhabitants. A thorough sense of this proceeding was not wanting on the death of each of them—and when the last death took place, when my dear Charlotte was no more, both rich and poor throughout the village and the neighbourhood, both publicly and privately, gave sure proofs of genuine sorrow. The poor have often been accused of ingratitude—I think wrongfully. There was no instance of this when my dear Charlotte died. A case or two I might mention as an illustration of what I say. One moral and amiable girl who had been deceived and deserted by a deceitful man who had promised her marriage, when she heard of my

daughter's hopeless illness, without our knowing it at the time, she spent a week of sleepless distress, and ever since deeply mourns her loss, and all this because my daughter had kindly sympathised with her in her distress and given her good advice and helped her in her time of need and enabled her to get on till she made a prudent marriage with a worthier man. Another case which I would speak of, which is only one amongst many—a poor blind girl who received an annual donation from my daughter, after her death required to be led four miles to be at my daughter's funeral, over which she wept many tears of gratitude and sorrow. In her acts of kindness my dear daughter was, as I thought, often rather impulsive. Two or three winters ago a poor man fell on the ice and broke his thigh, and had to be carried home to his comfortless cottage, where he had a wife with twins and six other small children. My daughter having heard of their situation, sent the servant to see how they were. On her return she made a very eloquent and pathetic report. My daughter being touched, got up directly and sent them a sovereign, to their great astonishment—and pleasure—for which they have been ever afterwards grateful. Though I could not help being pleased with this act—though hardly in accordance with my daughter's means—I observed to her that women were often impulsive in deeds of charity. She jocularly replied 'In deeds of charity men reason much and do little; women reason little and do much, and I will act the woman still.'

In 1857, two years after Charlotte Brontë's death, the year which saw the first edition of Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Mr. Brontë addressed to her two letters. The handwriting testifies to the writer's advanced age and failing eyesight. One of them Mr. Clement Shorter has already given to the world.

After quoting that letter, the Dean continued: The second letter is dated August 24th in the same year. It refers to criticisms passed on the *Life*.

"Why should you disturb yourself," he says, "concerning what has been, is, and ever will be the lot of eminent writers? But here, as in other cases, according to the old adage, 'The more cost the more honour.' Above three thousand years since Solomon said, 'He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow'; 'Much study is a weariness of the flesh.' So you may find it, and so my daughter Charlotte found it, and so thousands may find it till the end of the world should this sinful, perverse world last so long as to produce so many authors like you and my daughter Charlotte. You have had and will have much praise with a little blame. Then drink the mixed cup with thankfulness to the great Physician of souls. It will be far more salutary to you in the end, and even in the beginning, than if it were all unmixed sweetness."

Still more interesting is a letter of April 7th, 1857, as it touches upon his parental authority over his children. He writes:—"The principal mistake in the memoir which I wish to mention is that which states that I laid my daughters under restriction with regard to their diet, obliging them to live chiefly on vegetable food. This I never did. After their aunt's death, with regard to the housekeeping affairs they had all their own way. Thinking their constitutions to be delicate the advice I repeatedly gave them was that they should wear flannel, eat as much wholesome animal food as they could digest, take air and exercise in moderation, and not devote too much time and attention to study and composition. I should wish this to be mentioned in the second edition."

Proceeding to speak of Charlotte Brontë's friendship with Mrs. Gaskell, the Dean mentioned that their first meeting was in August, 1850, at Briery Close, "a house high above Low Wood, on Windermere, then occupied by Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth." Even before that meeting Charlotte Brontë had written on November 20th, 1849, to her friend Mr. Williams:—"The letter you forwarded this

morning was from Mrs. Gaskell, authoress of *Mary Barton*. She said I was not to answer it, but I cannot help doing so. The note brought the tears to my eyes. She is a good, she is a great woman." On January 1st, 1850, she had instructed her publishers to send Mrs. Gaskell a copy of *Wuthering Heights* as a return for her present of *The Moorland Cottage*. The visit at Briery led to a visit of Mrs. Gaskell to Haworth and to several visits of Charlotte Brontë to Manchester. There is in Miss Gaskell's possession a letter written to her mother after the former visit, and in it Charlotte Brontë says: "After you left, the house felt very much as if the shutters had been suddenly closed and the blinds let down. One was sensible during the remainder of the day of a depressing silence, shadow, loss, and want. However, if the going away was sad, the stay was very pleasant and did permanent good. Papa, I am sure, derived real benefit from your visit; he has been better ever since."

Regarding later visits of Charlotte Brontë to Manchester, the Dean said: Apart from her visit in connection with her father's illness Charlotte Brontë came to Manchester in June, 1851, on her way from London to Haworth, again in April, 1853, and lastly, just before her marriage, in May, 1854. She describes the house of Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell in Plymouth Grove as "a large, cheerful, airy house, quite out of Manchester smoke." "A garden," she says, "surrounds it, and as in this hot weather the windows were kept open, a whispering of leaves and a perfume of flowers always pervaded the rooms." Plymouth Grove of to-day has, I am afraid, lost something of its smokeless atmosphere; but the house and the garden are still there. Mrs. Gaskell, in describing Charlotte Brontë's second visit, tells a curious story of the shyness which she evinced after having lived so long out of the world. "We had a friend, a young lady, staying with us, and although our friend was gentle and sensible after Miss Brontë's own heart, yet her presence was enough to create a nervous tremor. I was aware that both of our guests were unusually silent, and I saw a little shiver run from

time to time over Miss Brontë's frame. I could account for the modest reserve of the young lady, and the next day Miss Brontë told me how the unexpected sight of a strange face had affected her."

An even more curious story lives in Miss Gaskell's memory. It happened that Mrs. Sidney Potter, the author of *True Memories*, came to call on Mrs. Gaskell during Charlotte Brontë's visit. She was shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Gaskell and her guest were conversing. Mrs. Gaskell, after greeting Mrs. Potter, turned to introduce her to Charlotte Brontë, but Charlotte Brontë had vanished. Mrs. Gaskell naturally assumed that Miss Brontë had slipped out of the room by one of its doors; but after Mrs. Potter's departure she reappeared from behind one of the heavy window curtains, into which she had fled for concealment at the sight of a stranger.

It was after the visit in April, 1853, that Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mrs. Gaskell, "The week I spent in Manchester has impressed me as the very brightest and healthiest I have known for these five years past." The last of the three visits to Manchester extended only over three days. Charlotte Brontë was then occupied in preparing for her marriage, and she went to Leeds for the sake of making the necessary purchases. There is not much to be added, but the following letter of Charlotte Brontë possesses a peculiar interest, as it reveals the story of her engagement. On April 18th, 1854, she wrote to Mrs. Gaskell from Haworth:—

"I should have deferred writing to you till I could fix the day of coming to Manchester, but I have a thing or two to communicate which I want to get done with.

"You remember—or perhaps you do not remember—what I told you when you were at Haworth. Towards the end of autumn the matter was again brought prominently forward. There was much reluctance, and many difficulties to be overcome. I cannot deny that I had a battle to

fight with myself; I am not sure that I have even yet conquered certain inward combatants. Be this as it may—in January last papa gave his sanction for a renewal of acquaintance. Things have progressed I don't know how. It is of no use going into detail. After various visits and as the result of perseverance in one quarter and a gradual change of feeling in others, I find myself what people call 'engaged.' Mr. Nicholls returns to Haworth. The people are very glad—especially the poor and old and very young—to all of whom he was kind, with a kindness that showed no flash at first, but left a very durable impression. He is to become a resident in this house. I believe it is expected that I shall change my name in the course of summer—perhaps in July. He promises to prove his gratitude to papa by offering faithful support and consolation to his age. As he is not a man of fine words, I believe him. The Rubicon once passed, papa seems cheerful and satisfied; he says he has been far too stern; he even admits that he was unjust—terribly unjust he certainly was for a time, but now all this is effaced from memory—now that he is kind again and declares himself happy—and talks reasonably and without invective. I could almost cry sometimes that in this important action in my life I cannot better satisfy papa's perhaps natural pride. My destiny will not be brilliant certainly, but Mr. Nicholls is conscientious, affectionate, pure in heart and life. He offers a most constant and tried attachment—I am very grateful to him. I mean to try and make him happy, and papa too."

Dr. Welldon concluded by quoting a letter sent by Mr. Brontë to Mrs. Gaskell in April of the following year, on the death of Charlotte Brontë. "There is something of stoicism," Dr. Welldon commented, "as well as of Christianity in the bereaved father's calm and stern submission to the Almighty will."