A Centenary Appreciation of Charlotte Brontë.

James Stephens

To cite this article: James Stephens (1917) A Centenary Appreciation of Charlotte Brontë., Brontë Society Transactions, 5:27, 171-173, DOI: [10.1179/030977617798887913](https://doi.org/10.1179/030977617798887913)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/030977617798887913>

Published online: 18 Jul 2013.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 3

View related articles [↗](#)

A CENTENARY APPRECIATION OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

By James Stephens, Author of *The Crock of Gold*.
Reprinted from the "Sphere," 22nd April, 1916, by
permission of Clement K. Shorter, Esq.

Things are so ordered that although we can capture any good thing if we are strong enough, we cannot own it until we are worthy to do so. By virtue of this law three-quarters of the world booty has to be kept in the dust of our lumber rooms, for we do not know what to do with it, and we are oppressed by a utility or a beauty which may be apparent, but is still foreign and unhandy. It is under our fingers, but no amount of muscle or anger will bring it under our will and seal it ours. It is this law which makes war seem a madness and which clips so many energies and ambition to a trivial slenderness, and it is the straining of this law (as in the last phrase) which makes all law seem ridiculous, for something does happen from war although it may not be possession, and something does follow from possession even though it is not ownership.

In literature the like happens. The most determined reader will pass whatever he is not fit to read, and even if he read it he will take no nourishment from his author. An attack on a universally accepted classic is almost always the sign of a literary and spiritual defeat on the part of that critic. "Show me your books and I will tell you what you are" is profoundly true, but the word "what" should be "where," for we are not yet real beings commanding ourselves and our surroundings. We are states of consciousness, mobile as mercury, and still to be disciplined and moulded into real being. It is the key to the time, to the war, to the bitter social and economic struggle which preceded the war, and the bitterer one which is to follow it.

Much literary history has been a series of flights and evasions and ultimate surrenders, and for many readers there is still some writer with whom they cannot become acquainted. They have the friends they are worthy of and they will get the others when they merit them. This until only a few months ago had been my case with Charlotte Brontë. I had dodged her through years of reading, and the sight of a Brontë book reminded me only that I had never read a word of hers, and fortified me in the resolution not to do so if I could manage to avoid it.

It would be difficult to find a reason for this boycott. Perhaps when I was totally unfitted to appreciate her work I tried to do so, and the rebuff or boredom received remained with me as a kind of instinct. Perhaps the professorial criticism of ten or twelve years ago terrified me from even attempting to read her, for one of the choice ambitions of youth is not to like anything that could possibly be commended by authority. Whatever the cause, we took the opposite sides of the road, and I am now heartily content that I did so, and reserved for to-day a pleasure which might so easily have been spoiled yesterday.

Certain books should not be read in youth—among these the Brontë novels, Shakespeare, the Bible, George Borrow, and the *Arabian Nights*. Blushing sixteen has no key to such matters, and if they are enjoyed at that age the enjoyment must be looked for elsewhere than in comprehension. As we leave the twenties we begin to think there may be more in the professors than meets the eye, and at thirty we have usually made our peace with tradition or have become literary anarchists. It is a career in either case, and alas that, in the latter, the genius can only be accompanied by the dunce—Eternal companions, for none but a fool is courageous enough, intuitive enough, to cherish the wise man. Are they not the salt of life, those literary rascals who spoil everything they lay a pen to, but whose motives shine and blaze like

a tin can in the sun? It is not their duty to create life but to reflect it as a bottle-top or a moon reflects light, and so they redeem our backyards and our nights from a too unbearable dusk.

Rhetoric, but we may be pleased that there is something in which to find pleasure without asking whether it be true or untrue—that is the secret and justification of rhetoric, and it has its own truth also, for rhetoric is art, and nothing else is art but that. What good is any artist until he has arrived at his purple passages? Then, indeed, do we know if the regal colour is in his soul, or if he is putting us off with borrowed shreds and shoddy material and sweated labour. Charlotte Brontë's colour is from the true loom, the kingly purple with ornaments of gold and jet. It is not cunningly massed, for her craft was not impeccable; rather it is scattered and perpetually recurring in phrases and asides that move us as we are moved by the courageous utterance of the prophets with all their implication of the magnificent, the impertinent, and the pathetic.

Among the true creators, who spin life and reality as a spider weaves its silk, must be placed the name of Charlotte Brontë. Perhaps she had not a tithe of the gifts which other writers had, but, and in despite of all lack, she is unique and unapproachable. To my mind she is the finest human being that English fiction has discovered. No work of art can weigh more than the weight of its creator, and in those scales other English novelists are not substantial beside her. Her books are informed with herself. Always her gesture is large and her utterance noble; always her reader feels the contact of a rare personality, of a living intelligence that can fire even banality into humanity, and of a character that was based in something other than literary or artistic gymnastics, and by that character, the sole greatness to which a human being may attain, she was great.

Beannacht Dé len a hanam.