

New Light on the Brontës

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literary tradition in the shape of the Brontës. Devonshire might have its "Lorna Doone," and "Westward Ho!," but no other county had such strong literary associations as that of the Brontës in Yorkshire. A vote of thanks to the Baptist and Wesleyan Chapel authorities for the use of their schools was moved by Mr. John Brigg, M.P., seconded by Mr. W. W. Yates, and adopted, the Rev. W. Slugg acknowledging the vote.

During the interval between the tea and the evening meeting a large number of visitors took advantage of the brilliant weather by wandering over the moors behind the village, and thus seized an opportunity of viewing the scenery which had such an inspiring effect on the Brontë genius.

NEW LIGHT ON THE BRONTËS.

An Address delivered at Haworth on April 10th, 1897, in connection with the Re-opening of the Brontë Museum.

BY MR. CLEMENT K. SHORTER.

I really do not feel the ordinary diffidence in addressing you this evening which I usually experience before strangers, because with the members of the Brontë Society there is certainly no one who should feel more at home than I do. So many of them have written to me again and again; many of them I have troubled again and again with tedious communications about this or that trifling fact and they have always answered me with kindness and a generous gift of time. Consequently, in talking to you for a few minutes this evening, I feel that I am but addressing friends in an ordinary conversation in an ordinary room. It would be impossible, however, to speak here in this village of Haworth without a profound sense of the sacred ground upon which we stand. I remember well the first time I came to Haworth, then almost a boy, that feeling was particularly strong with me as I wandered through the Churchyard and into the Church and Vicarage. All these associations of the Brontës thrilled my heart. I do not know of any place in England, save only Stratford-on-Avon, that conveys the sense of magnetism and of glamour which this village of Haworth gives to the stranger.

Well, if one searches for the reason of that, it is surely largely to be found in the beautiful biography which was written in 1857, exactly 40 years ago, by Mrs. Gaskell. I have been announced to speak to you to-night on the subject of "New Light on the Brontës." Now, in one sense, no more new light on the Brontës was possible after Mrs. Gaskell's book was published. The general impression that we have of the Brontës is the same. Nothing has been written since and nothing can be written that alters in any material point the beautiful story, beautifully told by the pen of that brilliant writer. In the main the facts are known to all. There were three sisters, the daughters of a poor country parson, writing their little books in childhood, and thenceforth plodding on to greater books in the after years, those greater books which made them famous, and nothing that can be said by anybody—and it would be wrong of me to come here without emphasizing this point, although I have tried to emphasize it elsewhere—will alter the fact that Mrs. Gaskell laid the foundation of much of this Brontë enthusiasm. It is quite true that the Brontës wrote immortal books, but these books would certainly not have been read as much to-day as they are if no biography had been written. There are many writers of immortal books in whom we take no such personal interest. Some authors, indeed, have had their books written *out* of popularity by inefficient biographers. But the writers in whom we are interested to-day had their story so beautifully told at the right moment, and it has sunk into our minds and hearts. I have elsewhere asserted that Mrs. Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë has had a far larger sale than any other biography in our literature. This statement has been strongly questioned. It has been urged that Boswell's "Johnson," for example, with sixty years more of regular circulation, has far exceeded the Brontë book in popularity. This is certainly not the case. Boswell was proud of a first edition of 1700 copies. His book was published in 1791. It seems quite clear that up to its author's death in 1795 it had not in spite of its success, a success for those days, sold 3000 copies. Since then it has indeed had a steady sale and has been acknowledged as the best of all biographies, but it has not, after all, appealed to other than distinctively literary people, who in every generation are but a few. Croker, I know, gave the book a singular popularity, and fifty thousand copies of his edition have been sold,

Dr. Birkbeck Hill's edition, the best for our time, has not, however, got into a second edition. There are cheap editions of the book, it is true, but when every factor is considered I am almost certain that Boswell's "Johnson" cannot for a moment compare in mere sales to Mrs. Gaskell's "Memoir of Charlotte Brontë." That book had so many things in its favour. Miss Brontë's popularity was great, but it was enhanced at the time of her death by the rumours abroad of her somewhat pathetic life. Mrs. Gaskell also was popular as a novelist, and so when she wrote her book with a keen eye to the romantic conditions of the Brontë story it was natural that the public which had admired her writings as well as the public which admired the writings of her friend all eagerly obtained the volume. Only Messrs Smith & Elder know the actual sales of Mrs. Gaskell's book during this period of forty years, but it is quite clear that it must have been very extensive. Think of the people you know who have read Mrs. Gaskell. How many people do you know who have read Boswell from cover to cover? It is a current jocularly at the meetings of the Johnson Club that many of its members have not done so. And thus I am entitled to emphasize how large a part Mrs. Gaskell has played in the modern Brontë enthusiasm. If there had not been a Mrs. Gaskell there would have been no Brontë Museum, no Brontë Society, and no meeting here to-night.

Let me not, however, fail to acknowledge in the presence of the Brontë Society the good work which it has done by its judicious enthusiasm upon the same lines. Mr. Yates, of Dewsbury, Mr. Stead, of Heckmondwike, Mr. Butler Wood, of Bradford, Mr. Horsfall Turner, Dr. Erskine Stuart,—these and other gentlemen have added materially to our knowledge of the Brontës and of the Brontë country. One and all have furnished us with minute information which only those who live in the very centre of Brontëland could have obtained.

I have heard it said that you people in Yorkshire are very forgiving. That you should be able to devote so much hero-worship to the Brontës does really in one sense show a remarkable openness of mind. A lady from the South of England, after reading *Wuthering Heights*, is reported to have remarked that she would as soon think of visiting the Red Indians as of going into a country in which such people existed as were described in Emily Brontë's weird novel. But although it is quite clear to you that Emily Brontë did not see every side of

the life of the Yorkshire in which she lived yet you have forgiven her limitations in love for her splendid genius, and nothing is too trivial, no incident too inconsiderable, to be placed on record, and that is why you have gathered together so many interesting mementos in the adjoining Museum. I have heard, indeed, even this tendency to collect relics of the Brontës severely censured, but I like to recall the story of hero-worship recorded in Lockhart's *Life of Scott*. Scott, on visiting the town of Sheffield, had purchased as a memento a planter's knife, and had written on a piece of paper the inscription which he wished to be engraved thereon, "Walter Scott, Abbotsford." When it went to the engravers an enthusiastic Scot, Saunders by name, offered his employer a week's work if he might be allowed to keep the card. Scott always referred to this as one of the most gratifying compliments he had ever received in his literary capacity! I do not think, therefore, we need mind exciting the scoffs of a few when a great army of Brontë enthusiasts thank us so cordially for every new point we bring to light concerning the greatest of our women poets and one of our greatest women novelists. My own small share in this research has been a labour of love and an almost unqualified pleasure. It does not come within the scope of my present address to say in detail all I might say about that—to tell you of my visit to Brussels, and of my talk with Mlle. Heger, for M. Heger, although then in the house, was too ill to see me. I have wandered down the Rue d'Isabelle and into the Pensionnat where the Brontë girls spent many happy and some miserable hours. I have been through the school-room and dormitories, now empty, but unchanged from the time when the author of *Villette* made so many mental notes of their characteristics. I have even eaten a pear from the very pear tree under which the Brontë sisters sat, and concerning which they wrote so affectionately. But even Brussels does not exhaust our existing Brontë associations. Within a few yards of Notting Hill Station in London live three sisters, the Misses Wheelwright, and there they have lived for forty years, silently recalling their many memorials of the Brontës, yet never during that time either meeting or corresponding with a single person who had also met the Brontës. Yet these Misses Wheelwright knew the sisters well. One of them had music lessons from Emily, another French lessons from Charlotte, while

the eldest sister, Lætitia, was one of Charlotte's most intimate friends. But there are other intimate associations still available. I would like to tell you something more, if it were not difficult to do so with delicacy, of Mr. Nicholls, who thirty years ago or more was a curate of this parish. I have met him in Ireland several times; I have found him to be an upright, intelligent, interesting, kindly man, a man who has now as always a great feeling of love and devotion for his richly endowed wife and is proud of her great fame. I had to unthink all that I had heard as to his being in every way a different man from what we hero-worshippers might, not without impertinence, have conceived of as a suitable husband for Charlotte Brontë. He is a man whom any woman might revere, and I was pleased to feel as I did, that here before me was the man who brought a little gleam of sunshine and happiness into the home and into the life of one of our greatest novelists, and who still keeps up a warm interest in his old home at Haworth and its Brontë associations. It is utterly untrue as has been hinted that he discouraged his wife's literary aspirations. She read to him every fragment of her writings, and she wrote many short papers after her marriage, some of which will yet see the light. I have read at least three "openings" of stories and they represent quite as much actual writing effort as any other period of Charlotte Brontë's life can claim. You remember that during the seven years previous to her marriage she had only written three novels; why, therefore make a criminal of her husband in that during the nine months after her marriage she did not write three more? Mr. Nicholls recalls to me that he sat with her at the fireside one evening at Haworth and that she read him the opening chapters of a new novel—afterwards republished in the *Cornhill Magazine*—and they chatted pleasantly over the possible development of the plot.

But I am a long time coming to the two or three points of interest which have been made known to me since I published *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*. The first concerns a curacy of Mr. Brontë's to which no biographer has so far referred. You know that when Mr. Brontë left Ireland he went to Cambridge and then to Wethersfield. There is a very charming story told by Mr. Augustine Birrell of how Mr. Brontë fell in love with a young lady, a Miss Burder, and asked her to be his wife, and how she accepted the proposal, and that then an

irate guardian would not allow her to marry a poor curate, so Mr. Brontë, heart-broken and love-sick, left Wethersfield. That story is very pretty, I do not know how far it is true, I doubt if Mr. Birrell went into the matter very thoroughly, but it does not much matter, the episode leads nowhere. But the biographies tell us that when Mr. Brontë left Wethersfield he went straight away to Dewsbury, and that he passed all the rest of his life in curacies in Yorkshire until he finally died as incumbent of Haworth. Now my information is that when Mr. Brontë left Wethersfield he took up a curacy at Wellington, in Shropshire. There had, it would seem, been living close to Wellington another curate, a Mr. Nunn, whom Mr. Brontë had known at Cambridge, so Mr. Brontë went into Shropshire. He was there about a year, and he left, Mr. Nunn's descendents tell me, because he quarrelled with Mr. Nunn because the latter insisted on becoming engaged to be married, and in support of Mr. Birrell's story of the rejected lover at Wethersfield we have the fact that Mr. Brontë was certainly a very vigorous woman-hater at the time. After a year in Wellington Mr. Brontë went to Dewsbury, in Yorkshire. It is interesting to note that Mr. Brontë's vicar at Wellington was John Eyton, a great preacher of that day (1809) and a zealous antiquarian. I hope you don't find even a triviality such as the discovery of Mr. Brontë's additional curacy entirely unimportant in Brontë records.

My second point is that the first curate Mr. Brontë had in Yorkshire was a Mr. Hodgson, who was here from 1837 to 1839. In my book I state that Mr. Brontë's first curate at Haworth was Mr. Wightman. I based that statement upon Mr. Brontë's funeral sermon on Mr. Wightman in which he certainly seemed to imply that Mr. Wightman was his first curate. But this was a mistake as the following letter from Mr. Hodgson's son-in-law explains. I may add that Mr. Hodgson's daughter and her husband have been to see me, and I was very glad to meet them. Here is the letter from Mr. de-la-Hey, who married Miss Hodgson :—

Bathealton Rectory, Wiveliscombe, Somerset.

DEAR SIR,—I am reading with much interest your lately published *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*, and, as what I have to say is in connection with your book, you will, I trust, excuse me for troubling you with it.

In one of her letters Charlotte Brontë says that Mr. Hodgson was one of her father's curates, but in your chapter on the Curates of Haworth you say that Mr. Wightman was

Mr. Brontë's first curate, and you add in a footnote that "a Mr. Hodgson is spoken of earlier, but he would seem to have been only a temporary help." On what ground do you make this statement?

Charlotte Brontë says rightly that Mr. Hodgson was her father's *curate*. In fact Haworth was his first and only curacy. He was curate there, as far as I can make out from my wife, who is Mr. Hodgson's daughter, in 1835-6, and left it for the Incumbency of Christ Church, Colne, Lancashire, where he died in 1874. Had you, or any other interested in the matter, made inquiries of the older inhabitants of Haworth, you would have found that they had not forgotten Mr. Hodgson. He liked the people there and was very happy in his curacy.

Mr. Hodgson had a great respect for Mr. Brontë, and scouted with indignation the tales told of his outbursts of intemperate rage. He spoke of him as a man of a very nervous temperament, and, as an instance of it, said that often when he had promised to preach he would send to Mr. Hodgson at the last moment and tell him that he was unable to do so. This was the case on the first or second Sunday on which Mr. Hodgson officiated at Haworth. It had been arranged that Mr. Hodgson should preach in the morning and Mr. Brontë in the afternoon, but while Mr. Hodgson was in the afternoon Sunday School Mr. Brontë sent for him and told him that he felt unequal to the task of preaching and that Mr. Hodgson must take his place. To this Mr. Hodgson demurred, urging that he had no sermon ready. "Oh," said Mr. Brontë, "you, must preach extempore; the people like it better." Poor Mr. Hodgson with much sinking of heart had to do as he was bid, and the Haworth folk used to remind him of that first extempore sermon and say that he never preached a better one.

Mr. Hodgson is mentioned in Charlotte Brontë's letter in connection with Mr. Bryce. Mr. Bryce had expressed a wish to Mr. Hodgson that he could find a suitable partner for life, and it was in consequence of this that Mr. Hodgson took him over to see the Brontës. My wife distinctly remembers that her father told her that several letters passed between the two after Mr. Bryce's visit, and that the notion of marriage was given up because both families being consumptive the union would not be a prudent one. Thus there would seem to have been more in this incident than Charlotte Brontë would have had one suppose.

Mr. Hodgson did not see much of the Brontës, and only paid occasional visits of duty to their father. His impression of the girls was that pride formed a considerable element of their shyness and reserve. He must however, have had a pretty favourable opinion of them on the whole or he would not have taken his curate there for the purpose hinted at above.

My father-in-law was a man of a clear head and sound judgment, and little likely to be led away by imagination; yet I have heard my wife more than once, when asked for a true ghost story, relate the following as she heard it from her father: "During his curacy at Haworth my father lodged in an old house occupied by three coeval generations of women—mother, daughter, and granddaughter. The house had the reputation

of being haunted, but I never heard my father say that he had seen the ghost. His landlady, however, told him that when her granddaughter was a child of about three years old she one day came rushing downstairs in a great fright saying that she had seen a lady standing in the middle of the room with something tied round her throat. The ghost made its presence known to my father in several ways. He was returning in the evening from a visit when he saw a light moving about from one chamber to another in the upper regions of the house. Although it was not very late he thought the people must be going to bed and hurried on accordingly. To his surprise he found the three females sitting quietly at their work round the kitchen fire, and on asking whether anyone had been moving about with a light upstairs was answered in the negative. Another time he had gone upstairs in the dark to fetch a book on which he knew that he could easily lay his hand. He found the book, and was just turning to go downstairs, when close to his ear he heard what sounded to him like the shaking out of a silk gown. More than once as he was sitting reading or preparing his sermon he would hear the crack of a whip in the room above him. He would rush upstairs and the whip would resound in the attic. He would follow it there, and there it was again in the room below.

This ghost had also an unpleasant habit of disturbing him at night. He slept in one of the old four posters which had an understructure of sacking, instead of the more modern laths or strips of wood. When he had got comfortably settled the bed would begin to heave as though someone underneath were uplifting it. He would get up, light his candle, and look beneath, but nothing could be seen. This fact he communicated to Branwell Brontë who was very sceptical on the subject, and my father invited him to come and test the truth of what he said by sharing his bed. He came, and took every precaution for excluding anyone from entering the room after they were in it. He closely examined the room in every way, and satisfied himself that no one was there but themselves. He locked and bolted the door, and securely fastened the windows. But they had not been long in bed before the upheaving began. One night's experience was quite enough for Branwell, and he would not renew it. I was a child when my father at my request told me this ghost story, and he precluded it by saying that for whatever reasons they were allowed to reappear upon earth, they were not allowed to do any harm. I say this, he said, from my own experience, for one night, at Haworth, I had fallen asleep while reading in bed, my candle burning on the chair beside me, when an unconscious movement of mine would probably have pushed the bed curtain into the flame of the candle. Judge my surprise and thankfulness when in the morning I found the candle burnt down into the socket and removed to a safe place at the bed's foot."

It has always seemed strange to me that those who were so anxious to unearth all that they could of the history of the Brontës should never have taken the trouble to apply to Mr. Hodgson.

Believe me to be, yours very truly,

E. OLRIDGE-DE-LA-HEY.

In further support of this contention, so clearly justified, that Mr. Hodgson was curate at Haworth, Mr. Oldridge de-la-Hey sends me the following also:—

A requisition to the Revd. William Hodgson, Assistant Minister of Haworth, Yorkshire, April 30th, 1837.

REVD. SIR,—We the undersigned inhabitants of Haworth, aforesaid, being fully satisfied with your faithful and diligent services, both in the desk, pulpit, Sunday School, and parish, earnestly desire (if you can see it to be the path of duty pointed out by Providence) that you would continue in your present situation for another year, at least, or as long as you conveniently can. And at the same time we wish to state it is our hope and belief that, notwithstanding trade is depressed, your subscription will be conducted in a spirit, similar to that which gave rise to it, last year.

This document bears the name of Mr. Brontë and also of Branwell, followed by some two hundred and thirty-four other signatures, many of them, I doubt not, sufficiently familiar names still to many here in Haworth. The document then concludes as follows:—

All the preceding names or signatures, which are two hundred and thirty-six, were procured in a few hours, and had the requisition been sent round the parish I am persuaded from what I have heard and seen that it would have been signed by all the churchpeople in Haworth and its vicinity.

P. BRONTË, Incumbent.

Before leaving Mr. Hodgson I may add that his curate, who proposed to Charlotte Brontë, was not named Price, as inaccurately stated by me in my book, but Bryce. He died at Colne and is buried in the Christ Church Cemetery, and an inscription on his tomb tells us that his name was David Bryce, and that he died on the 17th January, 1840, aged 29.*

I have but little more to add. The most unacceptable passages in my book were those in which I referred to Charlotte Brontë's relations to the Sidgwicks. The Sidgwicks are now a distinguished family in English literary life, and not the least distinguished member of that family wrote to me to demur to Miss Brontë's characterization of her friends.

"I am reading your book about the Brontë's," she says, "with the greatest interest and pleasure, and I want to tell you that Miss Brontë's description of Mrs. Sidgwick, of Stonegappe, is a cruel caricature of a most kind and sweet-natured woman."

*Annals and Stories of Colne and Neighbourhood, by James Carr.—J. Heywood, Manchester, 1878.

I knew Mrs. Sidgwick in her old age and my husband knew her all his life, and we both know that Miss Brontë's stories of her were absurd. Mrs. Sidgwick told me that Miss Brontë had a most unhappy difficult, temper, and that she took offence where no offence was meant. I am quite certain that Mrs. Sidgwick never said in a tone of surprise, 'What, love your governess,' and I cannot easily believe that any of the Sidgwicks would tell a young lady to 'walk behind.' Certainly the family traditions are not of unkindness to others, but of generosity and consideration. Miss Brontë was as much out of place as a nursery governess as Miss Burney was at court; but her unfitness for the duties her fortunes drove her to undertake was hard on her employers as well as on her. Mrs. Sidgwick told me that Miss Brontë often went to bed all day and left her to look after the children at a time when she was much occupied with her invalid father, Mr. Greenwood, at Swarcliffe."

My book has brought me many, many letters from all parts of the world and they are an amazing testimony to the interest in the Brontë sisters which seems to gather volume and increase day by day. My own interest in the Brontës is not in the least diminished by the fact that I have spent so many hours in trying to learn something about them. On the contrary, I want to learn more, and I shall welcome information from whatever source. I have been most generously treated on all hands. Mr. Nicholls, Miss Wheelwright, and others have helped me untiringly in the preparation of my book, and when I came before the public the kindness of those who, having worked in the same field might have been pardoned for not giving me so much of favour, has been most remarkable. I have come to the conclusion that no work can be as pleasant as preparing a biography and the next best thing to making biography oneself is to edit it, and so, sooner or later, I hope to re-edit Mrs. Gaskell's biography of the Brontës, and not till then shall I have completed my researches concerning their most fascinating story.
