



The Australian Brontë Association Newsletter

Issue No 1

May 1998

Formation of the Australian Brontë Association

In recent years, some of the local members of the Brontë Society felt that the time had come to set up an independent local Brontë organisation, not to compete with the Haworth Brontë Society but to complement it.

The reasons for setting up an independent local society are as follows:

1. Since 1985 a small number of local Brontë Society members have attended occasional meetings organised by the Australian representative, Fergus McClory, who has now retired. Local members have felt a desire for more frequent meetings and this requires a committee to share the load and to provide a greater supply of ideas.
2. The Haworth Brontë Society's financial arrangements involve a system of reimbursement for expenses incurred. This system is cumbersome for an active society and we believe the most appropriate structure for a local association is one in which the members are responsible for raising and spending their own money.
3. The membership arrangements of the Brontë Society are via Haworth, making it unwieldy for local needs. This often led to delays in filtering information through to Australia which last year meant several new members missed Brontë Society meetings. The most appropriate structure therefore involves the local association handling its own memberships.
4. Not all Brontë lovers in Sydney want to join a U.K. based Society with all the hassles of arranging foreign currency etc. For many, the benefit of receiving the *Brontë Society*

Transactions (published by the Haworth Brontë Society) makes membership worthwhile and some members are able to participate in UK events from time to time. However, it is difficult to recruit new members for local activities on this basis. Many people just want the local meetings.

5. With just an Australian representative, the Brontë Society was ineligible for grants from local funding bodies. To be eligible for Australian grants, an organisation needs a separate, properly constituted organisation that can be held accountable for administering grant money.

We believe that it is important for us to be independent of Haworth. This does not mean we wish to turn our backs on the Society, we will actively encourage members to join the Brontë Society in addition to the Australian Brontë Association. The benefits of the Brontë Society as opposed to the ABA are quite different. To encourage dual membership, the ABA offers a discount for members of the Brontë Society. To facilitate the work of the Australian representative of the Brontë Society and to emphasise the cooperative nature of our Association, we have set out in our by-laws the invitation to that representative to become an ex-officio member of our committee.

With the retirement of Fergus McClory after twelve years as the Australian representative of the Brontë Society, the Committee of the ABA has been asked to nominate a replacement. Haworth is now considering our nomination and we hope to be able to inform you of the outcome in our next newsletter.

The ABA Committee would like to take this opportunity to salute Fergus McClory for his contribution to the Brontë Society in Australia and to thank him for the fellowship and informative meetings he has organised over the years. We look forward to his continued association with Brontë interests.

Report of the ABA Meeting 25th March 1998

The inaugural event of the Australian Bronte Association was held on Wednesday 25th March 1998 at the University of New South Wales. There were 38 people present, which is very encouraging, especially as we haven't yet turned up our publicity machine to full volume. Surprisingly, given the rabbit warren of rooms in the Arts Faculty building, and the fact that the meeting had to be relocated at the last minute, nobody was lost. This was largely thanks to the signposting organised by Christine Alexander.

I opened the proceedings by introducing the committee members and briefly outlining events leading up to the formation of the ABA.

The main event of the evening of course was the screening of a recently produced version of Jane Eyre. We were fortunate to have access to such a well-equipped venue with projection TV facilities. Dr Kate Newey's review of the video appears below.

Following Jane's aborted wedding, and her flight from Thornfield, we stopped for discussion and supper. Those preparing supper felt conspicuous at the front bench, as if they were doing a TV cooking demonstration! Fortunately, everyone was so engrossed in the discussion, magnificently led by Kate Newey, that nobody noticed the supper preparations.

The discussion was very lively. Some members thought the video was too "Woman's Weeklyish" while others thought it was very good and defended it strongly. Many people commented later on how much they enjoyed the arguments and Kate's subtle steering of the discussion, allowing everyone to make their point.

We then watched the last part of the video, made more interesting because of issues raised during the discussion. Kate then chaired a second round of talk to complete what everyone present agreed was a delightful evening.

Christopher Cooper



Review of *Jane Eyre*

Viewing the most recent adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, co-produced for television by Britain's ITV and the American Arts & Entertainment network, is a mixed experience. There is the delight of watching a familiar story, beautifully filmed, unroll before you, like the supremely comforting luxury of being read to. And then there is the mild anxiety about what has been changed, truncated, or completely left out of this version of the novel, and disappointment at the way in which the beautiful locations and careful period detail only tell half the story.

Screen adaptations of novels - particularly classic favourites - are tricky things. There are large practical and theoretical questions about the transference of stories from the novel to the screen - questions often framed and solved in very different ways by practitioners and critics. And then there are overwhelming questions of audience appeal. Not only do adaptations have to satisfy devoted readers who are exacting in their judgements of details of plot and tone, but they also need to attract new audiences, who may be indifferent or resisting readers. But in film and television making, the niceties of final audience appeal are often a very small end to a long and complicated process. Getting a film to the cinema or television screen requires inordinate amounts of time, money, and deal-making of all kinds in which the integrity of the source material can sometimes seem to become a minor consideration in the complexities of demographics, scheduling, star billing, and advertising (the recent Gwyneth Paltrow-starring films, *Emma* and *Great Expectations* might be cases in point). Hollywood (standing for all that non-Americans love to hate about American popular culture) isn't always at fault here, as sometimes those apparently mercenary considerations of demographics, scheduling, star billing, and advertising can create a witty gem such as *Clueless*. But more often that not, the combination of generic differences between the novel and the screen, and the commercial considerations of film and television production as business, leave a keen viewer only partially satisfied.

This was my state after watching this new film of *Jane Eyre* twice. The first time, in the company of other Brontë enthusiasts, in a comfortably dark viewing room with a large screen, I was drawn into the beauty of the locations and the careful attention to detail in the physical recreation of Charlotte Brontë's imagined world.

The film's visual style is subtle, using interesting contrasts of light and shade to create powerful interior pictures, evoking the mysteries of Thornfield with its 'madwoman in the attic'. Ciaran Hinds' Rochester is a subtle performance which doesn't overplay the misogynist capacities of the Byronic hero, nor move Rochester into matinee idols postures of heroism. Samantha Morton gives us a very self-sufficient Jane Eyre, played with Yorkshire directness, and her clear, unwavering gaze on all those around her is an outward indication of Jane's inward determination and self-awareness. This characterisation makes Jane's second interview with Rochester (her formal introduction to him) a delightful mixture of comedy and a serious battle of matched intellects and passions. Her affirmation that Rochester is not handsome is entirely credible in this scene and sets the tone for the development of the relationship between Jane and Rochester in the rest of the film.

However, it's hard for this approach to show us Jane's passionate nature - the film relies on a series of voice-overs in which Jane confides her growing love for Rochester to the viewer. And as the love story develops, the weaknesses of this adaptation become more obvious. The dialogue that Hinds and Morton are given! On second viewing the film's unreliable veering between dialogue derived from the novel and dialogue straight from Barbara Cartland is often cringe-making. The film's increasingly narrow focus on the love story is rather disappointing, especially as there were inklings of other themes early in the film. Jane's declarations of independence are made strongly here, but as romantic love develops, it crowds out other ideas in Jane's head. This was not, I think, entirely Charlotte Brontë's view of the relative place of romance in the scheme of things. After almost a century of women's emancipation from the view that 'Man's love is of a man's life a thing apart, / 'Tis woman's whole existence' (Byron, *Don Juan*), it's disturbing to see how a film in the 1990s reduces *Jane Eyre* to just this belief.

Kate Newey

Arthur Bell Nicholls Booked to Come to Australia

From *The Australian Women's Mirror* June 12th 1946 (as reprinted in *The Brontë Society Transactions*, 1946).

Despite the name of the Sydney suburb Bronte (which has nothing whatsoever to do with our favourite family of writers) there are very few Australian connections with the Brontë family. In fact until I came across this item in an old copy of the *Brontë Society Transactions* I thought there were none at all.

Australia played a little-known part in Charlotte Brontë's romance. When her father refused to allow her to marry Arthur Bell Nicholls, her lover was so upset that he wrote to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and offered his services as a missionary in Australia. His offer was accepted, and Nicholls entered into a long correspondence with the Society, arranging his departure to Australia. The letters are still in the archives of the Society.

This was early in 1853, and the frantic Charlotte spent the ensuing months pleading with her father to give his consent to the marriage. Charlotte eventually won her father over by promising that Arthur would help him in his parish and that they would never leave him. On these conditions, Patrick Brontë agreed to his daughter's marriage and Arthur Nicholls wrote to the Society withdrawing his offer to go to Australia as a missionary.

Christopher Cooper

Brontë Birthplace Trust

As you know, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne Brontë were born at Thornton. After many years of neglect, in which the house was divided and 'modernised', Barbara Whitehead, author of *Charlotte Brontë and her 'dearest Nell': the Story of a Friendship* (1983) recently bought the Brontë birthplace. The original house required extensive restoration but Ms Whitehead has rejoined the two sections of the house and has begun to address damage to the structure of the building which the initial restoration work revealed.

Ms Whitehead hopes that the house may be opened for limited periods later this year as a

Study Centre, when the Brontë Birthplace Trust will organise a team of supervisors to help the visitors. Fundraising for the continued work to the building remains a concern and the Society hopes to eventually purchase the building from Ms Whitehead when she decides to opt for a quieter life.

If you are planning a trip to Yorkshire, it is possible to stay at the Brontë birthplace, however we hear that the rooms are quite expensive.

Dates for Your Diary

Our Forthcoming Meetings

Tuesday 23 June 1998, 7.30pm

'Art as Accomplishment: the drawings and paintings of the Brontës' an illustrated lecture by Professor Christine Alexander, patron of the Australian Brontë Association.

Cost: \$4 members, \$8 non-members

Venue: The Meeting Room, New College, UNSW, Anzac Parade, Kensington.

RSVP: phone 9850-9539 (day)

Tuesday 1 Sept. 1998, 7.30pm

'The impact of Brontë biography on a reading of *Shirley*' by Amanda Collins, University of Sydney. This talk will be followed by readings from the novels and discussion.

Cost: \$4 members, \$8 non-members

Venue: As above *RSVP:* phone 9850-9539

'A Christmas Event'

At the next meeting we will announce our final event for the year, to take place at the Harold Park Hotel, now called 'The Comedy Hotel', on the corner of Wigram Road and The Crescent, Balmain.

Other Events

Friday 5th June 1998

Susannah Fullerton will present a lecture at the WEA from 6-8.30pm. This special evening course will discuss Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, including the extraordinary story of its publication and the various attempts to create film versions of the novel.

Come and enjoy the magic of Charlotte Brontë's classic tale of passion and deception!

Cost: \$25 (incl. supper)

Venue: WEA, 72 Bathurst St, Sydney

RSVP: phone 9264 2781

JANE EYRE AND THE EMPIRE

A review of a chapter from *Rule Britannia* by Deidre David
(Cornell University Press, 1995)

Deirdre David's book, *Rule Britannia* is subtitled *Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing* and chapter three is called 'The Governess of Empire: Jane Eyre Takes Care of India and Jamaica'. David makes a convincing argument that although *Jane Eyre* is set firmly in England, with only minor references to Jamaica and the wider empire, the colonial theme is strongly represented throughout the book.

Jane displays an extraordinary self-confidence - extraordinary for an orphan, badly treated by her cousins, and extraordinary for a pupil exposed to persistent humiliation at her school. The words by which Jane announces to the reader that she and Rochester did, at last, marry, place her very much in the 'subjective' role - 'subjective' in the grammatical sense of the word. She was the subject of the act of marriage, not its object. It was not 'reader, Rochester married me' nor the egalitarian 'reader, we were married', but the forthright 'reader, I married him'.

From where did this confidence come - the attitude that put her firmly in control of her life? Perhaps the inheritance helped a little. But Jane displayed an almost impertinent sense of her own worth right from childhood. The main source of her confident sense of identity originates in her Englishness! David argues that the colonial expansion that was taking place overseas profoundly affected the outlook of those who never left its shores.

England was not just another country. It was the heart of the great empire. It was the fount of all civilisation. To be English, even if one of its humbler citizens, was to be superior to the rest of the world. Jane has no doubt as to whether she would rather lounge around in a stifling villa in Marseilles as somebody's mistress or to be 'a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England'.

As Deidre David explains, 'Jane's values coincide with those prescribed for British imperial womanhood: first, a belief in her own

social and cultural superiority to the native; second, recognition that she must sacrifice her physical comfort in the cause of civilising the native; and third, an acceptance of her ancillary status in the male-dominated business of running the empire'.

For Jane, natives include all people unfortunate enough not to be English. Bertha Mason was the savage from Trinidad. Charlotte is ambiguous as to whether or not she was native West Indian or half-caste. One can't help feeling that her scorn would be all the greater if Bertha had been fully English by blood but had 'gone native', taking on the lax manners and morals as the sun loosened her corsets.

A writer about the days of the British Raj noted the strong tendency for colonial women to drift into 'flabbiness and inertia under the combined influences of heat, laziness, and servants at command. The first sign of deterioration is when a woman omits her corsets from her toilette, and begins lolling about in a sloppy and tumbled tea-gown in the morning.'

The uncivilised lands started just across the channel. Jane's moral superiority extends to continental women like Adele's mother - 'I will not be your English Celine Varens' - when Rochester attempts to buy her expensive clothing and jewellery. Even Rochester himself is regarded in some respects by Jane as 'having gone native', that is taking on the un-English moral values of darkest Europe and one of many reasons why Jane turns down St John River's offer of missionary partnership is that she felt she had been called to serve in the mission-field of Thornfield. Even though she had no expectation of ever being able to return to Thornfield, that was her calling.

The colonial expansion was spear-headed by men. But they soon realised the need for the more civilising influence of women. Women went out as wives, and later as single women. Some went to heal, but many went to educate the natives. They were the 'governesses of the empire'. Education was seen as important to the colonial administration as a means of making the natives more docile and easier to control.

Teach them to read so that they can understand the colonial laws, teach them enough geography so that

they can find England on a map and understand their relation to it, teach the peasant farmer enough arithmetic so that he can 'economise his means and enter into calculations and agreements', teach him the skills of surveying 'so that he can measure all the red spaces of the empire'.

Such a civilising influence required strong-minded women who had vision, were capable of sacrifice, fortitude and above all were well organised and not given to emotional outbursts. Jane has exactly these qualities.

There are many references to Jane's ability to plan and keep her head in a crisis. Referring to her escape from Lowood she 'orders her brain' to devise a plan and comes upon the scheme to advertise. 'This scheme I went over twice, thrice; and it was then digested in my mind: I had it in a clear practical form: I felt satisfied and fell asleep.' Jane's practical mind forms part of her attraction for Rochester.

There are colonial references pointing to 'the red parts of the map' and even to parts with different colours. Rochester's time in Trinidad is central to the plot of *Jane Eyre*. St John Rivers wanted Jane to assist his missionary activities in India and he practically ordered her to give up learning German in favour of Hindustani.

There are many references to the East. While the British Empire had not stretched to the lands of bazaars and the sultans, the colonial attitude of moral superiority did reach those lands (at least in the mind of someone like Jane).

When she returns with Rochester from a shopping expedition Jane says to the reader, 'He smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched'.

But she is determined to show him that they live in the healthy heart of England not in the besotted sultan culture of the East. While there might be some superficial similarity of Thornfield to a harem (Rochester with his three women, Mrs Fairfax, Adele and Jane) Jane strongly rejects any hint of such a comparison and when Rochester declares that he would exchange her for an entire seraglio she replies that if that's what he wants he should go to Istanbul. Moreover she would be ready to prepare herself 'to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved'. (Not as a missionary's docile helper, you understand, but as the crusader herself.)

I must admit that I was a little sceptical about reading a 'feminist Jane Eyre', but I was impressed by the scholarly approach and clear argument. I think that my understanding of the novel has been enhanced by gaining a better understanding of the colonial world view of the early Victorian era.

Christopher Cooper

Recent Publications

The Brontë's: Family History, with new introductions by Charles Lemon (Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1997). This boxed six-volume set brings together eleven previously published items of Brontë biography. At £425 for the set, this is one for the serious collector.

Some Unique Yorkshire Towns, by Arnold N. Patchett (Pentland Press, 1997). Patchett's book gives a detailed account of 18 Yorkshire towns, including a chapter on Haworth. While not specifically a 'Brontë' book, *Unique Towns* provides details of the rich heritage of the Yorkshire area.

Anniversaries

1998 marks 150 years since the deaths of Branwell and Emily Brontë (24 September and 19 December 1848 respectively).

In June 1848, Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was first published, making this year the 150th anniversary of its publication

THE BRONTË SOCIETY, HAWORTH

While the Australian Brontë Association is independent of the Haworth-based Brontë Society, one of our aims is to promote the Brontë Society. Belonging to this international Society is not for everybody, which is why we set up our independent local association. However many of us find that there is a benefit in belonging to both.

The main benefit for Australians is the publications. The *Transactions* of the Brontë Society is a scholarly and well-respected journal that has been published for over a hundred years. It publishes in-depth papers on various aspects of the Brontë's writing, the social history of the times and places in which they lived. It has also published interesting but more peripheral items, such as 'The Eyesight of the Brontë's'. More recently the Society began publishing the *Gazette*, which contains information about meetings, conferences, reviews of recent publications or TV adaptations etc.

For members who travel to the UK from time to time there is the additional benefit of free admission to the Brontë Parsonage Museum and free access to the library (by prior appointment). There are also special offers and discounts for various items. Members can participate in activities such as the special June weekend in Haworth which includes the Annual General Meeting, excursions, walks, literary luncheons etc.

Membership dues are in English pounds (the present unfavourable exchange rate makes it a little more expensive than it once was). Annual Membership is £22 and Life Membership is £350. For two members living at the same address these are £30 and £500 respectively. For full-time students the annual membership is £7.50. These rates are a little higher than for those living in Europe to cover the cost of airmail postage for the publications.

If you are interested in joining ask for a membership form at the next meeting of the Australian Brontë Association.

Next Newsletter

In our next ABA Newsletter we are going to begin a series of *Profiles*, in the form of interviews, on our members. We will begin with our Patron and Committee, and we hope it will give you a chance to get to know us and each other – all our quirks and special interests.

THE AUSTRALIAN BRONTE ASSOCIATION BY-LAWS

(1) NAME

The name of this organisation shall be THE AUSTRALIAN BRONTË ASSOCIATION

(2) OBJECTIVE

To promote study of the Brontë's within Australia and to bring together people interested in the works and lives of the Brontë's.

(3) MEETINGS

* At least 4 meetings shall be held each year of which at least one will be a social event.

* The first meeting of each year will include the Annual General Meeting at which reports will be given and elections will be held.

* Business meetings may be held in conjunction with any other meetings except social events.

* A quorum at an Annual General Meeting or other business meeting is 12 financial members or 50% of the financial members whichever is less.

(4) VOTING

* Each financial member present at an Annual General Meeting shall have one vote on each matter considered.

* No person shall have a casting vote.

(5) EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

* The office-bearers of the Executive Committee shall be Patron, President, Treasurer, Secretary, Membership Secretary, Publicity Officer, Newsletter Editor and Haworth Representative.

* The Patron is appointed by the Executive Committee.

* The Haworth Representative is to be the Australian Representative appointed by The Brontë Society (where that person agrees to serve as The Australian Brontë Association's Haworth Representative).

* All other office-bearers shall be elected by the members of the Association at the Annual General Meeting.

* The President is responsible for coordinating the activities of the Association and organising and chairing the meetings.

* The Secretary is responsible for handling all general correspondence of the Association and for taking and presenting minutes of the business meetings and committee meetings.

* The Membership Secretary is responsible for handling correspondence relating to membership and for maintaining membership records.

* The Treasurer is responsible for collecting moneys, paying accounts, banking, keeping accounts and preparing financial reports.

* The Publicity Officer is responsible for publicising the Association.

* The Newsletter Editor is responsible for editing the newsletters.

(6) PATRON

* The Patron shall be appointed by the Executive Committee and shall be an ex-officio member of the executive committee.

* The Patron is responsible for providing leadership in matters of policy and direction of the Association and should be a person of eminence in the field of Bronte studies.

(7) HAWORTH REPRESENTATIVE

* The Australian Representative appointed by The Brontë Society shall, subject to his or her approval, be the Haworth Representative for the Association and as such shall be an ex-officio member of the Executive Committee.

* The Haworth Representative shall be responsible for providing links between The Brontë Society and its members within the Australian Brontë Association and for encouraging members of the Association to join The Brontë Society.

(8) EXECUTIVE MEETINGS

* Executive meetings shall normally be held at least once between each pair of consecutive general meetings.

* A quorum at executive meetings shall be three executive members.

(9) MEMBERSHIP DUES

* The normal annual membership dues for individuals shall be \$20 per member.

* The annual membership dues for pensioners and students shall be \$15.

* The annual family membership (for two persons living at the same address) shall be \$25.

* For individual members who are also members of The Bronte Society the annual membership dues shall be \$15.

* The year shall be January to December with dues payable on 1st January.

* Members shall be unfinancial after 31st March.

* Members joining during July to December shall pay half dues.

(10) MEETING FEES

* Meeting fees shall be determined by the Executive Committee. For general meetings these are to be set to cover the costs of that meeting.

* Charges for fund-raising social events may be set at a level which will provide a surplus to be used to subsidise major events of the Association such as overseas speakers.

(11) FINANCIAL MATTERS

* A cheque account shall be opened in the name of the Association with any two of the President, Secretary, Membership Secretary and Treasurer to sign.

* The annual budget shall be presented to members at the first meeting of the year.

* The books of accounts shall be audited annually.

* The income/expenditure statement for the previous year shall be presented to members at the Annual General Meeting.

(12) ELECTIONS

* All office-bearers, except the Patron and Haworth Representative, shall be elected at an Annual General Meeting, held in conjunction with the first meeting each year, and shall serve until the next Annual General Meeting.

* All nominations must be made in writing to the Secretary by 1st February.

* A vacancy occurring in the Executive Committee during the year shall be filled by co-option by the Executive Committee and persons so co-opted shall serve until the following Annual General Meeting.

(13) NON-PROFIT CLAUSES

* The income and property of the Association shall be applied solely towards the promotion and objectives of the Association and no portion thereof shall be paid or transferred directly or indirectly by way of dividend bonus or otherwise howsoever by way of profit to the members of the Association provided that nothing herein shall prevent payment in good faith of remuneration to any officer or servant of the Association or to a member of the Association in return for services actually rendered to the Association or reasonable and proper rent for premises let by any member of the Association.

* The Association shall not be dissolved except at a business meeting of the Association called for the purpose and by a resolution carried by a majority of 80% of the votes recorded in respect of the same.

* If upon winding up or dissolution of the Association there remains after the satisfaction of all its debts and liabilities any property whatsoever the same shall not be paid to or distributed among the members of the Association but shall be transferred to The Bronte Society in Haworth.

(14) BY-LAWS

* These By-Laws shall be effective from the time of their adoption by a majority vote of members at a business meeting.

* Amendments to these By-Laws may be considered at a business meeting.

* Amendments must be made in writing at least one calendar month before such a meeting.

From the Editor

I hope that you have enjoyed the first edition of the *Australian Brontë Association Newsletter*. Hopefully the first of many! Thank you for your support of our new Association. I look forward to receiving contributions (book reviews in particular are welcome) from our members, which can be posted to me at 7 Division St, Coogee 2034, or you can call me on 9665 2326.

Vanessa Benson