The Australian Brontë Association Newsletter

Issue no. 4 — December 1999

PROGRAMME FOR 2000

★ **Friday FEBRUARY 11** from 6-7:30pm in the Collins Bookshop, Shop M201 (Level 2) Broadway Shopping Centre, Bay Street Broadway

A BRONTË "HAPPENING"

Some readings from the writings of the Brontës, selected by **Susannah Fullerton**, interspersed with wine and cheese and the opportunity to browse the shelves of Collins Broadway Bookshop.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The following three meetings will be at 2pm in the Meeting Room of New College, Anzac Parade, KENSINGTON.

★ **Saturday APRIL 29**

EMILY THE VICTIM

A talk, featuring Emily's poetry, by **Dr Jack Nelson**, a retired librarian from the University of New South Wales.
The meeting will include a brief AGM and election of officers for the year.

★ **Saturday JULY 22**

HELEN HUNTINGDON :
THE 'FEMALE SAVIOUR' IN *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

This will take the form of a workshop with opportunity for discussion in small groups. It will be conducted by **Brydie Maguire**, honours graduate from Macquarie University.
In her second novel, Anne Brontë provided a critique of the domestic ideology of nineteenth-century bourgeois society. Central to her criticism was the restriction of women to certain gender roles, including the 'angel in the house' and the moral guardian, or moral saviour in the domestic sphere. The presentation will take a combined literary and historical approach, focussing on the ways in which Helen Huntingdon engages with these 'female' roles during her first marriage. Questions will also be posed for discussion, focussing on wider issues of gender in the novel.

★ **Saturday OCTOBER 14**

SADISTIC IMPULSES IN THE WORK AND WORLD OF THE BRONTËS

A talk by **Dr Fran de Groen**, Senior Lecturer at the University of Western Sydney.

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★ **NOVEMBER/DECEMBER**

ABA CHRISTMAS FUNCTION

Date and Venue to be announced

REPORT FROM THE PRESIDENT

So, we come to the end of our second year. Our numbers are still somewhat modest (especially compared to our big sister, the Jane Austen Society of Australia) but it was pleasing to see that we lost very few members from last year and we picked up enough new ones to have made a modest net gain over 1998. Let's hope that we can continue this into the new millennium. (If you haven't yet renewed let this be another reminder.) Our financial position is quite healthy and we have plans, once we have ensured that our membership renewals are up to expectations, to use this surplus to make some substantial purchases for our library.

We have decided that, especially as we still have many fewer items than members, we should limit the borrowing period to 4 weeks for books and 2 weeks for audio and video materials. This will, of course mean that members will incur the cost of postage but it will ensure that more members can borrow. We are producing a catalogue and so it will be possible to have items mailed out as well as borrowing them at meetings. And, of course, this will be of particular benefit to those members who live outside Sydney.

As you will have seen, we have an exciting programme organised for next year. At last we have succeeded in being able to plan 12 months ahead, and it's now time for us to start thinking about 2001. If any members have any ideas could they please let one of the committee know.

Today I received a couple of books and some newspaper cuttings from some friends in Oxenhope. Oxenhope is a little village just outside Haworth and it is the end of the line of the Worth Valley Railway (and the setting for the film of the Railway Children. One of the books is James *Tully's The Crimes of Charlotte Brontë*. As I already have it (see the review in this newsletter) I have donated one copy to our library.

Let me briefly outline the contents of the cuttings. One item refers to the reprinting, by the Brontë Society, of *Haworth, Past and Present* by J. Horsfall Turner, first published in 1879. Although it obviously mentions the Brontë family, the book shows that the village had an interesting history even before the family arrived. Much mention is made of the non-conformist tradition of the area with references to men like John Wesley and William Grimshaw. But the history begins by looking at Haworth in mediæval times.

Another item refers to yet another of Charlotte's letters which is up for auction. This one was written by her to William Smith Williams (her publisher's editor) in 1849. The Brontë Society is interested in purchasing it and expects it to sell for about £30,000 when it comes up for auction on December 8th.

Charlotte is often referred to as an early feminist, and indeed she wrote much in support of the plight of women, particularly single women, in male dominated Victorian England. But she was not at the extremities of feminism and was critical of those who were. In the letter to Williams, she writes of Lady Morgan and her book *Women and Her Master*, 'Not content with elevating women, she seeks to disgrace Man. Moreover her style is pompous ... she often writes rather from a pedantic wish to show her learning than from an earnest desire to impress others with the truth of which she herself is sincerely convinced.'

October marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Shirley* and the celebrations involved a number of activities at the Red House in Gomersal and Oakwell Hall. There was a newspaper cutting showing a photograph of a couple of the staff at Oakwell Hall in Victorian costume. Both properties were featured in Shirley and are well worth seeing if you visit Yorkshire.

In this issue of the newsletter we are featuring book reviews, including the text of the reviews of the biographies of Charlotte that were presented at our last meeting.

By the time you read this the Christmas Party at St Jude's will be over, or at least well

under way. On behalf of the committee I wish you all a happy Christmas and New Millennium and look forward to seeing you at the Brontë 'Happening' in the Collins Bookshop in February.

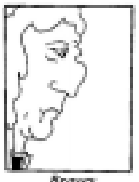
Christopher Cooper

REBECCA ALEXANDER

With best wishes,
Rebecca Alexander.

1981 – 1999

By now many ABA members will have learnt, through the grapevine, of the death of Rebecca, the daughter of our patron, Christine Alexander. Rebecca died in an accident just two weeks before her eighteenth birthday. The sympathies of the members of the ABA go to Christine and Peter and their son Roland.


Branty
owner of Bronte's Inn


Bodey

On your behalf the committee sent flowers to the funeral and several of us were there in person. The death of a young person is especially tragic yet Rebecca's funeral was strangely spiritually uplifting. Those of us who had not known Rebecca very well came to know her better through the words of three of the many whose lives had been influenced by her and it was clear that a life of great potential had been cut short.

One could not help thinking of the short lives of the Brontë children, especially Elizabeth and Maria, who were even younger than Rebecca when they died. Yet the service did not dwell on tragedy but rather was full of light and hope, and the words of Mother Julian of Norwich that headed the Order of Service set the tone:


Murat
French Calvary
Officer

All will be well
And all things will be well
And all manner of things will be well

Despite her youth Rebecca had accomplished a great deal. Of interest to the Brontë community is the fact that at the age of 12 she illustrated *Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine* edited by her mother. It is very fitting that Branwell was also about 12 when he wrote the text that she was illustrating. We reproduce here some amusing portraits of some of the Glass Town characters. (Many of you will recognise the original for the portrait of Young Soult, the poet.)


Young Soult
poet

I remember Rebecca being very pleased to be asked to sign my copy of *Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine* a couple of years ago. It may never become a collector's item but I shall treasure it all the same.

Christopher Cooper

The Many Lives of Charlotte Brontë

At our last ABA meeting, a number of our members presented reviews of Brontë biographies, looking at 'The Many Lives of Charlotte Brontë'. The presentations were followed by some lively discussion about the nature of biography, Charlotte's creation of a 'persona' and the strengths and limitations of the various 'lives'. We have included the reviews in the newsletter for you to enjoy.

The Brontës

by Juliet Barker

(Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994)

I feel inadequate to review a work of such magnitude as that of Juliet Barker, who has such an in depth appreciation of the lives and work of the Brontë family not least as librarian at the Brontë Parsonage Museum. Perhaps, instead, I may present the feelings for and about Charlotte that the reading of this biography invoked in me.

The word 'genius' has been mentioned this afternoon. I prefer the word 'talented' and some, like Charlotte, are more talented than others. Born in 1816, the third daughter, Charlotte became, in 1825, with the loss of her mother and sisters, Elizabeth and Maria, the 'older sister'. It is interesting to note that Charlotte and Emily both created heroines who were orphans, only in *Shirley* did the happy discovery of a long-lost mother occur.

Charlotte suffered, as so many children do, because she was 'different' – shortsighted, shy, small, plain, all characteristics guaranteed to segregate her from activities of a team nature. In addition, she had a brilliant, imaginative mind, but it was her reluctance to flaunt her superior knowledge which gradually endeared her to her fellow pupils at Roe Head School.

It was here that she met Mary Taylor and Ellen Nussey, who became her friends and influenced her thinking. In the case of Ellen Nussey, however, one might feel that it was a dangerous influence particularly at a time when Charlotte was undergoing a crisis in her religious beliefs. Ellen was ill equipped to advise Charlotte, not possessing as fertile an imagination nor such an informed mind as her friend,

yet Charlotte constantly turned to Ellen for advice.

What I find fascinating about Charlotte's character, is that here was a brilliant mind tripping over itself and in some ways frustrating not only her readers but also herself, and yet at the same time she was so aware of her own fallibility.

In spite of her obvious lack of blatant physical attractions (at least in her own estimation), Charlotte had four proposals of marriage. The first was from Henry Nussey, Ellen's brother, who at 27 became the curate at Donnington, in Sussex and needed a wife to assist him. This was more of a business arrangement and he was refused by Charlotte who declared that when and if she married, it must be for love.

Then there was a proposal from Rev. Pryce, a young Irish clergyman from Dublin, who visited the Brontës at Haworth. He, too, was turned down.

When James Taylor, the managing editor at Smith, Elder & Co (Charlotte's publishers) proposed, Charlotte refused against the wishes of her father, because he was physically repulsive to her. Juliet Barker writes that Charlotte could not abide 'his determined, dreadful nose'.

Lastly, there was the proposal from her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, who had been pursuing her for some time but was not favoured by her, nor by her father, who wanted Charlotte to have the economic security that James Taylor could have provided.

Having suffered herself from the pain of her unrequited love for M. Heger at school in Brussels, Charlotte eventually recognised the misery of Arthur Bell Nicholls and at the age of 38, she married him. According to Juliet Barker, Charlotte at last found the love she had always sought in the man she married. How sad that her happiness was so short-lived!

So the feelings invoked in me after reading Barker's biography are of sadness in relation to Charlotte. One must remember that the period in which she lived was the romantic era of the 19th Century – romantic love was the goal of young women, and although today women do not have to assume a male pseudonym to be recognised for their talent, I believe they still yearn for romantic love!

B. E. Winter

Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius

by Winifred Gérin

(Clarendon Press, 1967)

This review took the form of a dialogue between Graham and Annette Harman.

G: Well, I was absolutely outraged by this book.

A: And that was before he'd even opened it.

G: I've always known everything there is to know about the Brontës in general, and Charlotte Brontë in particular. This was pretty easy for me, because there are only three facts to know.

A: These facts were:
(1) The Brontës were country girls, growing up in the middle of a moor, and their novels appeared miraculously from some unknown kingdom;
(2) Although you might compare *Wuthering Heights* to *King Lear*, as an elemental work, the Brontë novels essentially had no literary parents and no children;
(3) The Brontës, in their youth, created magic lands like Glass Town and Gondal, drawn freshly and powerfully directly from their childish imaginations.

G: In these circumstances, how can we talk about the ***evolution*** of genius? We all know that genius is something that drops from heaven, emerges from a dream, or is left on your doorstep by the fairies.

Opening up the book, though, we find that Winifred Gérin does indeed justify her subtitle. Here are two features of the Gérin approach. Gérin is not happy to marvel at what wonderful novels Charlotte Brontë wrote, or at Moses' spectacular parting of the Red Sea. She has to trace <u>everything</u> back to its petty beginnings.

For example, Gérin couldn't leave us to believe that Heathcliff and Cathy were buried together as the result of some inexorable and elemental imperative. She has to point out that Emily took the idea from some country curate, who wanted to be buried with the barmaid from the local pub. And my impression of Heathcliff as a character is in no way enhanced by the possibility that there was a trial version called Grassy Slope.

Not only does Gérin need to trace the seeds of every Charlotte Brontë idea she can, but she also has a need to fill in every intermediate step, and, indeed, to find out everything at all that there is to find out. From the introduction on, she is very aware of the fact that many other Charlotte Brontë biographies already exist, and that her only justification for writing another one is that she can consistently cap the previous versions:

The effect of this is to take us from a conventional view of Charlotte Brontë, superficial but magical, to a Winifred Gérin view which is encyclopaedic but prosaic. Here's another quote from the book, referring to the time when Charlotte was 14, and was sent to Roe Head School:

A: "At the Miss Woolers' school, the third floor remained uninhabited, a circumstance which tended greatly to heighten the girls' curiosity, for Roe Head was reputed to have its ghost. On certain nights - a

slow-dying legend averred - the sound of a silk dress rustling over the floorboards of the upper storey could be distinctly heard. For Miss Wooler, the wish to discredit anything so fantastic as a ghost led to the practical course of sending any girl who mentioned it upstairs after dark to fetch her something that could be easily found".

G: Winifred Gérin is very much in the Miss Wooler mode, installing electric floodlights in erstwhile romantic, candle-lit corners. Gérin demolishes the Charlotte Brontë legend in 3 ways:

Firstly, one of the central foundations of Romanticism is its distortion of the nature of genius. Genius may well be, in sad reality, 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration. In contrast, the archetypal Romantic hero ***relies*** on misrepresenting himself as someone who spends most of his time idly communing with Nature, and rousing himself occasionally from his languor to dash off a masterpiece. The Byronic hero is *ipso facto* a liar, and that lie is a device by which he may transcend reality.

Coleridge's widely believed story that he composed Kublai Khan during an opium dream is the classic example, and Charlotte Brontë is of the same era and myth. Winifred Gérin, in showing us how Charlotte <u>actually</u> did it has wantonly blown her cover. I needed this biography, like I needed the news that an early draft of Kublai Khan had been found in Coleridge's attic.

Secondly, Winifred Gérin tells me far more about Charlotte Brontë than I really want to know. It is the "uncharted wilderness" aspect of Romanticism that is one of its greatest strengths. In anyone's language, in any biography, mystery is good news. The only exciting part about Agatha Christie's biography, for example, is not the 3,999 weeks which are carefully chronicled, but the 1 week when no-one knew where she was. Picnic at Hanging Rock is an Australian classic, because no-one has the faintest idea what happened in it.

In Chapter 5, Winifred Gérin contrasts the correspondence of Charlotte and Ellen Nussey, with that of Charlotte and Mary Taylor:

A: *"The correspondence, stretching over nearly 25 years and piously preserved by Ellen, forms the basis of our knowledge of the outer circumstances of Charlotte's life. It is a deceptive document which leaves the essentials unsaid.*
Very different indeed may have been the letters addressed over the same period to Mary Taylor, but the reticent Mary destroyed them except for a few".

G: The whole point here is that supernatural beings like Vampires and Charlotte Brontë by their nature leave no reflection in a glass. If Mary Taylor had been the type of person likely to hoard her letters, no doubt Charlotte would have written to her in the same superficial strain that she wrote to Ellen Nussey. And if Winifred Gérin had heeded the very example that she cites, she would realise that in piously chronicling Charlotte's life, she, too, has doomed herself to eternally missing the point.

The third way in which Winifred Gérin diminishes the Charlotte Brontë legend is by revealing the mean beginnings of what we had previously only known by their stupendous outcomes. I have already given examples of this, in the description of the origins of Heathcliff's desire to be buried with Cathy, and the parting of the Red Sea in a glass of Ribena. The same result flows from Gérin's illustrations of the ugly fact that Glass Town had its roots, not in childish imagination, but in a dull imitation of adult work:

I rest my case. Mystery, ignorance and misrepresentation are the central foundations of the Charlotte Brontë legend, and the ladder by which Charlotte and her fellow romantics climbed beyond a merely mundane reality. Winifred Gérin's compendious scholarship has destroyed this mystery, and has murdered Charlotte in the process. Annette, what was your verdict?
A: Not guilty. Or at least, if the murder victim was the singularly naive and cut-out version of Charlotte Brontë that <u>you</u> appear to have been harbouring, Winifred Gérin has performed a public service by killing it off. Let's consider Gérin's passage on the origins of Rochester, which you'd have read if you'd made it past page 76:

"To be fairly judged, Rochester must be seen as the logical outcome of his author's earliest conception of a man. The Ideal Hero must be saturnine, faithless, proud, disillusioned, masterful, melancholy. It is impossible not to see the influence of Branwell. Above all, what distinguished Charlotte's conception of the hero, both in her juvenilia and adult writing, was her acceptance of his moral imperfections. In the last resort it derived from the father-figure of all Byron's heroes - Milton's Satan himself".

Here, Gérin gives substance and stature to the Charlotte Brontë legend in two important ways. Firstly, she anchors the legend in the here and now of this world which, although <u>you</u> may not have noticed, is the world we all actually live in. *Substance* is infused into the story by, for example, the linkage of the fictional Rochester with the real-world Branwell. Secondly, Gérin shows how Charlotte Brontë, in her works, is tapping into an immense ocean of human thought overall. Not only are the proximate and popular thoughts of a Byron tied in, but the titanic *stature* of more distant antecedents such as Milton's Satan. The documentation of these linkages can only add to our understanding and

appreciation of Charlotte Brontë's work.

Having said that, Gérin is also sensitive to the elusiveness of Charlotte's imaginative well-springs.

"The surprising thing about Rochester was that he was not M. Heger. He had no other antecedents than Zamorna, Charlotte's first and most enduring creation".

Finally, it is very clear from the book that Winifred Gérin has spent many years living where Charlotte lived, visiting all the places Charlotte visited, and letting thoughts, feelings and responses well up in her as they might have done in Charlotte Brontë. There's a real empathy in the book that I think you've completely failed to do justice to. All in all, I think anyone would find it a great biography, assuming that they bother to read it.

G: OK, maybe I'll read the rest of the book. What else do people need to know about it?
A: Well, the grammar's appalling. Do you have an example, Graham?

G: *"They were expected, for instance, to make their own beds and sweep the carpets but fire-laying, grate-polishing, cooking, and laundry were not considered a ladies occupation and their aunt herself was not more jealous of her own status than the girls grew up to be".*

A: There's a wry sense of humour. Another example?

G: *"With less commotion than had accompanied any other act in his life, Branwell suddenly died".*

A: She's a real Brontë groupie. An example of that?

G: *"Never unjust where genuine kindness was meant, the fact that Charlotte misjudged Mr. Nicholls for so long shows that she simply failed to notice his good deeds".*

A : (Although on the other hands there's also the occasional gentle dig at Charlotte:

G: *"Branwell's kind of love was the very kind to rouse her bitterest scorn. Far from softening her towards him, her own love for M. Heger (which the impartial might also say was love of an illicit sort) only hardened her heart"*.

G: And does she have an opinion as to why biography is important?

A: Yes, take it or leave it, here's Gérin‘s defence of the process of creating a biography, from Chapter 14 concerning Charlotte's time at Brussels:

A: *"The importance of tracing Charlotte's true experiences, as opposed to the fictional ones integrated into her novels, lies in their influence on her creative powers".*

Here's a final example from the Brussels period:

"The very intensity of her feelings during that period succeeded in sharpening even her exceptional powers of observation. All her perceptions, as though under the influence of a drug were heightened to their fullest capacity by the struggle going on in her soul. What she saw and heard during those months of acute mental and emotional suffering were indelible impressions, colouring the texture of her mind so deeply as to supply in retrospect, not only the emotional content of two entire novels, but the smallest details on which their plots were made to hinge".

Winifred Gérin has sensitively traced and recreated the evolution of Charlotte's genius in this biography.

Graham and Annette Harman

Unquiet Soul
by Margot Peters

Unquiet Soul, was published in 1975, when the author was an Associate Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater. She became a Brontë enthusiast at the age of ten when she discovered *Wuthering Heights* among her mother’s books.

This is an extremely enjoyable biography. My main comparison for this biography was Mrs. Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë, which* was first published in 1857 and consequently reflected Victorian ideas in its presentation of Charlotte Brontë. In contrast, Margot Peters presents a more modern view of Charlotte’s personality. Mrs. Gaskell’s biography used none of Charlotte Brontë’s letters to M. Heger. However, Margot Peters quotes extensively from the letters to reveal Charlotte’s obsessive personality and a naïve intensity of feeling, quite improper for a correct Victorian lady.

Margot Peters is equally good at analysing Charlotte Brontë’s private communication with her female friends. Through these letters, we see the real Charlotte Brontë and Margot Peters highlights the contrast between the intense private letter writer and the very shy and guarded public persona Charlotte presented to the world.

Unquiet Soul shows clearly the importance of the Brussels experience in Charlotte Brontë’s life – her loneliness there, her feelings for M. Heger, her opposition to both Catholicism and foreign ways. We have tended to think of Charlotte Brontë as having a very limited experience of life but Margot Peters illustrates that often Charlotte had opportunities but was prevented from taking them up by her own opinions and shyness.

I was particularly interested in Margot Peters' examination of Mary Taylor's decision to go to New Zealand. Charlotte's long-term friend found tutoring boys in Europe dull and unchallenging and felt England offered few opportunities for poor single females. She decided to emigrate and encouraged Charlotte to go with her.

How different the Brontë story might have been had Charlotte accompanied her friend. At this time in her life, Charlotte was in deep depression over her feelings for M. Heger and his refusal to correspond with her. She expressed a great need for change and employment yet for many reasons remained at Haworth. I would be interested in a biography, which includes a medical analysis of Charlotte's state of mind during this period of her life.

Unquiet Soul is written in a relaxed style that is very readable. Although it is a shorter biography than Mrs. Gaskell's, the edition I read was printed in a smaller font size than normal and this was particularly difficult when the font was reduced again for quotations from the letters. This biography had no illustrations.

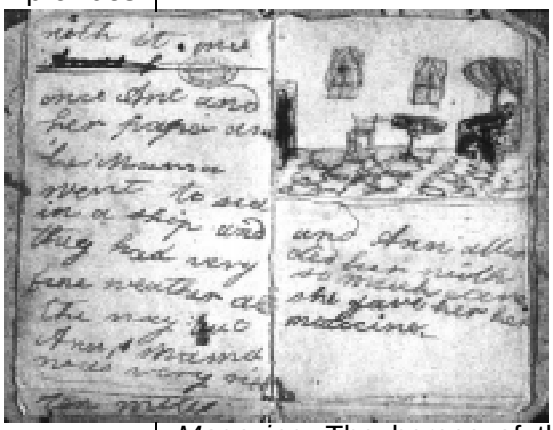
The copy I reviewed was kindly lent to me by Christopher Cooper. I tried to obtain a copy through the normal bookshops but it is out of print – though I was successful through a company called "Dial-a-Book". Muriel Andrews from "Dial-a-Book" provided me with a list of Brontë books, which I am happy to provide to anyone who is interested.

I can highly recommend this biography to anyone wanting to know more about the fascinating life of Charlotte Brontë.

Anne Harbers

Charlotte Brontë
by Jane Sellars
(British Library in the Writers' Lives series, 1997)

Jane Sellers was, for seven years, the director of the Brontë Parsonage Museum, and her brief, but profusely illustrated biography provides an excellent introduction and overview to Charlotte's life and prepares the reader for the more comprehensive biographies. Consequently it doesn't make any startling new revelations or theories about her.



The book focuses on Charlotte's letters, many of which are printed throughout the book. She wrote many of them, especially to her two best friends, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor, as well as to her publishers.

The first of the twelve chapters focuses on how Charlotte came to be at Howarth and her time in Cowan Bridge School. There are two illustrations of interest here. The first is of one of her earliest manuscripts measuring 28mm by 36mm and containing 6 watercolour illustrations. The story is about Anne: "Once Ann and her papa and mama went to sea in a ship and they had very fine weather all the way but Ann's mama was very sick and Ann attended her with so much care she gave her her medicine." The second is of the tiny journal she produced with her siblings, called *Blackwood's Young Men's Magazine*. The heroes of this story were inspired by Mr. Brontë's gift to his children of toy lead soldiers.

The second chapter concerns her education and describes her time at Roe Head and the two lifelong friends she made there. In this chapter are some of her drawings and a letter she sent to Ellen that tells of her unhappiness at being a governess. In it we see the paper-saving strategies that were popular at the time where, after finishing a page she turned it sideways and continued across what she had already written.

The fourth chapter deals with her time in Brussels and mentions the love letters she wrote to M. Heger. We have a note of irony in this chapter when M. Heger congratulates Patrick Brontë on the good work he has done in bringing up the girls. It is interesting to note that Madame Heger kept these letters to use as evidence against Charlotte should the need arise. It didn't, and many years later they were offered to Mrs. Gaskell to use in her biography, though Mrs. Gaskell chose to ignore them.

Chapter five describes "one of the most celebrated publishing failures of the nineteenth century", the publication of the poems by the three sisters. Charlotte was the one whose idea it was to publish them and their lack of popularity probably caused her to turn to writing novels.

No biography of Charlotte would be complete without a discussion of these novels and chapters six, eight and nine are dedicated to this purpose. At this point I would like to read an extract of the effect *Jane Eyre* had on George Smith, her publisher:

"After breakfast on Sunday morning I took the manuscript of "Jane Eyre" to my little study, and began to read it. The story quickly took

me captive. Before twelve o'clock my horse came to the door but I could not put the book down .... [I] went on reading the manuscript. Presently the servant came to tell me that luncheon was ready; I asked him to bring me a sandwich and a glass of wine, and still went on with *Jane Eyre*. Dinner came; for me the meal was a very hasty one, and before I went to bed that night I had finished reading the manuscript."

Chapter seven deals with the deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne and the different attitudes Charlotte had to each. Charlotte felt she was in competition with Branwell and wasn't very sympathetic towards him. She describes his death as a mercy. Branwell's last surviving drawing is reproduced here. Her great admiration for Emily is shown by the account she gives of Emily's last day on earth and her profound respect for Anne is revealed in her letter to W.S. Williams, her publisher.

Chapter ten contains the views that Thackeray, his daughter, George Smith and Mrs. Gaskell had of Charlotte and also Charlotte's opinions of Thackeray and Jane Austen. We are all familiar with Charlotte's opinion of Jane Austen! As for Thackeray, Charlotte greatly admired him, so much so that she dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to him. This, however, turned out to be a blunder because Thackeray's wife became insane after four years of marriage and had to be committed to an asylum.

Thackeray was most impressed with *Jane Eyre* and he wrote: "I wish you had not sent me Jane Eyre. It interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it at the busiest period ....." etc. Concerning *Villette* he wrote that the author was a "poor little woman of genius". And he once embarrassed Charlotte terribly, when she attended one of his lectures in London, by introducing her to his mother as Jane Eyre, for which she took him firmly to task!

The second last chapter deals with Charlotte's marriage to Arthur Bell Nicholls. Her father's opposition to this is said to have been because he feared the consequences of pregnancy on her fragile health. It is interesting to note that Charlotte and her new husband took the trouble to visit Arthur's relatives while on their honeymoon, but not her own.

The last chapter describes how Mrs. Gaskell's biography of Charlotte came to be written. Apparently, a rather unflattering article about Charlotte in Sharpe's *London Magazine* came to the notice of Patrick and Arthur, who asked Mrs. Gaskell to set the record straight, not knowing that it was Mrs. Gaskell herself who had written the article. However in her biography Mrs. Gaskell sanctified Charlotte, describing her as the unhappy victim of a tragic life. Jane Sellars describes this biography as a "sentimental mythology".

Jane Sellars describes Charlotte as a mixture of shyness, ambition, intransigence and profound romanticism and the book finishes, as one might expect, by describing her as one of the greatest writers of English literature.

Maria-Louise Valkenburg

Charlotte in Love: The Courtship and Marriage of Charlotte Brontë

Brian Wilks

(Michael O'Mara Books Ltd., 1998)

I was most interested to read a biography by this name, especially after our recent meeting on various biographies of Charlotte Brontë. In reviewing it, I feel it was a good concept to base a biography specifically on two central events in her life (courtship and marriage), although I am not sure if the material supports a book of this length (200 pages).

The concept of "Charlotte in Love" drives much of the analysis of Charlotte's life. In the initial chapters, Brian Wilks points out that our record of the courtship is from Charlotte's viewpoint, through her letters to friends, and we lack the perspective of her suitor, Arthur Bell Nicholls.

In contrast to Margot Peters' more crisp and incisive biography, (reviewed earlier in this newsletter) I found Brian Wilks' style less detailed with more supposition about what Charlotte and others may have felt and coincidences. An example of this can be seen in his comment that, 'Had he attended the marriage, Patrick would have arrived at the full realisation that he would be losing his last child were he to answer the conducting priest's question: "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"'

Although the chapter structure looked logical, occasionally I had to check the chapter title during my reading as some sections seemed to work over an idea many times, which I found unnecessary, although often the idea itself was sound.

The author also related events from the writing of Charlotte Brontë's novels and other significant events from her life (such as the timing of Charlotte's wedding at 8.00am, the same time of day as Jane Eyre's marriage to Rochester).

Is there a connection between events occurring many years after the creation of the novel? I found this interesting at first, but a little trite when long passages of speculation on this subject continued (Did Charlotte hesitate to put the name labels on her luggage just as Jane Eyre had?).

In contrast, the final chapters on the honeymoon trip and subsequent months of marriage are well written, quote extensively from Charlotte's letters and give a good impression of her life at this point. Brian Wilks makes one curious to know more about Arthur Bell Nicholls and suggests, 'The history of Arthur's grieving and of his life without Charlotte, the account of his attempts to protect her memory from distortion and sensational conjecture, is another story, and one which deserves, one day, to be told.'

In conclusion, I feel this biography could have been shorter and still explored the central themes in detail. As a general biography, there are others that are more broadly informative, but in its aim to present the courtship and marriage, Brian Wilks presents some interesting ideas and successfully conveys an impression of what their marriage meant to Charlotte.

Anne Harbers.

The Crimes of Charlotte Brontë

James Tully

(London: Robinson, 1999)

I remember many years ago as a science student at Sydney University going along to a lecture by a member of the Flat Earth Society. We were all expecting it to be so laughably stupid that we expected to have a great time heckling the speaker over his ignorance of physics. But we were confounded by the fact that he knew more physics than we did. He countered the usual arguments about ships disappearing over the horizon by explanations involving relativity and the curvature of space! That is not to say that he convinced us that the world is really flat – we just found it hard to fault his reasoning!

I felt the same when reading Tully's book. Of course it is all nonsense. It has to be. But when reading the book, it sounds so very convincing and it is consistent with the publicly available facts. He seems to have researched it well.

Now it is possible to take the known events in anyone's life and to weave an implausible but dramatic story which nevertheless fits those facts. Did you know, for example, that Jane Austin was a spy for the French navy? That is why she took such an interest in things naval. And of course it explains why she would put away what she was writing if anyone entered the room! We just presumed it was her novel.

In writing such an alternative view of a well-documented story it becomes even more plausible if you not only fit the facts but also explain the hitherto unexplained little mysteries. Why was the famous profile portrait of Emily cut out from a larger canvas and the rest discarded? Nicholls explained that he thought the other sisters were poorly executed and that only Emily's was a good likeness. The real reason is that he had had an affair with Emily before he married Charlotte and he cherished her memory more than Charlotte's.

Why did Emily reject an examination by a doctor so violently when she was dying? Simple! She thought she was pregnant by Nicholls. Why did Nicholls not seem to notice at first that Charlotte had been thrown from her horse on their honeymoon in Ireland, even though he was close by? This was simply his first attempt to murder her. And why did Martha Brown keep in contact with Nicholls after he returned to Ireland, even to the extent of visiting him? Very simple. You see they had been lovers from way back.

The story has a fictional framework. A lengthy sworn statement by Martha is discovered by Charles Coutts when his family firm of solicitors in Keighley relocates. The narrative is primarily hers but it is interspersed with commentary by Coutts who has searched the public record of the Brontë story and relates it to Martha's account. Clearly he is Tully's mouthpiece and his detached legal weighing up of the evidence adds to the credibility of the account. So, despite the fictional framework, Tully appears to believe that the account he gives in Martha's words is substantially true.

Now anyone reading a list of the main events of the story would conclude, as I did, on my way to the flat earth lecture, that the whole thing is ridiculous. The remarkable thing is that while reading it you begin to believe that the story may just be true! I think this is due to Tully's skill as a convincing storyteller rather than the merit of his case. I

must confess, however, that after reading the book, I am convinced that there are probably some grey events that lie behind the sanitized Brontë story, though probably none so black as murder.

The central character in Martha's account is Arthur Bell Nicholls. He is just your ordinary everyday curate who, apart from being a womaniser, is just quietly getting on with his work. Unfortunately Branwell finds out that he and Emily have been meeting on the moors (and more!) and decides to blackmail him to help pay for his drink and drugs. But with his meagre stipend Nicholls finds it difficult to give Branwell what he demands and since Branwell is fast heading for the grave anyway there does not seem to be anything wrong with giving him a gentle push with a slow acting poison.

But Emily suspects him and her health suffers from the resulting moral conflict. Should she expose him or should she keep silent to protect the one she loves? Nicholls discovers this and as she is very poorly he fears she will unburden herself before dying. So she too has to go a little more quickly than nature intended -- antimony poisoning in carefully regulated doses, producing symptoms not unlike those of tuberculosis.

But Anne and Charlotte have become suspicious. You really begin to feel sorry for Nicholls. Once the ball starts rolling it seems it can't stop! They both keep silent, but for how long. Charlotte's loyalty is secured when she falls in love with Nicholls but Anne has to go the same way as Emily. This is not difficult because her health too has started to decline (more moral conflict) and Nicholls helps things along with some more antimony. But having decided that the death should take place on the trip to Scarborough, he has to persuade Charlotte to administer the lethal dose. Naturally she is reluctant but agrees anyway. She does not want to lose him, and after all Anne is going to die soon anyway.

So exit Anne. To avoid any enquiry, Charlotte has Anne buried there in Scarborough rather than bring her body back to Haworth. So now Nicholls can concentrate on his duties as curate. But can he rely on Charlotte's silence? He decides it would be safer to marry her. The royalties from her books add to her attractions. The rather strange wedding takes place to which Mr. Brontë is not even invited. But on second thoughts it might be safer if she died too! The fall from the horse fails so more antimony is required. Exit Charlotte.

Now all these events are told by Martha Brown, one of the servants at the parsonage who has been having an affair with Nicholls all along. Martha also knew something about Mr. Nicholls evil deeds. She had seen a secret diary kept by Anne detailing Nicholls' involvement in Branwell and Emily's deaths. There is no way that she is going to get poor Mr. Nicholls into trouble but when she comes across Anne's diary she decides to keep it rather than hand it over to Nicholls.

So with Charlotte gone, the parsonage only contains old Mr. Brontë, Nicholls and Martha. Mr. Brontë never seems to know what day it is, so they are free to live almost as husband and wife. This causes some scandal in the village. But Nicholls does not want to marry Martha. Not yet, anyway. "Just wait and I promise that you won't lose out".

This goes on for six years and finally Mr. Brontë exits, stage left (maybe with help from Nicholls, maybe not). Despite having disliked Nicholls (to the extent of opposing his marriage to Charlotte) he has changed his will in favour of Nicholls. Nicholls also hopes to succeed him in the parish but the Parish Council chooses someone else.

So Nicholls decides to return to Ireland. "What about me?" Martha asks. He beats around the bush but as soon as she mentions that she has the diary he apologises for not having made his meaning clear. Of course she will accompany him to Ireland. But after a few months she becomes homesick and returns to Haworth so Nicholls marries one of his cousins.

At one stage he thought he would have to eliminate Martha too, but as they part on good terms and as he sends her money on a regular basis, she presents no threat. So they all live happily ever after – all, that is, except Branwell, Emily, Anne and Charlotte!

Implausible nonsense! Probably. But the book is really worth reading just to experience the growing feeling that just possibly it might all be true – or some of it. I found I could not put it down. And I felt that the Brontë family came across as more like real people than in most of the biographies I have read. In a way it is a pity that probably none of it is actually true!

But is there a danger that, having read it, it would confuse my memory of the real facts? I do not think so. In fact I believe that I will read the standard biographies, and especially the letters, more

critically. In particular I want to read everything I can get my hands on about this "rascal" Arthur Bell Nicholls. I will begin with *My Dear Boy* the life of Arthur Bell Nicholls by Margaret and Robert Cochrane published earlier this year. I note that there are 24 references to Martha Brown listed in the index. I wonder …
Christopher Cooper

PICTURE GALLERY

Celebrations at Oakwell Hall in October 1999 to mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Shirley*.

Oakwell Hall: the original for Fieldhead in Shirley. "Fieldhead … rich in crayon touches and sepia lights and shades."

Hall Green Baptist Church at the foot of Main Street in Haworth. Patrick Brontë was one of the signatories of the trust deed.

Howarth Parsonage in 1879 from *Haworth, Past and Present* by J. Horsfall Turner

My Dear Boy

by Margaret and Robert Cochrane

(Published by Highgate Publications Ltd, 1999)

My Dear Boy is a clearly written account of the life of Arthur Bell Nicholls - how his early life, education and upbringing shaped his character and influenced his views on religion and how despite two marriages, Charlotte was indeed the love of his life.

Margaret Cochrane refers to Arthur as the unsung member of the Brontë circle. Before this biography, we see him through other peoples', less sympathetic, eyes. In this book he stands alone as the man who formed a very important part of Charlotte's life during her last ten years on Earth and who made her last months in this world extremely happy.

Upon his arrival at Haworth he is described as "a well-built, good-looking young man, about 5ft 10ins in height with long full sideburns, as was then fashionable, and hair as black as coil." He had, it seems, a serious approach to life, conducting himself with dignity and gravity "as befitted a man of the cloth."

During the early C19th the philosophies of the High Church of England, with its emphasis on the Eucharist, clashed with those of the Low Church and its emphasis on evangelism and although Patrick Brontë stood on one side and Arthur Nicholls on the other as far as these things went, it did not affect the friendship and respect they had for oneanother

The book describes Arthur as a dedicated, reliable and trustworthy helper who quickly took over the majority of parish duties and got to know the other clergy in the district.

It was while performing his daily duties at the parsonage that Nicholls felt a growing attachment to Charlotte which soon turned to love. And so finally he summoned the courage to propose: ".....deathly pale, trembling with nervousness and speaking in a low voice, asked her to marry him. She was shocked, not so much by the proposal, but by the state he was in. She was used to seeing him always so controlled and statue - like. Suddenly she realised there was more to the curate than she had ever imagined ..... By now he was so overcome he could hardly move and she had to half-lead and half push him out of the room to return to his lodgings."

It wasn't until Charlotte finally married Arthur that she realised his true qualities. She says "So far he is always good in this way - and this protection which does not interfere or pretend, is, I believe, a thousand times better than any half sort of pseudo-sympathey. I will try with God's help to be as indulgent to him whenever indulgence is needed."

Arthur is depicted as an extremely private person who found Charlotte's letter writing to be quite irritating. He considered that Charlotte wrote too freely and rashly to her friends. This attitude led to problems he subsequently experienced with unwanted publicity after Charlotte's death.

Charlotte describes Arthur's care of her during her final illness in the following way: "No kinder, better husband than mine, it seems to me, can there be in the world, I do not want now for kind companionship in health and the tenderest nursing in sickness."

The second part of the biography deals with Arthur's life as a farmer back in Ireland after Charlotte's death and the problems he had to face with the friends they both had when, like a lion, he defended her memory.

This biography paints Arthur in a far more gentle light than other writers in their biographies of Charlotte have done. We suffer with him the pangs of rejection at the outset of his courtship of Charlotte, his joy at acceptance and his anguish at her early death. The last words he was ever to utter in this life were 'the name of his never forgotten first love."

If you have read Tully's book *The Crimes of Charlotte Brontë*, which purports to reveal many dark secrets about the Reverend Mr. Nicholls it is probably as well to read this biography to get a balanced opinion!

Maria-Louise Valkenburg

Interior of the Red House at Gomersal, the original of Briarmains in *Shirley*.