

HAPPY BIRTHDAY PATRICK BRONTË

The text of a talk by Catherine Barker on 17th March 2007



I was at a social gathering a couple of months ago and the talk got round, as it does, to books and reading. When I mentioned that I'd just started to read a couple of biographies of Patrick Brontë, one woman there said to me "Oh, the Brontë father. He was a bit of an old curmudgeon wasn't he?" I went home and looked up the word 'curmudgeon' and found that it essentially means a grumpy old man! So is this impression justified? Now I'm sure that you are all aware of the basic facts of the Brontë story of life at

the Haworth Parsonage, so I thought I'd concentrate on telling you a little about Patrick's early life and experiences with which you might be less familiar. Finally I'd like to look at the influence Patrick had on his children, so that you can make up your own minds as to whether or not he really deserves his less than flattering reputation.

HOW HE GOT HIS REPUTATION

So how did Patrick get this reputation? We can answer that in two words – Mrs Gaskell. Only ten weeks after Charlotte's death Patrick asked Mrs Gaskell to write his daughter's biography and it is in this work that he himself comes across as a less than perfect father. She describes him as being a selfish, eccentric, domineering, austere and

irascible old man, and speaks of the authoritarian atmosphere of his presence. She tells us that he was regarded as somewhat of an invalid whose alleged eccentricities included firing a pistol from the window each morning, eating meals away from the family in his study, making his children eat a vegetarian diet and wanting as little to do with them as possible. Indeed she flatly states “he ought never to have married. He did not like children”.

Mrs Gaskell did not know Patrick as a young man – indeed when she first met him Patrick was 76. She described him then as “a tall fine looking old man, with silver bristles all over his head; nearly blind”. When Mrs Gaskell returned to the Parsonage in July 1855 in response to Patrick’s request, she found he and Arthur still grief stricken “both Mr Brontë and Mr Nicholls cried sadly” she wrote. She therefore determined not to cause them any further grief by asking intrusive questions and decided instead to rely on evidence from others. Mrs Gaskell never paid much attention to Martha Brown, the Parsonage servant, but instead gave credence to an old lady who had nursed Mrs Brontë in her illness over thirty years earlier and who had been dismissed from the Parsonage. This aggrieved servant related several anecdotes about Patrick which were little to his credit but Mrs Gaskell accepted them as truth. They included tales of his having cut up one of his wife’s dresses, having burned some coloured leather shoes given to his children and having sawn off the backs of some chairs because he thought they were too fancy. Therefore it was Mrs Gaskell who helped create the legend about Patrick Brontë. “I have named these instances of eccentricity in the father” she wrote, “because I hold the knowledge of them to be necessary for the right understanding of the life of his daughter”. When the biography was published Mrs Gaskell was acclaimed and her subject engendered much sympathy. As Juliet Barker states, “the school of ‘Poor Charlotte’ biography had been born”.

So who was Patrick Brontë, where did he come from, how did he come to establish his family at Haworth, what sort of influence did he have on his family, and does he deserve the reputation bestowed on him by Mrs Gaskell?

EARLY LIFE

Patrick Brunty was born 17th March 1777, exactly 230 years ago today. He was naturally named after St Patrick whose saint's day this is, and the official name of today in Ireland is Patrickmas. He was the oldest of the 10 children of Eleanor and Hugh Brunty. Hugh Brunty was actually a native of Southern Ireland but he ran away from home and went to the North where he found work as a farmhand, married and settled. At the time of Patrick's birth the Bruntys lived at Emdale in the parish of Drumballyroney in County Down in what is now Northern Ireland. County Down is on the East coast of Ireland so it is opposite the English coast, with Belfast lying 30 miles to the North and Dublin 70 miles down to the South.

The whitewashed and thatched cottage in which Patrick was born was about 12 x 18 feet and consisted of two small rooms. The cottage has long fallen into ruin but there is a plaque there now to mark the spot, having been placed there by the Irish section of the Brontë Society.

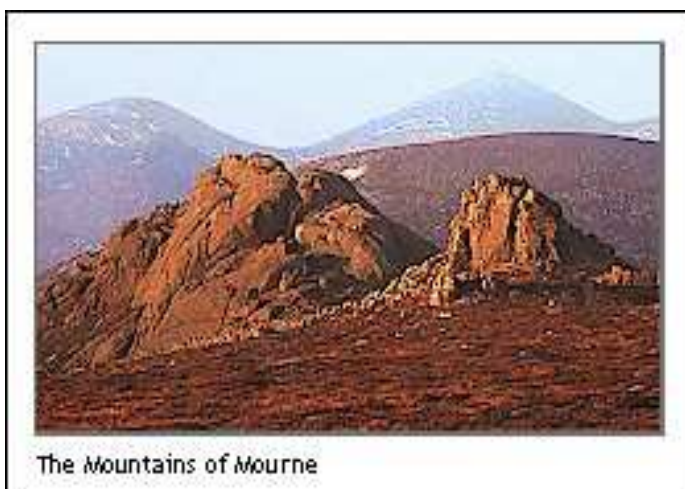
Hugh Brunty rented only a few acres of land, but "by dint of application and industry" in Patrick's own words to Mrs Gaskell, he "managed to bring up 10 children in a respectable manner". Whilst Patrick was still young his family moved from that small cottage in Emdale to a larger two storey stone farmhouse not far away at Ballynaskeagh, so the family fortunes must have been slowly improving.

Nevertheless the Bruntys led a plain, simple peasant Irish life with a subsistence diet of potatoes, oatmeal, buttermilk and bread. It sounds very bland to us but it was this diet which Patrick felt contributed towards the heartburn and dyspepsia from which he suffered all his life. These digestive problems were one reason why he ate separately from his family at the Parsonage.

The family wore plain clothes made from wool spun, dyed and carded by his mother Eleanor. We don't know much at all about Eleanor other than that she was known as Alice and came from the McClory family who may have had a Catholic background. Hugh had a great local reputation as being a marvellous story teller – he had what the Irish "the gift".

The Brunty family may have been poor but they were not quite illiterate as there were four books to be found in the home – the Bible, the New Testament, a volume of the poetry of Robert Burns and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Patrick read this small library over and over again and when he went out to work as an apprentice to a linen weaver at age 14, he bought himself a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost* one day when he was in Belfast on an errand for his employer. It was said that he used to prop the book up on the loom whilst he was weaving so that he could carry on reading. Indeed Patrick never went anywhere without a book in his hand and he had a habit of reading passages out aloud as he strode along. He thus caught the attention of the local Presbyterian minister Andrew Harshaw, who gave him access to his own library of classical books, and there Patrick familiarized himself with the works of such authors as Virgil and Homer. It is said that during this period of his life he probably ruined his eyesight trying to read at night by the light of rush and tallow candles.

Patrick made such progress that in 1793 Harshaw recommended him, then still only 16 years old, for a teaching position at Glascar Hill Presbyterian School. Patrick was to teach children of local families



The Mountains of Mourne

there for the next five years. He introduced them to history, classics and literature as well as taking them out for long walks over the hills of the Mountains of Mourne and sharing with them his passion for the natural world. In 1798 when Patrick was 21 he was offered a promotion by the Reverend Thomas Tighe, a notable Methodist minister to teach at a much larger school at Drumballyroney, as well as doing some tutoring with the Tighe children. Whilst he was working in the Tighe household extending his abilities as a teacher and discovering his growing interest in and knowledge of theology, Patrick made the decision to study for the ministry and become ordained.

So in September 1802 he sailed for England with £25 that he'd managed to save. He never returned to live in Ireland again, paying one brief visit back home in 1806 just after his ordination. However he sent money to his mother all her life hoarded from his small savings, and he remained in touch, albeit infrequently, with his siblings all his life. Interestingly Patrick was the only one of Hugh and Eleanor Brunty's children to pursue an academic career, the rest of his brothers remaining in Ireland working in rural and local trades.

CAMBRIDGE

Patrick was entered for St John's College, Cambridge because it was the Reverend Thomas Tighe's old college and had a strong representation in the Faculty of Divinity. Interestingly St John's was also noted for its preponderance of Yorkshire men so perhaps it was at Cambridge that Patrick got to hear of this Northern county where he was to spend over half his life.

Patrick commenced his studies in the Michaelmas Term on 1st October 1802 and was entered as Number 12235 in the St John's Admission Book. On arrival he was 25 years of age and therefore older than most of his fellow students. In those days one did not actually have to take a degree at university. It was looked upon by many wealthier undergraduates as a rite of passage, rather like the Grand Tour of Europe, with university being a pleasant place in which to idle away a couple of years before assuming family estate responsibilities. In contrast to most of his fellow undergraduates however, Patrick was eager and wanted to work. He must have cut an odd figure, being quite unworldly and ignorant of life outside Ireland, still wearing the homespun clothes made by his mother and almost penniless. It was very unusual in those days to be Irish in an almost exclusively English university and it was a huge achievement for Patrick in being awarded a place there at all.

Because of his impoverished background, Patrick was admitted to St John's as a Sizar, or servitor, to his more affluent fellow undergraduates. He therefore fagged for the wealthier students and this position reduced his fees. Patrick was also helped at St John's by winning several exhibitions or scholarships at Cambridge and he earned a little more money by coaching less promising students than

himself. He also received some financial assistance from the Church Missionary Society Fund, an organization directed towards helping promising recruits to the Church. So Patrick's undergraduate life at Cambridge was spent as a sort of charity scholar. Notwithstanding his precarious financial position, Patrick seems to have relished his time there, working hard studying classics as well as theology, and he was placed in the first class every year he was at Cambridge. He was awarded a copy of *The Iliad* which he inscribed 'My Prize Book, for always having kept in the first Class, at St John's College – Cambridge. P. Bronte AB. To be retained – semper'.

Perhaps being forced to associate with his fellow students from wealthier families made him more conscious of his own poor background, because it was whilst he was at Cambridge that Patrick decided to change his name. He first altered Brunty to Branty, then to Bronté with an acute accent on the e, and finally to the same spelling of the Brontë as we know it today. (It was Charlotte who added the dieresis over that e). His choice of spelling was probably in emulation of one his great heroes, Lord Nelson, who had had the title Duke of Bronte given to him by the King of Naples.

Whilst at Cambridge Patrick volunteered to enlist in the civilian corps, training with weapons to resist the threat of French invasion from Napoleon. One of his military comrades in arms was John Henry Temple, later to become Lord Palmerston, the celebrated mid Victorian Prime Minister. They drilled together and practiced their military manoeuvres in the Market Square at Cambridge and also on Parker's Piece, an open area of public ground which relatively unchanged today. For the rest of his life Patrick was to retain his interest in and passion for all things military, and politically speaking Patrick left Cambridge a convinced Tory, graduating as a Bachelor of Arts on St George's Day 23rd April 1806.

CURACIES

Patrick was ordained by the Bishop of London at Fulham Palace on 19th August 1806. Taking Holy Orders according to the Church of England he then embarked on a series of curacies just as newly ordained junior clergymen still do today.

His first curacy was at the Church of St Mary Magdalene in the pretty Essex village of Wethersfield only 15 miles from Cambridge and some 45 from London. He started his duties here on 12th October 1806 when he was 29 years old and his annual stipend was £60. His vicar there was the Regius Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge and was therefore away on his academic duties much of the time, so Patrick had a lot of responsibility as a young curate in his first posting. Indeed he started there by conducting a marriage and a baptism on the same day!

It was here in Wethersfield that Patrick fell in love for the first time with one of his young parishioners, Mary Burder, the 18 year old niece of his landlady. Mary's family worshipped at the Dissenting or Non Conformist Congregational Church and they objected to her romance with a penniless Irish curate of the Anglican Church so they put an end to the affair. This was probably the reason that Patrick then decided to accept a clerical vacancy that a friend of his from St John's College had alerted him to. Patrick did write to Mary for the next couple of years, but inevitably with time and distance the romance faded, and when Mary did reach the age of 21 when she could have married without her parent's consent, she had grown bitter about her failed relationship with Patrick and considered herself to have been forgotten and jilted by him.

So in January 1809 Patrick left Essex and went up to the county of Shropshire near the Welsh border to become curate of All Saints Church at Wellington. The surroundings here were completely different to those of rural Essex as Wellington was an industrial town centred round the coal mining and iron foundries developed during the Industrial Revolution. He shared this curacy with another young man, a Welshman William Morgan, and the two clerics became lifelong friends whilst serving here and they both moved on to parishes in Yorkshire together. At that time Yorkshire was regarded as a 'Promised Land' of great opportunity as the Industrial Revolution had greatly increased the population and so it was looked upon by the Church as a very fertile field in need of good ministers.

So Patrick found himself at Dewsbury in the parish of Bradford where he served as a curate to the Reverend John Buckworth, an acclaimed preacher and hymn writer of the day. Buckworth was able

to concentrate on his preaching role after Patrick arrived, leaving him to carry out the majority of the regular parish duties. In his 16 month long curacy there Patrick performed nearly 130 marriages, 426 baptisms and averaged over 50 funerals per month. He was a popular Sunday School teacher here and was remembered in later years as striding around the parish in an Ulsterman's blue linen frock coat with a shillelagh in his hand and speaking with a strong Irish accent. (When Mrs Gaskell met Patrick in the 1850s however she reported that she could find no trace of an Irish accent, so maybe 40 years living among Yorkshiremen had eradicated it by then).

Apart from his heavy work load, Dewsbury was an eventful curacy for Patrick, with three particular events making his time there a memorable one. Firstly Patrick rescued a simple minded boy from drowning in the River Calder after some local boys had pushed him in, returning him to his widowed mother and making the bullies apologise for their cruelty. Patrick then facilitated the traditional Whit Walk Procession in 1810 by flinging a local bully aside as he threatened to block the bridge that the townspeople were attempting to cross. Thirdly Patrick successfully campaigned for the release from prison of a young local man who had been arrested for alleged desertion from the army. Patrick wrote letters to William Wilberforce in his capacity as a Yorkshire MP and also to Lord Palmerston, his old comrade in arms from their student days at Cambridge who was by this time the Secretary at War. Palmerston intervened and the man was released, his accuser being sentenced to seven years transportation to Australia. These disparate events were much to Patrick's credit and show that he was a great believer in standing up for what he thought was right. They added to his popularity amongst his parishioners at Dewsbury where he was simply known as 'the Irish curate'.

It was whilst he was at Dewsbury that Patrick developed a growing ambition to become accepted as a poet, an author, a man of letters. Apart from his natural bent towards academic pursuits, the other reason that Patrick took to writing was that the vicars under whom he had served at Wellington and Dewsbury had both taken up writing as an extension of their Christian work. Literature was seen then as a medium with which to get the message across to a wider

audience than just a local congregation. Patrick's poetry therefore mainly consisted of religious themes and his prose tales all had moral purposes. His first publication was a small volume of poetry that he'd begun writing whilst teaching in Ireland and had added to both at Cambridge and during his early curacies. *Cottage Poems*, a copy of which can be seen today at Haworth, was published in 1811, to be followed by a second volume of poetry entitled *The Rural Minstrel*. *The Cottage in the Wood* or *The Art of Becoming Rich and Happy* was Patrick's first prose tale published in 1815, whilst *The Maid of Killarney* was Patrick's final imaginative work. This was a novella and was the most ambitious of his prose writings. It was set in Ireland and it was this book which had a great influence on his own children. These books however were largely unknown outside Patrick's small circle of acquaintances and they never achieved the literary greatness that he aspired to.

In July 1811 the Reverend Buckworth offered Patrick a promotion to the post of Perpetual Curate at St Peter's Church at Hartshead-cum-Clifton, which was still within the Dewsbury parish but here he was independent for the first time at the age of 35. During his four year curacy here in 1812 there were Luddite attacks on Cartwright's Mill at Rawfolds, two miles from Hartshead and Patrick was remembered for his openly stated opposition to the rebel gangs trying to cause industrial unrest. It was probably here that he acquired his habit of keeping a loaded pistol in the house overnight, discharging the unused bullet of the window the next morning! Apart from the Luddite threat, Patrick's curacy at Hartshead was important because it was here that he met his future wife.

MARRIAGE

Maria Branwell was 29 years old and came from Penzance in Cornwall. She was up in Yorkshire paying a visit to her uncle John Fennell, a Methodist headmaster and lay preacher. His school, Woodhouse Grove, at Apperley Bridge near Bradford, was set up for the education of the sons of Wesleyan ministers and Patrick, as Curate at Hartshead, 10 miles



Maria Branwell

away, was an inspector at the school, examining the pupils there in Latin and Scripture. He was invited to dinner with his employer and there he met the niece from Cornwall who had come to help out with the school's sewing and mending and also to act as a companion to the headmaster's daughter, her cousin Jane. When she met him, Patrick had the reputation of being a handsome fellow full of Irish enthusiasm. A physical description of Patrick when young was that he was tall, angular with auburn hair and intense blue eyes. Mrs Gaskell tells us that "even in his old age Mr Bronte is a striking looking man in his youth he must have been unusually handsome".

As for Maria, Mrs Gaskell described her as being "extremely small in person, not pretty but very elegant and always dressed with a great simplicity of taste Mr Bronte was soon captivated by this little gentle creature, and this time declared it was for life". Maria's letters to Patrick survive but unfortunately none of his to her. However we do have a poem he wrote to mark the day Maria turned 30 entitled 'Lines Addressed to a Lady, on her Birthday'. Maria's letters to Patrick show her to be sensitive with a strong sense of religious duty, but possessing a sense of humour sometimes teasing Patrick and calling him 'my dear saucy Pat'. Patrick and Maria were married on 29th December 1812 at St Oswald's Guiseley in a double ceremony with Maria's cousin Jane Fennell who was marrying Patrick's good friend the Reverend William Morgan.

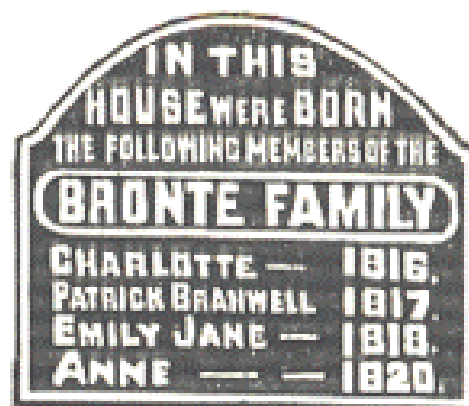


St Oswald's Church, Guiseley

The newlyweds made their first home at Clough Lane Hightown and it was here that their first two children, Maria and Elizabeth were born in 1814 and 1815. It has been suggested that perhaps his wife's fear of the unrest caused by the Luddite disturbances at Hartshead was one reason that Patrick exchanged his curacy there for one at Thornton 15 miles away. The higher salary of £140 might also have been an inducement now that the couple had two children. So Patrick was appointed to the larger parish of Old Bell Chapel at Thornton near Bradford, where his first service here on 23rd July 1815 was a

thanksgiving for the great victory over Napoleon at Waterloo, and the collection was taken in aid of the widows and children of those who had fallen in the battle. Thornton was where Charlotte was born in April 1816, followed by their only son, Patrick Branwell in 1817, Emily Jane in 1818 and lastly Anne in January 1820. Patrick said that the happiest time of his life were his five years at Thornton with his wife and young family. Their house in Market Street where the children were born still stands today and a plaque marks the spot.

A few months after Anne's birth Patrick heard of a vacancy for the living of the Church of St Michael and All Angels in the parish of Haworth ten miles from Thornton. This was yet another



promotion and carried the larger salary of £170 per annum. With six small children to support now this was a big consideration for Patrick so he applied for the incumbency which was offered for life, together with the parsonage that went with the position. So Patrick, Maria, their six small children and seven carts laden with their worldly possessions moved to their new parish in February 1820.

FAMILY YEARS AT HAWORTH

The Parsonage stood on the very edge of the town where it met the moors, and was to be home to the Brontës for the rest of their lives. Mrs Gaskell called the situation of the Parsonage “bleak”, and wondered how the move there would have affected the gentle, delicate Maria, whose health was already failing as the family moved there – she had been pregnant six times in seven years. In the event, Maria had less than 18 months in her new home as she fell ill with cancer within the first year of Patrick's incumbency. He was distraught, and did everything he could for his dying wife, employing a nurse for her during the day and nursing her himself at night. She was only 38 when she died in September 1821 and Patrick was devastated. There

is little doubt that their marriage had been a happy one, Patrick telling Mrs Gaskell in 1856 that Maria had been “an excellent wife and mother, and a highly respected member of Society”. Feeling his loss and his isolation keenly, he wrote to his friend the Reverend John Buckworth “Had I been at Dewsbury I should not have wanted kind friends; had I been at Hartshead I should have seen others occasionally; or had I been at Thornton a family who were ever truly kind would have soothed my sorrows; but I was at Haworth, a stranger in a strange land”.

With Maria dying so soon after their move there, it is little wonder that Patrick was to tell Mrs Gaskell “In Haworth, my Family afflictions began”. He must have been desperate as to how he was going to carry on with his professional duties as well as run a household of six small children without a wife. Two months after Maria’s death he proposed marriage to Elizabeth Frith a lady whom they had met at Thornton. She had welcomed the Brontës to Thornton and was such a good family friend that she became Charlotte’s Godmother. Politely but firmly however Elizabeth declined Patrick’s proposal. She did though remain close to the family over the years. Patrick tried again to find a replacement for Maria the following year when he attempted to reignite the romance that he had had during his first curacy at Wethersfield down in Essex. Not having seen her for 15 years, Patrick wrote to Mary Burder telling her that he was now a widower with six small children. Miss Burder’s refusal was not as polite as that from Elizabeth Frith. She wrote indignantly that their romance had been “buried in silence and until now almost forgotten”. Her firm rejection of him was the end of Patrick’s attempts at remarriage, and he was to remain a widower for the next 40 years. A practical solution to his problem was then provided by the arrival of Maria’s sister, Elizabeth Branwell from Penzance to act as surrogate mother to the children and to run the Parsonage household for them all, doing her duty by her motherless nieces and nephew who called her Aunt Branwell.

Patrick’s income at this stage was just under £200 pa and he was concerned about the expense of educating his family. A school at Cowan Bridge near Kirkby Lonsdale in neighbouring Lancashire sounded ideal as it was specifically set up for “the daughters of poor

clergy". The story of the harsh life there is well known as of course Charlotte used it as the model of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*. Both Maria and Elizabeth developed tuberculosis whilst there and, as we know, died tragically within a few months of each other after having been nursed by Patrick and Aunt Branwell back at the Parsonage. Patrick then brought Charlotte and Emily home fearful he might lose them too, and he decided he would tutor them, Branwell and young Anne, himself at home.

Whilst Aunt Branwell taught the girls household skills, Patrick tutored them in arithmetic, history and geography. Patrick taught Branwell Latin and Greek as well and also engaged a painting master for him. The girls joined in these art lessons and were later taught music by the local organist engaged by Patrick. He bought a piano for the Parsonage on which Emily in particular became most proficient. And of course there were books, Patrick strongly encouraging all his family to read.

It was Patrick who brought Branwell home some wooden soldiers after a visit to Leeds one day. Charlotte grabbed one and declared it to be the Duke of Wellington, and then each of the others selected a soldier to adopt. Thus it was Patrick who inadvertently started the children off with their tales of the exploits of their heroes manifested in these toy soldiers. Well from here on I'm sure you are all familiar with the story of the literary ventures of the young family, and whilst they were busy writing what we now call *The Juvenilia*, what was their father doing?

PATRICK'S LIFE and WORK AT HAWORTH

As to Patrick's work at Haworth, he was very active on behalf of his flock, caring for both their spiritual and their physical welfare. He was not the type of parson to establish very close relations with his parishioners, but he conscientiously performed his duties, visiting the sick and all those who sent for him, so he was well respected in the parish – "he's a grand man; he lets other folks business alone" was one comment.

By all accounts Patrick was a good preacher as those who heard him testified. He used to preach for exactly one hour, setting his watch in front of him on the three decker pulpit in order to keep an

eye on the time and he usually preached without notes! He had the Irish way with words, and used simple language to explain parables to his congregation so that they would easily understand. Although he was an Evangelical, he stoutly defended the Church of England as the Established Church and was very much anti Catholic, opposing such High Church adornments as candles and formal vestments, denouncing them as “Romish ways”. When Charlotte went to Confession in Brussels she wrote an account of the experience to Emily and ended by saying “I think you had better not tell Papa of this”.

For many years Patrick had no help so he was kept very busy with teaching and visiting the sick. The birthrate and mortality rate were both high so there were a large numbers of baptisms and funerals. The population had increased by over a third since he had arrived so Patrick needed assistance as he missed the help of a wife, although his daughters did teach in the Sunday School when they were at home. But it was not until 1835 when he was nearly 60 that he got his first curate, made possible with a grant of £50 from the Pastoral Aid Society.

When not engaged in Church work, Patrick took a great interest in politics and current events and wrote letters to papers such as the Tory *Leeds Intelligencer* and the Whig *Leeds Mercury* dealing with public issues of the day such as capital punishment of which he was an opponent, advocating of the use of medical ether for surgical operations, a national scheme for compulsory education, and making suggestions for the improvement of the design of muskets used by the British Army complete with diagrams which showed his great knowledge of firearms.

Patrick was also very much concerned with local issues. He wanted Haworth to have its own magistrate, a peal of bells for the church and a new railway line to link Haworth to the main rail network. He pleaded with the National Society to start a school in Haworth and wrote a series of letters seeking support. He eventually succeeded and managed to obtain books, furniture and a schoolmaster.

Even when in his seventies Patrick did not give up with his efforts to improve life for his flock. He fought a long battle with the authorities to try and improve the sanitation of Haworth which at that

time had no sewers. He kept up a series of letters until finally, nearly five years after he had organized his initial petition, a sewer was installed in the main street in June 1854, to be followed by a small reservoir for the town 4 years later. He was conscious of the poverty under which many of his parishioners existed, the winter of 1839-40 being a particularly harsh one. Patrick and his curate bought shirting, blankets, oatmeal and potatoes and joined the Dissenting Church minister in distributing food and clothing to the poor. So he cared for his local parishioners as well as for his family.

PATRICK AND HIS ADULT CHILDREN

In 1831 Patrick fell ill with “inflammation of the lungs”. He did recover but his illness was important because it forced the family to consider its future. If Patrick died they would have to leave the Parsonage, as that house was naturally part of the living. It was this thought that prompted the girls to become governesses, a suitable occupation for daughters of impoverished clergymen.

With the death of Aunt Branwell in 1842, Patrick lost his sister-in-law who had stayed at her post and faithfully looked after him and the family for over 20 years, and then that same autumn he lost the curate of whom he was particularly fond, William Weightman, who died of cholera at age 28. William had been with Patrick for 3 years and in his funeral sermon Patrick referred to their relationship as being “like father and son”. William’s death must have been especially hard for Patrick as he was by this time in despair over his own son who had once been his pride and joy. It is impossible to consider Patrick’s life without referring to that of Branwell, who really deserves a separate talk of his own. Suffice it to say that the family were in despair over Branwell, the only son and brother from whom they’d all hoped so much. There had been much encouragement for his artistic talents, Patrick paying his art tutor two guineas per hour, a lot of money when his stipend was only £200 per year. It must have been heartbreaking for him to watch as his son frittered away his talents with drink and drugs and to realize inevitably that he would never mount to anything, succeed at a career, or help to support his sisters. Patrick brought Branwell home when drunk and drugged and put him to bed himself. Once he set his bedclothes alight so Patrick insisted that he should

sleep in the same room and tried to keep him with him as much as he could during the day. Charlotte wrote to Ellen “He leads Papa a wretched life” and she said “Papa, and sometimes all of us, have sad nights with him”. Patrick was in his seventies by then and he felt unable to confide in anyone about his son’s collapse, having to bear all his grief and disappointment alone.

The distress and anxiety over Branwell was succeeded by the despair of his early death, followed closely by the deaths of Emily and Anne. Charlotte wrote that the reason she had Anne buried at Scarborough was “to save Papa the anguish of the return and a third funeral”. In nine months Patrick had lost three of his four adult children.

Patrick became more dependent on Charlotte as his eyesight began to deteriorate and he could no longer read or write for himself or even walk to his own church next door without assistance. Charlotte wrote to Ellen “his sight diminishes weekly and can it be wondered at – that as he sees the most precious of his faculties leaving him, his spirits sometimes sink?” A cataract operation was deemed necessary and was performed without anaesthetic. It was whilst sitting with her father in the darkened rooms of their lodgings in Manchester where they had to stay for a month after the operation, that Charlotte began to write *Jane Eyre*. The cataract operation was successful but his sight was never the same, although he continued to preach twice on Sundays into his early eighties.

Patrick was left alone with Charlotte but soon there appeared a threat to domestic arrangements in the shape of Patrick’s curate Arthur Bell Nicholls. When Charlotte told her father of Arthur’s proposal Patrick was fearful he would be left on his own – he was after all 75 by this time and apprehensive of such a change in his old age.

“Papa worked himself into a state not to be trifled with, the veins on his face started up like whipcord, and his eyes became bloodshot. I made haste to promise that Mr Nicholls should on the morrow have a distinct refusal.” Arthur promptly resigned and Patrick wrote a reference for him to go to Australia as a missionary with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. He stated that Arthur had been his curate for seven years and “during that time has behaved himself wisely, soberly and piously he is a man of good abilities and

would I think, under Providence, make an excellent Missionary”. Arthur evidently had second thoughts about going quite so far away and decided to settle instead for a curacy at Kirk Smeaton near Pontefract, still in Yorkshire and from where he and Charlotte were able to correspond.

When Charlotte then became ill, Patrick was only too well aware that her headaches and malaise were the manifestation of her unhappiness for which he was responsible and he was finally to give permission for the couple to become engaged in April 1854. This change of heart might have been due in part to the fact that Patrick was dissatisfied with his replacement curate and began to see advantages in having Arthur back. Talking of her marriage plans, Charlotte wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey “it takes nothing from the attention I owe to my father. I am not to leave him – my future husband consents to come her – thus Papa secures by the step a devoted and reliable assistant in his old age”. After their honeymoon and return to the Parsonage Charlotte wrote that she was much relieved at the way in which her father seemed to accept her new husband “so far the understanding between Papa and Mr Nicholls seems excellent; if only it continues thus I shall be truly grateful. Papa has taken no duty since we returned, and each time I see Mr Nicholls put on gown or surplice, I feel comforted to think that this marriage has secured Papa good aid in his old age”.

Patrick was naturally devastated by Charlotte’s death after only nine months of married life and he and Arthur were left alone. Mrs Gaskell’s final sentence in her biography of Charlotte refers to the Haworth villagers “whose hearts shivered within them as they thought of the two sitting desolate and alone in the old grey house”. Indeed, Arthur and Patrick were to stay together in the Parsonage for six more years, Arthur looking faithfully after his father-in-law in accordance with Charlotte’s last wish.

Patrick died on 7th June 1861, and on the day of his funeral on 12th June all the shops in Haworth were closed as a mark of respect, the church was packed and several hundred people gathered outside in the churchyard. The coffin was carried by six of Patrick’s closet friends and neighbours, all clergymen, and he was buried in the family vault at Haworth after 41 years of faithful ministry there.

SO WHAT WAS PATRICK'S REACTION TO FAMILY FAME?

Mrs Gaskell did not think that Patrick was sufficiently appreciative of Charlotte's genius or sympathetic as a father. However it was Patrick himself who asked Mrs Gaskell to write her biography and which he himself was prepared to write if Mrs Gaskell had refused. So there is no doubt that Patrick was extremely proud of his daughters, particularly of Charlotte, and if he mentions her more often than Anne or Emily it must be remembered that Charlotte was the only one of all his children to achieve literary success in her own lifetime. He declared that he had detected hints of their abilities when they were young, telling Mrs Gaskell that when his children were small and inventing or acting their own plays, he often had to mediate when there were disputes. "In the management of those concerns, I frequently thought that I discovered signs of rising talent, which I had seldom or never before seen in any of their age."

Later when they were writing their novels Patrick recalled that the girls "read their manuscripts to each other, and gave their candid opinions of what was written – I never interfered with them at these times – I judged it best to throw them upon their own responsibility. Besides, a clergyman bordering on the age of 80 years was likely to be too cold and severe a critic of their efforts of buoyant and youthful Genius – Hence it came to pass that I never saw their works till they appeared in print".

After the success of *Jane Eyre*, Patrick took a great interest in the writing of *Villette*, anxious for Charlotte to finish it and for her to give it a happy ending with Lucy Snow marrying Paul Emmanuel. Instead Charlotte only alluded to Paul's fate in order to comply with her father's wishes. Patrick even wrote to his brother Hugh in Ireland in January 1853 sending him a copy of *Jane Eyre*, asking Hugh to "let my brothers and sisters read this", and stating that when *Shirley* and *Villette*, then being published in three volume editions, were published in a cheaper format "he would send them too".

Given the gift of a crayon portrait of Charlotte by her publisher George Smith, Patrick was delighted and hung it proudly in the parlour where it can be seen today. Thanking him for it Patrick wrote

“I may be partial but I fancy I see strong indications of the genius of the author of *Shirley* and *Jane Eyre*”.

Mrs Gaskell reported that when she visited Patrick and Charlotte in 1853 and Charlotte left the room “then all his pride in her genius and fame came out. He eagerly listened to everything I could tell him of the high admiration I had at any time heard expressed for her works. He would ask for certain speeches over and over again, as if he desired to impress them on his memory”. Mrs Gaskell was touched when she visited Patrick after Charlotte’s death to find that he had gathered a collection of newspaper articles and reviews, of which “there was hardly any notice, however short and clumsily worded, in any obscure provincial paper, but what has been cut out and carefully ticketed with its date by the poor bereaved father – so proud when he first read them – so desolate now”.

When Sarah Garrs, who had been a servant at the Parsonage before emigrating to America, wrote to Patrick after Charlotte’s death, he replied “You probably little thought, that the children you nursed on your knees, would have been so much noticed by the world – as they have been – Emily and Anne, wrote and published *Clever Books*, and Charlotte’s writings and fame are known in all parts where genius, and learning are held in due estimation”. So there is no doubting Patrick’s love for and pride in his daughters and their achievements.

HOW MUCH INFLUENCE DID PATRICK HAVE ON HIS CHILDREN?

Patrick did have a great influence over his children because:-

Their mother died whilst they were all still very young and therefore he was the only parent they really knew. The children led a relatively isolated existence at the Parsonage – no wide circle of friends or large family network with whom to interact. They were educated at home largely by their father, and never really left home. There were various sorties at times for work but they always returned. Patrick told Mrs Gaskell “On the death of their Aunt, my children came home and remained with me till they died”. He was always there for them because of the nature of his profession. None of the children left home for marriage and when Charlotte eventually married she stayed with her father. Finally Patrick outlived all six of his children – an

extremely rare occurrence. Therefore his influence over his children was considerable.

Patrick had great integrity and his single minded care for intellectual things was particularly inherited by Emily, who also inherited her father's strong passionate Irish nature. He passed his ideas, passion and morality on to his daughters in several ways, for example his love of learning and education. William Dearden, a school master friend of Branwell's said that Branwell had told him that after their mother had died, Patrick had "watched over his little bereaved flock with truly paternal solicitude and affection – that he was their constant guardian and instructor – and that he took a lively interest in all their innocent amusements". In the evenings Patrick would gather the children round him "for recitation, and talk, giving them oral lessons in history, biography or travel", and William Dearden said "he had too high an appreciation of the value of education to neglect his duty in that particular as a father of a family". Patrick's yearning for Education is a Celtic trait and certainly rubbed off on Charlotte and Emily, so anxious to learn in Brussels. In 1842 Monsieur Heger wrote to Patrick "In Judging the father of a family by his children [what] we have found in your daughters can only give us a very high idea of your worth and your character. With pupils like these we had very little to do; their progress is more your work than ours we only had the slight merit of providing suitable material for the praiseworthy activity which your daughters have drawn from your example and your lessons".

Despite his lack of funds Patrick did everything he could to encourage a love of books and reading among his children, allowing them to obtain books from the circulating library at Keighley. Patrick joined the Mechanics Institute there in 1833, attending lectures and occasionally giving one himself. He even bought a copy of Byron's *Life and Works* edited by Moore and allowed his children to read it – quite risqué for a mid-Victorian father! Patrick made his children aware of current affairs and politics, habitually



reading to them any public news in which he felt they would be interested and he encouraged them to discuss news of the day. On one such occasion in 1829 Patrick brought home a copy of *The Intelligence Extraordinary* (what a wonderful name!) reporting a speech made by the Prime Minister Robert Peel containing the conditions upon which Roman Catholics were to be allowed to sit in Parliament. Charlotte recalled “with what eagerness Papa tore off the cover and how we all gathered round him, and with what breathless anxiety we listened as one by one they were disclosed and explained and argued upon so ably and so well”. In their imaginary world the people, landmarks and happenings that the children wrote about were based on actual people and events which they had read about in the books, periodicals and papers brought into the Parsonage by their father. They inherited his admiration for Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington. When Patrick escorted Charlotte and Emily to Brussels and left them at the Pension Heger, he was pleased to be able to fit in a visit to the site of the Battle of Waterloo, his hero’s most famous victory.

Patrick’s Spartan ambition which had lifted him out of dire poverty and, via Cambridge, to become a respected clergyman influenced his daughters’ resolution and self discipline. Charlotte wrote to Aunt Branwell about her plans to go to Brussels “Papa will perhaps think it is a wild and ambitious scheme; but who ever rose in the world without ambition? When he left Ireland to go to Cambridge University, he was as ambitious as I am now”.

Patrick not only possessed great physical bravery as evidenced by his cataract operation at age 69 without anaesthetic, but he also had great spiritual strength and his daughters inherited this. He taught them to believe that everyone was “under Providence” and that God was “The Supreme Disposer of Events and the Controller of all Hearts”. After Anne’s death Patrick wrote “I have indeed had my ample share of trouble – But it has been the Lord’s will”. Similarly after the deaths of her brother and sisters Charlotte wrote “It is over. Branwell, Emily, Anne, are gone like dreams – gone as Maria and Elizabeth went twenty years ago. One by one I have watched them fall asleep on my arm – and closed their glazed eyes and I have seen them buried one by one and thus far – God has upheld me. From my

heart I thank Him”. Surely such stoicism and deep religious faith was learned from her father?

Most importantly Patrick influenced the writings of his children. He himself was of course overshadowed by his daughter’s literary fame, but that owed more to his influence that he has been given credit for. Patrick’s religious beliefs can be seen in the writings of his children, both in their prose and poetry, especially the poetry of Emily, which has been likened to that of several Methodist hymns, whilst Anne’s writing shows that she was particularly affected by a fear of personal damnation, hell and punishment.

The romance and language of his Irish heritage can be traced in Patrick’s own poetry and in the Celtic stories and myths which he related to his children and which had such an effect on them. As time went on, North country folklore also became part of his repertoire, Mrs Gaskell reporting that Patrick would regale the children with “strange stories, which had been told to him by some of the oldest inhabitants of the parish stories which made one shiver and shrink from hearing, but they were full of grim humour and interest to Mr Bronte and his children”.

His own recollections were used by his children. Patrick used to tell the old family story for example, of how his great grandfather, a cattle dealer called Hugh Brunty, the same name as his father, had found an abandoned child on a packet boat sailing between Warrenpoint in County Down, and Liverpool. He brought the child, who was dark haired and thought to be a gypsy, back home with him to live with his own family and his presence in the household later caused conflict between his own children. Sound familiar? Surely Emily used this tale of Patrick’s own family for *Wuthering Heights*. The servant in her novel, Joseph, was probably based on the character of Gallagher, a servant at Hugh’s farm and by whom he was ill treated, causing him to run away from home at age 16. The dog kept by Patrick’s father when he was young was called Keeper and when he left home his only regret was that he had to leave Keeper behind.

Charlotte used Patrick’s story of himself when he was a curate at Dewsbury throwing a bully out of his way in order to let a procession pass in writing of Mr Helstone’s action with the two processions in *Shirley*. Patrick’s tales of the Luddite riots of 1811/12 when he was

the curate at Hartshead were also used by Charlotte when she wrote *Shirley*. The idiosyncrasies of curate friends of Patrick's such as the martial form of Christianity practiced by Hammond Roberson whom he had met at Hartshead were picked up and caricatured in *Shirley*, whilst one of Patrick's curates at Haworth, Mr Smith, was to become Mr Malone in that novel.

Another legacy of Patrick's Irish background was his enduring love of the natural world, which helped his easy transference from the wild rugged beauties of the Mountains of Mourne to the similar landscape of the Yorkshire Moors. The whole family inherited his great love of walking – there were no carriages or horses kept at the Parsonage. Like their father, the girls roamed for miles over the moors and when elderly Patrick would bitterly lament that he could no longer walk as far “where is my strength gone? I used to walk 40 miles a day”. His love of nature is shown in his poetry collection *The Rural Minstrel* and the influence of his poetry particularly passed to Branwell and Emily.

Patrick's prose work *The Maid of Killarney* in particular had a great influence on the children. They imitated their father's style, especially his inclusion of poems as songs. They borrowed his characters, particularly his heroine Flora who was the model for their heroines of the *Juvenilia*. Juliet Barker tells us that “many passages from *The Maid of Killarney* on subjects as diverse as describing the beauties of the landscape or singing the praises of the Duke of Wellington could just have easily been written by one of the Brontë children”.

So there is little doubt that Patrick was a great influence on his daughters who did inherit their values from their father.

So does Patrick deserve his reputation as an eccentric tyrant, a curmudgeon?

No. Why Not? He was a much more caring and balanced character than that depicted by her. He had a sense of humour for example, for which we have evidence in the humorous poem he wrote when his curate succeeded in evicting local women from spreading out their washing to dry over the tombstones in the graveyard – (*See December 2006 edition of the ABA Newsletter, p. 14*). He also wrote

two letters that we know of in the guise of dogs, signing one from ‘Your, kind, trusty and humble Dog, Robin Tweed, At My Kennel Near the Vicarage’.

Secondly there is evidence of much family affection. There is little doubt that his children loved their ‘Papa’ as they called him. He created a stable home for them and they did not like leaving it. When she was in Brussels and feeling homesick one day Charlotte wrote in a page of a school book atlas “I am very cold – there is no fire – I wish I were at home with papa, Branwell, Emily, Anne and Tabby”.

Charlotte cared enough for her father to leave Brussels to look after him in his increasing blindness, and her refusal to leave him on her marriage shows that she must have loved him very much. Indeed her last wish was that her husband should stay and take care of her father for the rest of his life. In all their writings there is no criticism of him. Even Branwell recognized his father’s love for him, writing to his friend Leyland in 1847 “my father cannot have long to live, and that when he dies, my evening, which is already twilight, will become night”. Hardly the words of a son describing his tyrannical father.

Perhaps Patrick could be blamed for his overindulgence towards his son, giving him sovereigns when he threatened suicide and paying his debts without censure. He failed to understand that his son was not like himself as a young man. Perhaps he should have sent him away to school rather than keeping him at home so long? Or perhaps we can accuse Patrick of selfishness, willing to sacrifice Charlotte’s happiness by letting Arthur go off to Australia. Patrick was quite vitriolic about Arthur, stating “all the produce of the Australian Diggings would not make him and any wife he might have, happy”. This hostile treatment of Arthur does show him in a poor light.

On the other hand once the marriage was a *fait accompli* Patrick seems to have accepted it with good grace. Charlotte wrote “It is an hourly happiness to me to see how well Arthur and my Father get on together now – there has never been a misunderstanding or wrong word”. Another incident shows that Patrick was not as insensitive as he was portrayed. On reading *Shirley*, and realising Charlotte’s longing for the mother she had never really known, Patrick gave her the bundle of Maria’s letters to himself, written before they were

married, so that she could learn something about her mother's character.

Well, finally back to where we started with Mrs Gaskell. She certainly blackened Patrick's name in her biography, creating the impression that was accepted for years as fact. Juliet Barker calls Mrs Gaskell's portrayal of Patrick "a travesty of a portrait", and says that it is "a malicious caricature of a selfish and eccentric recluse". Patrick stated firmly that "The Eccentric Moments ascribed to me have no foundation in fact". He was more worried that references to his reputed insistence on his children following vegetarian diets would be held responsible for their poor health and early deaths. Patrick denied this strongly and wanted this corrected in future editions, but he kept a dignified stance and did not refute the claims in public. "I held my both tongue and my pen", he wrote, referring to the "few trifling mistakes" and requesting the removal of "eccentric and ridiculous" references to himself. Indeed, his attitude was one of such restraint and patience that Mrs Gaskell told George Smith, her publisher, that Mr Bronte has acted "like a brick". It has been suggested by Juliet Barker that Mrs Gaskell painted Patrick as a reclusive eccentric tyrant in order to explain those characteristics of the Brontës writings that the Victorians found unacceptable. Friends who knew Patrick however did not recognize the harsh portrait she painted. Their words used to describe him in contrast were – kind, affable, considerate and genial. The Brontë servants were devoted to the family and even after they left their service remained in contact. This would not have been the case had Patrick been a tyrant. Indeed, Nancy Garrs stated "He was the kindest man who ever drew breath".

CONCLUSION

Patrick may have been somewhat aloof, obstinate and rather reserved, but he was very keen to right any injustice and there is no doubting his physical and spiritual courage, ambition, energy, passionate love of learning, compassion, honesty, high moral standards and incredible faith whilst undergoing the huge ordeal of losing one by one all those family members whom he loved. He obviously had some idiosyncrasies – who amongst us does not? But I think that Patrick himself best expressed it when he told Mrs Gaskell

“I do not deny that I am somewhat eccentric (sic). Had I been numbered amongst the calm, sedate concentric men of the world, I should not have been as I am now, and I should, in all probability, never have had such children as mine have been”.

He was right. Not only was he their father, but their priest, companion, teacher and inspiration. Without him the Brontë sisters might never have written the works that brought the family fame. So I think that to day in true Irish fashion we should raise a glass and drink a toast to the Bronte patriarch – Happy Birthday, Patrick Bronte!

Catherine Barker

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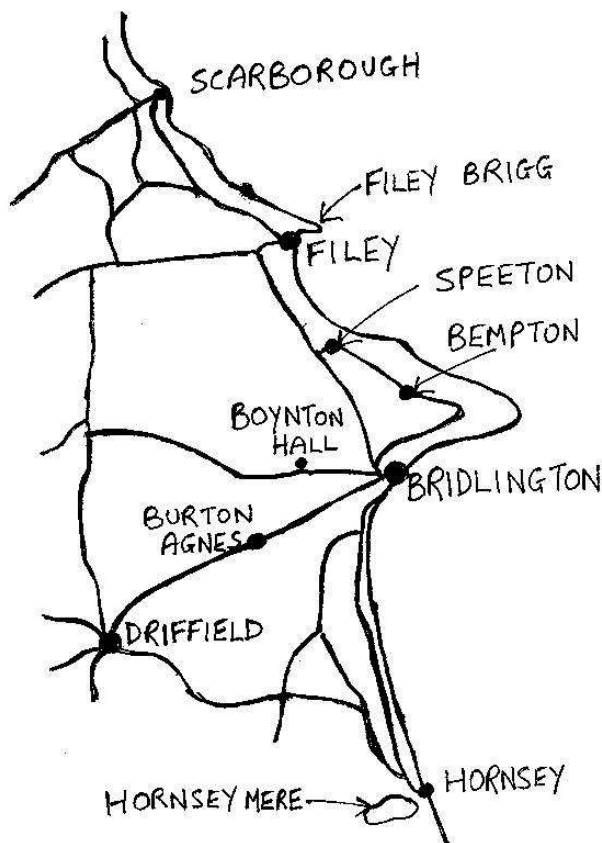
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THE BRONTËS AT THE SEASIDE

The text of a talk by Christopher Cooper on 30th June 2007



Charlotte was the first of the Brontë sisters to visit the seaside. It was in September 1839 when she went to the North Yorkshire coast with her friend Ellen Nussey, but before we accompany them to Bridlington let's see what Charlotte's state of mind was that summer, and why she felt that the bracing sea air might do her good.

Ellen Nussey was Charlotte's best friend from school and Charlotte had many times visited Ellen and her family at Brookroyd House near Birstall. There she met

Ellen's brother, Henry and they became good friends. In March 1839 Henry wrote to her. Ellen may have had some inkling of what was in this letter – she asked Charlotte about it and Charlotte replied:

“You ask me whether I have received a letter from Henry – I have about a week since – The Contents I confess did a little surprise me, but I kept them to myself, and unless you had questioned me on the subject I would never have adverted to it – Henry says he is comfortably settled at Donnington in Sussex that his health is much improved and that it is his intention to take pupils after Easter – he then intimates that in due time he shall want a Wife to take care of his pupils and frankly asks me to be that Wife.”

Although Henry didn't have the same exaggerated zeal as St John Rivers we can believe that this proposal, for the sake of her

usefulness to his calling more than for love, suggested the St John Rivers proposal in *Jane Eyre*.

Charlotte declined Henry's proposal with as much force as Jane declined St John Rivers. But Charlotte admired Henry and tried not to soften her refusal.

"You are aware that I have many reasons to feel grateful to your family, that I have peculiar reasons for affection towards one at least of your Sisters, and that I highly esteem yourself. Do not therefore accuse me of wrong motives when I say that my answer to your proposal must be a decided negative.

In forming this decision – I trust that I have listened to the dictates of conscience more than those of inclination; I have no personal repugnance to the idea of a union with you – but I feel convinced that mine is not the sort of disposition calculated to form the happiness of a man like you."

She goes on to describe the sort of wife who would make him happy – one whose temper is mild, who is serious, grave and cool-headed. In replying to Ellen she elaborates on her unsuitability to be Henry's wife by suggesting that it would startle Henry to discover that her true nature was that of a "wild, romantic enthusiast". It was several years before Charlotte would form a deeply passionate attachment – that for Monsieur Heger and several more years before she finally became the mild, serious and cool-headed wife of Mr Nicholls.

Actually Charlotte received another proposal that summer, though she felt this one was more of an odd joke than something to be taken seriously. One of Mr Brontë's former curates, now a Vicar, visited with his own curate, a Mr Price, fresh from Dublin. Mr Price made himself agreeable that day with his lively Irish humour. Charlotte laughed at his jokes but felt a little uncomfortable at his over-the-top Irish flattery. She was amazed when, a few days later, she received a letter from him proposing marriage. She wrote to Ellen "I've heard of love at first sight but this beats all."

Two proposals within such a short space of time may have created some turbulence in her previously untroubled life, but what caused her real strain, to the extent of affecting her health, were the three months she spent as a governess at Stonegappe. In May, June and July of that year she was employed as a nursery governess to the Sedgwick children of Stonegappe near Skipton that year. She complained that she found life there “tedious” and “restraining” and that she longed to escape.

She wrote to Emily in June:

I have striven hard to be pleased with my new situation. The country, the house, and the grounds are, as I have said, divine. But, alack-a-day! there is such a thing as seeing all beautiful around you – pleasant woods, winding white paths, green lawns, and blue sunny sky – and not having a free moment or a free thought left to enjoy them in. The children are constantly with me, and more riotous, unmanageable cubs never grew. As for correcting them, I soon quickly found that was entirely out of the question: they are to do as they like. A complaint to Mrs Sedgewick brings only black looks upon oneself, and unjust, partial excuses to screen the children.

In a letter to Ellen Nussey she declared she would rather “work in a mill” and called the Sedgwick children “pampered” and “turbulent”. So when she returned home to Haworth in July she felt very much in need of a holiday. She wrote to Ellen on 26th July that she “never was so glad to get out of a house in my life”.

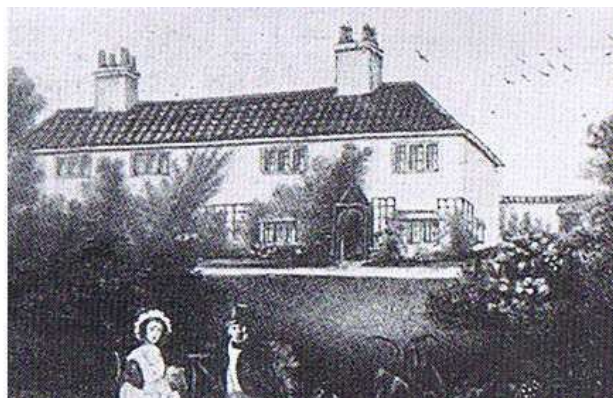
At this time Ellen was planning a trip to the coast for her health and decided to invite Charlotte along to raise her spirits. Charlotte was over the moon at the invitation and wrote “your proposal has driven me clean daft”.

They decided to make Bridlington their destination. Mary Taylor had recommended Bridlington. Also Henry Nussey had been a curate near there and had many friends in the area to whom he could give them an introduction.

The planning involved many letters back and forth between Ellen and Charlotte as they tried to work out the logistics. At first the plan was for Charlotte to meet Ellen in Leeds in time to catch the 10am train but Charlotte discovered that she couldn't get to Leeds in time. "Haworth ... is such an out-of-the-way place that one should have a month's warning before they stir from it", she wrote. There was a gig out of Haworth to Bradford, but at the last minute she discovered that it wasn't operating. She wrote to Ellen on 14th August "I have in vain packed my box ... impediments seem to throw up at every step ... leave me out of your calculations". But at the beginning of September Ellen borrowed Henry's coach and turned up unannounced at the Haworth Parsonage door ready to take Charlotte off with her within the hour. Charlotte quickly threw some last minute things into her box and off they went in great excitement and much giggling.

They reached Leeds and took the train to Selby. It was a great adventure for Charlotte as it was her first experience of a train journey. The railway boom had only just begun and the line to Selby had only been open for five years. At Selby they had to transfer to a stagecoach to York. From there they had intended to catch the coach to Drifffield, but it was full so they had to take a slower fly.

Ellen and Charlotte had intended to take lodgings on the waterfront at Bridlington but unbeknown to them Ellen's brother, Henry, had arranged for the two ladies to stay with his friends Mr and Mrs Hudson in a farmhouse at Easton, a small hamlet a couple of miles inland from Bridlington Quay. John Hudson was to intercept them at the Bell Hotel coach stop in Drifffield but they were not on the coach. John returned home, having arranged with the innkeeper to send them on to the farm by post chaise.



Charlotte's painting of Easton House

Now Charlotte had eagerly looked forward to staying right by the sea. During the planning stages she had written to Ellen:

“The idea of seeing the sea – of being near it – watching its changes by sunrise, sunset, moonlight, and noonday – in calm, perhaps in storm – fills and satisfies my mind. I shall be discontented at nothing.”

So you can imagine that despite their being grateful to the kindness of the Hudsons they were very disappointed not to be closer to the sea. It wasn't until day three of their month long visit that they were able to escape the hospitality of their hosts and to walk the two miles to the coast. From the top of Bessingby Hill Charlotte caught her first view of the sea and the broad and beautiful sweep of Bridlington Bay, with the chalk cliffs beyond. She was completely choked with emotion and, sobbing quietly and unable to speak, she drank in the power and splendour of the German Ocean, as the North Sea was known at the time. Ellen thoughtfully walked ahead to allow Charlotte to come to terms with her emotions and years later she recalled that her friend's eyes were “red and swollen and she was trembling”.

A travel guide published in 1877 describes Bridlington as follows:

“The town has a clean and cheerful appearance, its streets are spacious, its various edifices of a respectable class ... the town is otherwise indebted to nature for its watering-place celebrity. The elements of air and water are possessed in their utmost purity; and a combination of circumstances ... renders it unsurpassed and almost unequalled on these coasts, in the excellence of the sea-bathing.”

Some days they walked in the fertile chalky wolds above the sea plain. Thorpe Hall and Boynton Hall were nearby and one day they walked to the village of Burton Agnes, where Henry had been curate, and visited some of his friends there. The vicar under whom Henry had worked was Charles Lutwidge, the uncle of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll.

They also explored a wood rich with autumnal colour. Charlotte later referred to this as ‘Harlequin Wood’, having misheard the locals’ pronunciation of the true name ‘Hallow Kiln’ Wood. Stories have passed down by local farmers that Charlotte was fascinated watching the sheep washing in the Gypsy Race, a stream that runs down to Bridlington Harbour.

Charlotte became very fond of Mrs Hudson's seven year old niece, Fanny Whipp. Fanny is likely to have been the original of Paulina Mary Home, the sweet child in *Villette*. And indeed Bretton, where the early events of that novel take place, is based on the old part of Bridlington. In Shirley, the landlady of one of the curates is Mrs Whipp.

Charlotte painted a watercolour of the farm house at Easton. The house is shown as having a trellised porch, festooned with honeysuckle and ivy. The Hudsons are shown on a rustic garden bench with their dog beside them.

Charlotte longed to be nearer the sea and persuaded the somewhat over-protective Hudsons to allow them to stay down at the Quay for the last week of their holiday. They knew a Mrs Ann Booth



**The house in Filey where
Charlotte stayed**

who kept a lodging house and by bringing them fresh milk and provisions every day they kept an eye on them.

They watched with interest the activities around the busy fishing harbour, and were amused at the pomposity of the fashionable set who paraded around the small pier in the finery. Charlotte wrote in amusement of the 'ranter's', the primitive Methodists, who made such a racket in the meeting house opposite their lodgings but insisted that they have a right to their own style of worship.

In October, after she had returned home, Charlotte wrote to Ellen:

"Have you forgotten the sea by this time? Is it grown dim in our mind? Or can you still see it, – dark blue, green, and foam-white; and hear it roaring roughly when the wind is high, or rushing softly when it is calm. ... I think of Easton very often, and of worthy Mr Hudson, and his kind-hearted help-mate, and of our pleasant walks to Harlequin Wood, to Boynton, our merry evenings, our romps with Little Hanchione (the name she gave to little Fanny Whipp)."

Even a year later Charlotte had not forgotten Bridlington. In the middle of a wuthering storm at Haworth she wrote “from what quarter the wind blows, I cannot tell – but I should very much like to know how the great brewing-tub of Bridlington Bay works, and what sort of yeasty froth rises just now on the waves.”

Anne Brontë came to know and love the seaside even more than Charlotte. From 1840 to 1845 she was governess to the Robinson family at Thorp Green Hall and during this time the family spent a good part of each summer at Scarborough. Anne accompanied them. In her diary of 1841 she records her first sighting of the sea.

Scarborough, with its long history as a spa town (there are natural springs under the cliffs) was at this time a very fashionable resort, sometimes referred to as ‘North East England’s Bay of Naples’. Grand houses with sea views lined the terraces and crescents and many had recently been built as lodging houses, with self-contained facilities and housekeepers for each apartment. It was in the new and very smart Wood’s Lodgings, on what is now St Nicholas Cliff, that Anne stayed with the Robinsons. These lodging houses have now gone and on the site today stands the Grand Hotel.

During these summers Anne grew to love Scarborough, with its theatres and galleries and the lively events laid on for the summer season. She also loved the older harbour area and Anne’s curiosity often led her into the narrow lanes where the fisher-folk lived.

Anne’s love of the sea is clear in *Agnes Grey*. The heroine states:

“I would often gladly pierce the town to obtain the pleasure of a walk beside [the sea] whether with the pupils, or alone with my mother during the vacations. It was delightful to me at all times and seasons.”

In chapter 24 the young governess describes an early morning stroll on the beach:

“I was dressed and out when the church clock struck a quarter to six. There was a feeling of freshness and vigour in the very streets; and when I got free of the town, when my foot was on the sands and my face towards the broad bright bay, no language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and the ocean, the bright morning sunshine on the semi-circular barrier of craggy cliffs surmounted by

green swelling hills, and on the smooth, wide sands, and the low rocks out at sea – looking with their clothing of weeds and moss, like little grass-grown islands – and above all, on the brilliant, sparkling waves ... My footsteps were the first to press the firm unbroken sands – nothing before had trampled them since last night's flowing tide had obliterated the deepest marks of yesterday, and left it fair and even, excepting where the subsiding water had left behind it the traces of dimpled pools and little running streams.”

In chapter 25 Anne describes a scene which is obviously Castle Hill in Scarborough. Mr Weston tells Agnes that he wants to take her for a walk that evening to “a bold hill on the land side, and towards the sea a steep precipice from the summit of which a glorious view is to be had”. This is where he proposes to her after they watch a brilliant sunset.

By January 1849 both Branwell and Emily were dead and it appeared that poor Anne would not be far behind. She was diagnosed that month with consumption in both lungs. In April Anne convinced Charlotte that the sea air would do her good and she begged for a visit to Scarborough. Charlotte was against the idea, fearing that it might hasten her death. But Anne's specialist agreed to her plan, not with the hope that it would assist in a recovery but more as a way of Anne having her dying wish. So in May, Charlotte and Ellen Nussey accompanied Anne to the coast.

The three women travelled by coach from Keighley to Leeds, then caught the train to York, where they stayed over night. They proceeded the next day to Scarborough by train. Their lodgings, which cost 30 shillings a week, were at No 2 The Cliff, very near Wood's Lodgings where in happier circumstances Anne had stayed with the Robinsons. The room had a splendid view of the bay, the harbour and the castle.

The next day, Saturday, Anne took a brief walk in the morning which exhausted her, but she was well enough in the afternoon to take a ride in a donkey carriage along the sands.



Donkeys are still there on the sand at Scarborough

On the Sunday Charlotte wrote to William Smith Williams at her publishers in London:

“As Anne sits at the window she can look down at the sea, which this morning is as calm as glass. She says if she could breathe more freely she would be comfortable at this moment, but she cannot breathe freely.”

It was decided that Anne was too unwell to attend church that morning but in the afternoon she walked down to the beach and rested on a seat while Charlotte and Ellen strolled a little further. A stunning sunset lit the sea that evening as they watched from the sitting room. Anne had been pulled to the window in her easy chair and Ellen wrote later:

“... her face became illuminated almost as much as the glorious scene she gazed upon. Little was said, for it was plain that her thoughts were driven by the imposing view before her to penetrate forwards to the regions of unfading glory.”

Next morning, Monday 28th May, Anne dressed herself by 7am. She was carried downstairs for breakfast but grew weaker as the day passed, and it became clear she was dying. When she faded away at 2 o'clock she was resigned and placid, and told Charlotte to “take courage”. The death was so calm that later that day the landlady, quite unaware of what had happened, put her head round the door to say that dinner was served. Charlotte decided that Anne should be buried at Scarborough, to save her father the distress of another funeral.

On Wednesday 30th May 1849 Anne was buried in the graveyard of St Mary's Church on Castle Hill which overlooks South Bay. The church was being restored so the service took place in Christ Church in Vernon Road instead.

Charlotte wrote to her father and he wrote back, urging her to stay on the coast for a while. So she and Ellen stayed for three more weeks. They stayed a week in Filey at a Mrs Smith's lodgings called Cliff House in what is now called Belle Vue Street.



Anne's grave

On 13th June Charlotte wrote to William Smith Williams again: “Filey, where we have been for the last week ... is a small place with a wild rocky coast – its sea is very blue – its cliffs are very white – its sands very solitary – it suits Ellen and myself better than Scarborough which is too gay.”

Filey, although smaller than Scarborough, was already a resort but retained its character as a fishing village with traditional east coast fishing boats. The town was just seeing its first real development.



Filey Brigg

Filey Brigg, which juts out into the sea, is impressive. Charlotte would have admired the view of the chalk cliffs of Bempton to the south, spectacular in clear weather.

After a week at Filey, Charlotte and Ellen travelled to the Hudsons at Easton Farm near Bridlington, their first visit since that happy

autumn of 1839. At this time Charlotte was working on Shirley and she spent a lot of time there writing. Mrs Gaskell maintains that chapter 24, in which Caroline Helstone recovers from a life-threatening illness, was written in the summer house at Easton. Clearly Anne was very much on her mind.

Three years later, in 1852, Charlotte was in poor health and was suffering from depression. In May she decided to heed her doctor’s advice and take a holiday at the seaside. At first she had intended to go to Scarborough since Miss Wooler, a much loved friend who had once been her teacher, spent summers there. But when she learnt that Miss Wooler would not be going there till late in the season Charlotte decided that Scarborough held too many unpleasant memories for her to face alone. Instead she returned to Mrs Smith’s house in Filey. While there she went to Scarborough to visit Anne’s grave. The tombstone had been erected after she had gone back to Haworth, and although the wording was done under her instructions she found no

fewer than five mistakes so she arranged to have it replaced. But the stone masons still made a mistake and the stone shows Anne as having died at 28, when in fact she was 29.

On June 2nd Charlotte wrote to her father:

“On the whole I get on very well here, but I have not bathed yet, as I am told it is much too cold and early in the season. The Sea is very grand. Yesterday it was a somewhat unusually high tide – and I stood about an hour on the cliffs yesterday afternoon – watching the tumbling in the great tawny turbid waves – that made the whole shore white with foam and filled the air with a sound hollower and deeper than thunder. There are so few visitors to Filey yet – that I and a few sea-birds and fishing-boats have often the whole expanse of sea, shore and cliffs to ourselves – When the tide is out – the sands are wide – long and smooth and very pleasant to walk on. When the high tides



are in – not a vestige of sand remains ...”

She wrote to Ellen:

“Filey seems to me much altered – more lodging houses, some of them very handsome – have been built; - the sea has all its own grandeur – I walk on the sands a good deal, and try not to feel desolate and melancholy ... I have bathed once – it seemed to do me good ... One day I set out with the intent to trudge to Filey Brigg but was frightened back by two cows. I mean to try again.”

Charlotte stayed a whole month in Filey. In a letter to Miss Wooler she was more frank than to her father:

“The first week or ten days – I greatly feared the sea-side would not suit me – for I suffered almost constantly from head-ache and other harassing ailments; the weather too dark, stormy and excessively bitterly cold; my Solitude, under such circumstances, partook of the character of Desolation; I had some dreary evening-hours and night-vigils.”

Charlotte was something of a hypochondriac, but a letter to Ellen from Filey revealed that what she really feared was that the illness which had dogged her the previous winter may be returning. She mentioned pain in the right side and hip, in the middle of the chest and “burning and aching between the shoulders”. Ellen had previously advised her to take a doctor’s advice and walk for three or four hours a day. Charlotte heeded the advice and wrote:

“... accordingly I have walked as much as I could since I came here, and look almost as sunburnt and weather-beaten as a fisherman or a bathing-woman with being out in the open air.”

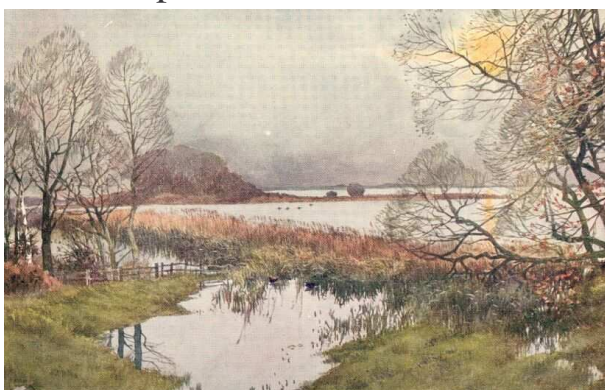
One Sunday she attended a church service which she described with some relish and amusement to her father. It was probably at the tiny Norman church at St Leonard’s at Speeton.



“On Sunday afternoon I went to a church which I should like Mr Nicholls to see ... It was certainly not more than thrice the length and breadth of our passage, floored with brick, with the walls green with mould, the pews painted white, but the paint almost worn off with time and decay. At one end there is a little gallery for the singers, and when these personages stood up to perform, they all turned their backs upon the congregation, and the congregation turned their backs upon pulpit and parson. The effect of this manoeuvre was so ludicrous I could hardly help laughing ... had Mr Nicholls been there he certainly would have laughed out. Looking up at the gallery and seeing only the broad backs of the singers presented to the audience was excessively grotesque.”

Clearly Charlotte was starting to think more of Arthur Bell Nicholls. He wanted to marry her but her father would not entertain the idea. He was incensed by the fact that Arthur had not even asked his permission to propose to Charlotte. Charlotte spent some time in London during the early part of 1853 and her father wrote savage letters to her about Nicholls, insinuating that she had encouraged him.

Back in Haworth Charlotte found life unbearable. Fed up, Nicholls applied to be a missionary in Australia and planned to leave Haworth by May so he handed in his notice. By this stage Patrick was not speaking to his curate. Charlotte felt so uncomfortable at home that she felt that she had to get out of the house so she visited Mrs Gaskell in Manchester. She returned home and Nicholls left, but he had decided against Australia and took up a post at Kirk Smeaton near Pontefract. His absence made her feel how solitary and unfulfilled her life was and she began to think of defying her father and marry Nicholls. In July Nicholls returned to the area and stayed in Oxenhope, close to Haworth and he and Charlotte met secretly.



Hornsea Mere

But the strain of it all was having a detrimental effect on her health and she felt she had to get away. In August she visited Scotland with her friends the Taylors but that trip had to be cut short. At the end of August Charlotte wrote to Miss Wooler who was renting rooms in Hornsea suggesting that she visit

her there. It was not until September that she was able to get away and join Miss Wooler at the seaside. She stayed with Miss Wooler for a week at No 94 Swiss Terrace, a seaside lodging house in pseudo Swiss style coated with stucco. During her strolls Charlotte took pleasant strolls on the sands and, accompanied by Miss Wooler, walked along Hornsea Mere, the largest natural lake in Yorkshire.

The last time Charlotte was at the seaside was on her honeymoon in July 1854. She wrote to Catherine Winkworth:

“It was at a little wild spot on the South West Coast of Ireland that your letter reached me ... such a wild, iron-bound coast – with such an ocean-view as I had not yet seen – and such a battling of



Kilklee

waves with rocks as I had never imagined.

My husband is not a poet or a poetical man – and one of my grand doubts before marriage was about ‘congenial tastes’ and so on. The first morning we went out on to the cliffs and saw the Atlantic coming in all white foam, I did not know whether I should get leave or time to take the matter in my own way. I did not want to talk – but I did want to look and be silent. Having hinted a petition, licence was not refused – covered with a rug to keep off the spray I was allowed to sit where I chose – and he only interrupted me when he thought I crept too near the edge of the cliff.”



Mr Nicholls may not have been a poetical man, or as passionate about wild scenes as his wife, but nor was he immune to the charms of the Irish coast. He wrote to a fellow churchman:

“We ... diverged to Killee, a glorious watering-place, with the finest shore I ever saw – completely girdled with stupendous cliffs – it was most refreshing to sit on a rock and look out on the broad Atlantic boiling and foaming at our feet.”

Charlotte never again saw the sea in this life, for in March the following year she passed over to the far shore where the boiling and foaming of this world’s troubles are no more. Whether she felt at home in the quiet, still waters of Heaven’s harbour we shall never know. Perhaps, like Catherine in her sister’s *Wuthering Heights* she would prefer to be washed up on some rocky coast so that she could once again enjoy the poetry of trouble and turbulence.

‘AS NO ONE SAVE A WOMAN CAN’: *BLEAK HOUSE* AND *VILLETTE*

**Adapted by Virginia Lowe from a talk she gave to a joint meeting
of the Australian Brontë Association and the N.S.W. Dickens
Society on 6th October 2007**

Villette was written and published while *Bleak House* was appearing in serial form. Ironically *Bleak House* both predates and follows *Villette*. I maintain that both novels influenced each other.

Is the first number of *Bleak House* generally admired? I like the chancery part, but when it passes into the autobiographic form, and the young woman who announces that she is not ‘bright’ begins her history, it seems to me too often weak and twaddling; an amiable nature is caricatured, not faithfully rendered, in Miss Esther Summerson. (*The Brontës*, letter 757)

Charlotte Brontë read the first part of *Bleak House*, when it was published in March 1852, and sent this comment in a letter to her friend and publisher, George Smith, on 11th March. At this time she had been working on and off (mostly off) at what was to become *Villette*, for almost a year. Illness, depression and grief for her sisters had culminated in severe writer’s block. Next day she wrote a letter to her friend Margaret Wooller, in which she expressed a determination to get on with her writing, declaring “further relaxation is out of the question, and I *will not permit myself to think of it*”. (*The Brontës*, letter 758) And indeed, the holograph manuscript of *Villette* is dated ‘29th March 1852’. Although it was August before she settled down to sustained work, it would appear that March was an important starting-point for *Villette* as we have it (Blackall, 1977). She finished it in November, by which time twenty-nine chapters (nine instalments) of *Bleak House* had appeared. *Villette* was published on 28th January 1853. Brontë made no further comment on *Bleak House*, but she was a voracious reader, and it is not unreasonable to assume that she continued reading the serial parts, as they were issued.

It was this ‘caricature’, Esther Summerson, which surely inspired the creation of Lucy Snowe. It led Brontë to create a similar character, but one ‘fleshed out’ – not a caricature, but a realistic portrait, ‘faithfully rendered’, of a woman in such circumstances.

There are aspects of a woman’s social and emotional experience inaccessible to a man, especially in Victorian times. Dickens himself recognised a different kind of perception in woman: “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come – and soon enough – when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can” (*BH*, ch. 5). Brontë apparently felt that no one save a woman could understand and feel a woman’s lot. It is the experiences unique to women that enrich Lucy. Lucy is Esther redrawn, with a woman’s perception.

Brontë had read only the first two chapters of Esther’s narrative when she commented on the ‘caricature’, and was inspired to fill it out. Not everyone sees Esther as a caricature. She can be seen as a good person successfully created, real and believable. Nor was Dickens unaware of the woman’s lot. *Bleak House*, his novel on ‘the woman question’, is full of strong, independent female characters, from Mrs Bagnet, who runs her husband and his music shop with equal efficiency, to the French murderess. (Moers, 1985) It is the hardship and loneliness of the ‘superfluous’ woman which he does not recognise.

Ether’s and Lucy’s names are an indication of Brontë’s indebtedness. “I can hardly express what subtlety of thought made me decide upon giving her a cold name”, Brontë remarked to her publisher about Lucy Snowe, when asking if it was not too late to change her name from Frost. (*The Brontës*, letter 797). This can be seen as a direct contrast with Esther Summerson, whose name reminds us that “sunshine and summer air” are with her wherever she goes. (*BH*, ch. 30).

Lucy “had about her an external coldness”, as Brontë herself acknowledges, but this concealed the blazing soul (*‘la flame à l’âme’*)

that M. Paul recognised (V, ch. 27). ‘Lucy’ could also derive from *lux, lucis*, ‘light’, in contradistinction to Esther, whom Brontë had remembered describing herself as ‘not bright’. (*The Brontës*, letter 757). What Esther actually says is ‘I know I am not clever’ (*BH*, ch. 3). ‘Lucy’ is more usually seen as derived from Wordsworth’s Lucy and Lucy Gray poems.

Both Esther and Lucy are reticent and self-effacing narrators. “It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself. As if this narrative were the narrative of my life! But my little body will soon fall into the background now”. (*BH*, ch. 3), says Esther in her first chapter. She frequently tells us she does not want to talk about herself. This can be taken as mock-modesty, but for me the sense that she has another story to tell – that of the murder and of the evils of Chancery – and is genuinely surprised to discover that so much of her own must be told in the process, is convincingly portrayed.

Lucy, on the other hand, rather than express reluctance to write about herself, simply does not do it. She fails to tell us how people responded to her, about her own emotions, especially love, even about what happened to her family. Readers have to work it out for themselves.

Esther is reticent in one area only. “I have omitted to mention in its place that there was someone else at the family dinner party. It was not a lady” (*BH*, ch. 13). She is so transparent that we suspect at once that this is the man she loves, but she keeps up the reticence, both about the events and about her own feelings, when Allan Woodcourt enters the story.

Lucy is similarly reticent, the most notorious example being the six chapters which elapse before she tells us that Dr John is in fact Graham Bretton. Even then, she does not confess that she loves him. Only after she understands and accepts Paul’s quite different love, hence feels herself lovable, can she admit to loving Graham. Nor is she straightforward about Paul. He had been leaving her violets and chocolates, lending her books, even marking her assignments (greater

love hath no man...), long before she tells us. Even her choice of words sometimes tries to deceive. “I, Lucy Snowe, was calm” (V, ch. 3), she tells us. Externally she was, but her inner turmoil is revealed in the tension of the writing on either side of this claim. Brontë took Dickens’s hints of reticence, of unreliability in the narrator, and made them a major part of *Villette*’s construction, in notable contrast to Jane Eyre’s open, chronological narration.

Esther tells us about herself from the beginning. “I had always rather a noticing way” (BH, ch. 3). Lucy is also a watcher, an observer, an outsider, but she offers us no such sweeping statements. Her story is full of gaps and hiatuses. Like the sections Paul cuts from the books he lends her, like the letter dictated by Feeling “for my own relief” (V, ch. 23), which she replaces with one dictated by Reason and sent to Graham, the gaps are often the most important part of her story. She even admits that “blanks were inevitable...a part of my life’s lot” (V, ch. 24). Eventually we come to feel that Lucy has told us all we need to know. By the end, we do trust her as a narrator. “The whole history, in brief, summoned to his confidence, rushed thither truthful, literal, ardent, bitter” (V, ch. 41). Though she never gives the reader the candour, the openness, she bestows on Paul with her love, we do feel she has given us all we need to know. Lucy keeps her secrets until the end – in the letters from the Indies, to which we are not granted access, and in the book’s indeterminate ending.

Even in the plot, Brontë made Lucy and Esther similar in many ways. Both appear to be orphans. Neither has the security of a name, a father, a dowry, so essential to living the life of a lady in Victorian times. Both have godmothers, and both part with them at fourteen. It seems that Brontë saw this type of deprived childhood as more likely to lead to a “morbid and weak” personality than a sunny and warm one like Esther’s (*The Brontës*, letter 797). Both bury their past beneath a tree – Esther her beloved Dolly, Lucy Graham’s letters. Both have two lovers, a young doctor and an older man, almost a father figure. Of course Brontë did not know how *Bleak House* was to end, but in her story the older man, with a superficially less attractive appearance and personality, is the more likely partner. “Lucy must not

marry Dr. John ... he is a 'curled darling' of Nature and of Fortune, and must draw a prize in life's lottery." (*The Brontës*, Letter 795). Possibly she could already foresee the outcome for Esther, and again reversed it in her uncaricatured version.

There are other parallels too, some as minor as a child tumbling down stairs (Georgette/Peepy), a lover's disapproving mother (Mrs Woodcourt/Madame Walravens), east winds (actual or hypothetical) and the appearance of ghosts. Other similarities in the lives of Esther and Lucy are the offer to share the happy lives of others, and their illness, hallucination and disfigurement.

Names are important in both stories. As well as the contrast between 'Snowe' and 'Summerson', both have a changing of names as a theme. Nicknames are an example. Esther is 'Old Woman', 'Cobweb' or 'Dame Durden' (a husband-hunter from a popular comic street song, see Axton 1966). These nicknames are used affectionately, but all define her role and reinforce its inescapability. Perhaps there is some covert resentment in her remark that "my own name soon became quite lost among them" (*BH*, ch. 8). In a similar way, Lucy is given nicknames by Ginevra. "Timon was one of her dozen names for me." (*V*, ch. 21). 'Timon', as a misanthrope, is typically role-defining too. Lucy, like Esther, is desexed, made to seem older, by names like 'Old Crusty', 'Mother Wisdom' and 'Grandmother'.

Names change in both stories, not only by the use of nicknames, but as part of the plot. Esther's story is her attempt to discover her parents, hence her name ('Hawden', like her father), and of course at the end she changes it to Woodcourt. In *Villette*, the name changes from Polly to Paulina, Home to De Bassompierre, and especially Graham Bretton to Dr John, are significant. Esther's father changes his name from Hawden to Nemo, or 'no one', and ironically this is in a way another of the 'names' Esther takes. She is nameless, alone and alien – 'no one'. Caddy asleep on her lap "was no one, and I was no one" (*BH*, ch. 4); and her Dolly was "staring at me – or not so much at me, I think, as at nothing" (*BH*, ch. 3). Lucy, even more alone and

alien, friendless in a foreign city, is several times impugned by Ginevra. “Who *are* you, Miss Snowe? ... If you really are the nobody I once thought you, you must be a cool hand” (V, ch. 27).

This alienation is one of the aspects of being a woman which Brontë was able to see and spell out much more clearly than Dickens. Esther is in fact nameless and alone. Her ambiguous position at Bleak House, as neither servant nor part of the family, is akin to that of a governess (described so well by Brontë in *Jane Eyre*) or paid companion, which Lucy is to Miss Marchmont. Nevertheless, apart from her terrifying dream or hallucination in Chapter 35, where she desperately yearns to get free of her duties and even her relationships, Esther does not articulate this. She does not experience the existential alienation which besets Lucy, even at fourteen.

Lucy’s inner self is prey to the roles imposed on her, both by society in general and by other people. Sometimes she is irritated, sometimes quietly amused, by people’s misapprehension of her personality. “What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed!” (V, ch. 26). No one understood, nor was she able to explain herself. “But if I feel, may I *never* express?” “*Never!*” declared Reason’ (V, ch. 21).

In particular, it is her love that she cannot allow herself to express. With Dr John she is in an inescapable dilemma. If she shows nothing of her love, she remains unnoticed. If she had shown anything, she would have been seen as Vashti – completely outside the realms of gentility (‘Vashti’, as the queen whom Esther superseded in the biblical Book of Esther, is perhaps another name giving us a clue to Lucy’s origins in *Bleak House*’s Esther). The mere exchange of a sexual glance between Ginevra and De Hamel prompts Dr John to declare that “no woman ... who could give or receive such a glance, shall ever be sought in marriage by me” (V, ch. 20. On this see Clark-Beattie, 1986). Paulina, in so many ways Lucy’s double, also has this debate with herself. Like Lucy, she tears up the letters dictated by passion, and sends Graham only those dictated by reason.

Dickens did not acknowledge Esther's passion, her rebellion nor her sexuality. He held to a strong belief in the sexual innocence of women, in all his books. Esther is completely 'ladylike' – passive, accepting, never declaring her love for Allan Woodcourt. This is how Lucy appears on the surface too, but Paul recognises her "fiery and rash nature" (V, ch. 26). His stated opinion is that "lovely, placid, and passive feminine mediocrity was the only pillow on which manly thought and sense could find rest for its aching temples." He also declares that 'a woman of intellect' is a 'luckless accident' – with a play on Lucy's name, and exactly how she perceives herself: 'lusus naturae' (V, ch. 30). Nevertheless, what attracts him to her is her intelligence, her hidden fire or passion, her wit and humour. (Seldom mentioned by critics, Lucy's wit, humour, frequent laughter and games, like the noose on the back of M. Paul's chair in Chapter 28, are among her least repressed, most attractive characteristics). Lucy fears that her life, her vitality and passion, will lie buried forever like the nun, but Paul's recognition of her hidden qualities frees her to accept them in herself.

Like the nun, Lucy is entrapped, even entombed, in her role and, to some extent, in the building (see Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). She is almost always shown indoors, or in the enclosed garden. Outside there is threat and danger – she is followed by two men, she hallucinates, she even faints. The roles society allocates to her – companion, nursemaid, teacher – are also confining, and seem inescapable. It is Paul who frees her here, too. She becomes the independent proprietor of her own establishment. Dickens seems on the point of recognising this same entrapment in Esther. The keys she rattles rather desperately to cheer herself up are surely symbolic of her entrapped state, though neither she nor Dickens seems aware of how powerful and universal this feeling could be.

Lucy's sense of powerlessness is a symptom of her alienation. She sees herself as a tool of fate, with no opportunity to control her own life, even though she has powerful role models, most notably Madame Beck., "a very great and a very capable woman" (V, ch. 8). Mrs

Bretton and even Miss Marchmont are also independent proprietors of their own homes.

Brontë's awareness of the threat of violation, invasion, intrusion, even rape, inherent in a woman's lot comes out clearly in the plot, and in the writing style. When Lucy is trapped in the attic, the rats and beetles, which she fears will "unsuspected, invade my skirts" (V, ch. 14), symbolise this feeling. It originates most noticeably with M. Paul:

... Firm, fast, straight ... strode a step, quick, regular, intent. The closed door of the first classe – my sanctuary – offered no obstacle; it burst open, and a paletot and a bonnet grec filled the void; also two eyes first vaguely struck upon, and then hungrily dived into me. (V, ch.14)

These implications of violence are occasioned not only by male behaviour. Madame Beck and Ginevra both intrude on her privacy. Even reality can do so. "Presently the rude Real burst coarsely in – all evil, grovelling, and repellent as she too often is" (V, ch. 12).

Esther's narrative has none of these overtones. Seen through the eyes of a man, Esther is protected both physically and mentally from any form of violation or rape. Dickens sees her as loved, honoured, respected and free. He has no concept of the alienation, violation and imprisonment that society and men impose on women. Only a woman could encode these common women's experiences into a text the way Brontë does. As Lucy says, after her first experience as a teacher, "Then first did I begin rightly to see the wide difference that lies between the novelist's [read 'male novelist's'] and poet's ideal 'jeune fille' and the said 'jeune fille' as she really is" (V. ch. 8). This wide difference is exactly what Brontë has tried to bridge, by changing the 'caricature' of Esther into a 'faithfully rendered' portrait in Lucy.

There is a coda to this. Nine months after *Villette* was published, *Bleak House* was eventually completed. In the final issue, Esther is given a small version of Bleak House, and also the man she loves, just

as Lucy had been presented with a small school, and the man she loves, towards the end of *Villette*. Both women have been kept in suspense, in anxiety, depression, even despair, for weeks before these joyful revelations are made. In both cases the male authority figure (John Jarndyce, M. Paul) tortures the woman he loves for weeks, in an egotistical and patronising way, to enable him to make the grand, dramatic gesture. She, overwhelmed with gratitude and relief, does not even suggest she might have liked to help choose the wallpaper! This behaviour is more characteristic of M. Paul, who is egocentric, and given to self-display, to dramatic gestures and to testing Lucy. I have always felt uncomfortable with this coming from the benevolent, genial and undramatic John Jarndyce. Perhaps my story has come full circle, and Dickens himself borrowed the idea for the ending from *Villette*. We have no proof, of course, not even that he read *Villette*, but like Brontë he was a voracious reader, and *Villette* was widely discussed.

There is probably more to explore in this double helix pattern of influence.

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Virginia Lowe

Virginia Lowe has an MA in English Literature, and a PhD in children's literature from Monash University, and her doctoral thesis has been published as *Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children tell* (Routledge 2007). She has been a university lecturer and a librarian, and now runs her own manuscript assessment service Create a Kids' Book. - www.createakidsbook.com.au, vlowe@alphalink.com.au or 03 9578 5689.

CHARLOTTE AND EMILY'S LOVE FOR SIR WALTER SCOTT

**(part of a talk given by Christopher Cooper at
the Highland Weekend)**

Charlotte, Branwell and Emily all read Scott as eagerly as young readers today read Harry Potter. He awakened in them a love for historical action, brave deeds and his descriptions of wild places and uncivilized people. They also loved the rhythm of his poetry and knew much of it by heart.

In 1806, while at Cambridge, Patrick Brontë bought a copy of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* which was published in 1805 and his children read and re-read it. When Emily was 9 she made Scott the hero in her *Islander's Play*. In 1838, at Roe Head School, Charlotte received a volume of poetry for her services as a teacher. It contained Scott's *The Vision of Don Roderick* and *Rokeby*. And at the Pensionnat Heger she translated some of Scott's poetry into French. But it is very clear from her writing that she read many of his novels from an early age.

As Christine Alexander, in her Oxford Companion, points out "it is remarkable how many of Scott's novels are alluded to in the Brontës' own novels". Charlotte makes direct quotations from *Waverly*, *The Black Dwarf*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Ivanhoe*, *Kenilworth*, *Old Mortality*, *The Pirate* and *The Talisman*. Many of the names the children used for places and characters come from Scott.

But they also used, not only Scott himself, but some members of his family in their juvenilia. They even appropriated the artist William Etty, who illustrated the first edition of *The Pirate* and transported him into their land of Angria, where he continued as an artist.

Christine Alexander asserts that “much of the Brontës penchant for German Romanticism, Gothic novels and Scottish border ballads, regional dialect, the evocation of landscape, chivalrous war, and romantic love, had been fostered by their addiction to Scott’s poetry and novels”.

Even in the pre-adolescent days they had a very grown up idea of love and romance. There is very little of the delicate variety, such as they would have found in Jane Austen. No, for them love was a wild and passionate thing and their juvenilia contains much sexual intrigue and jealousy that came from their reading of Scott. It is fortunate for them that Patrick was never able to read the miniscule script of their juvenilia.

Charlotte’s *The Green Dwarf* and *A Tale of the Perfect Tense* imitate Scott, both in their titles and in their form. The landscape of Gondal is remarkably like what they imagined of Scotland with lakes, snow-capped mountains, glens, castles, wandering deer and wooded hills.

Branwell loved the opening of *Old Mortality* and said it was the most beautiful he had read, with its description of ‘lone vales of green bracken’ and ‘linnet peopled hills’. In Angria there is a place called Airdmore, echoing ‘Aird’ in Scotland which Scott described in *Tales of a Grandfather*.

Juliet Barker, in her definitive biography, finds it ironical that *Wuthering Heights* should be regarded as the archetypal Yorkshire novel since it owes more to Scott’s Border country than to the Yorkshire moors. Cathy’s delirious view of Nelly as an old witch “gathering elf-bolts to hurt our heifers” is a reference to *The Black Dwarf*. Jaques Blondel believes that Emily learnt her trade as a novelist from Scott.

Charlotte’s early writing owes a debt to Scott’s invention of an initial fictional storyteller. *The Duke of Zamorna* is narrated by Charles Townshend who, like the landlord in *Tales of My Landlord*, presents relics from the past as a pretext for his story.

In 1848 Charlotte wrote to W.S. Williams protesting her originality. “Were I obliged to copy any former novelist, even the greatest, even Scott, in anything, I would not write.” Yet, as Christine Alexander points out, the fact that she singles out Scott betrays “the depth of her own engagement with Scott”. As children, the Brontës did consciously copy Scott. But his literary blood flowed through their veins to such an extent that, fused with their own originality, something new was created.

There is much of Scott that Charlotte and Emily did not copy. Their style is much tighter than Scott. They don’t go off on long side excursions that, interesting as they may be to a scholar, slow down the action. Scott is very little read these days and that is no doubt because the modern reader finds it hard to get going. The Brontës are able to engage the reader on the very first page. Their novels are lean meat, with no excess fat. For Scott, who wrote at great speed there was little time for polishing. His output was much greater than all three Brontë sisters together but he has been criticised for being repetitive.

Yet he was a great writer and it’s a pity that he’s so little read today. But I’m beginning to realise that to get the most out of the Brontë novels we should immerse ourselves in Scott – and Shakespeare, and the Bible.

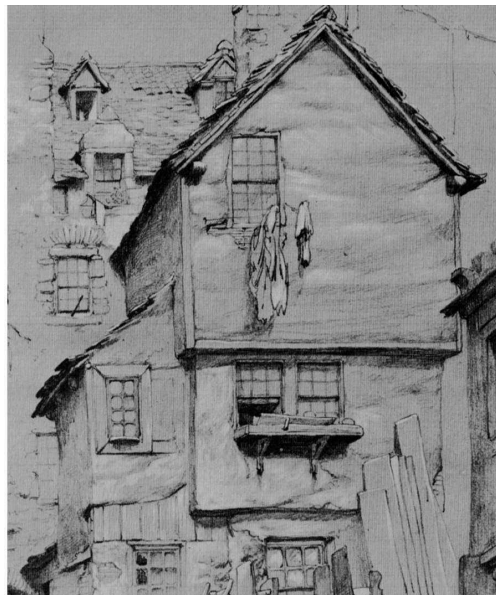
There are two types of experience we can gain from a great writer. A writer like Jane Austen is self-contained. She has a fresh story to tell to every generation. It may be interesting to know what she knew, and what she read. But we principally enjoy her because she holds up a mirror to our own society, even though she is writing about times long past.

But writers like the Brontës create a world that is fascinating because of its remoteness from the one we know. For such a writer we need to try to fill our heads with as much as we can of what filled theirs – to see the world as they saw it. And for the Brontës it is Scott, more than any other, that filled their heads.

YOUNG WATTIE

**Abridged from the opening chapters of *Sir Walter Scott The Great Unknown* by Edgar Johnson, published by Hamish Hamilton 1970
and given as a talk at the Highland Weekend**

In 1771 Edinburgh still clung to its ridge of rock from Holyrood to the castle. A good proportion of the city's 60,000 inhabitants lived in the tenements along the Royal Mile. Some of these buildings were 12 stories high. Between these houses, plunging down the steep hills on the south and the north descended narrow foot-passages called wynds and blind alleys called closes where doorways clustered around entries to the common stairs and pigs rooted in the refuse piles. Here a dismal lane called the College Wynd struggled up to the college gateway. Here lived the legal practitioner Walter Scott and his family in their 3rd floor flat. In this place, on 15th August 1771 was born a flaxen-haired infant whom his parents christened Walter.



College Wynd

He was the 9th child but only three were still living when Walter was born. His parents were economical with names and recycled those of dead children. Walter replaced an earlier Walter.

Wattie, as he was called, grew plump and vigorous. One evening, when he was 18 months, he contracted a fever which was put down to teething. But a few days later his right leg was found to be powerless. His grandfather Dr John Rutherford, a professor of medicine at the university, and several other doctors found no dislocation or sprain. The disease, not recognised at the time, was infantile paralysis. Dr Rutherford suggested that Wattie should be sent to his other grandfather, who had a farm, to try the effect of fresh air and outdoor exertion. So in the spring of 1773 little Wattie was taken to his grandfather, Robert Scott's home at Sandyknowe in the

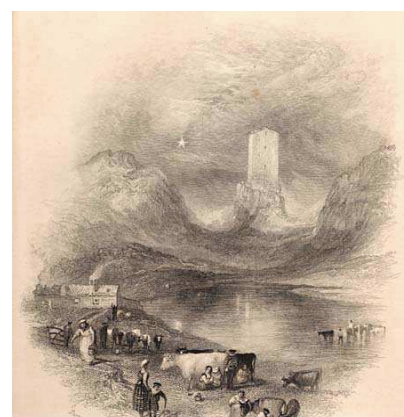
Border country. Wattie's earliest memories were the wind-blown hills 30 miles south east of Edinburgh.

All kinds of folk remedies were tried to overcome Wattie's lameness. Whenever a sheep was killed the child was wrapped in the skin, still warm from the flaying. On sunny days he was carried out of doors on the shoulders of one of the farm hands or cradled in the arms of the maid who accompanied Wattie from Edinburgh. This maid, a town-girl, had left behind her in Edinburgh a lover who had possibly taken more than her heart. Lonely in the country she developed a hatred for her infant charge as the cause of her unhappiness and began to feel a strong temptation to carry him up to the crag, cut his throat with her scissors, and bury him in the bog. Something impelled her to confess these murderous urgings to the housekeeper. She was soon dismissed and sent back to town.

Wattie became a favourite amongst the house servants and farm hands. The ewe milkers said he was "very gleg at the uptake and soon kenned every sheep and lamb by the headmark". Lying on the grass among the flocks he came to feel a fellowship with these patient animals and an affection that lasted throughout his life.

The Border country around the farm was haunted and historic ground. Wattie heard many tales of his ancestors and other great men of the area. He heard of Thomas the Rhymer who had been imprisoned by the Queen of the Fairies, and one of his ancestors, the wizard Michael Scott. Nearby was Melrose Abbey and farther away down the Tweed, in a smooth and lazy loop of the river, glowed the pinkish orange sandstone of Dryburgh Abbey.

Above the meadow where Wattie often lay, rose the Tower of Sandyknowe, its square and massive shape reflected in the deep loch. Every morning Wattie clamoured to be taken out to this field, in the shadow of the tower. There he would stay the whole day and when he was to be carried home again the cow Baillie blew a special note on his whistle to tell the maidservants. One day he was forgotten until a thunderstorm came

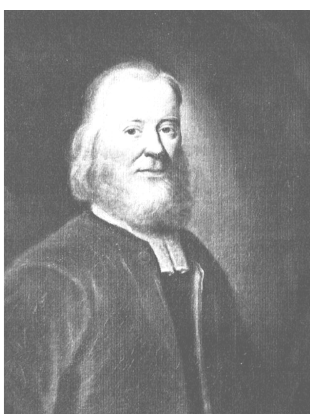


**The Tower at
Sandyknowe**

on. Suddenly remembering him his aunt Jenny ran out to bring him back. She found the child lying on his back, clapping his hands at every lightning flash and crying out “Bonny! Bonny!”

On stormy or wintry days Aunt Jenny would read aloud. Wattie’s quick memory soon enabled him to recite long passages in the lisp that marked his speech. His favourite poem was “Hardiknute”. He loved the ballad so much that he was soon shouting it out on all occasions. Once the minister of the parish, Dr Alexander Duncan, who had come for a sedate chat, sat exasperated under the bombardment. He protested in despair: “One may as well speak in the face of a cannon”.

Wattie’s grandmother could remember the old days of Border warfare between the English and the Scots and told him many a tale of its wild heroes. She was descended from an ancient Berwickshire family, the Haliburtons, who at one stage owned the lands of Dryburgh, including the ruined abbey. The lands eventually passed out of the hands of the family but the right of burial in the Abbey was retained.



Beardie

On Robert Scott’s side, Wattie’s ancestors were a rough lot who had stolen cattle and burned castles with the best of them. From both his grandparents he learned the saga of their deeds. He heard about his great grandfather, also a Walter Scott. So fierce was his devotion to the Stuart kings that when James fled in 1688 he swore never to touch a razor or scissors till the banished dynasty was restored to the throne. The luxuriant growth that gradually came to cover his breast led to his being called “Beardie”, but he almost lost both beard and neck by intriguing and taking arms in the 1715 uprising.

Beardie’s second son, Robert (Wattie’s grandfather) was brought up to be a sailor. But on his first voyage he was shipwrecked off Dundee and took a violent distaste to the sea. Robert quarrelled with his father over giving up on life at sea and Beardie cast him off. So Robert decided to set up as a sheep farmer and leased Sandyknowe. An old shepherd named Hogg lent him his life savings of £30 to stock the farm. The two of them went off to the Wooler fair. Hogg went

around and selected the sheep, but when he met up with Robert for the money he discovered that Robert had spent the entire £30 on a fine horse! Luckily Robert rode to the hounds a few days later and displayed the animal so well that he was able to sell it for double what he'd paid for it. This money was used to stock the farm.

Wattie delighted to hear these stories of his freebooting ancestors and Robert Scott's youthful adventures.

Aunt Jenny began to teach Wattie to read. At first he resisted the attempt, much preferring to be out of doors, tumbling on the meadows. But she persisted. He was particularly attracted to the accounts of two men who had contended successfully against physical defects like his own.

John the Lamiter was a 13th century Warden of the Border:

A son he had at that same tide

Which was so lame could neither run nor ride,

John, this lame son, if my author speak true,

He sent him to Mungo's in Glasgu.

A descendent of John Lamiter was William Boltfoot who, despite his lameness, became one of the "prowest knights" of them all, a fearless horseman and dreaded spearman. These two examples gave Wattie the confidence that he too could triumph over his handicap. "From childhood's earliest hour", Scott wrote in his last years, "I have rebelled against external circumstances."

By now Wattie had grown strong enough so that once again he could stand and even limp about with a slow jerk, supported by a crutch. His improvement encouraged hopes that his lameness might be cured and Andrew Wilson, the Kelso physician chosen by grandfather Rutherford to look after him, suggested that electrical treatment might help. At the doctor's Mrs Wilson sat in an armchair with Wattie in her lap. While the powerful current was being adjusted it took a strange leap and knocked out a wedge at the end of the table. But three year old Wattie refused to be terrified. Flinging out one arm, his whole face alive, in a heroic lisp he heartened himself with the opening lines of Hardiknute.

"Th-tately th-tepped he Eatht the La-and,

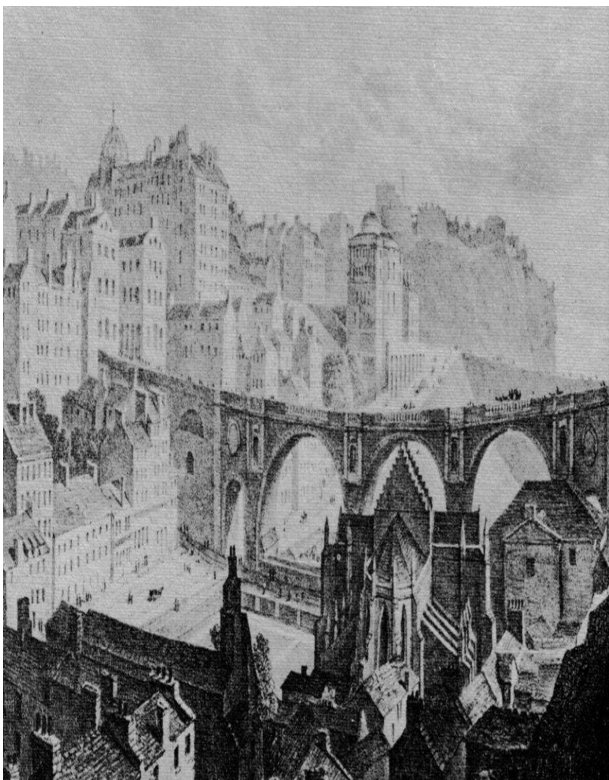
Th-tately th-tepped he Wetht!

Noting that the lisp might prove embarrassing in later life Dr Wilson corrected it with a touch of his lancet to the tongue. Years later, when Sir Walter and Lady Scott met Dr Wilson at a dinner, the doctor reminded him of this service.

“Docteur!” exclaimed Lady Scott, in the French accent she never lost. “What is it that you ave done? You have set a tongue agoing that has never stopped since!”

Whether the electrical treatment did any good, Wattie’s leg did grow stronger. Gradually he became able to hobble briskly about, aided by a staff something between a crutch and a cane. Although the leg was still much shrunken and contracted, Wattie was growing into a high-spirited and healthy little boy.

At the end of January 1775, when he was in his fourth year,



**Edinburgh during Scott’s
childhood**

grandfather Robert died and Wattie was sent back to Edinburgh. The little boy who had known the free hills and green fields was now brought back to the grey stone streets and close quarters of Edinburgh. At Sandyknowe he had been an only child, the centre of attention. Back in Edinburgh he would have to learn to live in close quarters with his older brothers racing and stamping up and down the steps of a full house. The family now lived in a spacious house of their own in George Square, a new residential development. Wattie found himself in a fine square hall

with a graceful mahogany-railed staircase. There was also a drawing room with deep panelled window-recesses, white painted wainscoting, and Adam fireplaces, as well as a study for Mr Scott, a basement kitchen and the bedrooms for a growing family. Probably the sight of

Wattie's little limping figure toiling along after his leaping brothers led his parents to consider a suggestion from Dr Wilson that the waters of Bath might aid his lameness. Aunt Jenny agreed to take the child under her care, and early in the summer of 1775 she and Wattie, nearly four years old, sailed for London.

In the crowded quarters of the little coastal vessel the child shared a bed with a Scottish lady who 36 years later boasted that she had once been Walter Scott's bedfellow and remembered him as "the drollest-looking, odd entertaining urchin that ever was seen".

From London they proceeded to Bath. They were later joined by his uncle, Captain Robert Scott, home on leave from India. The captain took his little nephew to his first play, Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. He was enchanted.

Although Wattie continued to grow and was becoming strong, the waters of Bath did not help his leg. So after a year in Bath Wattie was brought back to Edinburgh with an English accent.

But soon he was sent again to Sandyknowe where his grandmother was still running the farm. His uncle Thomas came to the farm once a week and told Wattie stories about the American revolution which had just broken out, as well as stories of his own family. Gruesome tales always filled him with a shuddering terror, sometimes more than could be born.

The following summer it was thought that sea bathing might help his lame leg. This time Aunt Jenny took Wattie to the village of Prestonpans on the sheltered coast of the Firth of Forth. Aunt Jenny was now forty-three but she was still a beautiful woman and she had an admirer, George Constable who followed her to Prestonpans. He would take Wattie down to the beach where the fishermen were drying their nets, telling him wild stories of shipwrecked sailors and escapes over the cliffs. There was also a retired ensign who took notice of young Scott and found in him an

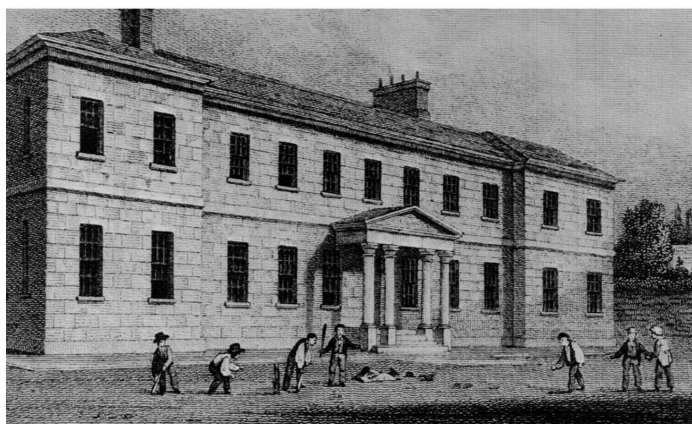


**Portrait of Wattie in Bath
at the age of 6**

eager listener to his stories of military feats and old campaigns. Prestonpans had featured in the 1745 uprising and Captain Dalgetty took Wattie to the place where Cope's troops had been slaughtered and where Colonel Gardiner was slain by a highland scythe.

So Walter Scott's head was already full of wonderful stories of action and great deeds before he was even five. And he impressed visitors with his ability to recite heroic poetry with great enthusiasm and emotion. One lady, Alison Cockburn, remembered her first encounter with young Scott when he was just six. She wrote, "he has the most extraordinary genius of a boy I ever saw ... he reads like a Garrick". Wattie told his mother that he thought Mrs Cockburn was a virtuoso like himself. "Dear Walter," says Aunt Jenny, "what is a virtuoso?" "Don't ye know? Why it's one who wishes and will know everything." Another visitor to his mother complained of the heavy rains. Wattie, who had been hiding under the table, looked up. "That's Caledonia weeping for the poverty of her soil."

By now Wattie was back in Edinburgh and his father decided he should be sent to the Edinburgh High School, where Latin was the main focus of study. At first Wattie was an indifferent pupil because the grammar failed to fire his imagination. But because a pupil's position in the classroom depended on his ranking in class young Walter put in just enough effort to get into the middle of the class where he was able to move to a seat by the fire. But his competitive nature, and his keen memory, enabled him to move up towards the top of the class. But try as he might he could not dislodge the top boy. At last Wattie noticed that every time this boy was asked a question he fumbled with a button at the bottom of his waistcoat. So Wattie surreptitiously cut off the button. When the boy was next asked a question his fingers vainly sought the button and he



Edinburgh High School

looked down, confused and speechless. Wattie triumphantly took his place.

Wattie became popular among his schoolmates. He was determined that, despite his lameness, nobody should patronize him and push him about. He gave as much as he got in schoolyard fights. His flow of imagination won him admirers. In the winter play-hours, when icy rain or sleet made outdoor exercise impossible, his stories, told around the fireside of a local sweet-seller, always drew an eager circle of listeners.

He took to roaming the streets and wynds of Edinburgh, sometimes alone, sometimes with a band of schoolboys and came to know the nooks and crannies of this great city. He was with a group when one of the older boys threw snowballs at the Town Guard. While the guard seized hold of some of the ring leaders the others ran off. Wattie dived under a table of an outdoor stall and took refuge under the petticoats of an old apple woman.

Despite his lameness Wattie became one of the boldest and nimblest climbers. He successfully tackled the dangerous Cat's Neck on Salisbury Crag.

Street fights called "bickers" broke out constantly between boys of one square with those of a neighbouring one and between the boys of the High School and those of a humbler institution. These were more a kind of violent play than a fight with malice but the participants, Wattie included, often went home with bruised ribs or bloodied nose. On one occasion things got a little out of hand when one of the High School boys got hold of an old sabre and struck down the leader of the opposing group. At the sight of much blood both bands fled in opposite directions. The wounded boy had to be taken off to the Infirmary by a watchman. Luckily the wound was not severe and the boy would not reveal who had struck the blow. Wattie and his brothers later got in touch with him and offered him a small amount of money in compensation on behalf of the High School band, but the boy refused, saying his blood could not be bought. Eventually he was persuaded to accept a pound of snuff for his old aunt with whom he lived.

Wattie was 8 when his older brother Robert joined the navy. This left John, Tom and Anne at home in Georges Square. They

shared many happy evenings when Wattie read from *The Arabian Nights* and they acted out some of Shakespeare's plays. Wattie particularly enjoyed playing the role of the deformed Gloucester in *Richard III*, observing that his limp "would do well enough to represent the hump".

They loved to hear the stories told by their father's manservant John McKinley. One such story gave Scott the plot of *Guy Mannering*. It was a tale of a traveller in Galloway who toward nightfall was given shelter in a country house just as the lady was about to bear her first child. He was a learned astrologer and he cast the baby's horoscope, which foretold some unhallowed danger on the boy's twenty-first birthday. The years passed and as the fatal time approached the youth fell beneath the power of a dark suggestion that he take his own life. In desperation the father sent him on a long journey to the astrologer's house. There the sage presented him with a Bible and left him alone to resist the final assault. It came in the shape of a swarm of demons, and finally the Author of Evil himself appeared, urging that the young man had sinned beyond redemption and should destroy himself. Almost overwhelmed by despair, the victim still resisted, though the satanic power somehow rendered him unable to articulate the name of God. But at last he raised the Bible, asserting his faith in its assurances. As he spoke, the clock struck the hour with which his birthday ended, and with a yell the defeated fiend vanished.

Another inexhaustible source of stories was Mrs Scott's maiden aunt, Miss Margaret Swinton, who lived with one old maidservant in a small house in Clark Street, not far from George Square. Some of the stories she told were about her own ancestors, stories of bloody feuds and macabre deeds. Aunt Margaret herself had strong nerves and revelled in things strange and unnatural. Among her fancies was reading alone in her chamber by the light of a taper fixed in a candlestick she had made out of a human skull. One night this skull on the mantle piece started to move. It spun around two or three times, leaped to the floor and began rolling around the room. She calmly went to the next room for another light and returned to solve the mystery. She found that within her *memento mori* had crawled a rat whose struggles to get out had caused these strange gyrations.

But she was a kind and soft lady and Wattie had great affection for her. When he was ill she would attend to him. So when she died he was greatly affected, not just because a kind friend had been taken from him but by the gruesome manner of her death. The servant who had been attached to her for half a lifetime suddenly went insane, hacked her mistress to death with a coal axe, and rushed into the street with the bloody weapon, screaming aloud the deed she had just done. This incident brought home to Wattie that such things were not confined to legends and chilling tales. They could happen in real life. He later referred to this as the time when “the first images of horror that the scenes of real life stamped upon my mind”.

Dr Adam, the rector of the High School, referred to young Walter as Gaulterus Scott and said that, although his technical skill in Latin had a few deficiencies, “he understood the Latin writers better than any”. At the age of ten Walter tried his hand at making some translations of Horace and Virgil into English verse. One of these describes an eruption of the volcano at Mount Aetna.

In awful ruins Aetna thunders nigh,
And sends in pitchy whirlwinds to the sky
Black clouds of smoke, which, still as they aspire,
From their dark sides there bursts the glowing fire;
At other times huge balls of fire are toss'd,
That lick the stars, and in the smoke are lost:
Sometimes the mount, with vast convulsions torn,
Emits huge rocks, which instantly are borne
With loud explosions to the starry skies,
The stones made liquid as the huge mass flies,
Then back again with greater weight recoils,
While Aetna thundering from the bottom boils.

Among his schoolmates at this time Wattie's closest friend was a boy named John Irving. The two became constant companions. Every Saturday, and even more during vacations, they took long walks

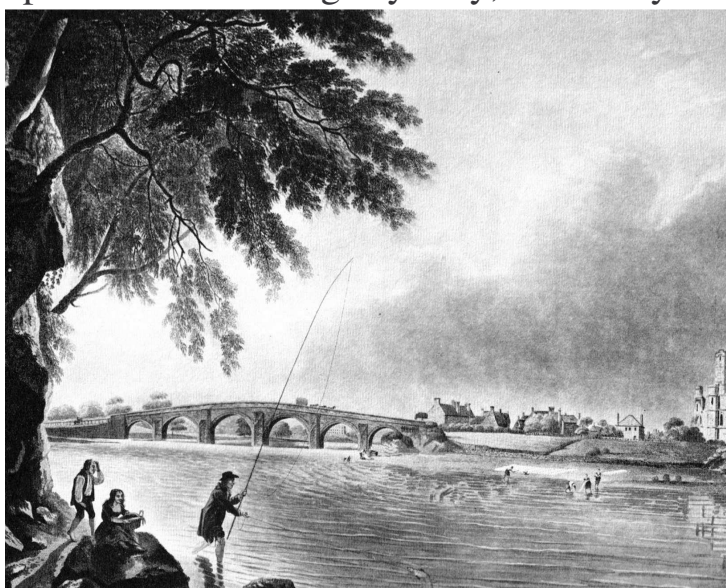


to solitary places like Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crag. They clambered up the rocks to some inaccessible nook sheltered from the wind. Sometimes the two got into places from which they found it hard to move either up or down, and there were times when John thought he would have to fetch a ladder to extricate his friend, but somehow Wattie always found it possible to scramble his way to the top and to descend.

From the rocky heights of Arthur's Seat they could look down over the city, from Holyrood, almost beneath their feet, to the ramparts of the Castle. Snug and alone in a cranny of the rocks, they brought out three or four volumes borrowed from the lending library. The favourites were romances of knight errantry such as *The Castle of Otranto*. Wattie read faster than his companion and had to wait to turn the page. John soon forgot most of what they read but Wattie could repeat whole pages months afterwards. From these orgies of reading they were inspired to make up and tell each other interminable tales filled with battles, giants, and enchantments.

The time eventually came for Wattie to leave High School. He recalled later, "I left the High School ... with a great quantity of information, ill arranged, indeed, and collected without system, yet deeply impressed upon my mind; readily assorted by my power of connexion and memory, and gilded, if I may be permitted to say so, by a vivid and active imagination ... I waded into the stream like a blind man into a ford, without the power of searching my way, unless by groping for it. My appetite for books was as ample and indiscriminating as it was indefatigable and I since have had too frequently reason to repeat that few ever read so much, and to so little purpose."

Once he left school at the age of 11 Wattie was sent to Kelso to stay with



The bridge at Kelso

his Aunt Jenny. Besides an old maidservant there was Wattie's cousin Barbara lived with Miss Jenny as her companion. She had played dolls with him when he was younger.

He kept up his Latin by spending four hours a day at the Kelso Grammar School. The master, Mr Lancelot Whale, was an absent-minded, grotesque, enormous figure nearly seven feet tall. Despite being something of a humorist himself, he was driven frantic by the inevitable puns his pupils made upon his name. They would ask him when he last saw Jonah, or called him Prince – the Prince of Whales. But he was an able Latin scholar.

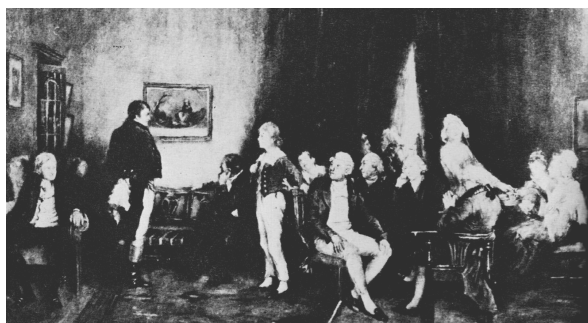
At this school Wattie met James Ballantyne and the two boys became friends. They would often walk along the banks of the Tweed while Wattie entertained his friend with a story. Wattie loved Kelso and its associated history and described it as “the most beautiful if not the most romantic village in Scotland”.

Later that year he was recalled to Edinburgh and enrolled in Edinburgh College. Here his teachers were lax disciplinarians and the classrooms were constantly in a state of uproar. Wattie joined in the fun and his Latin suffered. It was here that he had his first exposure to Greek and he learned little and took a strong dislike to the subject.

He continued his friendship with John Irving, with whom he read and walked as much as ever. Gradually they extended their ramblings until they had visited all the old castles within eight or ten miles of Edinburgh. Walter's favourite walk was to Roslin. Among its elms and chestnuts stood Rosslyn Chapel, bright in honey-coloured stone, with its intricate buttresses and, within, its dark, carved columns and the rich floral frothing of its vaulted ceiling.

Walter at the age of 14 became an apprentice in his father's law firm. He disliked the drudgery but worked diligently. With the money he was now earning he began to buy many books and not just law books. Through his uncle Dr Rutherford and the father of one of his college students Adam Ferguson he met some of the notable literary figures of Edinburgh. It was at Professor Ferguson's home that, in the winter of 1786-87, Walter met Robert Burns. Scott was about 15 at the time and Burns 27. What impressed Walter most was his eyes, “large and of dark cast that glowed when he spoke”. There

were many eminent people in the room and Walter and his friend Adam sat in the background, listening. But Burns had noticed on the wall a print which portrayed a soldier dead in the snow with his dog in misery by his side and his widow with a child in her arms. Burns was moved to tears. Beneath the picture were some lines from a poem *The Justice of the Peace*. Burns asked who had written them and nobody could tell him, until Walter remembered that they were by Langhorne and he whispered this to his friend, who passed the information onto Burns.



Young Scott meets Robert Burns

In the second year of his apprenticeship Walter broke a blood vessel in one of his lower bowels. He was so dangerously ill that his uncle Dr Rutherford doubted whether he would recover. He was bled and blistered and his diet was limited to a scanty allowance of

vegetables and rice. His recovery took many months and when he was strong enough to travel he went again to Kelso where he stayed with his uncle Robert Scott, now retired from the East India Company.

Walter was now 17 and he began to take an interest in “female forms of exquisite grace and beauty”. On one of his walks Walter met Jessie, the pretty daughter of a local tradesman. He suspected that Uncle Robert would disapprove so they met and corresponded in secret. Walter was overjoyed that she felt the same about him as he did about her, and because she did not dismiss him as a cripple. His emotion overflowed into verse:

Lassie can ye love me weel?
Ask your heart, and answer true,
Doth that gentle bosom feel
Love for one who loveth you?

Lassie gin ye'll love me weel.
Weel I'll love ye in return,
While the salmon fills the creel,
While the flower grows by the burn.

But before long he was called back to Edinburgh and Walter was plunged into despair. A few months later Walter found some excuse to return to Kelso for a time and there were trysts by sunrise and twilight, along the banks of the Tweed. In the times of waiting for an opportunity to see her again he wrote her long letters telling of his poetic enthusiasms, wrote her poems and copied out ballads and medieval love lyrics.

Walter and Jessie knew that their growing intimacy would be viewed with more than disfavour by their families. But he urged in verse the consummation of their desires and no doubt pleaded even more warmly when they were together. "The minstrel of old were well rewarded. I trust your poor Rymour will taste of your sweet bounty without stint as a fitting reward for his labours in your service."

Walter returned to Kelso as often as he could but even when he was in Kelso he was not always able to get away without arousing suspicion. Then one day she was suddenly sent away to nurse a sick relative and had no time to send him word.

Back in Edinburgh Walter had no way of finding out where she had gone. So he had to wait till he had the opportunity to go back to Kelso and make some guarded enquiries. He was startled to discover that she was in Edinburgh. He did not dare ask her aunt's name or address but felt sure that he could search her out.

He explored all parts of the city, high and low, stumping in every direction, peering up at windows. But he did not catch a glimpse of his vanished love. He retraced his steps again systematically through every muddy alley, into every close, up and

down every steep and narrow wynd. She had disappeared. With a heavy heart he gave up the search.

But then, by chance, he bumped into her. He was visiting a friend and came upon her. Her aunt lived on the floor above his friend. With what glowing excitement they fell into each other's arms. Walter paid more frequent visits to his friend than ever and seized every opportunity to slip upstairs unobserved.

The only trouble was that he often had to hide in the pantry until the invalid fell asleep or Jessie could find an excuse to leave her. Surrounded by crockery, dry haddocks, barley meal, marmalade on the shelves, with a ham suspended from a hook above his head, he stood in cramped and rigid silence.

Jessie gave him paper and pencil to help pass the time and among other verse he wrote:

Instead of loving words from you,
No sort of sound I hear
Save an old woman's sighs and groans
That make my stomach queer.

Though tired of standing all this time
I darena stir a leg,
Though wishing sair to stretch my arms
I canna move a peg.

Untouched the tempting honey pots
Upon their shelves remain,
For that I taste upon your lips
Makes me all else disdain.

Come hither! You my closet are
Where all my sweets are stored,
Oh save me from your aunt's good things
And some of yours afford.

But all the verse Walter addressed to his sweetheart after they had refound each other has less devotion and exalted passion than before their separation. Perhaps the unsophisticated simplicity of Jessie was delightful in the rustic setting of Kelso but merely ridiculous and tiresome in Edinburgh. He knew that she did not share his passion for books and romance but the gulf between them seemed to be more obvious here. Slowly the secret romance began to unravel. His visits became less and less frequent and he always had some reason to get away. Jessie suspected that she had a rival and there were quarrels that ended in tears.

At about this time Walter began to study for the bar. He attended lectures on Roman and Civil Law at the University. This brought him back into contact with some of his friends from High School. At the University Walter joined several societies including the Speculative Society, a debating club of young advocates. Here he scored the nickname Duns Scotus and was soon elected librarian, and subsequently secretary.

Walter passed his exams on June 30th 1791 and a year later passed his final exams on Scots Law in July of 1792.