

BOOKS

THE IRRESISTIBLE, AND FALSE, MYTH OF THE BRONTË SISTERS

A biography sets the record straight on Charlotte, Anne, and Emily.

By **Peter Ackroyd**

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Saved



Art work by Patrick Branwell Brontë / Photograph from Getty

It is one of the most charming stories in English literary history. In July, 1848, the publisher George Smith found waiting for him in his London office two “rather quaintly dressed little ladies, pale-faced and anxious-looking.” The smaller and plainer of them, wearing glasses, came up to him with a letter in her hand. It was addressed to Currer Bell, the somewhat notorious male novelist best known as the author of “Jane Eyre.” “Where did you get this from?” Smith asked her. “From the post office,” Charlotte Brontë replied. “It was addressed to me.” So it was that the secret of the Brontë sisters was revealed. Mr. Smith’s most famous author was a woman—and a provincial woman at that. Charlotte was undistinguished, with a head that struck Mr. Smith as “too large for her body”; she might just as well have been a missionary, or even a cook. Her younger sister Anne had a manner “curiously expressive of a wish for protection and encouragement, a kind of constant appeal.” Emily, the middle sister, had remained at home in Yorkshire, where she kept house and fed the dogs.

Mr. Smith could hardly have guessed that he was present at the birth of a literary legend as powerful as that of Marlowe’s murder or Chatterton’s suicide. The received story of the Brontës was not so sanguinary, but it was equally sensational. The world soon knew that there had been three women of genius, untutored and unloved, immured within a house as bleak as any prison or asylum, insulted by a drunken and manic brother, oppressed by a stern and occasionally violent father, finding their relief only in wonderful little treks across the Yorkshire moors.

Mrs. Gaskell, possibly the most credulous and most sentimental biographer of the nineteenth century, began the process. She was already a famous novelist, but she reserved her finest fictional touches for her life of Charlotte Brontë. Her sublimely inaccurate portrait was followed by works of various other biographers, who managed to fill their books with material more extravagant than anything to be found in a Brontë novel. One of them had the sisters eating “gypsy fashion” on the moors, while another tried to prove that all their writings were based upon Irish originals.

There was a reaction against these excesses when certain unfortunately prosaic facts were introduced by Francis Leyland, in his 1886 biography. Yet the general tendency has continued to be toward a kind of morbid romanticism, and it must be said that Juliet Barker’s comprehensive and sensible new work, “The Brontës” (St. Martin’s; \$35), is the first that wholly takes a stand against the legend. The girls were neither mad nor bad nor particularly dangerous to know. Their father, Patrick, was a kind and genial parent; their brother, Branwell, was a talented and resourceful writer; Aunt Elizabeth Branwell was not the ferocious and dogmatic Methodist of myth but a rather flighty old party of advanced views. All this will come as a severe disappointment to the more excitable Brontë admirers, but, in exchange for their illusions, Juliet Barker offers them a beguiling and convincing account of the family upon the moors.

Patrick Brontë was an Irishman of straitened means who by skill and hard work made his way to Cambridge University. He became a devout Evangelical, then a minister who managed to give even “muscular Christianity” a good name. In 1812, while serving at a church in Hartshead, near Dewsbury, Yorkshire, he met Maria Branwell, his future wife. She was bright, alert, and energetic, with her own propensity for religious fervor. They conversed upon “the heavenly Father” and “eternal felicity,” but there were one or two pleasantly gothic touches to redeem an otherwise sober courtship: he proposed to her in a ruined abbey, and her bridal veil was lost in a shipwreck.

So the Brontë children emerged from a pious household where the machinations of the local religious societies provided the only hint of drama. Patrick fulfilled his pastoral duties conscientiously and, on one notable occasion, preached to the Bradford Female Auxiliary Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews. He wrote poems and stories that ended happily, as all evangelical stories should, yet were strangely prescient of his daughters’ later productions. Maria wrote, too, and once composed an essay on the virtues of poverty. It is all sufficiently starched and restrained, if not quite as grim as the readers of “Wuthering Heights” might wish.

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Seven years after his marriage, Patrick Brontë announced that “Providence has called me to labour in His vineyard at Haworth.” Haworth was described by a clergyman as almost a “heathen village,” whose inhabitants treated people “like wild beasts,” and this is the impression that Brontë biographers have tried to maintain. The fact is, however, that Haworth was not a backwater on the edge of desolation but a prosperous industrial town. The adjacent moors have also been a source of romance, of course—at least for those who know little about them. Mrs. Gaskell considered them to be an ominous brown but, Barker points out, she had merely visited them at the wrong time of the year. And the Brontë parsonage itself is not quite the horrid pile she depicted but a late-eighteenth-century house of some elegance and charm. The view of the moors from its windows was splendid, and not one to incite any particularly grotesque associations. Those came from closer quarters.

A year and a half after the move to Haworth, Maria Brontë died, crying out continuously, “Oh God my poor children—oh God my poor children!” Four years later, the two eldest, Maria and Elizabeth, died of consumption, contracted at a boarding school for the daughters of clergymen. These were indeed formative experiences in the lives of the remaining siblings, but the Brontë sisters did not automatically become the silent wraiths of Mrs. Gaskell’s imagination. On the contrary, Barker shows that their

childhood was essentially a happy one, and that the accounts of suffering were largely promulgated as a way of excusing those passionate elements of the Brontës' fiction "which the Victorians found unacceptable." In truth, the remaining Brontë children were remarkable only in the literary predilections that they shared, and Barker provides a wonderful portrait of four highly intelligent people who preferred one another's company to anyone else's and, as a result, stimulated one another's already overheated imaginations. They contracted "scribblemania," and poured out an endless stream of prose and verse written in very small letters on tiny scraps of paper. Charlotte and Branwell collaborated on the creation of a fictional world known as Angria—and for a time, it seems, Branwell was the better writer. Emily and Anne, who had become "like twins, inseparable companions," worked together on events in a land named Gondal. The four of them were instinctive novelists, mainly because they saw no distinction between invention and reality; it is hard to overemphasize how much those unreal worlds meant to them, since they seem to have dreamed, lived, and imagined very little else. It should come as no surprise, then, that their "mature" fiction springs directly from their childhood writing. The scenes and passions of "Wuthering Heights" come from Gondal, and Charlotte purloined the opening chapters of "The Professor" from one of Branwell's pieces.

Still, the Brontës needed a wider field in which to display their talents. Part of the reason for their immersion in fictional worlds was no doubt a certain irritable dissatisfaction with the real world around them. And Charlotte was, characteristically, the most

irritable of all. She believed herself to be ugly, and believed Haworth to be a “miserable little village”; to one friend, she “seemed to have no interest or pleasure beyond the feeling of duty.” She became a governess and a teacher but was unimpressed by, as she wrote in her diary, “the apathy and the hyperbolic & most asinine stupidity of these fat-headed oafs” whom she tried to instruct. She could be very hard on her pupils—“A Dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited,” she wrote—but, from that time forward, she also became very interesting. She began to show all the signs of a young writer’s frustration: she was angry at herself for remaining unknown and angry at the world for its reluctance to know her. She did send some poems to Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, who replied that “literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be.” She was twenty-one years old, and she wrapped up this appalling piece of advice with a note in her own hand: “Southey’s Advice To be kept for ever.”

It is Charlotte’s vulnerability and emotionalism that really make her the paramount Brontë sister—and, indeed, the heroine of Barker’s biography. Or perhaps “heroine” is not quite the right word, since in this notably candid account she emerges in many respects an unsympathetic creature. We thought that she was Jane Eyre, but all along she was Mr. Rochester. We can also be quite sure that this somewhat unflattering description is, for once, no figment of the biographical imagination. Barker’s assessments are as sober as a bookkeeper’s. She calls contemporary accounts of Charlotte “extremely unreliable”: Charlotte herself has “greatly exaggerated”

one thing, and other biographers have “vastly overstated” another; certain reports are “unlikely.” If Juliet Barker likes to sound anything, it is “a cautionary note.”

Barker has been the curator and librarian of the Brontë Parsonage Museum and, in the eleven years she spent researching her book, has made a thorough study of all available manuscripts. As a result, her portraits of the Brontës have the fullness of painstakingly examined truth. Charlotte was a spirited and often hysterical young person; she could be selfish, manipulative, and even, on occasion, malicious. Branwell was impulsive and histrionic; he worked successively as a portrait painter, a tutor, and a railway clerk, but there is no doubt that the failure of his literary and artistic ambitions was what led him in the general direction of the bottle. Anne was dutiful and conscientious; one suspects that she had a finer character than all the others put together but was much too reserved to display it. Emily sought comfort in her own imaginative world, and took no interest at all in the real one. For this reason, she was cordially loathed by many of the people who encountered her. “It is curious,” Barker writes in one of the most refreshing moments in this always invigorating biography, “that Emily should ever have gained the reputation of being the most sympathetic of the Brontës . . . as all the evidence points to the fact that she was so absorbed in herself and her literary creations that she had little time for the genuine suffering of her family.”

Those “literary creations” did eventually find an audience, however shocked it purported to be. Charlotte, predictably, was the driving

force behind the first publication in book form of the sisters' works, in 1846, under the masculine pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. They "began the world," to use a contemporaneous phrase, with a volume of poems, from which they excluded the work of their brother; Barker describes this act as "petty and mean." In fact, Branwell's alienation from his sisters' joint endeavors may have been partly responsible for his alcoholism. It is not fashionable, nor has it ever been, to take the male side in this particular situation—but there is an argument to be made that the Brontë father and brother were in some sense the victims of these three difficult women. Charlotte's iron will and Emily's imaginative remoteness, for example, must have created an atmosphere as heady as that of Branwell's drunkenness.

The book of poems sold only two copies, and Charlotte decided that they should all move quickly into prose. She published "Jane Eyre" in 1847; later that same year, Emily and Anne published "Wuthering Heights" and "Agnes Grey," respectively. "Jane Eyre" was an almost unprecedented success. The other two novels did much better than the poems, but their earliest critics generally regarded the narratives as wild and depraved, and they were, of course, right. "Wuthering Heights" is an extraordinary emanation from a lonely and self-sufficient sensibility, looking within itself and finding an entire history of human passion. "Agnes Grey" is, frankly, gray, and the truth is that Anne Brontë would probably not be remembered for her own sake—although her second book, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall," does possess moments of genuine horror.

Nevertheless, she has been lifted into immortality in the arms of her sisters.

Charlotte is quite another case. She was clearly possessed of genius, and, of all the sisters, she had both the most capacious and the most singular mind. She had Emily's streak of wildness and wilderness somewhere within her, but she also had a very strong sense of the substantiality of things. She was as much interested in the poetry of the world as she was in the romance of the sensibility, and she is certainly the greatest describer of weather in the English language. But one thing marked her out from the beginning: she never stopped writing about sex. She was called the Byron of the novel and a literary *Salvator Rosa*; her *métier* was described as "love agony." All these characterizations meant the same thing: she was obsessed with sexual relations and sexual repression alike. When she was eventually "outed" as a woman and a minister's daughter, one critic said that she immediately "forfeited the society of her own sex." But this, alas, had already happened in another sense.

Death was never far away from the Brontës. In 1848, Branwell, half dead from gin and opium, completed the process by succumbing to tuberculosis, at the age of thirty-one. "In all my past life," he declared on his deathbed, "I have done nothing either great or good." Charlotte was more composed, and described his passing as a "mercy," but it was in fact only the beginning of her troubles. Emily, too, was being wasted by tuberculosis, and consistently refused medical aid. "She made haste to leave us," Charlotte wrote later. It was as if she could not wait to depart from a world she had

barely noticed. Anne followed a few months later, as calm and as patient as she had always been. The three of them had died within eight months, as if they felt they belonged together in death as well as in life.

Charlotte, the only sibling left, went back to her work. It seemed to be the only consolation she had, and after the publication of "Shirley," in late 1849, she recovered her ambition. She visited London's literary lions on occasion, to a somewhat mixed reception. Thackeray called her "a very austere little person," and one evening he slipped out of his house to avoid meeting "the She Author." But she was never comfortable in "society." She was nervous of strangers and always self-conscious about her appearance. On being asked if she liked London, she considered the matter for a few moments and then replied, gravely, "Yes and no." At Haworth, she became even more miserable: she was often ill with colds and fevers, was generally lonely and unable to work, and was always surrounded by "the saddest memories" of those with whom she had once shared her life. Now there was only her father.

Yet eventually she gathered the necessary strength to finish "Villette," and also to put her sisters' affairs in order. In 1850, she wrote a short biographical memoir, which in retrospect seems much more patronizing than she can ever have intended. She hardly wondered, she said, at the "unfavourable reception" of "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall," for her sister Anne was, after all, "slightly morbid." Barker notes the censoriousness of this surviving sister, and goes on to suggest (with good reason) that Charlotte burned the manuscript

of Emily's unpublished second novel—"this act of wilful destruction" based upon Charlotte's belief that her sister's "unsophisticated culture" had lapsed into bad taste. It would be of a piece with Charlotte's somewhat domineering attitude toward her sisters in life, yet it is revealed as one of the most shocking episodes in the entire Brontë history. In her memoir Charlotte had said that she "felt it a sacred duty to wipe the dust off their gravestones"; she almost managed to wipe off the names as well.

And then, dear reader, she married. She wed her father's curate, whom she had once ostentatiously disliked. She was happy at last, just like one of her heroines. She wrote playful notes to her friends, quite unlike the severe dispatches of earlier years, and became every inch the curate's busy wife. Nine months later, she was dead: at the age of thirty-eight, she was too old, or too frail, to endure a pregnancy. Now the legend could flourish. It began with what has become known as "the school of poor Charlotte," ably assisted by Mrs. Gaskell, but soon spread to the other Brontë sisters. Their story has since been taken up by feminists, psychoanalysts, and cultural historians. If you visit Haworth today, you will find Brontë mugs and paperweights, Brontë thimbles and tea towels, Brontë quill pens and embroidery sets: kitsch or memorabilia according to taste. There are even replica heads. But Barker realizes that biography itself should not carve stone or plaster images; and here, in "The Brontës," the three sisters are restored to life. ♦

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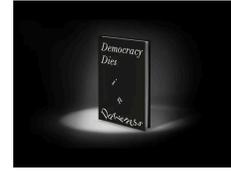


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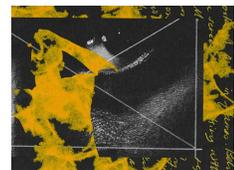


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