



*Charlotte
Brontë*

A Fiery Heart

CLAIRE HARMAN

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...there's a fire and fury raging in that little woman a rage scorching her heart...She has had a story and a great grief that has gone badly with her

—WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY (1852)

...a tiny, delicate, little person, whose small hand nevertheless grasped a mighty lever which set all the literary world of that day vibrating

—ANNE THACKERAY RITCHIE (1891)

...talented people almost always know full well the excellence that is in them

—CHARLOTTE BRONTË (1846)

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Prologue

1 September 1843

It is 1 September 1843 and a 27-year-old Englishwoman is alone at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, a girls' school where she is an unpaid student-teacher. It is halfway through the long vacation and everyone else who has a home or family to go to left weeks ago: the proprietress Madame Heger, is at the seaside with her husband and children; the other teachers are on holiday or travelling.

Miss Brontë's home is too far away to warrant a return for a mere two months. She can't afford the cost of the journey back to her father's Yorkshire parsonage, and, besides, arrangements should be kept to: Charlotte is a scrupulously dutiful person. But she is finding the empty dormitory oppressive with all the beds covered in white cloths like a morgue; every meal is eaten alone, and the Pensionnat's beautiful garden, with its old fruit trees and *allée défendue* of limes, seems more of a prison than a refuge when the rest of the school is abandoned. To escape the heavy solitude, it is Miss Brontë's habit to go out and walk the city and the surrounding countryside for hours at a time. "I should inevitably fall into the gulf of low spirits if I stayed always by myself here without a human being to speak to," she writes to her sister Emily, who was her companion at the school the previous year and knows the place well. The truth is, although she doesn't tell Emily this, she is already in the gulf. She is desperately unhappy.

Her return to Brussels for a second year at the Pensionnat Heger Charlotte sees with hindsight to have been a terrible mistake, for she has fallen in love with someone who, it is painfully clear, will never see her in a romantic light. It is the headmistress's husband, Monsieur Constantin Heger, a man of impressive intellect and spirit, the first person outside her immediate family to take her seriously, the first man to treat her as a potential equal. But the thrill of having his attention in her first year, as a pupil, has been followed by misery in the second, as his junior colleague. The Hegers have become wary of Charlotte's ardour and eccentricities, and much more formal in their dealings with her. And now the man she considered her soul-mate is pretending that she is nothing special to him at all.

She looks in the mirror and sees, with ruthless clarity, a catalogue of defects; a huge brow, sallowness, complexion, prominent nose and a mouth that twists up slightly to the right, hiding missing and decayed teeth. She looks poor and ill-dressed, haunted and miserable, with none of the brilliant light from her "great honest eyes" that other people sometimes saw, and marvelled at. "[I]t is an imbecility which I reject with contempt—for women who have neither fortune nor beauty...not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive." That's what she had written six months earlier, when her friend Ellen, back home in Yorkshire, had ventured to suggest that there was some romantic motive for Charlotte's return abroad.

The pain of staying indoors is too much: she sets off along the length of the parc Royal to the port de Louvain, through the gate and up the long hill heading eastwards away from the city. "No inhabitant of Brussels need wander far to search for solitude," she wrote later; "let him but move ha

a league from his own city and he will find her brooding still and blank over the wide fields, so dreary though so fertile, spread out treeless and trackless round the capital of Brabant.” Her destination is the Protestant Cemetery in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, two miles beyond the walls of this predominant Catholic city, a walk down into the hamlet of Evere, then up to the crest of a hill beyond. There is no church here, just a few dozen graves in a walled garden, heavily overgrown with cypress and yew, with inscriptions in English, French and German: the foreign tongues of alienated people dying far from home.

Charlotte has come to visit a particular grave, that of Martha Taylor, one of the West Riding families who had encouraged her to come out to Brussels in the first place and whose elder sister Mary had been Charlotte’s most admired friend since girlhood. Charming, quirky Martha—a flirt and chatterbox—had been swept away by cholera: the last time Charlotte had been out to visit her grave was just two weeks after the funeral the previous October. Emily had been with her then, and Mary, and all three young women had gone back and spent a strange evening at the lodgings of another English family, the Dixons, in the rue Royale. But even that gloomy day seemed better than this utterly solitary one. The Dixons had all left Brussels now, as had Mary Taylor, and Emily was back home in Haworth.

From the cemetery Charlotte keeps walking away from the city, through valleys, farms and hamlets to a hill where there is nothing but treeless fields as far as the eye can see. The furthest reach. She has to turn back, but coming into the city in the fading light she finds herself so desperately trying to get off returning to the Pensionnat that she ends up weaving around the surrounding streets to avoid it.

This unassuming-looking woman, tiny, unfashionable, darting out a look but not liking to hold one’s eye, was *in extremis*.

Passing by the towering west front of the city’s great cathedral, SS-Michel-et-Gudule, and hearing the bell calling the faithful to the evening service, Charlotte Brontë did something strangely unpredictable and entirely uncharacteristic: she followed the worshippers in. The prejudices that she had to overcome even to step inside the door of a Roman Catholic church were considerable. Charlotte, the daughter of an Irish Protestant minister, was, like all her family, ferociously anti-papist. She had been brought up to pity Catholics and to fear them—one of her great sources of discomfort in Belgium was the mere fact of being in a Catholic country, surrounded by a “Romanism” that “pervaded every arrangement.” Her letters from Brussels are full of remarks about the superstitious nature of her Catholic pupils and colleagues, their “sensual indulgence” and the childishness of mind “reared in slavery.” But, on that lonely September evening, she found herself wandering up and down the aisles of the venerable Gothic church and staying to hear the service. When it was over, she was still reluctant to leave and, gravitating towards a part of the cathedral where six or seven people were kneeling, she let herself be directed into a confessional. Explaining this queer whim to her sister the next day, she said, “I felt as if I did not care what I did, provided it was not absolutely wrong, and that it served to vary my life and yield a moment’s interest. I took a fancy to change myself into a Catholic and go and make a real confession to see what it was like.”

The ornate confessionals of Ste-Gudule are still there, guarded by massive wooden angels, with a central box for the priest and kneelers for penitents on either side. Charlotte had to wait at the grating for ten minutes while another confession proceeded in a barely audible whisper just a few feet away. There was a long interval for second and third thoughts to take hold, for the voice of her bigoted upbringing to shout down this strange “fancy”—but she stayed put and eventually heard the communicating grill open and in the half-light saw the priest leaning her way—her cue to begin.

What did she say? In the letter she wrote about the episode to Emily the next day, Charlotte

described everything but the substance of her confession: she described the difficulty she had in explaining to the priest (in French, of course) what she, a Protestant, was doing in his church at all. She described the priest's surprise and alarm, and the news that her religion precluded her from enjoying "le bonheur du sacrement." "[B]ut I was determined to confess," Charlotte said, and the priest eventually agreed to hear her, reasoning that it might be the first step towards a conversion. Freed by this act of kindness, "I actually did confess—a real confession." Her sense of relief was palpable.

The object of Charlotte's unrequited love, Constantin Heger, was a difficult, mercurial character who haunted each of her later novels (as Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Louis Moore in *Shirley*, Paul Emanuel in *Villette*), and he cost her two years of intense heartache, humiliation and futile hope. But Charlotte was also struggling with the larger issue of how she would ever accommodate her strong feelings—whether of love for Heger, or her intellectual passions, or her anger at circumstances and feelings of thwarted destiny—in the life that life seemed to have in store for her, one of patchwork, unsatisfying employment, loneliness and hard work. What was someone like her, a plain, poor, clever, half-educated, dependent spinster daughter, to do with her own spiritual vitality and unfettered imagination? How could she live with the painful "consciousness of faculties unexercised" that had moved her to go abroad in the first place, and that she recognised, from the example of her equally brilliant siblings, not as some sort of freakishness, but as an intimation of the sublime?

Coming away from the huge cathedral in the dark, Charlotte was already calculating how she would evade any consequences of the priest's interest in her situation, and she had no intention of ever repeating her experiment. But her moment of freedom in the confessional was a pivotal one. Far from home, speaking in a whisper in a foreign language to a priest of an utterly alien faith, she was able to express what had been an intolerable burden to contain. As Lucy Snowe in *Villette* says of her own confession, "the mere relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient, yet consecrated—the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused—had done me good. I was already solaced."

Charlotte Brontë's solace went further than the immediate comfort of confessional release. Her experience in Ste-Gudule gave her an idea not just of how to survive or override her most powerful feelings, but of how to transmute them into art. Within the year she was writing her first novel, *The Professor*, and, soon after that, sending out her poems to publishers with those of her sisters, under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. The "relief of communication" was in telling the truth: not to a stranger in the darkness in a whispered foreign tongue, but to readers, through her works.

TWO WEEKS AFTER Charlotte's visit to Ste-Gudule, the young Queen of England was in Brussels, on an official visit to her uncle Leopold, who, in 1831, had been made the first monarch of the new kingdom of Belgium. Victoria was an object of wonder across the globe—so young, so powerful, so female—and the sisters in Haworth had been fascinated by her ever since she came to the throne in 1837, a newly minted monarch of their own age and gender, ushering in a new age. Charlotte went out to see the royal party pass, and reported back to Emily, eager for any impressions. "I saw her for an instant flashing through the Rue Royale in a carriage and six, surrounded by soldiers," she wrote. "She was laughing and talking, very gaily."

Five years later, the insignificant little Englishwoman in the cheering crowd who had watched Victoria flash by would be keeping that queen and half the nation awake with the novel she had

written.

Becoming Brontë

1777–1820

Charlotte Brontë's father was born on St. Patrick's Day 1777, in a cottage in Emdale, County Down, in the last decades before the Act of Union with Great Britain. His father, Hugh Brontë Prunty, O'Prunty or Branty—the name wasn't written down often enough to have a settled spelling—was a Protestant farm-hand and sometime lime-kiln worker, originally from the south of Ireland, who married a woman called Alice, or Eleanor, McClory. Facts about either parent are scarce. Was Alice a Catholic, as some traditions have it, snatched from a different bridegroom on her wedding day by the impetuous Hugh? Had Hugh run away from home as a boy? Was he, as some biographers claimed in the glory-days of Brontë myth-making, a famous local storyteller, a sort of peasant maker? Patrick Brontë himself shut down curiosity about them when he claimed his family history was so irrelevant that he hadn't ever bothered to find it out:

My father's name was Hugh Brontë—He was a native of the South of Ireland, and was left an orphan at an early age—It was said that he was of an Ancient Family. Whether this was, or was not so, I never gave myself the trouble to inquire, since his lot in life, as well as mine, depended, under providence, not on family descent but our own exertions.

This was to Elizabeth Gaskell, the woman Patrick had appointed to write a memoir of his daughter Charlotte in the 1850s. Patrick Brontë is of course unlikely to have been such an innocent bystander in his own autobiography; on the contrary, he proved rather keen to control it. In his mind, though, the story only began with exertions which paid off.

The cottage where Patrick, the first of the Bruntys' ten children, is believed to have been born could not have been more modest: a two-roomed thatched cabin with a mud floor and rough-cast walls. The bedroom was in the back and the kitchen in the front, where Hugh is said to have earned a little extra money by roasting corn in a small kiln. This kind of primitive dwelling, typical of the time and place, is recalled in Patrick's poem "The Irish Cabin," where he extols an ideal of simplicity and humility, a moral home:

*A neat Irish cabin, snowproof,
Well thatched, had a good earthen floor,
One chimney in midst of the roof,
One window, and one latched door.*

But it's not entirely certain that the Bruntys ever lived in such picturesque deprivation. The better

documented home was the one where Hugh and Alice lived after 1781, a house in near Lisnacreevey, where in due course Patrick had some schooling and learnt to read and write. Both his parents were practically illiterate but fostered a respect for book-learning in their children and owned four books themselves: the Bible, a separate New Testament, *Pilgrim's Progress* and Robert Burns's *Poems*. Young Patrick Brunty would have been able to read many times Burns's account of how he was "called" from the plough by his Muse, a story that galvanised a generation of romantics and dreamers. The triumph of native genius over poverty and obscurity could hardly have reached a more impressionable audience, or been passed on to greater effect.

With the family growing at a steady rate of a baby almost every two years, the firstborn son of the Brunty's was never in any doubt of his duty to get out to work as soon as possible and make the most of every opportunity to further both himself and the group at large. At the age of twelve he was working part-time at the local blacksmith's and was later apprenticed to a linen-weaver and draper, but Patrick was not cut out to be a labourer or artisan; his work at the loom, reputedly, was of poor standard because of his devotion to reading, so perhaps, like his daughter Emily later, he had a book propped up alongside his task. The boy spent whatever money he had on books, and also memorised enormous amounts of verse, capturing in his mind what he couldn't own personally (*Paradise Lost* was a particular favourite). The local Presbyterian minister, Reverend Andrew Hardshaw, was aware of the promising youth with scholarly habits and gave him free run of his own library. And after the boy turned sixteen, Hardshaw helped him to get a job teaching local children at the village school in Glascar.

Patrick Brunty's career as a teenaged schoolmaster was not very rewarding, as he had little empathy with children (despite coming from a large family) and was unwilling to stagnate at what seemed the furthest boundary of self-improvement. His wages were so small that in five or six years he managed to save only a few pounds and his future opportunities must have seemed rather bleak—worse than those of his siblings, who carried on the labouring life that was all his family had known thus far. But Patrick held out for something more cerebral.

This was a time of violence and upheaval in the country and abroad, of Levellers and smaller insurgent groups stalking the countryside at night with revolutionary hopes kindled by the dramatic example of what had just taken place in France. The Brunty family was divided dramatically on the issue of independence from English rule, and, one has to assume, along religious lines too, as Patrick's next youngest brother, William, was a United Irishman, one of Wolfe Tone's revolutionaries pressing violently for Catholic and Nonconformist emancipation. William fought at the Battle of Ballynahinch in 1798, which ended in a rout of Tone's supporters and marked the end of the rebellion in Ulster. No wonder Patrick kept his distance from this brother; Catholic agitators were, in his view, "insidious And Malignant enemies" of the Protestant status quo, and mass movements inherently dangerous. "I am a true friend to liberty of conscience and political liberty," he once said, "but...of all kinds of tyranny I dread most that of the multitude."

Patrick's restlessness and loneliness in these formative years might be reflected in the story that he eventually left Glascar school under a cloud, having been "complained of" for some sort of romantic entanglement with a local farmer's daughter. But by that time (his early twenties) he had come to the attention of one of the most influential men in the district, Thomas Tighe, JP, vicar of the newly built Church of Ireland church at Drumballyrone. Tighe offered Patrick a position as tutor to his two sons and began to direct the young man's thoughts to a life in holy orders, encouraging him to participate in the powerful movement to regenerate the Established Church, spearheaded by John Wesley and

clerics such as Charles Simeon, Tighe's mentor at Cambridge. In return for tutoring the minister's sons, Patrick received lessons in Latin and Greek, the essential subjects for anyone aspiring to a university place, so that by the age of twenty-five—an advanced age, by any standards—and after years of dogged application and hard work, he was ready to apply for admission to Tighe's alma mater to study for the priesthood. Thus he left home and family ties behind him in 1802 and made his way across the Irish Sea, via the great and strange cities of Liverpool and London, to the cool splendour of Cambridge, the dizzying riches of the college libraries and the demanding company of a lot of clever, confident, privileged young men. It was a remarkable transition from one kind of life to another, the details of which Patrick never tired of relating and which never failed to impress.

Having no resources apart from a few pounds in his pocket, Patrick was admitted to St. John's as a "sizar," a student whose education was subsidised by domestic work, placing him in a distinctly different social stratum from the main body of commoners. His pride was in no way piqued by this lower status (unlike his daughter Charlotte when she found herself isolated socially as a governess) and he strove successfully for college prizes to help support himself, studying as hard as possible to justify the faith in him that Tighe and others had shown. In his second year Brunty received a grant of £20 from the Evangelical philanthropists William Wilberforce and Henry Thornton: a good use of funds, for the candidate was unusually frugal and focused, managing to live "very genteelly" on a fraction of what the other undergraduates had, as fellow sizar Henry Kirke White noted with admiration when he arrived at the college three years later.

Patrick's time at Cambridge was marked by a very significant change. His first known signature date from 1791, when he wrote his name five times over in a book, four times as "Prunty" and once as "Brunty," and when he matriculated at St. John's, in 1802, it was under the name "Patrick Branty" written down by a college official, and probably reflecting the new student's strong Irish accent. But the name he now wished to go by was Bronte, a more genteel and elegant rendition of his variable patronymic, with splendid associations ever since the award of the title Duke of Bronte to Rear Admiral Horatio Nelson in 1799. Nelson's Bronte was a site on the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily—divertingly exotic and un-Irish—the word is Greek, in fact, meaning "thunder" (a pun Charlotte would later make hay with). Patrick tried out many variant spellings over the next few years—Bront, Bronte, Brontë—eventually settling on the diaeresis and "Brontë," probably to indicate how to pronounce it correctly. Nelson adopted the signature "Bronte Nelson" or "Nelson & Bronte," and in the years following the Battle of Trafalgar, in 1805, it can have done Patrick no harm to suggest a connection between himself and the demi-god who had saved the nation from invasion. Even in the 1840s his daughter Charlotte was assumed to be the hero's kin. Becoming "Brontë" was a powerful act of refashioning on the part of Patrick Brunty, and, although his invented name sprang up and flourished for only one generation, it went far in fame.

A brief return to Drumballyronee in 1806 between graduation from Cambridge and taking holy orders seems to have been the last time Patrick Brontë set foot in his native land. He was there to secure the written proof of his birth, which was necessary for ordination, and during his visit preached his first sermon at Tighe's church, where his family worshipped, and where his parents and some of his siblings were later buried. He never went home again—despite an apparent disinclination "to live & rot in old England." In later life Patrick was surrounded by Irish clergymen in Yorkshire who thought nothing of travelling home once or twice a year, a journey that, after the establishment of the railways, was neither difficult nor prohibitively expensive. But Brontë stayed put. There seems to have been little love lost between him and his siblings, and he scarcely mentions his mother at all. He kept

in touch with his family sporadically, mostly through the third eldest, Hugh, but his letters were not affectionate, and there's more than a touch of resentment in his reference, as late as 1855 (in his will) to having given them "considerable sums in times past."

Patrick took up his first curacy in Wethersfield, Essex, in the autumn of 1806 and was ordained priest the following year, at the age of thirty. At this point in his life he was more than ready to look for a wife, and thought he had found one in his landlady's niece, Mary Burder, an attractive nineteen-year-old who lived with her widowed mother and siblings. Patrick's ardent, eccentric manner and handsome person won Mary's heart, and he in turn seems to have been animated by her youthful simplicity and affection, sharing with her his hopes and ambitions for the future, and writing some wordy verses in her praise. By 1808 he had proposed and been accepted, albeit without her family approval and possibly without their knowledge.

In the end, the engagement to Mary Burder foundered, it seems, because Brontë began to think he had "violated both the dictates of my conscience and my judgment" by seeking to ally himself with a member of a non-conformist church. If so, it shows him as both a reckless and rather chilly lover. After a brief time away in Leicestershire, assessing what his prospects for promotion there might be, he returned to Wethersfield in a mood of "peace & contentment," as he reported complacently to a Cambridge friend. He fully expected Mary Burder to be equally mellow about their recent severance, and, even when she made a succession of trips away to avoid having to see him in the parish, the curate interpreted this as pragmatism rather than pique: "The Lady I mentioned, is always in exile," he wrote; "her Guardians can scarcely believe me, that I have given the affair entirely up forever."

Mary Burder was soon relieved of his presence. Patrick moved from Wethersfield to Wellington in Shropshire at the start of 1809 to take up a curacy under Reverend John Eyton, another of Charles Simeon's followers. Wellington was a growing centre of Methodism, and Brontë met a group of very like-minded men there, making lifelong friends with his fellow curate William Morgan, a strong-minded and talkative Welshman, and the local schoolmaster John Fennell. One of the areas being targeted by the evangelical movement was Yorkshire, so it was with the pleasure of championing entering the fray that all three young men, Brontë, Morgan and Fennell, found themselves posted to the West Riding. Morgan took a curacy, and Fennell was head of a new boarding school for the sons of Methodist preachers at Woodhouse Grove in Apperley Bridge near Leeds. Patrick himself went first to Dewsbury, where he was assistant to another inspirational vicar, John Buckworth, and in July 1810 took up his most responsible post to date, as perpetual curate of Hartshead-cum-Clifton, a village near Huddersfield.

Brontë's reputation for being an eccentric outsider seems to have originated in these early bachelor curacies. He is said not to have got on very well with his wealthier parishioners in Dewsbury, who cavilled at his Irish background and accent. Irishness also told against him at Hartshead, where he was called "Old Staff" on account of the shillelagh that was his usual accessory and that he once used to drive some bell-ringers out of church when they broke the Sabbath by attempting a competitive practice. There were other, more heroic stories about him too: rescuing a simpleton whom bullies had thrown into the flooded River Calder and fighting off a man threatening a parish school procession. His landlord's daughter later said that he was thought "clever and good-hearted, but hot-tempered, and in fact, a little queer."

One of the curate's reported peculiarities was that he had been seen pacing up and down the Dewsbury vicarage garden, pencil and paper in hand, writing. Patrick Brontë had in fact been composing poetry for at least three years and had high hopes for himself in the field, publishing,

1810, at his own expense, a slim volume called *Winter-Evening Thoughts: A Miscellaneous Poem*. *Cottage Poems* followed the next year, a much longer production, with very fine paper, design and type for a volume, as the preface declared, aimed at “the labouring poor.” What was the minister trying to achieve: literary fame, a novel way of spreading the gospel, or both? Or did he consider the self-published books as elaborate calling-cards, to advertise his talents abroad? The poems in his second publication were as undistinguished as the first; the rhymes and metres often risible (one poem, “The Cottage Maid,” sounding unfortunately like a series of limericks), his address to a highly sentimentalised common man doomed to miss its mark. And the message he wished to convey, in a period of extreme hardship and distress after fifteen years of war, was both anxiously reactionary and inhumanely pious: essentially, the poor should rejoice in their lot and not seek to change it. But the most revealing part of *Cottage Poems* is perhaps its introduction, in which Patrick Brontë admits, a little guiltily, how addictively enjoyable writing could be: “from morning till noon, and from noon till night, [the author’s] employment was full of real, indescribable pleasure, such as he could wish to taste as long as life lasts.”

Very few copies of this book survive, but one, in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, is bound in vellum and has a beautifully written inscription: “To Miss Fennell,/By the Author,/as a Token of his/purest Friendship,/and Christian/Love.” The copy is missing its raciest page (a passage from “Winter-Night Meditations” about rakes and prostitutes in “sin-polluted” cities) and contains a number of corrections and annotations in ink that can have been made only by the author. Strangest of these is the adjustment of two lines in “Verses Sent to a Lady on her Birth-Day,” from “Full soon your eyes of sparkling blue/And velvet lips of scarlet hue,/Discoloured, may decay” to “Full soon your sparkling hazle eye/And velvet lips, of scarlet dye” etc. This was a poem written in the Mary Burder era, but in his adjustments it looks as if Patrick was customising his book for a new “Lady,” in a way that could seem familiar and jocular if the sentiments of the poems weren’t so severe. “But hark, fair maid! whate’er they say/You’re but a breathing mass of clay/Fast ripening for the grave” are lines unlikely to delight a twenty-year-old girl, and if Brontë hoped they would draw Miss Fennell’s hazel eye his way, he was mistaken. His friend William Morgan was about to take the prize.

Brontë had moved to Hartshead at a time of “unhappy disturbance” in the West Riding, as more and more workers in the cloth industry were finding themselves replaced by machines, predominantly the cloth-dressers, or “Croppers,” who performed the most specialised and highly paid part of production: the trimming of wool fibres from finished material. The secret society known as the Luddites had formed in defence of the croppers and others like them, appearing under cover of darkness, armed, masked and, like their leader “General Ludd,” under false names. Hundreds of men, calling themselves armies, could be mustered in this way, their faces blackened, staves, pikes and hammers at the ready to damage or destroy the hated shearing-frames and gig-mills. In February 1812 there were nightly attacks of varying degrees of violence on mills in the West Riding and Spen Valley. Some owners were champing at the bit to fight back: William Horsfall of Ottiwells went as far as acquiring a cannon, while in Patrick Brontë’s own parish William Cartwright of Rawfolds Mill armed his workmen with stones, guns and vitriol to protect his property at night.

Cartwright was ready and waiting for the Luddites when over a hundred of them mustered at a nearby inn on the night of 11 April 1812 and proceeded in silence to the mill. The attack on the building lasted twenty minutes, but, with so many guns and men on Cartwright’s side, there was little doubt who would prevail, and the would-be machine-breakers had to retreat in disarray, leaving two o

their number wounded. A detachment of the Queen's Bays arrived within the hour and the two captives were taken to an inn in nearby Roberttown and kept under arrest until they died, interrogated to the last by the vicar of Liversedge, Hammond Roberson, Patrick Brontë's predecessor at Hartshead.

Where was Patrick Brontë while the attack on Rawfolds Mill was going on? The rioters included many Hartshead parishioners, and there must have been widespread intelligence locally of the plan and preparation; even the sentinels at the mill were suspicious for the two preceding nights. As a clergyman of the Established Church, Patrick Brontë belonged ostensibly to the ruling class and to the attack, but he was conspicuously not of the group who helped Cartwright defend his property and if he signed the testimonial later condemning the action, we cannot know, as the ink has faded too much to read. None of the rioters was betrayed to the authorities, despite the presence of 4,000 troops in the region and many government spies, and despite the posting of vast rewards for information leading to the conviction of participants. Brontë's position was a difficult one: as a working cleric he fully understood the plight of his unemployed and desperate parishioners, but as a man, he had little confidence in his social power among his superiors. Legend has it that he secretly buried in unmarked graves at Hartshead fatally injured rioters, or some of the seventeen Luddites sentenced to death for their part in the Rawfolds attack following their show trial in York nine months later. Neither of these stories is likely to be true, but they reflect people's sense of where Patrick Brontë's sympathies lay and when she chose to set her third novel, *Shirley*, during the Luddite riots in the Spenn Valley. Charlotte Brontë was in a way expressing her own, and her father's, delayed shock reactions to this bloody chapter in local and national history.

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ONE OF PATRICK BRONTË'S RESPONSIBILITIES was to act as an examiner at Woodhouse Grove, and it was on a visit there in the summer of 1812 that he met Mrs. Fennell's niece from Cornwall, 29-year-old Maria Branwell. Maria had come to help in the school, be a companion to her cousin Jane (an only child) and perhaps replace her in the Fennell household after Jane's marriage to William Morgan was planned for the end of the year.

The family Maria came from in Penzance was cultured and prosperous. Her father, Thomas Branwell, dead since 1808, had been an importer of luxury goods with a grocery shop in the Market Square; he had also had investments in a local brewery and bank, and had been a member of the town council. There was a sizeable family presence in the town, since Thomas had eleven children and his brother Richard, who was responsible for building the popular Assembly Rooms in the 1790s, was the father of ten, one of whom went on to have twelve children. They were a staunchly Methodist clan.

Maria was the eighth of her family, which was widely spread out in age (Mrs. Branwell had been forty-seven when she had her last baby). A picture of Maria aged about fifteen shows a girl with a very lively and intelligent expression casting a quizzical look at the artist, a first and last glance from this enigmatic figure, since the only other images of her—an anonymous amateur profile and an enhanced copy of it lovingly made by Charlotte some years after her mother's death—show little more than a conventionally neat and modest matron. When Thomas Branwell died, he bequeathed each of his four daughters a £50 annuity, the generosity of which can be measured against the £20 a year that Charlotte Brontë earned as a governess thirty years later. This gave them a considerable degree of independence and the three unmarried sisters, Elizabeth, Maria and Charlotte (aged thirty-two, twenty-five and seventeen respectively), stayed on at the family home with their mother, and then, after her death in 1809, on their own. "For some years now I have been perfectly my own mistress," Maria told Patrick

Brontë when they were courting, “subject to no *control* whatever—so far from it, that my sisters who are many years older than myself, and even my dear mother, used to consult me in every case of importance, and scarcely ever doubted the propriety of my opinions and actions.” Maria told her fiancé frankly that she felt she could have done with a little less of that freedom, and the responsibilities that went with it: “I thank God, it never led me into error, yet, in circumstances of perplexity and doubt, I have deeply felt the want of a guide and instructor.” Her deference was conventional for a bride-to-be, but Maria was also communicating to Patrick a history of management and independence.

The death early in 1812 of their uncle Richard, who owned the house the sisters lived in, precipitated changes. Charlotte Branwell decided to stay in Penzance (she had fallen in love with her cousin Joseph and was engaged to marry him), as did Elizabeth, a confirmed spinster at thirty-six, but Maria made the bold move to join her aunt Jane and husband John Fennell in Yorkshire, and help them in the running of Woodhouse Grove. At twenty-nine, she seemed to have little intention of going back to a life of inaction, and while making herself useful at the school and offering herself as a future domestic substitute for her cousin Jane, she might also have been on the lookout for a mate herself.

She found one very quickly in the queer, talkative best friend of cousin Jane’s fiancé. She and Patrick Brontë struck up an acquaintance on his visits to the school and soon were “walking out together to local beauty spots, where Patrick impressed her with his charm and qualities of mind and spirit. With his person too, no doubt. Patrick Brontë was tall and well-made, with dark red hair, piercing eyes, a “nobly-shaped head, and erect carriage.” Mrs. Gaskell, who met him when he was almost seventy years old, guessed immediately that “in his youth he must have been unusually handsome.” Maria Branwell, on the other hand, was extremely small and “not pretty, but very elegant,” a description that passed without objection by Patrick Brontë, so must have truth in it and may have even originated with him. Very few other descriptions of her exist, but they indicate a “friendly, amiable, wry and clever woman, “possessing more than ordinary talents.”

We know about their courtship wholly from Maria’s side, as nine remarkably frank and revealing letters she wrote to Patrick were preserved carefully by him. They contain almost all we know about the mother of the Brontës; the only other relic of her that has survived is a pious essay. That there are so few letters makes their thoughtful, soliloquising air all the more poignant, as Charlotte appreciated better than anybody when she read them forty years later: “there is a rectitude, a refinement, a constancy, a modesty, a sense—a gentleness about them indescribable. I wished She had lived and that I had known her.” The first letter was written in August 1812, full of bemusement at the speed of events: “If you knew what were my feelings whilst writing this you would pity me,” Maria said to the near-stranger she had fallen in love with. “[I] fear to go too far, and exceed the bounds of propriety. The places they had known together had begun to seem insipid without “your arm to assist me, and your conversation to shorten the walk”; she was thinking about her lover so much, in fact, that “when I work, if I wish to get *forward* I may be glad that you are at a distance.” Somehow, she felt compelled to confess all this to Patrick: “I have now written a pretty long letter without reserve or caution, and all the sentiments of my heart are not laid open to you believe me it is not because I wish them to be concealed.”

By early September the couple were promised to each other in secret, Patrick having proposed picturesquely, in the grounds of Kirkstall Abbey. Maria’s cousin and family had formed “a pretty correct notion” how matters stood, however, “and as their hints, etc., meet with no contradiction from me, my silence passes for confirmation.” Maria had progressed from addressing Patrick as “De

Friend” to “My dear Saucy Pat,” but she was aware that every advance in intimacy left her more vulnerable. When there was a delay in getting a reply to her letters, or no answer at all, she was painfully disappointed, and Patrick’s tendency to forget or mistake messages obviously disturbed her more scrupulous and dutiful nature. On one occasion, some visitors turned up at the Fennell unannounced, Patrick having entirely forgotten to pass on their intention to call. Everyone put this down, good-humouredly, to the young minister’s being “mazed” with love: “And even I begin to think that *this*, together with the *note*, bears some marks of *insanity*! However, I shall suspend my judgment until I hear what excuse you can make for yourself. I suppose you will be quite ready to make one of some kind or another.” This was an interesting tone to be adopting so early in their acquaintance—fond, indulgent, but consciously patient. Maria’s expectation of happiness was great—“the anticipation of sharing with you all the pleasures and pains, the cares and anxieties of life, contributing to your comfort and becoming the companion of your pilgrimage, is more delightful to me than any other prospect which this world can possibly present”—but she also seems to have intuited that even requited love might not necessarily entail mental intimacy and that to some degree she would always be observing this unusual man and needing to accommodate his personality. No wonder that the letters resonated with Charlotte when she was shown them in 1850, who could herself have penned this frank, sensual, thoughtful declaration, written in fear of Patrick having cooled slightly in his responses, just three weeks before their wedding:

Real love is ever apt to suspect that it meets not with an equal return; you must not wonder then that my fears are sometimes excited. My pride cannot bear the idea of a diminution of your attachment, or to think that it is stronger on my side than on yours...I am certain no one ever loved you with an affection more pure, constant, tender, and ardent than that which I feel. Surely this is not saying too much; it is the truth, and I trust you are worthy to know it.

Charlotte’s friend Ellen Nussey saw the letters in the 1850s too, and remembered “a pathos and apprehension” in them from Maria’s thoughtful, solitary musings about the man she was to marry. Impressive as Patrick Brontë was, and blessed with unflinching faith and an intellect that was all the stronger for its simplicity, Maria Branwell seems to have had the superior mind and finer sensibility and the modesty to suppress that fact.

THE SUMMER AND AUTUMN of 1812 passed quickly for the lovers, snatching time to go on walks together, and for Patrick attending to the preparation of married quarters. Maria didn’t go home to Cornwall to settle her affairs there, and just a few weeks before the wedding the trunk containing her possessions was involved in a shipwreck off the Devonshire coast. Everything was lost except “a very few articles,” including two very different kinds of reading matter, *The Imitation of Christ* and some copies of *The Lady’s Magazine*. The shipwreck must have seemed strangely symbolic of the abrupt and final cutting off from home that her marriage effected, for, just as Patrick never returned to Ireland, there is no record of Maria ever going back to her beloved Cornwall after 1812. They were starting afresh, on their own voyage together.

The wedding—or weddings, rather—took place on 29 December 1812, for three were celebrated at the same time on the same day. While Charlotte Branwell and Joseph Branwell were exchanging vows in Cornwall, Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell and William Morgan and Jane Fennell were doing

at Guiseley Church in North Yorkshire. In a charming, almost comical arrangement, Mr. Fennell was to give both the Guiseley brides away and both couples interchanged roles in turn: first William performed the marriage ceremony for Patrick and Maria, with Jane acting as bridesmaid, then they swapped places and Patrick was minister, Maria the bridesmaid, and Jane and William bride and groom. Meanwhile, Charlotte and Joseph were taking their vows “on the same day and hour” at Madron Church, the very place where John Fennell and Jane Branwell had married twenty-two years earlier. Through these coincidences, the occasion enforced and celebrated all the connections between these very like-minded people, a little society in itself optimistically setting out to do good in the West Riding.

Patrick and Maria Brontë began their married life at Hartshead, in a rented house at the top of the hill. Patrick wasn't happy with the accommodation, especially after they knew that their first child was on the way, but his attempts to get a new parsonage built with money from the Church Commissioners led to disappointment and personal expense, and he seems to have been looking around almost immediately for a different parish. Maria gave birth to a daughter, named after her early in 1814, and another daughter, Elizabeth, was born the following year. In the meantime, Patrick had come to a happy agreement with his friend Thomas Atkinson of Thornton (who was courting a young woman near Hartshead), and in May 1815 the two clerics swapped parishes and the Brontës moved with their two little girls to a square stone modern house on Market Street, just a few hundred yards from St. James's Church and the main road into Bradford.

Patrick Brontë always spoke of his five years in Thornton as the best of his life. He and his wife were in their prime, their family was growing, and for the first and last time the Brontës made close and affectionate friendships in the village where they lived, most particularly with the local doctor John Scholefield Firth and his eighteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth, who lived at Kipping House, a few minutes' walk down the road from the Brontës' modest parsonage. Elizabeth's mother had died the previous year in a riding accident, so Elizabeth, an only child, was running the household when the new curate's family moved in. She immediately warmed to Maria Brontë and her little girls and stood godmother to the younger one, Elizabeth, when she was baptised in August 1815.

There was “constant friendly intercourse” between the two families and strong ties among the mutual friends, whose relationships were complex and close-knit. Thomas Atkinson, with whom Brontë had swapped livings (and who was a nephew of Hammond Roberson), married Dr. Firth's niece Frances Walker soon after his move to Hartshead.*¹ Dr. Firth's second wife, Anne, whom he married in 1815, had a twin sister, Mrs. Frances Outhwaite, whose daughter Frances was a schoolfriend of Elizabeth Firth and became Anne Brontë's godmother. Her brother, John Outhwaite, a respected young physician in Bradford, became a friend of Patrick Brontë.*² Between them, they made up a network of professional contacts, friends and godparents who stood the Brontës and their children in good stead throughout their whole lives.

Maria's elder sister Elizabeth Branwell was also part of this friendly circle. She stayed with her sister and brother-in-law from the middle of 1815 (the time of her god-daughter Elizabeth Brontë's christening) until after the birth of the next baby in the summer of 1816, and became a good friend of Miss Firth. Bradford had a library and a literary society, of which Patrick Brontë was a member, and there were many musical events and lectures. They also enjoyed dinners, outings, countless tea-drinkings and long, ambitious walks—to the top of Allerton, to Swill Hill. Both these last were in June 1815, just before Maria Brontë found out she was expecting her third child. The Duke of Wellington's victory at Waterloo was a cause of national rejoicing that summer, and at his church in Liversedge

Hammond Roberson had just had a new set of bells fitted in time to celebrate, cast from cannon captured from the French at Genoa. In Thornton, the Firths and Brontës collected money for the widows and orphans of Waterloo and took part in a day of public thanksgiving in January 1816 for the restoration of peace, and it seemed a hopeful time when the new baby, a girl called Charlotte, was born on 21 April.

Elizabeth Branwell returned to Penzance soon after the baby's christening,^{*3} taking an affectionate leave of Miss Firth, who noted "she kissed me and was much affected." Patrick Brontë was also sorry to see her go, and inscribed a copy of *Cottage Poems* to his "beloved sister" as a token of "affection and esteem." Aunt Branwell's later reputation was as a bit of a dry old stick, but this shows that in 1816, aged thirty-nine, she was responsive, appreciative and very much part of the friendly Thornton group.

To help run the household, the Brontës got their first servant the same year, a twelve-year-old-girl called Nancy Garrs, who had been trained at Bradford School of Industry, a home for orphans and poor children of which Mrs. Outhwaite was a patron. Nancy acted as cook, maid and nurse to the growing family. Mrs. Brontë was soon pregnant again, and this time, much to everyone's delight, she gave birth to a son, Patrick Branwell Brontë, fourteen months after Charlotte, on 26 June 1817. Nancy's sister Sarah joined the household the following year, by which time another baby was on the way, a girl born on 30 July 1818 and christened Emily Jane. The comings and goings between the Firth and Brontë families were as frequent as ever, though Miss Firth's walks into Bradford were now mostly without Maria, so busy at home with her five young children, and tea parties were sometimes charmingly, arranged for the older Brontë girls on their own. "M. E. and C. Brontë to tea," Miss Firth recorded in January 1819, and again, in October, "The little Brontës called."

The year 1819 was a troubled one in the north of England. The aftermath of the long war had brought widespread unemployment and new protectionist Corn Laws taxing imported grain led to distress from high bread prices. Tensions rose dramatically following the shocking slaughter in August of fifteen men and women attending a pro-reform rally in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, bitterly dubbed "Peterloo." For some months that autumn and winter, the country seemed on the brink of armed rebellion, with uprisings uncomfortably close to Thornton, one as near as Huddersfield. On 29 September, Miss Firth noted: "Came home in safety, thank God"; and on 31 March 1820, "We set up expecting the Radicals." Her grandson later explained that Patrick Brontë had completely unnerved his old friends with tales of what he had witnessed in Ireland in 1798, and "by his prophecies of what was coming in England, almost frightened Mr. Firth to death, so that he had all his windows barred up in consequence." Patrick's own habit of keeping loaded guns around the house, by his bed and even on his person (reported by various servants and visitors from the 1820s onwards) may well date from this time.

The anxious vigil at Kipping House took place just after the christening of Maria's sixth baby, Anne, to whom Elizabeth Firth and Fanny Outhwaite stood as godmothers. But the Brontës were not to be their neighbours much longer. The vicar of Bradford had nominated Patrick to the perpetual curacy of Haworth, a village only a few miles to the north-west of Thornton, but on high, windswept ground. The chapelry itself had a challengingly wide spread, taking in villages within a radius of almost eight miles, but it was the former parish of a famous evangelical preacher, William Grimshaw, and he possessed a good-sized, free-standing parsonage house, very suitable for the family, who by now must have struggled to fit into Market Street's modest rooms. They made plans to leave.

Patrick Brontë had published two more books in his years at Thornton, *The Maid of Killarney*

(1818) and *The Cottage in the Wood; or, The Art of Becoming Rich and Happy* (1815), the latter a charming little production, 3 by 5 inches in size, with a beautifully executed frontispiece specially commissioned for the book, showing a pious cottager discovering a drunkard at his door. In later years the Brontë children must have been intensely interested in their father's little novel, scaled down to their size and with its fine illustration and neat print. Even the story would have enthralled them, with its taming of a rake by a good girl, and readers of Charlotte Brontë's novels might recognise some familiar themes—a man hoping he can bribe a girl into mistresshood or marriage, the girl's virtuous determination to support herself, whatever the difficulty, and her reward of a surprise bequest.

The author's preface marks a decided change from his confession in *Cottage Poems* of the thrill he got from writing; here, Patrick warns against developing an addiction to it that destroys the writer's contentment with the everyday:

The sensual novelist and his admirer, are beings of depraved appetites and sickly imaginations, who having learnt the art of *self-tormenting*, are diligently and zealously employed in creating an imaginary world, which they can never inhabit, only to make the real world, with which they must necessarily be conversant, gloomy and insupportable.

Patrick Brontë's children had the run of his books and must have read these words often, but no group of young people ever took less heed of such a warning.

*1 The Atkinsons became godparents to Charlotte Brontë and Mrs. Atkinson was the aunt of Amelia Walker, one of Charlotte's later schoolfriends.

*2 The Outhwaites were a philanthropic family—John was well loved for not charging the poorer patients at Bradford Infirmary, and Frances and her mother were patrons of the Bradford School of Industry.

*3 At which the godparents were Thomas and Frances Atkinson.

An Uncivilised Little Place

1820–25

Patrick Brontë's move to Haworth was fraught with vexations. The vicar of Bradford had made the appointment without seeking the opinion or approval of the church trustees, who did not take kindly to being ignored. Confusion reigned for a few weeks: Brontë resigned before he had even taken up residence, and his replacement, Samuel Redhead—also elected by the vicar without reference to the trustees—was given a potent demonstration of local discontent when the whole congregation walked out of his first service. In the wake of this decisive thumbs-down Patrick Brontë returned to the post, although he didn't move his family across to the village immediately. Haworth already seemed a contentious place in comparison with Thornton.

The parsonage the Brontës moved to in April 1820 was considerably bigger than the one they had left but stood at a remove, separated from the village by the church and from the church by the graveyard. The view that greeted them from their new front windows was of a small piece of scrubby garden, a low wall with a gate, then graves. At the back there were fewer windows, with mullions instead of wooden sashes, looking out on to the parson's field and beyond it to the moor.

The house itself had been built in the 1780s and had four main rooms on each of two floors and a small vaulted cellar. The front door opened into a wide hall with a dining room on the left, which became the family's chief reception room, and a parlour on the right, used by Patrick Brontë as his study. Behind that room was the main kitchen, the heart of the house, with a fire always burning in the range and a large table around which the children often gathered; and along a passageway was the back-kitchen, where the laundry was done in a copper and where tradesmen and parishioners who came on business were shown. There might also have been a scullery and peat store in this back part of the house, but it was demolished in the 1870s without any records being kept. The footprint of Haworth Parsonage can be seen in maps of the 1840s and 1850s, though, and it shows quite a large extension, connected to the house by a passage and forming a U-shape in the small backyard, in the south-west corner of which was a stone outbuilding housing a two-seater privy and in the north-west corner of which was a well.

Upstairs there were three main bedrooms and, over the front door, a small dressing-room that was used by the children as a playroom and occasional bedroom. How the family dispersed themselves upstairs is not entirely clear. Mrs. Brontë occupied the bedroom to the left at the front, which had a fireplace in it, and the room on the other side of the landing later became Patrick Brontë's room. The girls—except for the baby, Anne—probably shared the bedroom at the back; Branwell slept on his own, presumably in the playroom; and the servants shared a room above the peat store that was accessible only by an external staircase. It must have made a chilly start to Nancy's and Sarah's daily dressing and descending to the kitchen via the yard.

Leaving the house on the short path down to the church, the Brontës passed the yard where the

stonemason stored and worked his gravestones, the sexton's house on the left and then the backs of the houses and shops that clustered at the top of the steep Main Street. In front of the Black Bull and the steps leading up to St. Michael's was an open area where hustings and meetings took place and that served as a sort of village square. In the Brontës' day, the view down into the valley from this spot was dominated by chimneys; the water power of the becks running off the moor into the River Wharfe had spawned no fewer than nineteen mills and most of the townspeople were employed in the textile industry, either in the mills themselves or doing piece-work at home, carding and weaving. The population was high, and sanitation and standards of housing were low but a handful of businessmen had made astonishing new wealth in the area, "hundreds of thousands of pounds" by Mrs. Gaskell's reckoning.

The church itself was entirely different in the 1820s, the current building having been erected by Patrick Brontë's successor, John Wade, fifty years later. The Brontës' St. Michael's looked much more like a Low Church chapel, with plain windows, a modest altar, a gallery and a large triple-deck pulpit on the south aisle. Memories were still strong there of William Grimshaw, who was said to have rounded up malingerers at the pub with his horse-whip, nipping out of the church during the longer psalms to herd them in before the sermon. Grimshaw, a close friend of John Wesley and a pivotal figure in the Evangelical Revival, was revered in Haworth and beyond,^{*1} but his legacy proved troubling to Patrick Brontë, as Grimshaw had encouraged the local Methodists so effectively that they now had two chapels of their own. Though he had been nurtured by Simeonites and Wesleyans himself, Patrick Brontë saw the gradual detachment of Methodism from mainstream Anglicanism as a distinct threat, giving comfort to other Low Church and Nonconformist congregations—Baptists, Unitarians, Socinians, Ranters, Dissenters—and countenancing a rabble of doctrines that imperilled the very survival of the Established Church.

"A strange uncivilized little place" was how Charlotte apologised for her home town in the 1840s and how it struck many visitors. She did not blame readers of *Wuthering Heights* who expressed disbelief at the details of hill-farm life in Emily's book: "the language, the manners, the very dwellings and household customs of the scattered inhabitants of those districts, must be to [genteel] readers in a great measure unintelligible, and—where intelligible—repulsive...[They] will hardly know what to make of the rough, strong utterance, the harshly manifested passions, the unbridled aversions, and headlong partialities of unlettered moorland hinds and rugged moorland squires, who have grown up untaught and unchecked, except by mentors as harsh as themselves." In the 1820s the scattered homesteads on the moor—typically farms of between ten and twenty acres each, growing some oats or hay to feed a few cows—were places almost beyond the sight and reach of law. "Brutal tendencies" characterised the life of the town, where bull-baiting, horse-racing, dog- and cock-fighting, and fist-fights between men were common sports.^{*2}

The moors around Haworth—stretching out for almost eight miles to the west, where they touch the Lancashire border near the Forest of Trawden, and five miles to the south, to Hebden Bridge—were not quite the semi-wildernesses of today, carefully preserved for walkers, shooting parties and the water industry; they were places of work for quarrymen and peat-cutters, hill farmers and smallholders. The route to what are now the isolated ruins of Top Withins Farm (popularly believed to occupy the position of Heathcliff's fictional home) passed by at least seven small homesteads in the Brontës' day, and walking on the moor would have had to take into account the dangers of trespassing as well as large areas of permanently boggy and impassable terrain. Patrick Brontë was an exceptionally vigorous walker, and covered all his parish business on foot. He must often have been

seen out in all weathers, with his staff in his hand and high top hat on his head. The children to become hardened walkers, as the nearest place to buy books, newspapers, stationery, dress or fine goods or to consult a lawyer or doctor was Keighley, four miles away. The Brontës never owned either horse or carriage.

The “gentry” neighbours here were spread out, like everything in the chapelry: the Taylors at Stanbury Manor House; the Greenwoods at Spring Head (both Stephen Taylor and Joseph Greenwood were trustees of the church); the Heatons at Ponden Hall, a compact seventeenth-century house with a fine library.^{*3} In later years, the younger Brontës sometimes walked the two miles over Penistone Hill to borrow books from the Heatons but generally it was not a very sociable parish. The prevalence of “the old hill spirit” struck Mrs. Gaskell forcibly, coming as she did from a genteel Cheshire county town (immortalised in *Cranford*) and living as a minister’s wife on the outskirts of Manchester without suburban comfort. “I believe many of the Yorkshiremen would object to the system of parochial visiting,” she said; “their surly independence would revolt from the idea of any one having a right to come from his office, to inquire into their condition, to counsel, or to admonish them.” Patrick Brontë’s habit as a minister was not to interfere with his parishioners’ lives at all, unless they were sick, or to come to him for help. Brontë made his views perfectly clear every Sunday in robust sermons, but otherwise the family “kept themselves very close” from the first.

What kind of a man was Patrick Brontë, and what was he like to be married to, or to be the child of? Though he had plenty of natural wit, he was far from light-hearted. His public manner was ponderous and “Grandisonian,” as one visitor remarked. He qualified everything he said, “indeed he was cautious to the last degree,” and his many letters to newspapers over the years—on subjects as diverse as parliamentary reform, duelling and fire hazards—show a habit of making arguments needless and complicated. Perhaps this was to demonstrate his learning—to himself as much as to others. Brontë’s outstanding achievement in getting from the cot in Emdale to St. John’s College had left him, in many ways, a very anxious man.

Patrick had strategies for getting his own way that Maria had noticed during their engagement (when the question of their future married quarters arose): “you have such a method of considering and digesting a plan before you make it known to your friends,” she had written to him, “that you run very little risk of incurring their disapprobations, or of having your schemes frustrated. I greatly admire your talents this way—may they never be perverted by being used in a bad cause!”

When Elizabeth Gaskell met Patrick Brontë in 1853, she found him a model of old-fashioned manners and hostliness, but with a steely edge that chilled her. “I caught a glare of his stern eyes over his spectacles at Miss Brontë once or twice which made me know my man,” she said, alert to the fact that a truly domineering character might take pains to hide it; “he talked *at* her sometimes.” Mrs. Gaskell was intrigued by her new friend’s circumstances and had already heard all sorts of stories about the incumbent of Haworth, which predisposed her to think of him as a half-crazed domestic tyrant. Her main informant was a notorious gossip, Janet Kay-Shuttleworth, who had got her information from a nurse who had looked after Maria Brontë, a woman who certainly had plenty of opportunity to observe the Brontë family in the months she lived with them in 1821, but whose dismissal (on unspecified grounds) wasn’t likely to have made her think or speak very well of the family afterwards.

Some picturesque stories about life at the Parsonage subsequently emerged in Mrs. Gaskell’s book, which Patrick Brontë strenuously refuted on publication and which had to be suppressed or modified in later editions (though privately Mrs. Gaskell still clung to many of them). According to these

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