THE BRONTË FAMILY

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Abstract: *The Brontë family can be traced to the Irish clan Ó Pronntaigh, which literally means "descendant of Pronntach". They were a family of hereditary scribes and literary men in Fermanagh. The version Ó Proinntigh, which was first given by Patrick Woulfe in his Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall (transl. Surnames of the Gael and the Foreigner) and reproduced without question by Edward MacLysaght, cannot be accepted as correct, as there were a number of well-known scribes with this name writing in Irish in the 17th and 18th centuries and all of them used the spelling Ó Pronntaigh.*

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The name is derived from the word *pronntach* or *bronntach*, which is related to the word *bronnadh*, meaning "giving" or "bestowal" (*pronn* is given as an Ulster version of *bronn* in O'Reilly's *Irish English Dictionary*.) Patrick Woulfe suggested that it was derived from *proinnteach* (the refectory of a monastery). *Ó Pronntaigh* was earlier anglicised as *Prunty* and sometimes *Brunty*.

At some point, Patrick Brontë (born Brunty), the sisters' father, decided on the alternative spelling with the diaeresis over the terminal ⟨e⟩ to indicate that the name has two syllables. Multiple theories exist to account for the change, including that he may have wished to hide his humble origins. As a man of letters, he would have been familiar with classical Greek and may have chosen the name after the Greek βροντή (transl. thunder). One view, which biographer C. K. Shorter proposed in 1896, is that he adapted his name to associate himself with Admiral Horatio Nelson, who was also Duke of Bronte. One might also find evidence for this theory in Patrick Brontë's desire to associate himself with the Duke of Wellington in his form of dress.

In 1824, the four eldest girls (excluding Anne) entered the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, which educated the children of less prosperous members of the clergy, and had been recommended to Mr Brontë. The following year, Maria and Elizabeth fell gravely ill and were removed from the school, later dying on 6 May and 15 June 1825, respectively. Charlotte and Emily were also withdrawn from the school and returned to Haworth. Charlotte expressed the traumatic impact that her sisters' deaths had on her in her future works. In *Jane Eyre*, Cowan Bridge became Lowood, Maria inspired the young Helen Burns, the cruel mistress Miss Andrews inspired the headmistress Miss Scatcherd, and the tyrannical headmaster Rev.

Tuberculosis, which afflicted Maria and Elizabeth in 1825, also caused the eventual deaths of three of the surviving Brontës: Branwell in September 1848, Emily in December 1848, and, finally, Anne in May 1849.

Patrick Brontë faced a challenge in arranging for the education of the girls of his family, which was barely middle class. They lacked significant connections and he could not afford the fees for them to attend an established school for young ladies. One solution was the schools where the fees were reduced to a minimum—so called "charity schools"—with a mission to assist families like those of the lower clergy.

(Barker had read in the *Leeds Intelligencer* of 6 November 1823 reports of cases in the Court of Commons in Bowes: he later read of other cases, of 24 November 1824 near Richmond, in the county of Yorkshire, where pupils had been discovered gnawed by rats and suffering so badly from malnutrition that some of them had lost their sight.[24]) Yet for Patrick, there was nothing to suggest that the Reverend Carus Wilson's Clergy Daughters' School would not provide a good education and good care for his daughters. The school was not expensive and its patrons (supporters who allowed the school to use their names) were all respected people. Among these was the daughter of Hannah More, a religious author and philanthropist who took a particular interest in education. More was a close friend of the poet William Cowper, who, like her, advocated extensive, proper and well-rounded education for young girls. The pupils included the offspring of different prelates and even certain acquaintances of Patrick Brontë including William Wilberforce, young women whose fathers had also been educated at St John's College, Cambridge. Thus Brontë believed Wilson's school to have many of the necessary guarantees needed for his daughters to receive proper schooling.

In 1831, fourteen-year-old Charlotte was enrolled at the school of Miss Wooler in Roe Head, Mirfield. Patrick could have sent his daughter to a less costly school in Keighley nearer home but Miss Wooler and her sisters had a good reputation and he remembered the building, which he passed when strolling around the parishes of Kirklees, Dewsbury and Hartshead-cum-Clifton where he was vicar. Margaret Wooler showed fondness towards the sisters and she accompanied Charlotte to the altar at her marriage. Patrick's choice of school was excellent—Charlotte was happy there and studied well. She made many lifelong friends, in particular Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor who later went to New Zealand before returning to England. Charlotte returned from Roe Head in June 1832, missing her friends, but happy to rejoin her family.

Three years later, Miss Wooler offered her former pupil a position as her assistant. The family decided that Emily would accompany her to pursue studies that would otherwise have been unaffordable. Emily's fees were partly covered by Charlotte's salary. Emily was 17 and it was the first time she had left Haworth since leaving Cowan Bridge. On 29 July 1835, the sisters left for Roe Head. The same day, Branwell wrote a letter to the Royal Academy of Art in London, to present several of his drawings as part of his candidature as a probationary student.

Charlotte taught, and wrote about her students without much sympathy. Emily did not settle: after three months her health seemed to decline and she had to be taken home to the parsonage. Anne took her place and stayed until Christmas 1837.

Charlotte avoided boredom by following the developments of the imaginary Empire of Angria—invented by Charlotte and Branwell—that she received in letters from her brother. During holidays at Haworth, she wrote long narratives while being reproached by her father who wanted her to become more involved in parish affairs. These were coming to a head over the imposition of the Church of England rates, a local tax levied on parishes where the majority of the population were dissenters. In the meantime, Miss Wooler moved to Heald's House, at Dewsbury Moor, where Charlotte complained about the humidity that made her unwell. Upon leaving the establishment in 1838 Miss Wooler presented her with a parting gift of *The Vision of Don Roderick and Rokeby*, a collection of poems by Walter Scott.

The children became interested in writing from an early age, initially as a game. They all displayed a talent for narrative, but for the younger ones it became a pastime to develop them. At the centre of the children's creativity were twelve wooden soldiers which Patrick Brontë gave to Branwell at the beginning of June 1826. These toy soldiers instantly fired their imaginations and they spoke of them as *the Young Men*, and gave them names. However, it was not until December 1827 that their ideas took written form, and the imaginary African kingdom of Glass Town came into existence, followed by the Empire of Angria. Emily and Anne created Gondal, an island continent in the North Pacific, ruled by a woman, after the departure of Charlotte in 1831.[39] In the beginning, these stories were written in *little books*, the size of a matchbox about 1.5 by 2.5 inches (38 mm × 64 mm) and cursorily bound with thread. The pages were filled with close, minute writing, often in capital letters without punctuation and embellished with illustrations, detailed maps, schemes, landscapes and plans of buildings, created by the children according to their specialisations. The idea was that the books were of a size for the soldiers to read. The complexity of the stories matured as the children's imaginations developed, fed by reading the three weekly or monthly magazines to which their father had subscribed, or the newspapers that were bought daily from John Greenwood's local news and stationery store.

The writing that had begun so early never left the family. Charlotte had ambition like her brother, and wrote to the poet laureate Robert Southey to submit several poems in his style (though Branwell was kept at a distance from her project). She received a hardly encouraging reply after several months. Southey, still illustrious today although his star has somewhat waned, was one of the great figures of English Romanticism, along with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and he shared the prejudice of the times; literature, or more particularly poetry (for women had been publishing fiction and enjoying critical, popular and economic success for over a century by this time), was considered a man's business, and not an appropriate occupation for ladies.

Conditions at the school at Cowan Bridge, where Maria and Elizabeth may have contracted the tuberculosis from which they died, were probably no worse than those at

many other schools of the time. (For example, several decades before the Brontë sisters' experience at Cowan Bridge, Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra contracted typhus at a similar boarding school, and Jane nearly died. The Austen sisters' education, like that of the Brontë sisters, was continued at home.) Nevertheless, Charlotte blamed Cowan Bridge for her sisters' deaths, especially its poor medical care—chiefly, repeated emetics and blood-lettings—and the negligence of the school's doctor, who was the director's brother-in-law. Charlotte's vivid memories of the privations at Cowan Bridge were poured into her depiction of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*: the scanty and often spoiled food, the lack of heating and adequate clothing, the periodic epidemics of illness such as "low fever" (probably typhus), the severity and arbitrariness of the punishments, and even the harshness of particular teachers (a Miss Andrews who taught at Cowan Bridge is thought to have been Charlotte's model for Miss Scatcherd in *Jane Eyre*). Elizabeth Gaskell, a personal friend and the first biographer of Charlotte, confirmed that Cowan Bridge was Charlotte's model for Lowood and insisted that conditions there in Charlotte's day were egregious. More recent biographers have argued that the food, clothing, heating, medical care and discipline at Cowan Bridge were not considered sub-standard for religious schools of the time, testaments of the era's complacency about these intolerable conditions. One scholar has commended Patrick Brontë for his perspicacity in removing all his daughters from the school, a few weeks before the deaths of Maria and Elizabeth.

Due to their forced or voluntary isolation, the Brontë sisters constituted a separate literary group that neither had predecessors nor successors. There is not a 'Brontë' line such as exists among authors of realist and naturalist novels, or in poetry, the romantic and the symbolic.

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