

# The Brontës

*Edited by*  
Miriam Allott

The Critical Heritage



## **THE BRONTËS: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE**

## **THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES**

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# THE BRONTËS

## THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

MIRIAM ALLOTT



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FOR  
ADA HORROCKS  
*With love and gratitude*

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## General Editor's Preface

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The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality – perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.



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## Preface

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The obtuseness and crudity of the early reviewers of the Brontës is a persistent part of the Brontë legend, but it is a part that will not stand up to examination. The legend was encouraged in the first place by Charlotte's sorrowful remarks about her sisters' critics in her 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' of 1850, and in 1857 received further support from Mrs Gaskell, whose careful research for her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* stopped short at gathering and sifting the vast numbers of reviews and articles which had accumulated over the past ten years. For a long time in the twentieth century, ignorance of what Victorian reviewers actually wrote did nothing to correct received ideas concerning Victorian critical shortcomings. This situation has of course altered radically in recent years. Within the wide range of current Victorian studies, many anthologies of nineteenth-century criticism have played their own part in helping to set the record straight. It is hoped that the present collection will set the record straight for the Brontës' early reviewers and also represent the movement of opinion among their successors in the later years of the nineteenth century.



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## Abbreviations

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<i>LL</i> [i.e. <i>Life and Letters</i> ]	<i>The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence</i> vols 1-4, <i>The Shakespeare Head Brontë</i> , edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (1932).
<i>BST</i>	<i>Transactions of the Brontë Society.</i>
<i>Letters of Mrs Gaskell</i> (1966)	<i>The Letters of Mrs Gaskell</i> , edited by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (1966).
<i>The George Eliot Letters</i> (1954)	<i>The George Eliot Letters</i> , edited by Gordon S. Haight, seven volumes (1954).

## Chronological Table

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- 1812 The Reverend Patrick Brontë marries Maria Branwell (29 December).
- 1814 Maria Brontë born.
- 1815 Elizabeth Brontë born.
- 1816 Charlotte Brontë born (21 April).
- 1817 Patrick Branwell Brontë born.
- 1818 Emily Jane Brontë born (30 July).
- 1820 Anne Brontë born (17 January).  
The family moves to Haworth.
- 1821 Mrs Brontë dies (September). Her sister, Miss Elizabeth Branwell, takes charge of the house and family.
- 1824 Maria and Elizabeth go to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge (July); Charlotte joins them in August, Emily in November.
- 1825 Maria leaves the school because of illness (14 February) and dies (6 May). Elizabeth leaves for the same reason (31 May) and dies (15 June). Charlotte and Emily are taken away from the school (1 June).
- 1826 Beginning of the Brontës' childhood fantasy games centred on the toy soldiers given to Branwell by his father (June).
- 1831 Charlotte goes to Miss Wooler's school at Roe Head (January). Meets Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor.
- 1832 Charlotte leaves Roe Head to take charge of her sisters' education at home. By now the family's fantasy games have grown into the Angrian saga shared by Charlotte and Branwell and the Gondal saga shared by Emily and Anne.
- 1835 Charlotte returns as governess to Roe Head (July), Emily accompanies her as a pupil but becomes homesick and leaves (October). Anne replaces her (January 1836–December 1837). Charlotte leaves 1838 (May).
- 1837 Emily a governess at Miss Patchett's school at Law Hill near Halifax. Leaves after some months (exact period not known).
- 1839 Anne a governess with the Ingram family, Blake Hall, Mirfield, (April–December).

# CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- Charlotte a governess with the Sidgwick family, Stonegappe Hall, near Skipton (May-July).
- 1840 Charlotte, Emily and Anne together at Haworth.
- 1841 Anne a governess with the Robinson family, Thorp Green Hall, near York (March 1841-June 1845; Branwell joins her as tutor January 1843). Charlotte a governess with the White family, Upperwood House, Rawdon (leaves December 1841).
- 1842 Charlotte and Emily go to Brussels to study in the Pensionnat Heger (February); they are called home on their aunt's death (November). Charlotte returns alone to Brussels and stays for a further year (January 1843-January 1844).
- 1844 Failure of the plan to set up a school at Haworth (first mooted summer 1841).
- 1845 The family together at Haworth (Anne leaves Thorp Green in June; Branwell dismissed in July). Charlotte finds Emily's poems and projects the publication of a selection of poems by the three sisters (autumn).
- 1846 *Poems, by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* published by Aylott and Jones (May). *Jane Eyre* begun (August). *The Professor, Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* finished and begin their tour of the publishers (summer).
- 1847 *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* accepted by Thomas Newby (summer) and published after a long delay (December). *The Professor* (after at least three rejections during its solitary tour) rejected by Smith, Elder (August). *Jane Eyre* accepted by Smith, Elder (August) and published six weeks later (October).
- 1848 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* published by T. C. Newby (summer). Charlotte and Anne visit Smith, Elder in London to set the record straight after Newby's misrepresentations concerning the authorship of novels by 'the Bells' (July). Branwell dies (24 September). Emily dies (29 December).
- 1849 Anne dies (28 May). *Shirley* published by Smith, Elder (October). Charlotte visits London; meets Thackeray and Harriet Martineau (November-December).
- 1850 Charlotte visits London; meets G. H. Lewes and dines at Thackeray's house (June). Meets Mrs Gaskell and Matthew Arnold during her visit to the Kay Shuttleworths at Windermere (August).

# CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- Prepares and publishes the memorial edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, containing her 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' and preface to *Wuthering Heights*, and a further selection of Emily's and Anne's poems from their MSS; the edition appears under the imprint of Smith, Elder who secure the rights from Newby (September–December). Visits Harriet Martineau at Ambleside (December).
- 1851 Charlotte visits London; sees the Great Exhibition and attends Thackeray's lectures (May–June). Visits Mrs Gaskell in Manchester (June; second and third visits, April 1853, May 1854. Mrs Gaskell visits Haworth September 1853).
- 1852 The Reverend Arthur Nicholls (curate at Haworth since 1845) proposes to Charlotte and is refused because of Mr Brontë's disapproval (December). He leaves Haworth May 1853.
- 1853 *Villette* published by Smith, Elder (January).
- 1854 Charlotte becomes engaged to Arthur Nicholls, who returns to Haworth as curate (April); they marry two months later (June).
- 1855 Charlotte dies (31 March).
- 1857 Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* published by Smith, Elder (March). *The Professor* published by Smith, Elder, with a preface by Arthur Nicholls dated 22 September 1856.
- 1860 'Emma', fragment of Charlotte's unfinished story, published in *Cornhill Magazine* with an introduction by Thackeray (April).

## Introduction

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The body of writing published during their lifetimes by the Brontës is not large. It comprises *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* (1846); *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853) by Charlotte Brontë ('Currer Bell'); *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë ('Ellis Bell'); and *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë ('Acton Bell'). Charlotte Brontë's earliest novel, *The Professor*, which she wrote during 1845-6, was published posthumously in 1857, with the author's name still appearing as 'Currer Bell'. Other material gradually came to light after Charlotte's death in 1855 (Emily died in 1848, Anne in 1849). It included letters and poems; the fragment of a new novel by Charlotte; the juvenilia written by Charlotte and her brother Branwell as chronicles of their fantasy realm, Angria (Emily's and Anne's corresponding chronicles of their own fantasy realm, Gondal, have not been found); exercises written by Charlotte and Emily for their Brussels teacher, M. Heger; and the poignant birthday 'diary-papers' in which Emily and Anne tried to look into their future. But even with these additions, the total amount of material is still modest, and anyone wishing to study the Brontës can readily familiarize himself with all of it.

The case is very different with criticism of the Brontës. During the past thirty years or so it has grown enormously, but interest in the Brontës on the part of the general reading public was already thriving by the turn of the century, when Mrs Humphry Ward, who is still one of their most discerning critics, was preparing her introductory essays for the Haworth edition of their works.<sup>1</sup> She speaks with some feeling of the nature and scale of this interest in her preface to *Jane Eyre*:

Judging by the books that have been written and read in recent years, by the common verdict as to the Brontë sisters, their story and their work, which prevails, almost without exception, in the literary criticism of the present day; by the tone of personal tenderness, even of passionate homage, in which many writers speak of Charlotte and Emily; and by the increasing recognition which their books have obtained abroad, one may say with some confidence that the name and memory of the Brontës were never more alive than now, that

## INTRODUCTION

'Honour and Fame have got about their graves' for good and all, and that Charlotte and Emily Brontë are no less secure, at any rate, than Jane Austen or George Eliot or Mrs Browning of literary recollection in the time to come . . .

This lively interest in the Brontës had its beginnings long before 1899 in the immediate and dramatic success of *Jane Eyre* in October 1847, and was kept alive during the next two years by the mystery of 'the Bells' identity and sex, which was a favourite topic of contemporary literary gossip. Then in 1850 came Charlotte's arresting information about her dead sisters in the memorial edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, which revealed that the three 'brothers' who had been taken to task often enough for being 'coarse' and 'violent' were, startlingly, three young unmarried sisters from a remote country parsonage near the Yorkshire moors, two of whom were now tragically dead, carried off within months of each other by the family disease of tuberculosis. The death of Charlotte herself five years later encouraged readers to reflect once more – as so many readers have reflected since – on the disparity between the restrictedness of her own and her sisters' lives and the vitality of their creative imagination. It was the pity, respect and admiration called forth by hearing their story that drew Mrs Gaskell to Charlotte when they first came to know each other in 1850, and after Charlotte's death in 1855 led her to collect all the materials necessary for the writing of a biography of her dead friend. The work took two years to complete. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) was widely read and reviewed, the reviewers including several prominent literary figures of the day. Thereafter there is continuous evidence throughout the century of the fascination which the Brontë story held for the general reading public, a fascination which then and in our own century has often done its subjects a disservice by drawing attention away from their work to concentrate upon the details of their lives.

## SCOPE AND ARRANGEMENT OF THE COLLECTION

Anyone wishing to study contemporary critical attitudes to the Brontë sisters must sort through quantities of material, for Charlotte's novels in particular were extensively reviewed in daily and weekly newspapers and in almost all the monthly and quarterly periodicals of any standing. The generous space devoted at the time to the reviewing of novels must be a matter of envy to the modern novelist; most notices,

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even of novels by unknown writers, included a comprehensive account of the story along with extensive extracts illustrating the author's style, characterization and powers of description. By today's standards, many reviews of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – *Agnes Grey* was always more skimpily discussed – are remarkably substantial and well-documented. Yet these look meagre in number and scale when measured against the commentaries on *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*. The abundance of material, then, presents some problems, but there is the additional difficulty of selecting and arranging the material so that justice will be done to the impression made by the Brontës as a family group as well as to the individual impression made by each sister. The task is complicated by the fact that so long as 'the firm of Bell and Co', as an American reviewer described them (No. 20), were, so to say, in business together, there was some blurring by the public of their individual creative identities, the confusion being worse confounded by the shady dealing of Emily's and Anne's publisher, Thomas Newby, who exploited the situation to promote his sales (see pp. 10–12). It is of some help that in the period between 1847 and 1850 the reviews devoted to Emily, whose novel usually impressed itself strongly if not necessarily agreeably on its readers, are phrased with sufficient emphasis to ensure that this 'Bell' would not be readily confused with either of the other two. Again, although many critics in this period incorporated into their reviews general reflections about the puzzling group, they still managed to concentrate attention on the particular novel under discussion. So it is still possible when reading these earliest reviews to make out the emerging pattern of each sister's developing reputation. Sensitivity to their individual tones of voice could develop more freely once Charlotte had brought out her 'Biographical Notice' in 1850. Finally, when all three sisters were dead, and the first full record of their lives and achievements had been put before the public by Mrs Gaskell, it became a critical habit to attempt some evaluation of their relative stature, a process from which Emily early emerges as the force most to be reckoned with for originality and power while Charlotte remains for some twenty years or so the figure who commands from Brontë enthusiasts the warmest feelings of allegiance and admiration. From the 1870s onwards her work tends increasingly to be measured not only against that of her sister but also against the major literary achievements of the age, a process from which for many readers – including her publisher George Smith – she emerges as a gifted but



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limited writer whose place must be situated some way below the first rank.

The material in this volume is arranged to shed light on these stages in the development of the Brontës' nineteenth-century critical reputation. The first of the three main sections covers the years from 1846 to the early 1850s, that is from *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* to the publication of *Villette*. The second section concentrates on the movement of opinion throughout the 1850s, the decade in which critical opinion was affected first by the memorial edition of 1850 and then by the further reassessments following Charlotte's death in 1855 and the publication of Mrs Gaskell's *Life* in 1857. The third section includes a selection of statements made about their work during the rest of the century up to (and including) Mrs Humphry Ward's outstanding essays, written as introductions for the Haworth edition of the Brontës' collected works published in 1899-1900. In the first section each sister's work is treated separately, even though this means that there is some chronological overlapping (and that in one case a particular critique, which discusses each of the Bells in some detail, has had to be represented more than once). Exceptions are the early joint reviews of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, which were published together in 1847 to make up an edition of the popular 'three-decker' size. The fact that some of these early reviews decided notwithstanding to ignore *Agnes Grey* has its own importance here. The commentaries of 1857 by their nature require that what is said should not be broken up in order to preserve the separate treatment accorded to the sisters in the first section. The same principle holds for much of the material in the third section, an additional interest for the student of the Brontës being the incidence and timing of critiques, essays and full-length studies devoted exclusively to the work of any one sister.

In all three sections an attempt has been made to represent as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible. In other words, faced with the problem of what to leave out for the sake of economy (and readability), the decision has been made to extract the gist of many commentaries rather than to represent a few in more detail. Since, as I have said, the illustrative detail is usually copious, the danger of serious misrepresentation does not seem to me to be acute, and in any case it seems less serious than the injustices which may creep in with the elimination of one series of reviews in the interests of another. All the major controversial reviews are represented here, together with many others, including most of those which Charlotte Brontë herself commented

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upon in her letters. In some cases—for example Sydney Dobell, Swinburne (on Charlotte, not Emily), Peter Bayne and Eugène Forçade—hard pruning may be said to have done the authors some service. After all, closely sustained argument and analysis is not necessarily looked for in the occasional writing which provides the staple material for collections of this kind. Leslie Stephen's measured pieces for the *Cornhill Magazine* are exceptional and his contribution here is treated accordingly. Of all the contributions gathered in this volume, those by Mrs Humphry Ward are both the most substantial and the most considered, which is unsurprising in view of her assignment and the resources which she brought to it. Her work it is which has suffered most severely at my hands, but I take comfort from the fact that her essays are more accessible to the general reader than most of the other materials collected in this book.

### THE BRONTË SISTERS BECOME 'THE BROTHERS BELL'

The circumstances surrounding the transformation of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë into 'Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell' have been related many times since the first brief account given by Charlotte in her 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' for the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. Anyone even slightly familiar with the story of the Brontës knows that as a family they had been making up stories since their early childhood days, and that from the 'Young Men' plays (inspired by the wooden soldiers which their father, Patrick Brontë, brought home for their brother Branwell one day in the June of 1826) grew the celebrated cycles of tales about two fantasy realms, the realm of Angria created by Charlotte and Branwell, and the realm of Gondal, created by Emily and Anne. 'Resident in a remote district,' wrote Charlotte in 1850,

where education had made little progress, and where, consequently, there was no inducement to seek social intercourse beyond our own domestic circle, we were wholly dependent on ourselves and each other, on books and study, for the enjoyments and occupations of life. The highest stimulus, as well as the liveliest pleasure we had known from childhood upwards, lay in attempts at literary composition.

Life in a quiet country parsonage, with a large family, narrow means and plenty of books has often proved to be a valuable forcing ground for the creative imagination. What is remarkable in the Brontë

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sisters is the intensity and persistence of their possession by their own imagination. Charlotte was still writing Angrian tales celebrating the flamboyant Duke of Zamorna when she was in her early twenties, and at the ages of twenty-eight and twenty-five respectively Emily and Anne were still producing fresh chronicles of Gondal and acting out the parts of their heroes and heroines. 'The Gondals still flourish bright as new', Emily wrote in her birthday diary-paper of 30 July 1845: 'I am at present writing a work on the First Wars. Anne has been writing some articles on this, and a book by Henry Sophona. We intend sticking firm by the rascals as long as they delight us.'<sup>2</sup> That the sisters could be troubled by the strength of their addiction seems clear from Emily's poems addressed to her own imagination – for example, 'Who weary with the long day's care . . .', and 'O thy bright eyes must answer now . . .', both written in the autumn of 1844<sup>3</sup> – and from Charlotte's determination to pitch her first novel, *The Professor*, in a subdued imaginative key.<sup>4</sup> The anxiety probably played a part in the sisters' attempts to channel their creative talents in a new direction during 1845. In spite of Emily's remarks in her diary-paper, the Gondals were facing competition. Anne's companion diary-paper, written on the following day, 31 July 1845, records that the Gondals were 'not in first-rate playing condition' and adds 'Emily is . . . writing some poetry . . . I wonder what it is about? I have begun the third volume of "Passages in the Life of an Individual". I wish I had finished it.'<sup>5</sup> As we now know, Emily had been writing verse for several years, much of it personal as well as 'Gondalian', while Anne's 'Passages in the Life of an Individual' became the novel known as *Agnes Grey*. It is generally accepted today that both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Professor* – which had been incubating at least since Charlotte's return from Brussels in 1844 – must have been fairly well under way by the end of 1845. (*Jane Eyre* was not begun until the following August.) During that year, as Charlotte was to explain in 1850, the sisters were reunited for the first time after a long separation. In spite of their happiness at being together, this seemed to be, on the face of it, a barren and disappointing period. Charlotte's existence had been darkened since her return by her hidden unanswered passion for her Brussels teacher, M. Heger. There was no compensating hope to be had from the family plan to set up a school in the parsonage, which fell through from want of support. Branwell, the only son of the house, had been dismissed in disgrace from his post of tutor at Thorp Green and was already set on his course of self-destruction. In spite of

or perhaps because of these frustrations, the parsonage was alive with literary activity. Not long after Emily and Anne had written their diary-papers (Emily's is notably cheerful in tone), on 'a day in the autumn of 1845', Charlotte 'accidentally lighted on a MS. volume of verse . . . in Emily's handwriting'.<sup>6</sup> The history of 'the Bells' and their publications had begun.

Charlotte's immediate judgment that Emily's verse deserved to be published chimed in with 'the honourable ambition' which she shared with her sisters – 'we had very early cherished the dream of one day becoming authors' – and it was perhaps this ambition that eventually triumphed over Emily's fierce reticence. Few aspiring writers can have been as ignorant as they were of the ways of the publishing world, but once they had agreed to try to get a small selection of their poems into print, Charlotte's pertinacity carried the project through and rallied the others to renewed creative efforts when the fate of their initial venture looked bleak.

One of their first practical problems was to select suitable pen-names. 'Averse to personal publicity,' Charlotte tells us, 'we veiled our names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.' Her explanation reveals the sisters' characteristic blend of unworldliness, shrewd observation and moral principle. The 'ambiguous choice' was dictated<sup>7</sup>

by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice, we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.

Charlotte must have been recalling, as she wrote this, recent reviews of her second novel, *Shirley* (published not long before, in October 1849) which were affected by the now generally accepted opinion that 'Currer Bell' was indeed a woman. 'I was hurt', she wrote to G. H. Lewes concerning his review of January 1850 which discussed characteristics of female authorship, 'because after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an *author*, not as a woman, you so roughly – I even thought so cruelly – handled the question of sex.'<sup>8</sup>

#### PUBLISHING HISTORY OF THE 'BROTHERS BELL' (1846–57)

That the brothers found the 'bringing out of our little book . . . hard

work' is unsurprising in view of their inexperience and the current lack of enthusiasm for poetry on the part of most publishers, a state of affairs acknowledged by Charlotte in her letter of September 1848 to George Smith, '... "the Trade" are not very fond of hearing about Poetry ... it is but too often a profitless encumbrance on the shelves of the bookseller's shop.'<sup>9</sup> As a last resort Charlotte applied for advice to the Scottish publishers, W. & R. Chambers of Edinburgh, who sent a short sensible reply, 'on which we acted and at last made way'.<sup>10</sup> The 'way' lay through Messrs Aylott and Jones of Paternoster Row, London, who were booksellers and stationers as well as publishers. As G. D. Hargreaves argues in his pioneering essay on the publishing of the *Poems*, Chambers probably recommended the firm to Charlotte 'in the role of stationers who would be prepared to undertake the publication ... "on the authors' account", as Charlotte's first letter to them, on 28 January 1846, suggests'.<sup>11</sup> The procedure was common practice, and the agreement probably stipulated that the authors would retain their copyright, pay production costs, receive the money from sales, and pay the publishers a commission for their help in getting the book out. The records show that the cost of production in this case (including printing, paper and advertising) was at least £37.18.3. It appears that 1,000 copies were printed, a huge over-estimate (250 copies would have been nearer normal practice).<sup>12</sup>

Once the agreement was completed, things moved fast; Charlotte sent off the MS. (now lost) on 5 February, learning some two weeks later that the volume would be 'thinner' than she had thought;<sup>13</sup> proofs arrived throughout April; three advance copies in their green cloth binding had arrived at the parsonage by 7 May; and the volume was out by the end of May 1846. One year later, Charlotte posted copies to various well-known literary figures, notably Wordsworth, Tennyson, Lockhart<sup>14</sup> and De Quincey, accompanied in each case by the same wry little missive, dated 16 June 1847:

... our book is found to be a drug; no man heeds or needs it. In the space of a year our publisher has disposed of but two copies, and by what painful efforts he succeeded in getting rid of these two, himself only knows.

Before transferring the edition to the trunkmakers, we have decided on distributing as presents a few copies of what we cannot sell - we beg to offer you one in acknowledgment of the pleasure and profit we have often derived from your works (*LL*, ii, 136).

This sad anti-climax does not reflect the kindly opinions which the

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poems won from the handful of people who read them, and the book's subsequent history was brighter. Some eighteen months later, Charlotte's new publishers, Smith, Elder and Company, who were now enjoying *Jane Eyre's* success, met Aylott and Jones's inquiry about the disposal of the remaining 961 copies by buying up the stock at 6d a copy.<sup>16</sup> They reissued the work almost at once, in the autumn of 1848, with a new binding and title-page, but retaining the original date. The new edition made no dramatic impact, but had sold 279 copies by July 1853. The publishers appear to have had good hopes that sales would benefit by the publication of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, for in 1857 they had 450 copies bound up in readiness.<sup>16</sup> They were right to the extent that the principal reviews of the *Life* reconsidered the Brontës' poems, along with the rest of their writings, giving them closer and more discriminating attention than any they had yet received.

During the April of 1846, encouraged by the excitement of seeing their first work in proof, the sisters offered to Aylott and Jones<sup>17</sup>

... a work of fiction, consisting of three distinct and unconnected tales which may be published either together as a work of 3 vols of the ordinary novel size, or separately as single vols. as shall be deemed most advisable . . .

This time, the authors had no intention of publishing the work 'on their own account'. The 'tales' were *The Professor*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, on which the sisters had been working closely for several months. As 'the brothers Bell', they may have had in mind, as a precedent for separate tales published together, the work of the 'brothers O'Hara', otherwise John and Michael Banim, who published their *Tales by the O'Hara Family* in 1825. *Wuthering Heights* fleetingly recalled to one early reviewer (No. 63), John Banim's addition to the O'Hara tales, *The Nowlans* (1826). Aylott and Jones refused the undertaking,<sup>18</sup> but offered useful advice and the tales were sent out with a brief covering letter, dated 4 July 1846, to Henry Colburn, the first of the publishers upon whom, during 1846-7, the MSS were, in Charlotte's words, 'perseveringly obtruded'. Her own and Mrs Gaskell's accounts differ over the exact length of time that elapsed and the number of publishers who were approached before *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were accepted by Thomas Newby some time in the summer of 1847. Nor is it clear at what stage in its pilgrimage *The Professor* was offered separately from the other two. Charlotte's 'Biographical Notice' of 1850 has it that 'various' publishers were

approached 'for the space of a year and a half' until Emily's and Anne's novels 'were accepted on terms somewhat impoverishing to the two authors. Currer Bell's book found acceptance nowhere . . . As a forlorn hope he tried one publishing house more - Messrs Smith and Elder.'

According to Mrs Gaskell, 'the three tales . . . tried their fate in vain together; at length they were sent forth separately, and for many months with still-continued ill success.'<sup>19</sup> We do know from Charlotte's letters that the MS. of *The Professor* was rejected six times before being sent to Smith's on 15 July 1847 (see p. 13), and that proof sheets of Emily's and Anne's novels were ready at Newby's by the beginning of August;<sup>20</sup> Mrs Gaskell adds that their MSS were 'lying in his hands . . . during all the months of early summer . . .'<sup>21</sup>

Seemingly, then, Emily and Anne had to wait rather less than a year, not 'a year and a half', before Thomas Cautley Newby, the publisher, bookseller and printer, whose list of authors included 'the O'Haras', the prolific G. P. R. James and, for a brief spell, Anthony Trollope, agreed to publish *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. He has won no golden opinions for this transaction for his terms were ungenerous and he was dilatory in honouring them. His dishonesty in exploiting other publishers' successes which so distressed 'the Bells' (their mysterious identities were a windfall for him), was also to distress George Eliot twelve years later at the time of *Adam Bede*. Charlotte's allusions to Newby are invariably uncomplimentary, and his chief claim to fame today is the procrastination which permitted 'Ellis's' and 'Acton's' work to languish on his shelves throughout most of the period - mid-July to October 1847 - during which the energetic George Smith first rejected 'Currer's' *The Professor*, and then accepted, published and successfully launched her *Jane Eyre*. 'Mr Newby does not do business like Messrs Smith and Elder,' Charlotte wrote on 10 November 1847 to W. S. Williams, the firm's sympathetic literary adviser, 'Mr Newby shuffles, gives his word and breaks it . . . I have to acknowledge the benefits of a management at once businesslike and gentlemanlike, energetic and considerate.'<sup>22</sup> By this time, Newby, stung into action by *Jane Eyre's* success, had sent proof-sheets to Haworth for correction. The two novels were published in the following month, December 1847, in a three-volume edition, with *Wuthering Heights* occupying two volumes and *Agnes Grey* making up the third.

Charlotte's distrust of Newby was justified. According to her account of his agreement with her sisters, he arranged to print 350

copies of the edition, to receive £20 from the authors towards expenses, and to refund this on the sale of 250 copies, which would 'leave a surplus of £100 to be divided';<sup>23</sup> yet by September 1850, when the work was, as Charlotte says, seemingly entirely out of print, no part either of the £50 or the promised £100 had been received.<sup>24</sup> Moreover the first copies, as Charlotte complained in December 1847, were shoddily produced and abounded in printing errors.<sup>25</sup> More serious still, Newby had set about his task of confusing the identities of the Bells – and so affecting the course of contemporary criticism – by phrasing his advertisements so that his 'Ellis Bell' might be taken for Smith's best-selling 'Currer Bell'. *Wuthering Heights* was advertised as 'By the successful New Novelist' (*Douglas Jerrold's Magazine*, 5 February 1848), and as 'Mr Bell's new novel' (*Examiner*, 19 February 1848). The climax of his sharp practice came in the summer of 1848, though some of the blame for this must be shared by Emily and Anne, whose scruples forbade them to transfer their allegiance to Charlotte's publishers.<sup>26</sup> Emily's continued commitment seems to be indicated by Newby's letter expressing 'great pleasure in making arrangements for your next novel',<sup>27</sup> and Anne let him have her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which she had been working on since the winter of 1847 and which he published in 1848. His terms were better than before,<sup>28</sup> but his behaviour was not. His juggling advertisements now suggested that it was 'Acton' who had written all the 'Bell' novels. Impressive passages were lifted from reviews of *Wuthering Heights* – 'the work is strangely original. It reminds us of *Jane Eyre*. The author is a Salvator Rosa with his pen' (*Britannia*, No. 60), 'A Colossal Performance' (see the *Atlas*, No. 63) – to imply that 'Acton's' *Agnes Grey* had prompted this praise. Worst of all, he encouraged Harper Brothers of New York to bid for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, this time by allowing them to believe that it was written – along with all the other 'Bell' novels – by 'Currer Bell'.<sup>29</sup> The news got back to Smith's, who had made their own arrangements with another American publisher for the sale of *Jane Eyre*. Newby's manoeuvres shocked even more the three sisters at Haworth. When Smith's inquiry reached them, on 7 July 1848, Charlotte and Anne at once made their celebrated journey to London to set the record straight by presenting to George Smith at least two of the 'brothers Bell' for the first time in person. (Emily, as usual, was not to be dislodged, and kept the fort at home.)

Newby's part in the publishing history of the Bells was now virtually



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over. In the excitement of the first encounter with Smith, vividly described by Charlotte in her letter to Mary Taylor, their interview with Newby seems to have paled into insignificance, for Charlotte barely mentions it; we do learn, though, that when 'explanations were rapidly gone into', Smith reacted robustly and Newby was 'anathematised, I fear, with undue vehemence . . .'<sup>80</sup> He seems to have tried his old tricks again at the close of 1848, for Charlotte wrote to W. S. Williams on 7 December,

. . . I am indeed surprised that Mr Newby should say that he is to publish another work by Ellis and Acton Bell. Acton has had quite enough of him . . . by . . . petty and contemptible manoeuvring he throws an air of charlatany over the works of which he has the management. This does not suit 'the Bells'; they have their own rude north-country ideas of what is delicate, honourable and gentlemanlike . . .

She also informs him that<sup>81</sup>

'Ellis Bell' is at present in no condition to trouble himself with thoughts either of writing or publishing. Should it please Heaven to restore his health and strength, he reserves to himself the right of deciding whether or not Mr Newby has forfeited every claim to his second work . . .

Twelve days later Emily was dead. Anne died in the following May. In the winter of 1850, Smith obtained from Newby his rights to their novels and published a second edition, adding a selection of their poems along with Charlotte's 'Biographical Notice' and her critical preface to *Wuthering Heights*, all of which helped to settle most of the lingering doubts about the separate identities of 'Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell'.

'Currer Bell's' publishing history is altogether more straightforward, thanks to 'the management at once businesslike and gentlemanlike, energetic and considerate' – though less financially rewarding than it should have been – which she encountered at Smith, Elder, to whom she had sent the MS. of *The Professor* in July 1847, 'as a forlorn hope'. George Smith recalled in 1900 the arrival of the MS.<sup>82</sup>

. . . addressed to the firm, but bearing the scored out addresses of three or four publishing houses, showing that the parcel had been previously submitted to the publishers. This was not calculated to prepossess us in favour of the MS . . .

The story was lacking in colour and narrative interest, and was too short to sell widely at a time when the 'three-decker' was in vogue. But the reasons for refusing it were courteously given, literary promise

was detected, and it was added 'that a work in three volumes would meet with careful attention . . .'<sup>33</sup> Charlotte replied on 6 August that she had a narrative of this length in progress, 'to which I have endeavoured to import a more vivid interest . . . In about a month I hope to finish it.'<sup>34</sup> In fact she posted the MS. of *Jane Eyre* to Smith's on 24 August 1847, just a year after she had begun work on it,<sup>35</sup> and less than three weeks after writing this letter. It was published only six weeks later on 16 October in a three-volume edition entitled *Jane Eyre. An Autobiography. Edited by Currer Bell*. A second edition was called for by the end of the year and a third by the spring of 1848. For the second edition, the title was changed to *Jane Eyre. An Autobiography. By Currer Bell* (the fiction about the 'editor' was inadvertently preserved on the spine), and a preface added, in which 'Currer Bell' thanked the public, the press and the publishers for their generosity to an unknown author. She also included a dedication, cast in elevated terms, to her admired fellow-novelist, Thackeray. The third edition, published in April 1848, carried an author's 'Note' disclaiming all titles to any novels other than 'this one work alone', an obvious attempt to dispel the confusion about the identity of 'the Bells' which had recently been increased by Newby's chicanery.

Charlotte's second novel, *Shirley*, meditated as early as mid-December 1847,<sup>36</sup> took her nearly twice as long to complete. The first two volumes went well until the bleak months from September 1848 to May 1849 when she saw first her brother and then her two sisters die one after another. She toiled slowly through the third volume during the lonely summer of 1849, dispatched the MS. in early September, and saw the novel published on 26 October 1849. It was reissued in a one-volume edition three years later, on 19 August 1852. Her third novel, *Villette*, published 24 January 1853, again took her virtually two years to write. She began it early in 1851, worked on it laboriously with intermissions of ill-health and depression, and finally managed to finish it by November 1852.

Earlier, she had made two unsuccessful attempts to interest the firm in publishing a revised version of *The Professor*, once in the winter of 1847-8,<sup>37</sup> and again early in 1851. By 5 February 1851, she had 'yielded with ignoble facility in the matter of *The Professor*', as she put it in her letter to Smith, adding wryly, '[it] has now had the honour of being rejected nine times by the "Trade" (three rejections go to your own share).'<sup>38</sup> Eventually, in 1856, the year after her death, the MS. was carried off in triumph by Mrs Gaskell, who, with the aid of Sir James

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Kay Shuttleworth, rescued it with other Brontë papers from the guarded possession of Charlotte's husband, the Reverend Arthur Nicholls.<sup>39</sup> After various misgivings, including Nicholls's fear that the story might seem merely to go over the same ground as *Villette*, and Mrs Gaskell's worries about the possible need for revision, it was published, unrevised, in 1857, with Charlotte's preface and a brief note by Arthur Nicholls, dated 22 September 1856. The note states that Charlotte had written her preface 'shortly after the publication of *Shirley*', which suggests that she had given *The Professor* further serious thought late in 1849.<sup>40</sup>

One must assume that Smith, Elder concluded their agreement to publish *The Professor* on the same terms that had been agreed with Charlotte for her other three novels. Details concerning the editions and sales of all the Brontë novels are lodged – for the moment inaccessible – with the publishing house of John Murray,<sup>41</sup> but we do know from Charlotte that she earned in all £1,500 from her novels (£500 each). Considering that she was a best-selling author, and certainly enhanced her publishers' reputation, this was not a great deal. She herself expected more generous treatment for *Villette*: 'Papa . . . expected me to earn £700 – nor did I – myself – anticipate that a lower sum would be offered; however £500 is not to be despised.'<sup>42</sup> Mrs Gaskell was much tougher with Smith. Reminding him that she had received £600 from Chapman for *North and South*, she stood out successfully for £800 in payment for *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.<sup>43</sup>

## CHARLOTTE BRONTË AND W. S. WILLIAMS

It would be unjust and inaccurate to discuss Charlotte's early literary reputation without recording the part played in its initial stages by George Smith's literary adviser, William Smith Williams (1800–75), the mild-mannered older man whom Smith had rescued from his detested post of book-keeper with the firm of lithographers undertaking Smith, Elder's artistic work.<sup>44</sup> The prompt action was characteristic of the energetic practical intelligence which ensured the firm's success. George Smith (1824–1901) was only twenty-three when Charlotte first sent her work to him and had recently assumed responsibility for the business,<sup>45</sup> whose standing so far had rested chiefly on the *Annual*, *Friendship's Offering* (1823–43), and a series on scientific voyages, including Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839). It was after their initial dealings with Charlotte that the firm added to their lists

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the names of Matthew Arnold, Ruskin, Browning, Thackeray and Mrs Gaskell (the inclusion of the last two was largely owed to the firm's success with Charlotte). In these undertakings Smith's enterprise was complemented by the sensitive judgment of his reader. Williams, who was perhaps a writer *manqué*, had been involved in literary affairs since his days as an apprentice with Keats's publishers, Taylor and Hessey; in 1820 he saw Keats off to Italy on his last journey, and it is thought that he may have been the author of an early pseudonymous sonnet in praise of Keats's poetic achievement.<sup>46</sup> He had met various other writers of the Romantic period, and when Smith discovered him in 1845 he was trying to keep up his literary interests by writing dramatic reviews for the *Spectator*, though he found the editor, R. S. Rintoul, excessively chilly – 'The *Spectator* is not enthusiastic', Rintoul is reported to have said, 'and must not be.'<sup>47</sup> Williams may well have related this tale to Charlotte when the *Spectator*'s reviews of her own and her sisters' work continued to abide by this principle (see p. 22). His special liking for Turner won him the respect of Ruskin, a selection of whose writings he published in 1861. He displayed his habitual discernment when he saw that if *The Professor* must be rejected, its author must nevertheless be encouraged to try again. He did everything to promote *Jane Eyre* once it was out, skilfully selecting recipients of presentation copies from among contemporary literary personalities – his most striking choice, as it turned out, was G. H. Lewes, who was one of the keenest and certainly the most persistent of the Brontës' Victorian reviewers (see p. 24). Williams then urged Charlotte to persevere with her 'second attempt', wrote encouragingly to her during the long periods of depression in 1849, and again during the months of loneliness and ill-health in 1851–2 when she was writing *Villette*. Throughout the entire period, he helped her by his friendly sober letters, filled with good advice, discussions of her reviews and general literary talk – all of which can be glimpsed through her replies. He stimulated, then, most of her exclusively 'literary' letters. These provide, among other things, a lively running commentary on her own critics and reviewers, which itself throws light on our 'critical heritage' and is in consequence liberally drawn upon in the headnotes below. Her letters to Williams also include her revealing reactions to the regular, thoughtfully selected, gifts of books sent by himself and Smith, possibly the most influential gifts ever made by a publishing firm to one of their writers. The books were eagerly awaited, read and talked over by the inmates of the parsonage

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during 1848, and later were opened in solitude by the lonely survivor, whose major link with the outside world they remained until December 1853, when the pattern of her life began to change and she requested her correspondent, a little brusquely, 'not to select or send any more books. These courtesies must cease some day, and I would rather give them up than wear them out . . .'<sup>48</sup> Her respect for Williams was saluted after her death by Mrs Gaskell. 'My own feeling as to any revision [of *The Professor*]', she told George Smith in 1856, 'would be that Mr Williams should undertake it. I believe . . . that he would have been the person she would have chosen . . .'<sup>49</sup> His liking for that novel had survived Charlotte's two unsuccessful attempts to persuade the firm to publish a revised version; ' . . . its merits, I plainly perceive,' she had said in 1851, 'will never be owned by anybody but Mr Williams and me . . .'<sup>50</sup>

### THE BRONTËS' EARLY CRITICAL REPUTATION (1846-56)

The first decade of the Brontës' critical reputation opens with the publication in 1846 of the *Poems* and closes with the earliest attempts to set before the public substantial biographical and critical accounts of 'the Bells'. Even though recognition would be dramatically extended the following year with the publication of Mrs Gaskell's *Life*, it is still true to say that by 1856 Charlotte's literary reputation was secure, Emily's originality was acknowledged – it is in the 1850s that a growing number of contemporary literary figures begin to express their admiration for her peculiar gifts – and Anne, after the flurry about her 'disagreeable' subject-matter in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had died down, was already settled in her familiar shaded place beside her more famous sisters. In December 1852, that is even before the publication of *Villette*, the *Nonconformist* enthusiastically welcomed the cheap edition of 'the series of noble novels by the Bells', spoke sympathetically of 'the author of *Wuthering Heights*' and found her novel to be 'nearly as wonderful in its way as *Jane Eyre*'.<sup>51</sup>

The twentieth century, then, cannot claim any monopoly of insight in distinguishing the Brontës' giftedness, since there was early recognition for their grasp of particular detail, their lively feeling for character, and their possession of a creative intensity which did not stop to calculate the ins and outs of current tastes and expectations. Nor was it long before there was acceptance as well as recognition of the fact that their genius was entangled with elements of the crude and

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naïve, though perhaps it has needed the longer perspective of the present age to see that these ingredients were an inevitable part of their genius, at once ensuring and restricting its imaginative vitality. If we set aside the more sophisticated methods of modern academic criticism, early-Victorian reviews differ noticeably from our own chiefly because of the long-winded style then favoured (the habit of moral expatiation is closely associated with it) and the absence of detailed attention to particular narrative procedures, though interest in the novel as a literary form is lively and grows with the growing importance of the novel throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> A nearer approach to the cooler manner and the more searching assessments found acceptable today is discovered in some later criticism, for example Leslie Stephen's dryly intelligent piece of 1877 on Charlotte Brontë, included in his *Hours in a Library* (1879), which replies to Swinburne's verbose eulogy in his monograph of the same year, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (Nos 108, 109). Swinburne's perceptive later piece on Emily Brontë, written in 1883 as a notice of Mary Robinson's recently published *Emily Brontë* (Nos 111, 112), is a very different matter, anticipating among other things twentieth-century interest in the nature and effects of the 'poetic' novel.<sup>53</sup>

### *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* (1846)

Although the *Poems* received only three reviews of any substance, all of which are represented below, the tone of each was friendly, and two out of the three made a point of distinguishing 'Ellis' from her sisters. The *Critic* (No. 1), which alone devoted its attention exclusively to 'the Bells', quoted three of 'Ellis's' poems to 'Currer's' two and 'Acton's' one, and the *Athenaeum*, in its survey of current verse entitled 'Poetry of the Million' (No. 2), judged that 'Acton's' qualities 'require the indulgence of affection', 'Currer's' muse 'walks half way' between 'Acton's' and 'Ellis's', and 'Ellis's' gifts 'rise into an inspiration which may yet find an audience in the outer world'. The third review, in the *Dublin University Magazine* (No. 3), praised the three 'Bells' with less discernment as 'uniform in a sort of Cowperian amiability and sweetness'. This article, unsigned like the others but now known to have been written by William Butler, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin, is an excessively long-winded and rambling commentary, designed to be the first in a series entitled 'Evenings with our Younger Poets'. Apparently it greatly impressed Charlotte and her sisters (see p. 63).

It was not for want of trying that the book was sparsely reviewed. On 7 May 1846, in the first flush of that hopeful 'effort to succeed', Charlotte had directed Aylott and Jones to send copies of the *Poems* and advertisements 'as soon as possible' to eight periodicals (*Colburn's New Monthly Magazine*, *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Hood's Magazine*, *Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *Edinburgh Review*, *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Dublin University Magazine*) and two newspapers (the *Daily News* and the *Britannia*).<sup>54</sup> The publishers, it seems, added to the list the *Athenaeum*, the *Literary Gazette*, the *Critic* and *The Times*.<sup>55</sup> The sisters were thus in a sense indebted to their publishers for their two most perceptive reviews. During the next few years most of these (and many other) newspapers and periodicals would be reviewing work by one or other of the Brontës as a matter of course. The *Britannia*, which did not review the *Poems*, nevertheless remembered the *Poems* in its review of *Shirley* (No. 31), and devoted space to linking Charlotte's narrative poems with her novelistic skills; it was also to carry one of the more discriminating of the first reviews of *Wuthering Heights* (No. 60). Of the periodicals which did notice the *Poems*, the *Critic* always remained kindly disposed to all the Brontës, thus ensuring Charlotte's gratitude, for she was quick to respond whenever her sisters' qualities were recognized (headnote, No. 32). The *Athenaeum*, in spite of what Charlotte considered to be its somewhat lofty tone (headnote, No. 7), sustained its interest over a period of nearly forty years; it joined in controversies over details in Mrs Gaskell's *Life* and in 1883 it published Swinburne's influential essay on Emily Brontë, thus finally setting the seal on its early prophecy about her future fame.

The Brontës' companions in these reviews of their *Poems*, and the reviewers' uncomplimentary references to the many small volumes of new verse which they had ignored, help to explain why 'the Bells' were not widely noticed and why 'the Trade' was so little interested in publishing poetry (see p. 8). 'Amid the heaps of trash and trumpery in the shape of verses which lumber the table of the literary journalist,' remarked the *Critic*, 'this small book . . . has come like a ray of sunshine . . .' William Butler's 'trembling candidates for fame' include – 'the Bells' apart – no figures more dazzling than Claire Toumlin and the not-so-young R. H. Horne.<sup>56</sup> In this context the Brontës' restricted range mattered less than their 'true voice of feeling', the quality by which in the end all their work, unequal as it is, must either stand or fall. The quality may have recalled to these reviewers the memory of

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more distinguished poetic figures. The *Critic* discovered 'traces of Wordsworth, perhaps of Tennyson'. Butler, who shared his age's veneration for Wordsworth (he had just visited him in the Lakes), muses at length upon Wordsworth's achievement and upon the characteristics, as he sees them, of modern poetry, especially its plan-gent melancholy, its 'refined Pantheism' and the not-too-rarefied idealism informing its treatment of love. He does not situate 'the Bells' in this context beyond offering them benevolent encouragement to persevere. So long as there is the smallest indication of talent in a newcomer, he says, he is prepared to set aside for a time Shakespeare, Milton and 'the glittering *eau de vie* of Moore . . . the sterling "parliament" of George Crabbe . . . the "half and half" of Southey and Shelley and Keats . . .',<sup>57</sup> a catalogue which has its own interest as an index of current literary taste. Butler's encouragement and his general reflections prompted Charlotte to write a letter of thanks to the editor of the *Dublin University Magazine* (see headnote, No. 3). She also proposed to Aylott and Jones that a short extract from the review in the *Critic* should be used in any further advertisements of their book (see head-note, No. 1).

It is likely that 'Curren' and 'Acton', without 'Ellis' to support them, would have won no more enthusiastic response than the *Athenaeum's* forbearing remarks about the two Hersee sisters, members of whose family, it was felt, would be gratified by their appearance in print. Charlotte, as she explains, brought her own poems out of hiding chiefly in order to overcome Emily's distaste for publicity, and Anne had followed suit. She had no illusions about their quality (though their narrative interest is more engaging than Anne's melancholy piety), and in 1850 described them as 'juvenile productions written . . . before taste was chastened or judgment matured . . . they now appear to me very crude.'<sup>58</sup> The handful of rather colourless but not disrespectful reviews of the reprint of the *Poems* in 1848 gave her little pleasure. The *Standard of Freedom* and the *Morning Herald* ought to have 'more fully recognised Ellis Bell's merits', and the *Spectator* (No. 4) especially incensed her because, 'blind as any bat', it had failed to recognize Emily's supremacy.<sup>59</sup> She would have warmed to such readers as Peter Bayne and the unidentified 'W.P.P.', who ten years later, took Emily's poems seriously (No. 93 and see p. 21), and even more to those reviewers of Mrs Gaskell's *Life* in 1857 who made a point of celebrating Emily's 'wild and plaintive music', which was so hauntingly associated with the purity and austerity of her literary style.



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Some readers who were at first unenthusiastic – for example, Charles Kingsley (No. 96) – were drawn to look again at her poetry and found that they had earlier missed the signs of a genuine imaginative talent. But it was not until much later that any real attempt was made to link Emily's poetry with her novel, and even so more than another half century had to pass before the thought and feeling in the one was related to the impassioned themes and disciplined structure of the other.<sup>60</sup> By this time criticism was able to benefit from C. W. Hatfield's authoritative text of all Emily's poems, based on careful research into the original manuscripts.<sup>61</sup> Such research also helped to establish which of the poems had originated in Emily's Gondal stage and which were 'personal', though the critical consensus understandably remaining today is that in most important respects this is a distinction without a difference.

*Jane Eyre* (1847); *Shirley* (1849); *Villette* (1853)

Throughout her lifetime, Charlotte's reputation as a novelist rested upon the above three books. Its progress is not hard to outline, though the movements of critical opinion shaping it are sufficiently complex. With *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte found herself overnight the author of an immediate popular success. *Jane Eyre* became at once a fashionable topic of conversation in literary circles and also the target for a few self-appointed guardians of public morality who warned against its 'improprieties'; but its author's claim to serious literary standing was left open until the publication of *Villette*. Since the successor to a best-selling first novel invites a reaction of disappointment, Charlotte's second book needed to be very strong indeed in order to win a genuine *succès d'estime*. As it turned out, *Shirley* received wide attention, most of it respectful; a minority even applauded because it was less melodramatically colourful than its predecessor. But its virtues, notably its sharp observation of Yorkshire scenes and characters, were ultimately found insufficient to make up for its diminished narrative verve, the improbabilities in its main story, and its loose construction. Judgment concerning 'Currer Bell's' literary position was accordingly suspended until the appearance of *Villette*, when most doubts were removed. Lucy Snowe's sombre autobiographical narrative made painful reading for many admirers, but the book won acclaim for its truth, intensity and elevated moral feeling. Reproach for the melancholy which broods over the work in spite of its lively feeling for persons and places was usually offered in sorrow rather than anger, for by this time most

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reviewers knew who 'Currer Bell' was and what her life had been. On Charlotte Brontë's death in 1855 these feelings of admiration and pity were widely shared. 'W.P.P.', who himself 'felt no ordinary sorrow', quotes representative passages from the torrent of obituaries in the press:

softly, quietly, she went her way . . . such memorials of her as are ours have become pregnant with new meanings,

and again:

Her name is one which belongs to no dilettante associations, no trivial anecdote, no trapping of literary pomp and vanity . . . Henceforth it is a thought for the wakeful midwatches of the night, is a household word for the melancholy dusk. Behold! how we loved her.<sup>62</sup>

The *Daily News* carried Harriet Martineau's well-known (and luckily more trenchantly expressed) tribute to the 'gifted creature' whose loss would be felt throughout the country (No. 88). *Fraser's Magazine* printed 'Haworth churchyard', Matthew Arnold's elegiac tribute to all three sisters (No. 89).

The early controversies about the 'immorality' of the Brontës were recalled after Charlotte's death by admirers whose views suggest that it is not easy to draw a clear line, as has been attempted, between the relatively open-minded 1840s and the increasingly prudish 1850s.<sup>63</sup> The *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* of 1856 (No. 91) placed Charlotte beside Thackeray – the comparison would have gratified her deeply – as a ruthless adversary of pretence, and scorned those who saw *Jane Eyre* as 'an immoral production and Currer Bell as the treacherous advocate of contempt of established maxims and disregard of the regulations of society'. Such an attitude exemplified the fault 'which the Pharisees found with the teachings of the Saviour'. 'W.P.P.' saw the sisters as highly educated women who 'evinced their true modesty most forcibly by writing freely and truthfully on all subjects whether they were what Mrs Grundy – detestable old bugbear! – would call delicate or not'.

It is impossible to separate the reasons for early misgivings about 'Currer Bell's' moral values from those which made her work so attractive to the majority of her readers. She was, in effect, an original writer and the mixed reactions are in keeping. The spectrum of contemporary opinion about her is reflected in the periodicals whose particular religious or political bias usually flavours their literary

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reviews. The radical *Examiner*, though it could be shrewdly critical, always approved of 'Currer Bell' (as she approved of it); the high-and-dry 'organs of the High Church', the *Guardian* and the *Christian Remembrancer*, though wishing to be liberal, took exception to her unsettling individualism; and R. S. Rintoul's *Spectator*, watchful for the 'respectable families' for whom it catered,<sup>64</sup> failed to unbend until seemingly convinced by *Villette* that 'Currer Bell' was unlikely to bring a blush to the domestic cheek. On the other hand, the *Quarterly Review*'s celebrated attack on *Jane Eyre* in no way reflected editorial opinion, since Lockhart was enthusiastic about the Brontës and seems not to have foreseen that his reviewer, Elizabeth Rigby, would find the book offensive (Nos 13, 22).

Whatever the political or religious leanings of individual reviewers, there was general agreement about the new writer's 'extraordinary freshness and originality'. The phrase is taken from the review of *Jane Eyre* in the *Church of England Quarterly* for April 1848, which broke its rule never to review novels, because this one was so enthralling and had created such a powerful impression in the six months since its appearance. Its praise was tempered with the warning that 'Currer Bell's' heroine was 'a merely moral person', and, for any real sign of Christianity discoverable in her nature, 'might have been a Mohammedan or a Hindoo'.<sup>65</sup> 'Power', 'originality', 'freshness', 'vigour', 'truth' are the key words in the reviews of 1847 to 1848. This novel was 'different'. According to an early notice in the *Weekly Chronicle* it was 'the most extraordinary production that has issued from the press for years'.<sup>66</sup> For the *Tablet*, in another early notice, 'it was not at all a conventional novel'.<sup>67</sup> Some attempts were made to show how it was 'different'. For example, the *Era* of November 1847 (No. 11) refused to describe it as a 'mere novel' because

there is nothing but truth and nature about it . . . nothing morbid, nothing vague, nothing improbable . . . no high life glorified, caricatured, or libelled; nor low life elevated to an enviable state of bliss; neither have we vice made charming. The story is . . . unlike all that we have read . . . Bulwer, [G.P.R.] James, D'Israeli, and all the serious novel writers of the day lose in comparison.

The qualities associated by the *Era* with 'mere' novels and its unimpressive roll-call of authors are a reminder that 'Currer Bell's' success with *Jane Eyre* owed much to its timing. Her first novel made its appearance in the somewhat dismal interval between, on the one hand, the days of Jane Austen and Scott, and, on the other, the most

eventful period in the novel's history. Looking back in 1883, Swinburne compared the rise of the Victorian novel to the flowering of Elizabethan drama, a comparison also made by several other critics writing after the 1850s. The range and variety which prompted the comparison began to manifest themselves in the three years immediately following the publication of *Jane Eyre*, when there appeared Thackeray's masterpiece, *Vanity Fair* (1847-8); Trollope's first two novels, *The Macdermots of Ballycoran* (1847) and *The Kelly's and the O'Kelly's* (1848); Mrs Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848); Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50); and Charles Kingsley's social novels, *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850). All the Brontë novels, with the exception of *Villette*, belong to the same short period. Within a decade, these writers, who were by then established household names, were to be joined by George Eliot, whose major achievement spans the mid-Victorian years.

But the reviewers of the late 1840s and early 1850s could not know that they stood on the threshold of so rich an age for fiction. Charlotte's companions in early reviews include numbers of minor writers whose names are now hardly remembered outside specialist studies – Mrs Marsh, Lady Georgina Fullerton, Marmion Savage, Harriet Smythies. Signs of the changing times emerge in comparisons which begin to be made quite soon between 'Currer Bell's' Lowood and Dickens's Dotheboys Hall; in the reviewing from late 1848 of *Jane Eyre* alongside *Vanity Fair*; and in the various parallels drawn in 1849 between *Shirley* and *Mary Barton* and in 1853 between *Villette* and *Ruth*. Even so, it was still possible for a reviewer of *Villette* in the *Morning Advertiser* of 4 February 1853 to write in much the same terms as the *Era*'s review of *Jane Eyre* in 1847. 'Currer Bell's' books could not be classed, he felt, under the 'generic term "novel"', because they replaced 'frivolity of style', 'morbid excitement' and 'defiance of probability' with 'the strength of true feeling . . . and robust common sense'.<sup>68</sup>

In spite of failures by reviewers to discern larger movements at work in the fiction of the time, there was no mistaking that 'Currer Bell's' personal innovations lay, as the *Morning Advertiser* emphasized, in her truthful observation of everyday reality heightened by intense feeling, a combination which betrays her affinity with one strain of Romanticism. Mrs Humphry Ward, in 1899, was the first to attempt a close definition of the Brontës' relationship with the whole movement of European Romanticism, but early reviewers glance at Byronic elements in her work (see, for example, the *Examiner*, No. 27) and link

her with George Sand, towards whom Charlotte, like many of her contemporaries, was strongly drawn. The *Dublin University Magazine*, for example, detected a resemblance between *Jane Eyre* and *Consuelo*.<sup>69</sup> Swinburne was to return to this comparison in the 1870s (No. 108), but among early reviewers it was George Lewes who was most impressed by the kinship. He lent Charlotte some of George Sand's novels in the autumn of 1850 and received an enthusiastic letter in response.<sup>70</sup> One of the latest of his many reviews of the Brontës opens with the declaration, 'In *Passion and Power* – those noble twins of Genius – Curren Bell has no living rival except George Sand' (No. 45).

Lewes, who also responded ardently to Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (Nos 83, 94), was the most energetic spokesman for those who felt that the union of truthful observation and personal feeling in 'Curren Bell' made up for the weaknesses and improbabilities which in any less passionate writer would be fatally disabling. His enthusiasm derived from his delight in the writer's individual voice, the truth in the depiction of her central figures, her lively descriptive gifts and fresh sense of place, the robust English style which served these gifts, and – informing all – her 'passion and power'. His unfavourable review of *Shirley* (No. 39) made her 'sick' with distaste because of its clumsy insistence on the role of women writers and, though she only hints at this, its painful home truths about the inexperience of life which impaired the portrayal of Caroline's mother, Mrs Prior.<sup>71</sup> But his central criticism sprang in fact from his disappointment at the disappearance of the personal urgency which drives on the narrative in *Jane Eyre*. Its return in *Villette* he warmly welcomed (No. 45). He understood that the extravagances which had marred *Jane Eyre* and which also disfigured *Shirley* – for example, in the improbable behaviour of the Moore brothers – originated in that same powerful feeling, but in these instances undisciplined by truthful observation of human behaviour. This attitude explains his prescribing for Charlotte a course of reading in Jane Austen, thus eliciting from his correspondent some of the liveliest condemnations of that novelist to appear.<sup>72</sup> The vigour of Charlotte's general reaction to Lewes indicates the degree to which she took what he said to heart. The entire relationship between Lewes and Charlotte is of peculiar interest. Whatever he was to become once his life was bound up with George Eliot's, and whatever may be said concerning the Goethean 'neo-classicism' of other of his reviews, his response to the Brontës – and especially to Emily, his '*bête fauve*' – was the impassioned response of a strongly romantic temperament.<sup>73</sup>

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G. H. Lewes was certainly not the only admirer who tried to strike a balance between the weaknesses and strengths of Charlotte Brontë's novels. Albany Fonblanque of the *Examiner* – whom with the Frenchman, Eugène Forçade, she counted among the most discerning of her critics (see headnote, No. 21) – attempted in his review of *Shirley* (No. 27) to explain what was meant by the 'coarseness' which for many had spoilt *Jane Eyre*:

We have it in a less degree in *Shirley*, but here it is. With a most delicate and intense perception of the beautiful, the writer combines a craving for stronger and rougher stimulants. She . . . lingers with evident liking amid society as rough and stern as the forms of nature which surround them . . . dwelling even on the purely repulsive in human character.

She has 'vividness', 'reality', 'vigour', and her 'power of graphic delineation . . . is intense . . .', but she lacks any quality, particularly humour, with which 'to soften and relieve the habit of harsh delineation . . .'. 'Coarseness' was an indefinite term. For Fonblanque, it seems to be chiefly associated in this case with the provincial setting, speech and behaviour of Charlotte's Yorkshire characters. For others it was associated with Charlotte's 'indecorous' presentation of her characters' love affairs. In *Jane Eyre*, the new author had disconcertingly chosen to make her heroine plain and poor but passionate, and to permit her to live under the same roof as Mr Rochester in a situation which invited charges of impropriety. There were fewer risks to social decorum in her later novels, but the lovers were still uncommonly bold in expressing their feelings, the passionate nature of the heroines was still insisted upon, and the principal male characters, eccentric in manner and inelegant in speech, were still as far as possible from being what Keats called 'Mr Lovels'. For others again, 'coarseness' had principally to do with the manner in which the author dealt with church matters and with religion, whether she was castigating curates or shuddering away from the excesses of 'Romanism'.

The underlying cause of the general uneasiness, whatever the particular 'coarseness' singled out, is perhaps best summed up by the *Christian Remembrancer's* declaration in the spring of 1848 that 'moral Jacobinism burned in every page of *Jane Eyre*' and that '“unjust, unjust” is the burden of every reflection upon the things and powers that be' (No. 16). Matthew Arnold, it will be remembered, detected 'hunger, rebellion and rage' yeasting everywhere in *Villette* (No. 53).<sup>74</sup> This impassioned individualism – akin in feeling if not belief to the 'proud,

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rugged, intellectual republicanism . . . bidding cant and lies be still', for which Froude in 1849 felt that the 'clergy gentleman, and the Church turned respectable' could be no match<sup>76</sup> – was precisely the quality most admired by Eugène Forçade (Nos 21, 33).

The fact that Charlotte was what the *Christian Remembrancer* called 'a good hater' of the 'things and powers that be' may well have stimulated the special animosity colouring the few really hostile attacks on her work, notably Elizabeth Rigby's attack on *Jane Eyre* in the *Quarterly* (No. 22). The severity of this review is remarkable since the reviewer, then on the eve of her happy marriage to the painter and art historian, Sir Charles Lock Eastlake (they married in 1849 and he was knighted in 1850), was, on all the evidence, not only lively and attractive but herself somewhat unconventional.<sup>78</sup> She condemned the heroine's 'vulgarity', Mr Rochester's coarseness and brutality, the author's ignorance of fashionable dress and behaviour, and the 'anti-Christian' nature of the book as a whole. If the novelist was female, then she must have 'for some sufficient reason long forfeited the society of her own sex', and if male, as the ignorance about women's clothes suggested, then the writer was no artist (this illogicality was immediately pounced on by the deeply offended Charlotte). Lockhart had passed on with the assignment the rumour that 'the Bells', a copy of whose *Poems* he had received in 1847, were Lancashire weavers,<sup>77</sup> one of the bizarre tales current at the time, and this may have produced its effect.

Elizabeth Rigby's piece appeared towards the close of 1848, more than a year after *Jane Eyre*'s publication, and provided talking-points for commentaries on the same book which, remarkably, were still coming out in 1849, and for the new crop of notices greeting *Shirley* at the end of that year. Her points about 'vulgarity' and 'lack of principle' were generally taken up only to be dismissed out of hand or placed in a reasonable critical perspective. There was still some surprised comment in the notices of *Shirley* about Charlotte's treatment of the relationship between men and women, though the growing consensus that 'Currer Bell' was a woman produced a mawkish tone in certain reviews which irritated her (headnote, No. 24). But her book generally gave little offence. The *Church of England Quarterly Review* in its brief notice (No. 37) now pronounced 'the moral tendency not open to serious objection', and appeared rather less pleased about this than disappointed that *Shirley* had less 'originality and freshness' than *Jane Eyre* and was 'inferior in point of interest'. The *Spectator* (No. 28), though chilly, found 'less coarseness', welcomed the greater variety of

characters and, not unreasonably, preferred the vivid realization of the social and historical background to the love relationships, which, as Lewes recognized, had more 'feeling' than 'truth'. Fonblanque, besides attempting to explain what he meant by 'coarseness', picked up from the *Examiner's* earlier review of *Jane Eyre* (No. 10) its comparison of 'Currer Bell's' novels with those of Godwin (both shared a greater interest in 'mental analysis as opposed to . . . events'), now adding that it 'might have taken Lord Byron within the range of comparison'. But 'Currer Bell' was found better than either writer, because she did not, like Godwin, 'subordinate human interests to moral theories, nor, like Byron, waste her strength in impetuous passion. Keen intellectual analysis is her forte . . .' (No. 27).

Setting aside the dismissive piece in *The Times* (No. 35), which stung her to tears by finding *Shirley* 'puerile', 'commonplace', and simultaneously 'high flown and dull', Charlotte had little to complain of in the treatment of *Shirley*. Nor could she complain about the response to *Villette* some three years later, in spite of two reviews, both written by women, which were in their various ways as upsetting as the *Quarterly's* review of *Jane Eyre* and the remarks from Lewes and *The Times* concerning *Shirley*. Apart from these there was little serious condemnation. 'Coarseness' was not mentioned with any strong emphasis, pleasure was taken in 'Currer Bell's' return to her absorbing autobiographical method, and everyone was intrigued – and many captivated – by her eccentric hero, Paul Emanuel. Even the two reviews by women admired the new book's skill and power.

The controversial reviews in question were Harriet Martineau's in the *Daily News* and Anne Mozley's in – once again – the *Christian Remembrancer* (Nos 41, 54). Both were unsigned, but Charlotte immediately recognized Harriet's authorship:<sup>78</sup>

Extremes meet, says the proverb . . . Miss Martineau finds with *Villette* nearly the same fault as the Puseyites – She accuses me with attacking Popery with virulence – of going out of my way to assault it 'passionately' . . . In other respects she has shown . . . a spirit . . . strangely and unexpectedly acrimonious.

Harriet was a staunch rationalist. Her 'Puseyite' opposite number in this case was Anne Mozley, sister of James Mozley, editor of the *Christian Remembrancer*. In her lengthy (and frequently admiring) article, Anne Mozley recalled the periodical's earlier attack on the 'outrages on decorum' in *Jane Eyre*, found some improvement in this respect in *Villette*, but deplored the narrowness displayed in the author's views on



## INTRODUCTION

'Romanism'. She ended by attacking the author's support for feminine independence, since a 'restless and vagrant imagination, though owned by woman, can have no sympathy or insight into the really feminine nature . . .' It is in the 'daily round of simple duties and pure pleasures' that its 'true happiness and satisfaction lie'. From her diametrically opposite point of view, Harriet also attacked Charlotte's view of women. She disliked the novel's overwhelming 'subjective misery' and the excessive concern of the female characters with the need for love – women, she argues, do have other interests, and the failure to take this into account is a limiting weakness in an otherwise splendid, even Balzacian, tale.

Charlotte found it difficult to forgive either reviewer. She wrote a pained letter to the editor of the *Christian Remembrancer* (headnote, No. 54 and p. 370 n.), and felt betrayed by Harriet, with whom – radically different as they were in outlook and temperament – she had been friendly since December 1849, and to whom she had gone for advice when bewildered by repeated references to the indelicate behaviour of her heroes and heroines. 'She could not make it out at all,' Harriet records, 'and wished that I could explain it.' Harriet tried to do so: 'I had not seen that sort of criticism then . . . but I had heard *Jane Eyre* called "coarse". I told her that love was treated with unusual breadth, and that the kind of intercourse was uncommon, and uncommonly described, but that I did *not* consider the book a coarse one.' Charlotte begged her to read the book again, and to tell the truth as she saw it.<sup>79</sup> Later again she begged Harriet, in even more pressing terms, to tell her the truth about *Villette*. Harriet did this, both in a private letter and in her review. The 'truth' was too much for Charlotte, who broke off the correspondence and put an end to the friendship.<sup>80</sup>

*Wuthering Heights* (1847); *Agnes Grey* (1847); *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848)

It is hard to say how Emily's and Anne's novels would have fared in these early years without either the lively discussions aroused by their sister's work or her memorial to them in 1850. An early reviewer of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, in the *Atlas* of January 1848 (No. 63), felt that *Jane Eyre* had done much 'to ensure a favourable reception for the volumes now before us'; and throughout the next two years comparisons with the first of the 'Bell' novels feature constantly in reviews of 'Ellis's' and 'Acton's' work. 'The first is still the best' was a

common judgment, even when there was renewed admiration for the family's characteristic gifts of 'vigour' and 'genuineness'. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* caused some stir on its own account in the summer of 1848, but confusion about 'the Bells' was then at its height. The American periodical, the *Literary World*, reviewing Anne's new novel in August (No. 74), forecast 'an infinite series of novels of a new class, which would be strung on, like the knotted tail of a kite, to the popular work *Jane Eyre*'; and in referring to 'the author's mingled strains of harshness and genius' – this perception was by now a critical commonplace in reviews of the Brontës – it implied that 'Acton Bell' had produced *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as well as *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Confusion still reigned two years later when Sydney Dobell wrote his tribute to *Wuthering Heights* (No. 80) as the most impressive, if still immature, achievement so far produced by 'Currer Bell', whom he took to be the author of all the 'Bell' novels; he had refused to be shaken even by Charlotte's disclaimer in the third edition of *Jane Eyre* (see pp. 277–8).

In spite of such confusion, it is obvious that Emily's individual gifts strongly impressed her earliest readers. Even if these turned to *Agnes Grey* with relief because it was 'sunnier' or more 'measured', they found it untouched by the imaginative qualities which lifted *Wuthering Heights* out of the ordinary. Most reviews merely confined themselves to a few remarks about Anne's more placid story; some devoted their attention exclusively to its companion, among them Charlotte's favourite periodical, the *Examiner* (No. 59). There were many bewildered allusions to 'Ellis's' gloom and violence, and to the particular brand of the family 'coarseness' found in her book, the term being used this time to indicate the effect of her characters' unrestrained behaviour and habits of speech, both of which gave offence. But in the same breath that they expressed their misgivings, critics also expressed their admiration. *Wuthering Heights* was much more than a 'mere' novel for the reviewers in, among others, the *Britannia*, *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* and the *Atlas* (Nos 60, 61, 63), from all of which Newby was able to cull glowing passages for use in promoting *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (see p. 11).

The mistaken belief that early critics failed to do justice to Emily and Anne originated in 1850 with Charlotte's 'Biographical Notice' and was consolidated by Mrs Gaskell, whose statements about the early critical reception of the Brontës are highly misleading.<sup>81</sup> The mistake is understandable, since in 1850 and throughout her friendship