

Finding the Brontës

ON A JOURNEY TO YORKSHIRE, ATHENA MCKENZIE DISCOVERS THE HAUNTING ENVIRONS OF THE STORIED SISTERS



“We’ve braved its ghosts often together and dared each other to stand among the graves.”

—Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

IT’S A GOOD NIGHT to go looking for ghosts. A clinging mist diffuses the glow of the few streetlights, and several bats dip and whirl around the tower of Haworth Parish Church. Our group huddles around the gravestones close to the base of the tower, clutching gas lanterns to dispel the inky darkness and whatever else may be out there be-

yond the trees. Graves stretch off as far as the eye can see, crowded together in jagged lines; some are marked with tabletop stones that resemble primitive altars. Philip Lister, our ghost tour guide and the author of *Ghosts and Gravestones of Haworth*, cackles as he shares the macabre detail that some graves are believed to go 10 burials

deep. In the 1800s, Haworth Parsonage in Yorkshire was home to the Brontë sisters — Charlotte, Emily and Anne — perhaps one of the most renowned literary families (the parsonage is one of the most visited literary shrines in the world, with an estimated 75,000 visitors each year). Though most of the burials exist from their time, the Brontë family is interred in a family vault inside the church. Nor are their ghosts believed to roam the house. Earlier in the evening, we dined at Weavers Restaurant, where some locals believe Emily Brontë appears as a Grey Lady who floats across a wall where a staircase once stood. Though we may not find the sisters here, the graveyard gives insight into the affairs that haunted the Brontës themselves and influenced their writing. Lister paints a bleak portrait of life in Haworth while the sisters were alive. A time of poor sanitation, cholera, typhus and tuberculosis outbreaks, limited medical resources and rampant poverty. It’s intriguing to note that the children’s study in the parsonage →

— where Emily and Anne spun the Gondal sagas and Charlotte and their brother Branwell constructed the Angrian stories, their tales of imaginary kingdoms, in tiny handmade books — overlooks the graveyard. As Lister points out, their childhood games would have carried the constant backdrop of funerals and stone-masons carving epitaphs onto new gravestones. Wandering through their former home, which has been converted into the Brontë Parsonage Museum, visitors see the little books that hold the early scribbling of these women, who went on to write such enduring works, and can tour the room where the children played with toy soldiers and put on their fantastical plays.

Certain details linger, including an awareness of the time Charlotte and Emily spent at the Clergy Daughters School at Cowan Bridge, where their two older sisters fell ill and then returned home to die. It is said this place was the model for the infamous school in *Jane Eyre*, where “disease had thus become an inhabitant of Lowood and death its frequent visitor.”

Other clues to their literary inspirations lie within the letters and diaries on display throughout. An obvious influence on Charlotte was a fervid unrequited love for her teacher at the school where she studied in Brussels. The realization that grasps hold and won't let go, however, is how soon it was after the publication of their novels that Emily and Anne themselves succumbed to the conditions of the times. All three sisters were published under pseudonyms in 1847; Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* appearing by Currer Bell, Emily's *Wuthering Heights* by Ellis Bell and Anne's *Agnes Grey* by Acton Bell. Shortly after, in 1848, Anne published *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. By December of 1848, Emily, aged 30, had died of tuberculosis. Only months later, in May, Anne, at age 29, had also passed away from tuberculosis, leaving Charlotte as the last surviving sibling. She died in 1855, at the age of 38, after publishing *Shirley* in 1849 and *Villette* in 1853. She was pregnant with her first

child, after marrying her father's curate, the Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls.

Though this all happened more than 150 years ago, interest in the women and their novels has not waned. March sees another film release of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, starring Mia Wasikowska and Dame Judi Dench. And purists may love the classic version of Emily's *Wuthering Heights* with Laurence Olivier stalking the moors, but an adaptation out later this year hopes to capture a new generation of fans.

Readers may travel here to learn about the sisters, but one also develops a sense for Branwell, the beloved brother, who was always grasping for but never finding his calling in writing or art. And who struggled with alcohol and opium addiction and his own tragic love affair with a married woman. Branwell died at 31, just as the sisters were finding success, succumbing to tuberculosis in September of 1848. Included in the collection is a striking copy of Branwell's portrait of the three sisters, which contains a ghostly gap where he painted himself out. The original now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

However unfavorable Haworth was in the 1800s, it is hard to envision now. One struggles not to descend into cliché when describing the present-day village, as words like “quaint,” “picturesque” and “charming” seem coined for this English hamlet. Many of the same businesses still exist on the steep, cobbled Main Street, which is topped by the Old White Lion Hotel. It is lined with teasshops, pubs like the Black Bull (where Branwell drank), the Apothecary shop (where Branwell bought his opium), local food shops and several bookstores filled with early editions of the Brontë sisters' work. After exhausting the Brontë lore, Douglas Bainbridge, owner of the bookstore Venables & Bainbridge, talks of other writers drawn to the area, such as Syl-

via Plath, who is buried close by and wrote of the Brontës and the area in several poems, like “Two Views of Withens,” which captures the bleakness of the moors.

A pilgrimage to Haworth would not be complete without a wander over the surrounding moorlands that so greatly inspired the Brontës. We set out on a rainy day, past the grids of drystone walls used as field markers, our group ignored by the flocks of sheep. In August, these fields would be ablaze with the purple and pink of the flowering heather but, on this grey September morning, the rolling landscape presents as a muted green. Our hike takes us up to Top Withens, the ruins of the farm said to be the setting for the house in Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. It's easy to imagine the writer on a similar walk, conceiving the plot for her celebrated gothic novel.

But it's on the way back to Haworth that I feel we come closest to the sisters. The Brontë Waterfall is on the Haworth Moor and was a favourite haunt for all three. The sun comes out as we descend the rocky slope and cross the narrow stream to the tranquil clearing. We take turns climbing into the Brontë Chair, a stone that provides a natural sitting spot and the ideal location to appreciate the falls described by Charlotte in a letter as “fine indeed; a perfect torrent racing over the rocks, white and beautiful!” ■

To plan a trip and get advice and access to passes and transport tickets, go to www.yorkshire.com.



PHOTOGRAPHY: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (PARSONAGE); BRONTË PARSONAGE MUSEUM, HAWORTH, YORKSHIRE, U.K./THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY (LITTLE BOOKS); ATHENA WICKENZIE (CEMETERY)



The cemetery at the Brontë Parsonage Museum. Opposite: Brontë Parsonage Museum circa 1860 (inset); the little books made by the young sisters and their brother, Branwell. Previous page: the moors around Haworth; Branwell Brontë's portrait of his sisters.