

Branwell, the Lesser-Known Brontë Brother

Branwell Brontë is best known for being the brother of the three Brontë sisters – Charlotte, Emily and Anne – who were all very successful writers. It was commonly thought that Anne used Branwell, who was an alcoholic, as inspiration for the cruel, Byronic men in her second novel *Tenney of Wildfell Hall*. However, as a bright young child, it was him that greatness was to be expected from. What caused the derailment of his promising future?

Patrick Branwell Brontë was born on the 26 June 1817, the fourth of six children, to Irish clergyman Patrick Brontë and his wife, a Methodist called Maria Brontë (née Branwell). As was tradition at the time, he, as the first son, was named after his father (just as the eldest Brontë child, Maria, was named after her mother). His second name, Branwell, the name which he usually went by, was his mother's maiden name – this was not an uncommon way to name boys at the time. He was born, like most of his siblings, in Thornton, Yorkshire, but the family soon moved to Haworth when Patrick (Branwell's father) was appointed as a priest there.

While his sisters Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily were all sent to Cowan Bridge Boarding School in Lancashire (Anne being too young at the time), Branwell was given a classical education by his knowledgeable father. This was because his father believed he could tutor Branwell better as a point of pride (in the words of Elizabeth Gaskell – “he (Patrick Brontë) believed that Branwell was better at home, and that he himself could teach him well”), but also because after his mother's death in 1821, the family was financially struggling and the majority of his money was going towards his other children's education. Branwell excelled in his studies, and later produced translations of *Horace's Odes* (probably done in 1840) – a Classical Latin text – which received critical acclaim.

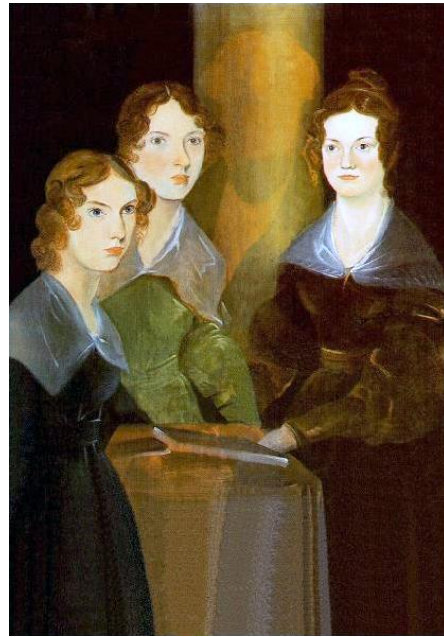
The Brontës' lives changed even more when, due to an outbreak of tuberculosis at Cowan Bridge, the two eldest children, Maria and Elizabeth, died at the tender ages of 11 and 10 in 1825. This led to the four remaining Brontë siblings becoming very close to each other. Very soon after, Branwell and his older sister Charlotte began creating their own imaginary world, *Angria*, about which they drew maps and wrote stories. Emily and Anne also wrote stories about their own world, *Gondal*. In 1829, Branwell used his knowledge to create his own magazine, the “Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine”, which his sisters contributed stories to.



As an adult, Branwell had red hair, unlike his siblings, and was below average height (in the words of Francis Leyland, he was “rather below middle height, but of a refined and gentleman-like appearance, and of graceful manners”) like Charlotte (around 4’10) and possibly Anne (but not Emily, who was around 5’6). He was said to be handsome and always wore spectacles.

Self-Portrait, 1840

At the age of 17, Branwell had decided that he wanted to be a painter. He took an apprenticeship, and it was at this age that he painted his famous portrait of his sisters (right), the only portrayal of them all together. At first, he was included in the portrait, but became dissatisfied – probably with how he painted himself and how crowded the picture perhaps was – and painted himself out, perhaps foreshadowing his lack of public success and the rift between him and his sisters. From 1838-39, Branwell worked as a portrait painter in Bradford (where he sometimes handed over portraits of his landlords instead of rent), but returned home to Haworth, in debt, in 1839, convinced that he would never make it as a painter. Ironically, his portrait of his sisters is now extremely famous and hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.



Again utilising his knowledge of literature and the classics, Branwell became a tutor to a Robert Postlethwaite in Cumbria in 1840, and at this time, he began to correspond with famous scholars at the time, such as Hartley Coleridge, even visiting Coleridge after his later dismissal as a tutor. It is during this time where it is suggested that he fathered an illegitimate child with a maid of the Postlethwaites called Agnes Riley, who gave birth soon after Branwell left to a child that possibly lived till around age 28, but probably died in infancy.

This seems to be confirmed by Branwell's poem 'Letter From a Father on Earth to His Child in Her Grave' (1846), although this may be written in the perspective of his father after Maria and Elizabeth had died. According to a visitor to the Postlethwaites, who caught a glimpse of a letter Branwell had written to his friend in 1859, Branwell's dismissal came about because he had "left Mr Postlethwaites with a natural child by one of the daughters or servants - which died". If this is true, then the child, Mary Riley, was Patrick Brontë's only grandchild.

Already at this stage, Branwell's alcoholism was becoming a major problem, causing him to become unmanageable to his father, something which increased over his years. In addition, Branwell had begun to take opium, a substance which blurred his senses further. Soon after his dismissal from his position with the Postlethwaites, he became a railway clerk (possibly because his reputation as a tutor had been tarnished), where he was quickly promoted. In this period, he also published poetry and artwork in Yorkshire magazines. However, his closest sister Charlotte was disappointed, feeling that he had given up on his dream.

Branwell was soon fired once again from his job, this time for incompetence. In 1842 he was dismissed due to a deficit of £11. This had probably been stolen by the porter, who had been left in charge when Branwell had gone out drinking. Branwell was never accused of the

theft but was sacked and the missing sum was deducted from his own salary. However, after nine months in Haworth, Branwell's sister Anne got him a position as a tutor in a home called Thorp Green as she had been governess there for 3 years prior. Despite Charlotte reporting that Anne and Branwell were "both wonderously valued in their situations", Branwell soon fell in love with the lady of the house, Lydia Robinson (who was fifteen years his senior). Soon, he began an illicit affair with her. In July 1845, he was again dismissed, probably because Mr. Robinson found out about it. Branwell expected to marry Mrs. Robinson after her husband died, but was surprised and distraught when she cut off all connections with him. This led him to up his drug use and become even more of a disturbance and trouble and a source of shame to his family (Anne for one had to leave her post because of him).

Of this occasion, Branwell wrote in his poem 'Lydia Gisborne (Mrs. Robinson's maiden name)': "My Hopes... Rolled past the shores of Joy's now dim and distant isle." During this period, despite Branwell being published as a poet under the name of Northangerland, he also became even more of a drunkard. His continual debt made it so that sometimes he could not buy any alcohol, which led him to develop delirium tremens, a condition which causes hallucinations and is caused by a sudden lack of alcohol coming into an alcoholic's body.

Famously, one night he set fire to his own bed, an incident which caused his father to sleep with him to keep the family safe and alleviate his nightmares. Branwell died on the 24th September 1848, aged 31. This was probably due to tuberculosis, but his death had also been hastened by his addictions. According to Elizabeth Gaskell, Branwell insisted on standing up in his last moments. Branwell passed away without even knowing of his sisters' success, as when they published their first books in 1847, they kept it a secret from all their family.

Branwell lives on in the books of his sisters, (arguably) as Heathcliff and Arthur Huntingdon and other characters. The letters of his sisters and his poems allow us to reconstruct his life in a way which makes his fascinating story known, despite the fact that he never made his dream of being a writer come true.