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# Emily Brontë's Bi-centenary

By Margaret Mills



A portrait of Emily Brontë painted by her brother,  
Branwell c1834

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This year has been the bi-centenary of Emily Brontë, that most enigmatic member of the Brontë family, and the anniversary has been celebrated by various events at the Brontë Parsonage Museum and elsewhere.

*Left: A portrait of Emily Brontë painted by her brother, Branwell c1834*



For anyone who loves the magnificent scenery, atmosphere and blissful peace of the Haworth moors, it is likely to be Emily who is at the forefront of their mind as they walk across the landscape. All the Brontë family loved nature and the elements, and the moors around Haworth have often been described by biographers as the Brontë siblings 'playground'. The freedom of the moors was so much part of Emily's being that she pined when necessary circumstances forced her away from home; she was much happier treading the moors with the family dogs, Keeper and Flossy, or inside the Parsonage kitchen, studying German from a book propped up on the table while she set about making the bread, a weekly task that she always took upon herself. No doubt as the bread was baking she found time to gaze from the window at the view outside.



*Left: A water colour drawing of Flossie attributed to Charlotte Brontë dated 1843. Now in the Brontë Museum. Despite the attribution to Charlotte Brontë here and in an early sales catalogue, there is a good deal of doubt about the artist. Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, in their catalogue of the sisters' works, are in no doubt that this is a likeness of Anne's dog Flossie, which was given to her by her pupils at Thorp Green, the Robinsons. But they are inclined to think that Emily, not Charlotte was, responsible for it. (Alexander, Christine, and Jane*

*Sellars. The Art of the Brontës. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).*

*Right. A water colour painting of Keeper by Emily Brontë. Now in the Brontë Museum. Although the mastiff and was a big one and is asleep here, there is no doubt of his power and he is no lap-dog. Emily preferred to draw wilder things than her sister Charlotte did.*

Elizabeth C Gaskell in *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857) recounts an incident that Charlotte witnessed of Emily disciplining Keeper, it is the one that reflects her character most strangely. Keeper had incurred her wrath by going upstairs once too often and had dirtied the clean counterpane with his gigantic muddy footprints.

When Tabby came in to report Keeper's wrongdoing, Emily's face whitened and her mouth set. 'Charlotte dared not speak to interfere, no one dared when Emily's eyes glowed in that manner out of the paleness of her face, and when her lips were so compressed into stone'.

She dragged the dog downstairs, he 'growling low and savagely all the time', and having no stick to hand, set about him with her fist, punching him in the eyes before he could spring at her, until he was 'half-blind, stupefied' at which point she took him off to his bed in the kitchen and bathed the injuries she had so brutally inflicted.

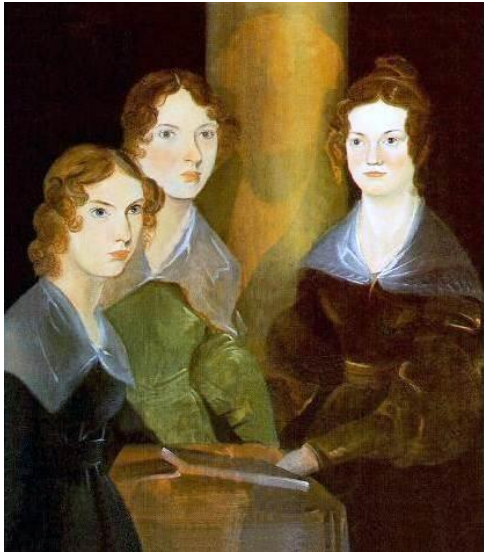


Mrs Gaskell tells this story as it had been told to her as an example of Emily's strength of character. Its dreadful sadism is all that the modern reader sees, that and the terror that Emily must have sometimes engendered in all members of the household. 'The generous dog owed her no grudge; he loved her dearly ever after; he walked first among the mourners to her funeral; he slept moaning for nights at the door of her empty room, and never, so to speak, rejoiced, dog fashion, after her death. He, in his turn, was mourned over by the surviving sister.'

Emily Brontë is, of course, best known for her one and only published novel *Wuthering Heights*. This is now considered a classic which was initially published under the male pseudonym of "Ellis Bell" as writing was not considered a suitable activity for women. It was first published in December 1847; a new edition was printed in December 1850 under her real name. If Emily had another book in progress at the time of her death in 1848 it was never published, and many Brontë scholars believe that the manuscript was deliberately destroyed by Emily's older sister, Charlotte, after Emily's death. Charlotte had been shocked into sleeplessness by what she perceived as the savagery in *Wuthering Heights*, and it seems probable that she feared a repetition of the reviewers' earlier criticisms and accusations of 'coarseness' in the book.

Although the action of *Wuthering Heights* takes place largely within doors, it is Emily's description of the forces of nature and the grandeur, wildness and hostility of the landscape that flows throughout the book. Each and every character is affected by what is happening outside their own four walls and surely few writers before or since have written so movingly of the dramatic moorland scenery. Emily's passion and the fulfilment she found in interacting with her beloved moors and with the often very eccentric and harsh folk who lived their lives in the surrounding locality are found within the pages of a book that has been loved for over 160 years. Complex human relationships and powerful emotions are contained within its pages, with descriptions of how different people deal with them.

Although nobody knows exactly where Emily found her inspiration for *Wuthering Heights*, she was widely read, heard stories and was especially fond of the wild windswept moors which may have inspired parts of her powerful story. *Wuthering Heights* has also given rise to many adaptations and inspired works, including films, radio and television dramatisations and Kate Bush's hit song "Wuthering Heights".



*Right: Painting of the three Brontë sisters by their brother Branwell. From left to right are Anne, Emily, and Charlotte. In the centre of portrait is the shadow of Branwell Brontë, who painted himself out.*

Charlotte Brontë has told us how her sister loved the moors. 'Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest heath for her', she said. Emily's native hills were far more than mere spectacle; they were what she lived in and by, as much so as the wild birds or the heather. Emily was close to her youngest sister, Anne, and if Anne walked the moors with her, the two of them would discuss their literary plans and characters as they walked.



*Left: Branwell Brontë, self-portrait, 1840*

Like the Yorkshire weather, Emily was sometimes unpredictable and difficult. Few complex characters are easy to understand, and there seems to have been a certain harshness in her powerful and peculiar character. Of the three sisters, however, she was the one who showed most sympathy and understanding at the wasted abilities and destructive lifestyle of their only brother, Branwell.

## The Real Wuthering Heights and its Significance

High Withins is the name of a hill on Haworth Moor which commands extensive panoramic views of the surrounding West Yorkshire countryside. The name 'wuthering' or 'wither' comes from a dialect word used especially in Yorkshire and Lancashire referring to turbulent weather.

The Withins farmhouse on Haworth Moor is reputed to be the site of Wuthering Heights in Emily Brontë's novel which is now a remote, abandoned ruined farmhouse just to the north-east of High Withins Hill. Originally it was known as "Top of the Withens". The Withins farmhouse was probably built in the second half of the 16th century by George Bentley or one of his relatives. It was inhabited by Jonas Sunderland and his wife Ann Crabtree from 1811 till 1833 at the time of the Brontës. It was taken over by their son, Jonas, and Mary Feather. The last occupier was Ernest Roddy a poultry farmer in 1926.

*Right: Withens Farmhouse in 1920 when it was occupied by Ernest Roddy.*

Although its appearance in the book does not match the house, its location does suggest the isolated and windswept site of Wuthering Heights. This ruined farmhouse at Withins is sometimes considered to be an inspiration for Wuthering Heights. However, it seems more likely that the now sadly demolished High Sunderland Hall, near Halifax



was possibly the original Wuthering Heights in Emily's imagination, rather than the Withins farmhouse. But how much Emily took from High Sunderland Hall for her imaginary farm of Wuthering Heights is not known.

All that remains today of Sunderland Hall are old photographs and drawings that show the architectural features resembling Wuthering Heights. These are of the gateway which had various well carved scroll work and decorated masonry, over the principal door (front porch) where two large statues similar to those described by Lockwood a character of Wuthering Heights in chapter one of the novel:

*"Before passing the threshold, I paused to admire a quantity of grotesque carving lavished over the front, and especially about the principal door, above which, among a wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys, I detected the date '1500' and the name 'Hareton Earnshaw'"*.

This one sentence in Emily's novel has always been a mystery to those who have sought to identify Wuthering Heights. Of all the farms and halls in the neighbourhood of Haworth only High Sunderland Hall confirms the truth of her description in this part of Yorkshire. Emily would have been familiar with High Sunderland Hall. This building, now demolished, was once home to the Sunderland family and is about two kilometres from Law Hall, where in 1837 at the age of 19 Emily came to teach.



*Above: High Sunderland Hall, Horley Green, Halifax before it was demolished in 1950.*



*Left: Haworth Parsonage now the Brontë Parsonage Museum. The northern extension in the photograph was not added until after Emily and her family had died in 1861.*

Photograph by Jeremy Clark.

The Haworth Parsonage is where the Brontës lived from 1820 until Patrick's death in 1861. Emily lived here most of her life, she moved to the parsonage when she was less than two years old and apart from relatively short periods at school or teaching, rarely left it.

Emily eventually accepted a domestic life in the parsonage, cooking and looking after her father. She was an isolated, painfully shy woman and is reputed to have died on the sofa in the dining room on 19 December 1848 at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Emily died tragically young, at the age of 30. We can only speculate about the work she might have produced had she have lived. But it seems fitting that probably Charlotte's last act for her dying sister was to place on her pillow a sprig of moorland heather. It's said that Emily was by then too ill to notice the flowers, but I like to think that the fragrance of the moors clung to the little sprig, and that this symbol of the moors somehow brought comfort and peace to her last moments on earth. On 22 December she was laid to rest in the family vault in the church opposite the parsonage.

It is now the Brontë Parsonage Museum owned by the Brontë Society and the rooms have been restored to how they would have appeared in the 1850s.

*Right: View of Haworth Parsonage and Church from the facing title-page, Vol. II of Elizabeth C Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857).*

At the time of Emily's life, the Parsonage and its location looked very different. The trees that crowd the graveyard had not been planted and the house was right on the edge of the town, bordering directly onto the moors. The Parsonage was also smaller as the northern extension was not added until after she and her family had died.



For more about the Brontë family, and news of past and upcoming events, look at the Brontë Society website [www.bronte.org.uk](http://www.bronte.org.uk) or telephone 01535 642323. The Brontë Parsonage Museum and shop are located in Church Street, Haworth, Keighley, West Yorks. BD22 8DR, and are normally open every day, except 24-27 December and 2-31 January.

