

## Patrick Bronte

You all know what I mean by “Bronte Country”, that untamed and rugged landscape around Haworth in the North Riding of Yorkshire, made famous by Emily of that ilk. How about if I put Bronte Country on wheels and move it to the rather less wild and barren hills of Shropshire instead ? For it was here that the first Bronte set pen to paper on a journey that would lead to Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights and Wildfell Hall.

The man who raised his gifted daughters in the parsonage at Haworth was Patrick Bronte, born in County Down in 1777. Patrick changed his Irish surname from Brunty to Bronte when he went to university, probably to make it sound more sophisticated. Clearly Mr Brunty had aspirations.

Even getting to university was achievement enough; Patrick’s father was a farm labourer and his son (one of ten children) was largely self-taught. Nevertheless, at the age of 25 he entered St John’s College, Cambridge, to read theology and set his sights on the Anglican priesthood.

Suitably furnished with a BA and ordained into the Church of England, Patrick Bronte then had to secure himself a curacy. The first was at Wethersfield in Essex, and then, in 1809, he became assistant curate at Wellington in Shropshire.

As with most careers, it was not a matter of what you know, but who you know. Bronte’s old room-mate at St John’s - John Nunn - was now curate at St Chad’s church in Shrewsbury. No doubt Rev. Nunn put in a word on Patrick’s behalf. And so the Irishman from Cambridge came to Shropshire.

All Saints church in Wellington had not long been rebuilt (in 1790). A crumbling medieval pile had been reconfigured by George Steuart, the architect of Attingham Park, and now boasted the first neo-classical facade in the county. Steuart went on to do the same thing at St Chad’s, when its medieval predecessor fell down.

The town too was in process of transformation. The Industrial Revolution had arrived in Shropshire, and coal mining was beginning to supplant agriculture as the principal trade. And as industrialisation hotted up, so the old coach road through Wellington was bringing the place new custom and new visitors.

I have a soft spot for Wellington. It was (though I knew nothing about it at the time) the place where I was born. But even I would have to admit that time has served it ill. The coal mines have gone and the centre of economic gravity has shifted to the new town of Telford, leaving the surrounding market towns struggling to keep afloat.

Yet Wellington’s literary pedigree is impressive. Houlston’s - later Hobson’s - the publishers in Market Square, grew to become one of the largest provincial printing houses in England. Philip Larkin had his first job at the public library here, handing out, as he cheerfully put it, “tripey novels to morons”. It’s hard to live down publicity like this. Larkin said of his time at Wellington that it was the most miserable, as well as the most creative, of his life.

As for Patrick Bronte, his creative juices too were beginning to flow. In the course of 1809 he dashed off his first poem - *Winter Evening Thoughts* - published in the local paper. Then he began to assemble a collection of a dozen or so poems - *Cottage Poems* - which was printed by Houlston's in the following year. Bronte's total poetical oeuvre was almost done and dusted in a single year.

If there was an Industrial Revolution on this side of Shropshire, it is not evident in Bronte's verse. And the Romantic revolution that created *Wuthering Heights* had not yet been born either. *Cottage Poems* are exactly what they say on the tin, long and rambling verses on nature that begin in the fields and usually end up in the church. If they weren't so long they might have been hymns. The lines are short, the rhymes are many and the sentiments simple.

(As it happens, the son of Wellington's next curate, Henry Gauntlett, went one better and penned "Once in Royal David's City".)

A minor poet Bronte would remain, and not a mining one, and this kind of verse was exactly what Houlston's were keen to publish.

There's no getting away from the fact that Patrick Bronte was a conservative, both in theology and in sensibility. His verses addressed to the poor labourer urge the peasant to be content with his lot, and to enjoy his poverty. Think how much quicker you'll be enjoying yourself in heaven, Bronte reassures him, than the rich man down the road. Indeed, given the meagre diet and wages of a Shropshire farm labourer, his family could be in heaven in no time at all.

That said, in his parochial work Patrick Bronte did his best to alleviate distress among Wellington's newly industrialised workforce.

Bronte's spell in Wellington was not long. He arrived in January 1809 and was gone by December. The widow of the local Methodist preacher, Mary Fletcher, took Patrick under her wing and found him another green hill further away.

By 1811 Patrick was in Dewsbury in Yorkshire - not quite yet in Bronte Country - and in this neck of the woods he remained for the remaining fifty years of his life, outliving both his wife and all of his talented offspring.

Only when Patrick Bronte headed for the North Country could the real literary story begin.