

## BOOK REVIEW

# War at t' Parsonage: The Brontës and Military Conflict

**The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings** by Emma Butcher, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, xiii + 216pp., £64.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-319-95635-0 (hbk); 978-3-319-95636-7 (ebk)

In 2015, the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth curated an important exhibition to commemorate the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo and the Brontë family's engagement with its politics and legacies. Bringing together military-orientated books that were owned by the family (such as Walter Scott's *Life of Napoleon*), drawings and watercolour paintings by the children (such as Branwell's disturbing depiction of conflict simply entitled *Terror*), and intriguing artefacts from the Museum's collection (including a bust of Wellington and a fragment of Napoleon's original coffin which was given to Charlotte by Monsieur Heger), the exhibition beautifully depicted the multiple ways in which Haworth's most famous family were fascinated by, and responded to, ideas of war and conflict throughout their lives and careers. The exhibition was housed in a smallish room separated from the main exhibition area, which created both an intense viewing experience – the walls and cases were full of objects and information – and suggested that, after our immersion in the domestic and literary lives of the Brontës in the key exhibition rooms, we also need to bear in mind how engaged the family were in the wider world and in debates about history and socio-political transformation. For as Terry Eagleton neatly phrased it in *Myths of Power*, his ground-breaking Marxist study of the sisters' mature writings, 'the Brontës lived through an era of disruptive social change, and lived that disruption at a particularly vulnerable point'.<sup>1</sup>

The instigator of this exhibition was Emma Butcher, whose important research on the Brontë family's understanding and manipulation of military conflict is the subject of her first monograph, *The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings*. Taking as its key focus the Glass Town and Angria sagas which were developed by Charlotte and Branwell across the 1820s and 1830s, Butcher's engaging analysis builds upon the work of critics like Christine Alexander, Heather Glen, and Victor Neufeldt, who have established the centrality of the siblings' early writings to their literary careers.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on a specific topic running throughout these writings, Butcher demonstrates again how fertile the material is for serious critical consideration. For in addition to providing some of the foundations for the siblings' mature writings, this youthful work effectively reveals the

<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 [1975]), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Christine Alexander, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987; 1991), and *Tales from Glass Town, Angria and Gondal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); *Tales of Angria*, ed. by Heather Glen (London: Penguin, 2006); *The Works of Patrick Branwell Brontë*, ed. by Victor Neufeldt, 3 vols (London: Garland, 1997–1999).

children's roles as commentators on military conflict, both actual and imagined, and how this subsequently enabled them 'to discuss explicit, problematic content in an uncensored literary environment' (p. 5).

The opening chapter of *The Brontës and War* sets out the key claims for the study by arguing that Charlotte and Branwell's Glass Town and Angria work established them as part of a 'nationwide conversation' about war, military confrontation and the soldier in the post-Waterloo period (p. 3). Through their reading in both canonical texts and contemporary periodical accounts, the siblings reflected upon, and reshaped, war narratives in a kind of 'domestic "think tank"' (p. 17) in order to explore insurrection, struggles for power, royalist versus republican politics, genocide, colonization, and local, national and international relations. The chapter also helpfully includes a detailed summary of the major wars and conflicts in Glass Town and Angria – itself evidencing Butcher's detailed knowledge of these intricate narratives – which asks us to rethink our preconceptions about the supposed limits of 'juvenilia'. Indeed, Butcher's study connects interestingly with other recent work by, for example, Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster, and Catherine Butler and Ann Alston, which reveals the complexities of writing by children.<sup>3</sup> In the Brontës' case, of course, this complexity is exacerbated by the collaborative nature of much of the writing.

Foundational to Charlotte and Branwell's developing awareness of military-related subject matter was the range of war literature they consumed. As Butcher persuasively demonstrates, from their reading of Virgil's *Iliad* and *Aeneid* the siblings were exposed to classical ideals of masculinity and physicality in military contexts, whilst their reading of Renaissance and Romantic texts (by Johnson, Spencer, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey and Byron) enabled the development of more complexity in their depiction of the actions and psychologies of the soldier figure. Particularly important here – as in many other ways for the Brontës – is the influence of Walter Scott whose poetry and prose, in Butcher's phrasing, 'capture[d] contemporary wartime feeling through past romantic parameters' and thereby 'reassociate[d] romance with war and heroism' (p. 49). Scott's use of the 'fog of war' trope, as defined by Samuel Baker, is key here in describing the martial chaos on the battlefield and Butcher proceeds to offer some intriguing readings of the ways in which elements of this inherited Romantic tradition – the concept of patriotism, for example, and the representation of the experiences of the war widow – are manipulated by Charlotte and Branwell.<sup>4</sup> The material covered in this chapter is both well selected and telling, and it adds importantly to our knowledge of the Brontës' reading habits.

Building upon the well-documented understanding of the Brontë family's near-adoration of the Duke of Wellington, Chapter Three of Butcher's study examines Charlotte's and Branwell's engagement with contemporary reactions to both Wellington and Napoleon and the ways in which these leaders are fashioned in the sagas, firstly under their own names and then as Zamorna and Alexander Percy respectively. This is a particularly insightful chapter which links the siblings' writings to the developing celebrity culture of the early-nineteenth century, and reveals how the narratives of Glass Town and Angria 'reimagine' these military figures in what Butcher terms acts of 'post-war fan fiction' (p. 78). This examination of Wellington and

<sup>3</sup> *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*, ed. by Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Children's Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Catherine Butler and Ann Alston (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Baker, 'Scott's Worlds of War', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Walter Scott*, ed. by Fiona Robertson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 70–82.

Napoleon, and the intense exploration of military psychologies in the sagas' refashionings, is then extended in Chapter Four to consideration of the experiences of the ordinary soldier. In a neat tracing of lines of influence, and notable pairings of imaginative fiction and contemporary non-fictional prose, Butcher demonstrates how Charlotte and Branwell's narratives drew upon and parodied the burgeoning post-1815 genre of the military memoir. What is particularly interesting about the ways in which the siblings manipulated examples of military life writing is how they astutely reflected contemporary understandings of war trauma (as yet medically undiagnosed as such, of course) and how they deployed various narrative techniques of the 'red-coated author[s]' they were reading (p. 94). In an interesting gendering of this material, Butcher reveals Branwell to be particularly drawn to battlefield descriptions, whilst Charlotte envisages the effects of warfare and violence within the domestic space and the turn to alcoholism as a 'remedy' for the trauma experienced by the returning soldier. Through consideration of both Branwell's poetry and Charlotte's prose, a fascinating concern with military bodies also emerges – the sexualized military body, the suffering military body, and the bodies in military spectacle. As such, the critical work in this chapter tellingly links to, and extends, previous studies of psychology and the body in the Brontë sisters' novels by, for example, Sally Shuttleworth and Beth Torgerson.<sup>5</sup>

The medium of the military memoir, which provides one of the bases for Butcher's analysis in Chapter Four, is paralleled by the 'colonial memoir' in Chapter Five's examination of race and warfare in the siblings' early writings. This is a particularly intriguing chapter given the sustained interest in the reverberations of empire and racial hierarchies in the novels of Charlotte and Emily, and sits interestingly alongside critical works by Carl Plasa and Beverly Taylor (although these are absent from Butcher's bibliography).<sup>6</sup> Focusing in particular on the First Anglo-Ashanti War (1823–1831), Butcher astutely reveals how racial prejudice saturates the siblings' depictions of conflict and how the kind of mingled attraction to, and anxiety of, difference that characterizes both 'Orientalism' and much nineteenth-century imperialist thought is at the heart of their work. From this, it is clearly evident how these early writings – which Butcher rightly terms 'raw, unedited narratives' (p. 121) – replicate, and, in many cases, endorse, the often invidious racial politics of their time.

Chapter Six brings the political focus nearer to home by considering civil unrest in the wake of the French Revolution, the American War of 1812, and the cessation of war with France in 1815. Through some insightful comparisons of scenes from the sagas with contemporary published reports, the siblings' understanding of the French Revolution in particular is shown to be pivotal to their interrogations of government, sovereignty and insurgency. Indeed, as Butcher argues in relation to Angria's Alexander Percy, '[t]he French Revolutionary model remained an ideal that Branwell's protagonist continued to strive for' (158). And in a telling articulation of the relations between historical events and imaginative fabrication, this chapter also offers some perceptive considerations of the possible influence of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre and the 1831 Bristol Riots upon Charlotte's *The Foundling* (1833) and *Stancliffe's Hotel* (1838). As Butcher deftly expresses it, '[t]he reorientation of the military as the enemy

<sup>5</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Beth Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Carl Plasa, *Charlotte Brontë: Critical Issues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Beverly Taylor, 'Race, Slavery, and the Slave Trade', in *A Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Diane Long Hoeveler and Deborah Denenholz Morse (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 339–53.

and the substitution of the people as the real “heroes” [in these texts] embodied the anxieties and social fears of a growing industrial nation that failed to identify with its people’ (p. 167).

There is much that is fascinating and insightful about *The Brontës and War*. Butcher addresses a body of work still in need of more critical attention and her analyses effectively situate Charlotte and Branwell as informed commentators upon both recent and contemporary history and the political, social and psychological effects of war. In an interesting parallel to Stevie Davies’ belief that at the time of her death Emily Brontë was ‘on her way to becoming a war-poet and a poet of class-war’ in the wake of the 1848 Revolutions,<sup>7</sup> Butcher leaves us considering how Branwell’s ‘intuitive response to war’ would have developed had he lived longer (p. 177). As the brief concluding chapter to the book notes, Charlotte’s work in her last 15 years – after her ‘Farewell to Angria’ manuscript of 1839 – saw her move away from direct military commentary of the kind that had galvanized Glass Town and Angria, and yet her interest in the figure of the soldier and the personalities of Wellington and Napoleon still resonates, if far more subtly, in *Shirley* and *Villette*.

Although it would be interesting at times to see how Butcher’s readings are inflected by greater engagement with theoretical perspectives – drawing upon theories of masculinity, for example, or historiography more generally – this is part of the project of the book: to open up debates, to demonstrate how the focus on one particular area resonates throughout the early writings, and to encourage further exploration of the complexities of Charlotte and Branwell’s literary foundations. Certainly, *The Brontës and War* is an exciting and thoughtful work which effectively reveals the Brontës to be keen interpreters of war through a multiplicity of perspectives and which therefore offers something genuinely new and revealing to both Brontë scholarship and nineteenth-century studies more widely.

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<sup>7</sup> Stevie Davies, *Emily Brontë: Heretic* (London: Women’s Press, 1994), pp. 245–46.