

The Invention of Charlotte Brontë

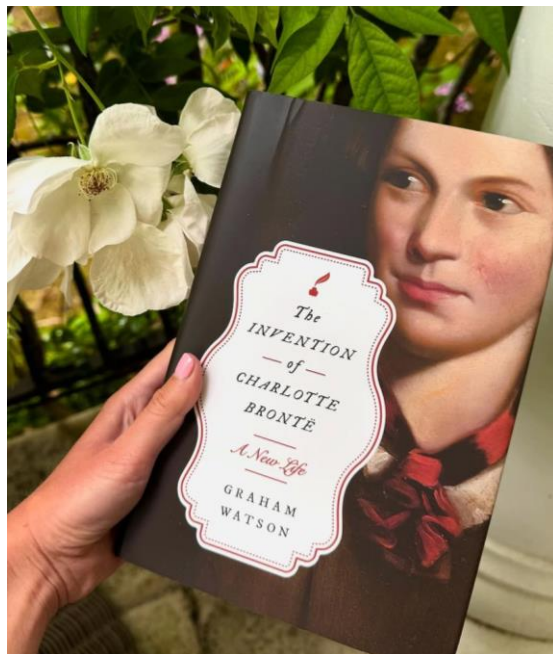
by Graham Watson, published by Pegasus

A handout to accompany the Smithsonian Associates program

Introduction

Charlotte Brontë remains one of the 19th century's most influential and beloved authors. Since her death aged 38, her impassioned novels *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* have inspired countless readers and writers the world over, and her tragic life story—entwined with those of her novelist sisters Emily and Anne—has become a cultural legend.

Graham Watson discusses his research in the manuscript archives of the Brontë and Gaskell families, their friends and associates and shares why he believes his findings challenge many long-held assumptions about one of the world's most celebrated literary families.



(Images: The National Portrait Library)

Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), left, and Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), right, were leading English writers of the 19th century. These portraits, made by George Richmond in 1850 and 1851 depict them during the period discussed in this program.

They were introduced by letter in 1849, after both had published their first novels, met in 1850 and established a confidential friendship that informed Elizabeth Gaskell's groundbreaking and controversial biography of Brontë published in 1857.

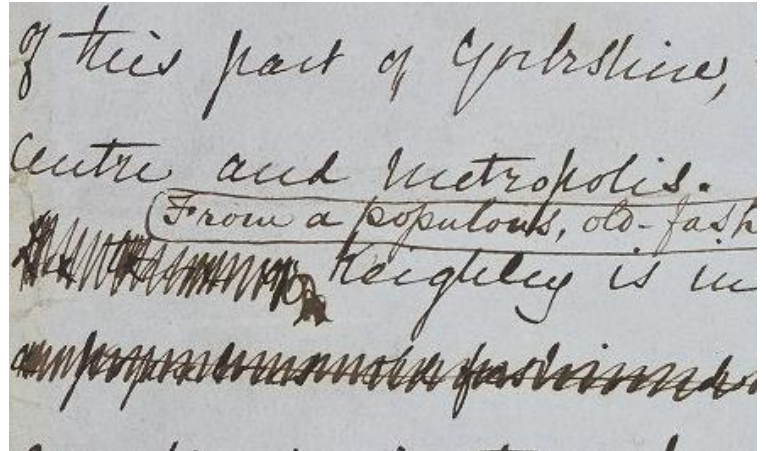
The Invention of Charlotte Brontë examines the complex origins and developments of Gaskell's material, her diligent research, and the legal threats that forced her to recant controversial material, ultimately compromising the integrity of her own work, resulting in a legacy that continues to be divisive until the present.

Key dates in the lives of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell

- 1810** (29 Sept) Birth of Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson, to William Stevenson (b.1772) and Elizabeth Holland (b.1771), in Chelsea, London.
- 1811** (29 Oct) Elizabeth's mother dies. Elizabeth is sent to live with her aunt in Knutsford, Cheshire.
- 1816** (21 April) Birth of Charlotte Brontë, third daughter of Rev Patrick Brontë (b.1777) and Maria Branwell (b.1783) at Thornton, Yorkshire.
- 1817** (26 June) Patrick Branwell Brontë born at Thornton.
- 1818** (30 July) Emily Jane Brontë born at Thornton.
- 1820** (17 Jan) Anne Brontë born at Thornton. (April) The Brontës move to Haworth, Yorkshire.
- 1821** (15 Sept) Charlotte's mother dies. Her maternal aunt Elizabeth Branwell (b. 1776) joins the Brontë household.
- 1824** (10 Aug) Charlotte joins her elder sisters Maria (b.1814) and Elizabeth (b. 1815) at Rev Carus Wilson's school for clergymen's daughters at Cowan Bridge, followed by (25 Nov) Emily.
- 1825** (14 Feb) Patrick Brontë removes Maria from Cowan Bridge; she dies of tuberculosis on 6 May. (31 May-1 June) Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily removed from school. (15 June) Elizabeth dies of tuberculosis.
- 1829** (22 March) Elizabeth Stevenson (later Gaskell)'s father dies.
- 1831** (17 Jan) Charlotte starts boarding at Margaret Wooler's (b.1792) girls' school in Roe Head, meeting lifelong friends Ellen Nussey (b. 1817) and Mary Taylor (b.1817).
- 1832** (Mid-June) Charlotte leaves Roe Head and is appointed superintendent of Haworth's Sunday School. (30 August) Elizabeth marries Rev William Gaskell (b.1805) in Knutsford.
- 1833** Birth of Elizabeth's first daughter, stillborn.
- 1834** (12 Sept) Birth of Marianne Gaskell.
- 1837** (January) Elizabeth's first published first piece, a poem 'Sketches Among the Poor, No. 1' appears in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. (5 Feb) Margaret 'Meta' Gaskell born.
- 1838** (Dec) Charlotte permanently leaves Margaret Wooler's school.
- 1842** (8 Feb) Charlotte and Emily leave Haworth with Mary Taylor for the Hegers' boarding school in Brussels, arriving 15 Feb. (7 Oct) Birth of Florence Gaskell. (29 Oct) Death of Charlotte's aunt Elizabeth Branwell. (8 Nov) Charlotte and Emily return to Haworth from Brussels.
- 1844** (1 Jan) Charlotte permanently leaves Brussels. (23 Oct) Birth of Elizabeth's only son, William.
- 1845** (10 Oct) Death in Wales of Elizabeth's son William.
- 1846** (22 May) *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* published by Aylott and Jones. (3 Sept) Birth of Elizabeth's sixth child, Julia.
- 1847** (19 Oct) Charlotte's first published novel *Jane Eyre* released by Smith, Elder & Co. (15 Dec) Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* published by T.C. Newby.
- 1848** (27 Jun) Anne's second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* published by T.C. Newby. (8 Jul) Charlotte and Anne reveal themselves to be Currer and Acton Bell to the staff of Smith, Elder in London. (24 Sept) Branwell dies at Haworth. (18 Oct) Elizabeth's first novel *Mary Barton* is published anonymously by Chapman & Hall. (19 Dec) Emily dies of tuberculosis at Haworth.
- 1849** (28 May) Anne dies of tuberculosis at Scarborough. (26 Oct) Charlotte's *Shirley* published.
- 1850** (April) The Gaskells move to Plymouth Grove, Manchester. Elizabeth begins writing for Dickens' *Household Words*. (20 Aug) meets Charlotte Brontë for the first time in Windermere. (10 Dec) new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* edited by Charlotte is published.
- 1851** (27-30 June) Charlotte stays with Elizabeth in Manchester.
- 1853** (10 Jan) Elizabeth's novel *Ruth* is published. (28 Jan) Charlotte's final novel *Villette* is published. (late June) Elizabeth's *Cranford* is published by Chapman and Hall. (19-23 Sept) Elizabeth stays with Charlotte in Haworth.
- 1854** (1-3 May) Final meeting between Elizabeth and Charlotte in Manchester. (29 June) Charlotte marries Arthur Nicholls (b.1819).
- 1855** (31 March) Charlotte dies of morning sickness and is buried (4 April) at St Michael's and All Angels, Haworth.
- 1857** (25 March) *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* published by Smith, Elder & Co. to be redacted and reissued 9 May and 22 Aug. (7 Jun) Charlotte's first novel *The Professor* published posthumously.
- 1865** (12 Nov) Elizabeth dies suddenly at her home in Hampshire and is buried (16 Nov) at Brook St Chapel, Knutsford.
- 1866** Elizabeth's *Wives and Daughters* is published posthumously.

***The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Elizabeth Gaskell,**
produced 1856-57 and published 1857

A detail from the long-hand fair copy manuscript in Elizabeth Gaskell's hand, showing redactions and insertions to the text.



(Image: The University of Manchester)

Production history

- **Sat 16 June 1855:** Patrick Brontë invites Elizabeth Gaskell to write an autobiographical 'account' of his daughter.
- **Wed 20 June 1855:** Patrick Brontë's first statement summarizing the facts of Charlotte Brontë's life.
- **Mon 23 July 1855:** Gaskell visits and interviews Patrick Brontë and Arthur Nicholls in Haworth, West Yorkshire, England, formally beginning her research.
- **Tues 14 Aug 1855:** Gaskell interviews instrumental witness Ellen Nussey in Birstall, England and obtains her letters, selectively redacted by Nussey.
- **Mon 8 Oct 1855:** Gaskell interviews Margaret Wooler, visits some conjectural locations of Brontë's novels.
- **Sat 3 Nov 1855:** Gaskell has obtained 20 key letters by Brontë to her publisher George Smith.
- **Sat 15 Dec 1855:** Gaskell obtains letters by Brontë to her editor W.S. Williams.
- **Friday 22 Feb 1856:** Gaskell has written the first 20 pages since January.
- **Tues 6 May 1856:** Gaskell interviews Constantin Heger, Brussels, Belgium.
- **Wed 14 May 1856:** Mary Taylor's written account of her friendship with Brontë arrives from New Zealand.
- **Wed 23 July 1856:** Gaskell obtains all Brontë's unpublished manuscripts from Arthur Nicholls: her juvenilia, *The Professor* and *Emma*.
- **Tues 19 Aug 1856:** Gaskell has written 240 pages of *Life*.
- **Mon 1 Dec 1856:** George Smith procures Brontë's copyright from Arthur Nicholls.
- **Sat 7 Feb 1857:** Gaskell has finished writing.
- **Through Feb 1857:** Elizabeth and William Gaskell correct proofs.
- **Wed 25 March 1857:** 1st edition published by Smith, Elder & Co, London.
- **Thurs 2 April 1857:** first complaint of misrepresentation is lodged by Patrick Brontë.
- **Friday 24 April 1857:** objections raised by Rev William Carus Wilson.
- **Wed 6 May 1857:** objections from Lydia Robinson's lawyers. Pressure mounts on Gaskell to renounce controversial claims.
- **Sat 9 May 1857:** 2nd edition released.
- **16 May – 6 Nov 1857:** Brontë associates argue publicly in newspapers regarding *Life*.
- **Wed 27 May 1857:** Gaskell's solicitors publish an apologetic retraction.
- **Sat 22 Aug 1857:** 3rd and final edition released.