

CHARLOTTE BRONTE, 'JANE EYRE' and ST MARY'S HALL

Although there is of course no direct link between Charlotte Bronte and St Mary's Hall, there is an indirect link, which may be of particular interest to you when you are reading 'Jane Eyre'.

Charlotte Bronte, who was born on 21st April 1816 (and was therefore twenty when St Mary's Hall was founded), went, as did her elder sisters Maria and Elizabeth and her younger sister Emily, to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, founded by the Rev. W. Carus Wilson, and it is this school of which Charlotte Bronte paints a portrait as Lowood Institution in 'Jane Eyre' (published 1847). In 1833 the school at Cowan Bridge moved to Casterton, becoming known as Casterton School. Now it was Casterton School that the Rev. Henry Venn Elliott visited in 1833 when he had in his mind the project of founding St Mary's Hall. The Rev. Henry Venn Elliott stayed with his friend the Rev. Carus Wilson and made a careful examination of the school. It was this visit that gave Mr Elliott the final impulse to build St Mary's Hall and the foundation stone was laid in the next year, 1834. Mr Elliott himself is remembered as saying in 1859:

'The idea of building St Mary's Hall was suggested to my mind after visiting the Casterton Clergy Daughters' School, when I thought there was no place like it in the south of England where the daughters of clergymen with limited incomes could be educated.'

One of the pupils who entered St Mary's Hall in 1836 had a sister at Casterton. The entry in the register reads:

'August 31st 1836 Ann Keith Lowry Age 17  
Parents James and Elizabeth Lowry curate of Holliwell. Has 12 children, 8 of them dead. Eldest governess to Lady Harriet Gurney, the second a pupil at Casterton.  
Character and abilities - very shy - affectionate'

Apparently the situation at Cowan Bridge was unhealthy and the pupils were badly fed. There were frequent outbreaks of typhoid. During the first two years of the school one pupil died in it and five, including Maria and Elizabeth Bronte, were hurriedly taken away and died soon after. Charlotte Bronte paints a similar picture at the fictional Lowood when typhus struck:

'Classes were broken up, rules relaxed. The few who continued well were allowed almost unlimited licence; because the medical attendant insisted on the necessity of frequent exercise to keep them in health.... The teachers were fully occupied with packing up and making other necessary preparations for the departure of those girls who were fortunate enough to have friends and relations able and willing to remove them from the seat of contagion. Many, already smitten, went home only to die: some died at the school.'

'Jane Eyre' Ch. 9

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It is in Chapter 9 that Helen Burns dies of consumption.

And what of St Mary's Hall? Well, you must bear in mind the very high mortality rate, particularly among children, of those days. (See, for instance, the record of the family of the Rev. Lowry, above.) Remembering this, here are some extracts

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from the register:

Ann Elizabeth Haight entered St Mary's Hall August 9th 1836 age 12  
'Left on account of health January 7th 1838'

Mary Jane Adenays entered St Mary's Hall October 6th 1838  
'Died at St Mary's Hall September 1842'

Jane Annette Turnour entered St Mary's Hall June 1840  
'Home and since dead'

Anna Maria Marriott entered St Mary's Hall August 1st 1840  
'Died at St Mary's Hall 1841'

Maryanne Cory entered St Mary's Hall October 15th 1841  
'Removed on account of health and since dead'

Mary Agnes Cleather entered St Mary's Hall August 1st 1843 age 12  
'Died at St Mary's Hall April 2nd 1844'

Margaret Saunders entered St Mary's Hall January 1846  
'June 1849 Home and died there March 1850'

Mary Peat entered St Mary's Hall August 1848 age 8  
'Died in the Hall April 26th 1850'

This is not a full list of such entries, though they were typical only of this period up to 1850.

Charlotte Bronte's sufferings at Cowan Bridge and the indignation she felt at the treatment of her gifted elder sister Maria (whom she portrayed as Helen Burns in 'Jane Eyre') were injuries she never forgot. Her portrait of the school in 'Jane Eyre' came near to ruining it. After her death when Mrs Gaskell in her biography of Charlotte Bronte identified Casterton School as Lowood the family of the founder, the Rev. Carus Wilson (the friend whom the Re. Henry Venn Elliott had visited in 1838), were only narrowly persuaded not to proceed with a libel action.

Charlotte Bronte in 'Jane Eyre' was not perhaps painting a deliberate picture of Cowan Bridge, but certainly was drawing from her own experience. Like Jane Eyre she was poor, undersized and plain, suffered at school, and became a governess in a private family. St Mary's Hall too was to serve as a 'nursery for governesses for the higher and middle classes', and many St Mary's Hall girls did indeed become governesses, or in some cases pupil governesses at St Mary's Hall (as Jane Eyre became at Lowood):

Mary Hammond entered St Mary's Hall June 13th 1840  
'Left January 1846 for a situation as a governess in the family of Henry Green Esq. Walthamstow'

Lucy Jane Adley entered St Mary's Hall August 8th 1840  
'Left 1845 for the situation of governess in the family  
of Rev. Farley Witney'

Sarah Elizabeth Thomson entered St Mary's Hall August 1st 1848  
'Left December 1857 and entered a family as a governess'

Mary Jane Holmes entered St Mary's Hall August 1853 age 13  
'Left Christmas 1858. Returned to St Mary's Hall as pupil  
governess February 1859. Died at home 1860.'

The fictional Jane Eyre does, however, say of Lowood that it improved  
and had its good points:

'The school, thus improved, became in time a truly useful and noble  
institution. I remained an inmate of its walls, after its regeneration,  
for eight years: six as pupil, and two as teacher; and in both  
capacities I bear my testimony to its value and importance.

'During these eight years my life was uniform; but not unhappy,  
because it was not inactive. I had the means of an excellent  
education placed within my reach; a fondness for some of my  
studies, and a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight  
in pleasing my teachers, such as I loved, urged me on: I availed  
myself fully of the advantages offered me.'

'Jane Eyre' Ch. 10

Lowood Institution is a fictional school; but Casterton School and St Mary's Hall still  
exist today, approximately 150 years after Charlotte Bronte first went to school, to place  
'the means of an excellent education' within reach of their pupils.

#### Bibliography

Eileen E. Meads: A Brief History of St Mary's Hall

The Rev. T. Houghton: A Sermon preached on Sunday evening October 16th 1898

Admission register St Mary's Hall 1836 -

Margaret Lane: Preface to 'Jane Eyre' Everyman edition

Charlotte Bronte: Jane Eyre (You will find the account of Jane Eyre's schooldays  
in Chapters 6 - 10.)