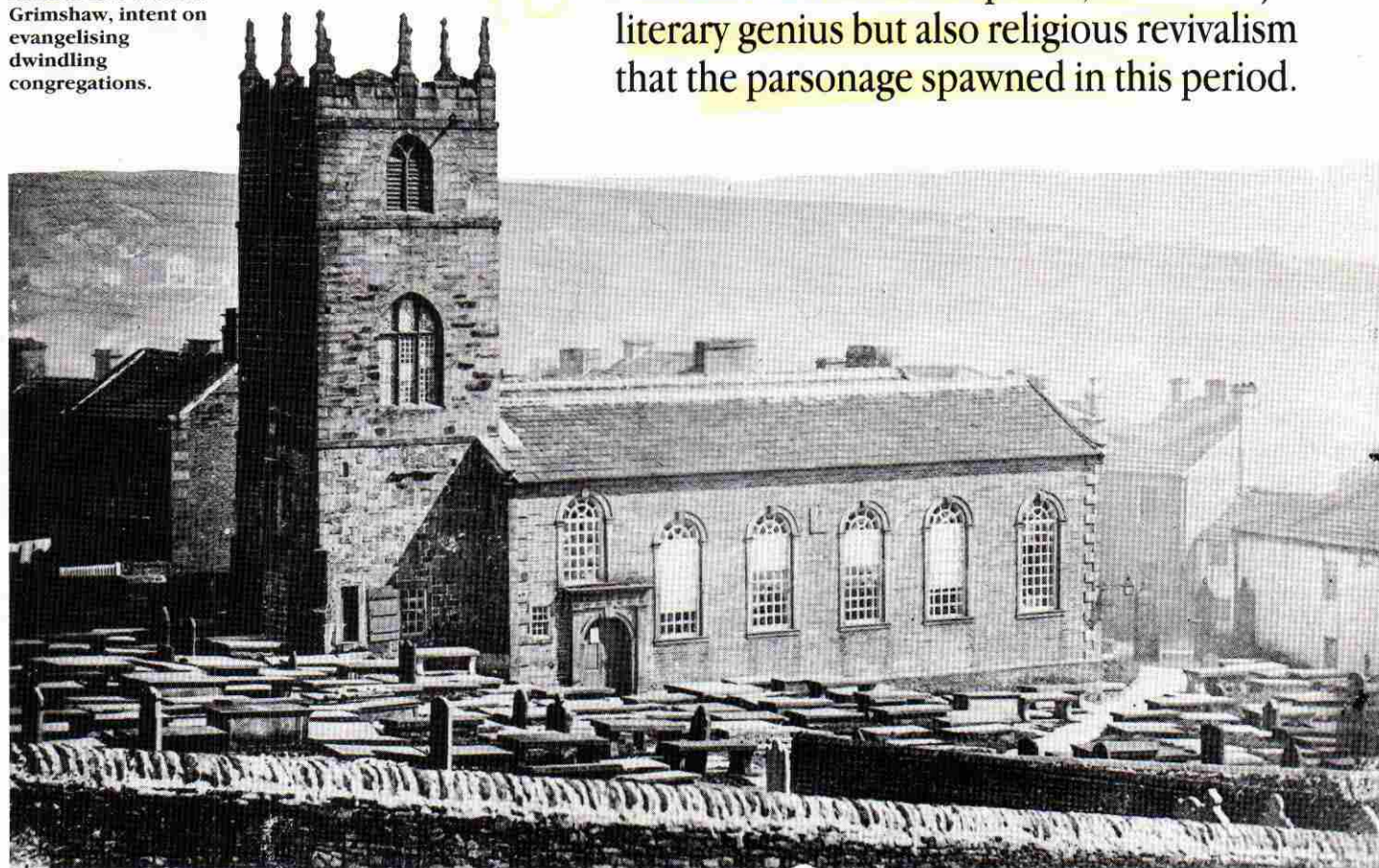


WILLIAM GRIMSHAW, PATRICK BRONTË AND THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL

Stony ground? Haworth old church, set against the dour landscape of the Yorkshire moors – a demanding terrain for men like William Grimshaw, intent on evangelising dwindling congregations.

The Brontës and the town of Haworth in Yorkshire, where they lived, are knitted inseparably in the popular imagination but, as **Michael Baumber** explains, it was not just literary genius but also religious revivalism that the parsonage spawned in this period.



The period between 1714 and 1740 saw a steep fall in church attendance. Nor was the problem confined to the Church of England. The Congregational and Presbyterian Churches were in decline and so were the Quakers. Yet the evidence suggests more a flight from the churches than from Christianity, because religious revivalism was also a feature of the period. Much of it was short-lived or limited in geographical scope but it showed that if the Church of England had sufficient imagination to draw on the well of religious enthusiasm that existed, much of the lost ground could be regained.

John Wesley was the man who set out to accomplish that task. He was a priest ordained into the Church of England, and the Methodist movement was originally conceived as a means of regenerating the Church from within. In the end the institutional rigidities of the established church forced him to leave and create an entirely new denomination. The practical problems which led to this result can be illustrated in miniature by examining the careers of William Grimshaw and Patrick Brontë, both of whom spent their mature years as Perpetual Curates of the remote Penine chapelry of Haworth.

Many of Wesley's early supporters

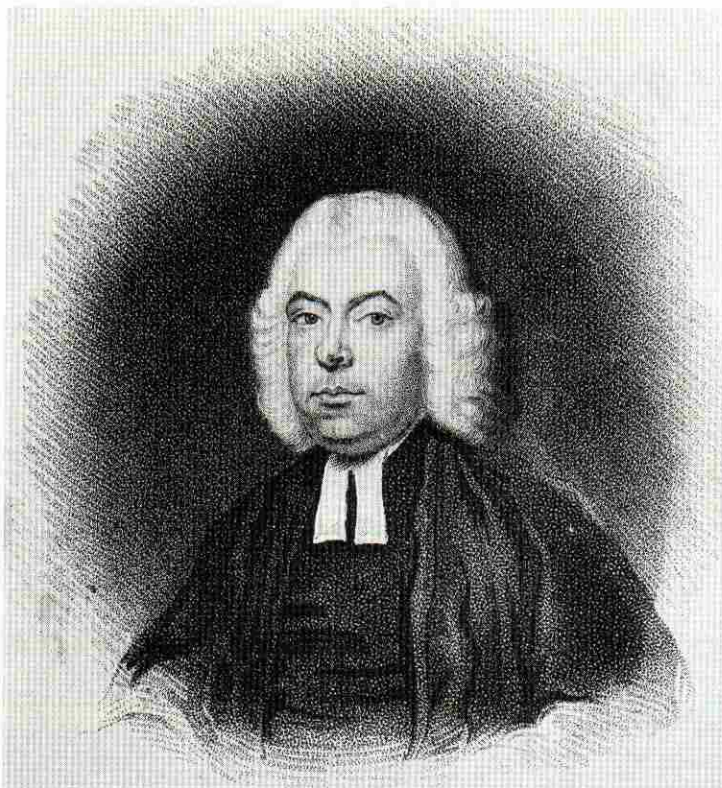
were Church of England clergy who shared his views. Pre-eminent among these men was William Grimshaw, the Perpetual Curate of Haworth. Grimshaw was initially cautious because he knew as little of the Wesleys as they did of him. When John's brother, Charles, first visited Haworth in October 1746, he was not allowed to preach from the pulpit but he did address one of the meetings that Grimshaw used to hold in his kitchen at Sowdens. Grimshaw was soon converted. The Wesleys preached that God's grace was available to everyone and that a person's sins could be forgiven before his or her death. This was exactly the conclusion that

Grimshaw had arrived at after great spiritual tribulation.

Grimshaw had also anticipated much of what was to be characteristic of the Methodist system. When he took a service he did not just 'read' it, he invested it with an emotional content unusual in the early eighteenth century. His use of congregational hymn singing and fervent public prayer also heightened the atmosphere. Grimshaw's preaching was not the usual academic discourse couched in terms far above the comprehension of his congregation. Instead he expressed himself in language which they could understand, preaching extempore, without notes, in 'market language' as many of his critics termed it.

The subject matter of Grimshaw's sermons was a variation on the same theme. The sinfulness of the people before him would be stressed. The torments of Hell that would await them if they continued in their wicked ways would be vividly painted. The need for repentance would then be introduced. He would end with the way God's grace had been made available to all by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, if the repentance and the determination to lead a new life was genuine. Nor did he confine himself to the church. His chunky figure tramping the moorland tracks of his upland chapelry soon became a familiar sight to the inhabitants. House meetings and services in unconsecrated places became a regular part of his work both for those who found getting to church difficult and for instruction.

Grimshaw did not limit himself to the chapelry of Haworth. Like the Wesleys he was prepared to go wherever there was a need. He accepted invitations from his former parishioners at neighbouring Todmorden to hold house meetings there, much to the anger of his successor, Robert Hargreaves, who complained in vain to the Archbishop of York. The meetings Grimshaw held in the chapelry of Colne where the Perpetual Curate, George White, was an alcoholic who neglected his duties, led to a violent confrontation in 1748. Grimshaw and his supporters were beaten by a hostile crowd and imprisoned for a short



William Grimshaw (1708-63): from an engraving in an 1821 edition of *The Methodist Magazine* – his inclusion there emphasising that he was seen very much as a founding father of the movement.

time.

Grimshaw went even further afield. In 1743 he made an alliance with William Darney, 'Scotch Will', as he was known, was an itinerant pedlar. He appears to have been a product of one of the earlier revivals, initiated by the Reverend James Robe, the minister of Kilsyth, in 1733. In his wanderings Darney founded a number of religious societies, mainly in the Rossendale area of Lancashire. Soon Darney was speaking at Grimshaw's house meetings and Grimshaw was addressing his societies in Rossendale. Darney was responsible for introducing Grimshaw to the idea of using the laity in the conduct of house meetings and in preaching. As the locals put it, 'Mad Grimshaw has turned Scotch Will's Clerk'.

Thus Grimshaw had adopted practically all the main features of Methodism before Charles Wesley's visit. The result was that when John Wesley first preached in Haworth Church in June 1747, he received an enthusiastic welcome from an overflowing congregation. Grimshaw also introduced the Wesleys to Darney and persuaded the pedlar to throw in his lot with the Methodists. In the years that followed, Grimshaw's reputation as a preacher spread far and wide and he became the dominating figure on the Methodist circuit known as the Great Haworth Round, which stretched from Haworth to

Workington.

Grimshaw's approach was not without its critics. Many of his converts would have liked him to break with the Church of England. They also thought they should have complete control over their own local church and they objected to the centralising tendencies of the Wesleyan movement. A considerable minority were attracted by the Calvinist doctrine of individual perfection. These strands of thinking led to a division in Grimshaw's ranks, when a considerable portion of his converts led by James Hartley, joined the Particular Baptists. At first Grimshaw was understandably upset, but he came to believe that they were all workers for a common cause, remarking wryly on the number of his chickens that had become ducks.

The Wesleys placed such a great value on 'the Apostle of the North', as Grimshaw was known, that they arranged for him to become the leader of their movement should they predecease him. In the event Grimshaw died in 1763, twenty-eight years before John Wesley, but it is interesting to speculate what might have happened if he had outlived them.

Too much has been made of the hostility of individuals within the Anglican hierarchy to the early Methodists. Grimshaw had no trouble with his superiors. The first Archbishop of York he had to deal with was William Herring. What Herring looked for were clergymen who were resident and attending to their parochial duties. Grimshaw was a model incumbent and had no trouble at all. Herring's successor was Matthew Hutton. After Hutton learned that Grimshaw's first quarterly communion at Haworth attracted a mere twelve people but that he now got between 4-500 attending in winter and nearly 1,200 in summer, he refused to listen to any of his critics. Nor did the position change when Hutton made way for Archbishop Gilbert. After Grimshaw had preached before him for two hours, Gilbert took him by the hand and said, 'I would to God that all the clergy in my diocese were like this good man'.

The example of Grimshaw and men like him led to the growth of an Evangelical Movement, similar to the

Methodists in approach and doctrine but with significant organisational differences. One of the features which was to distinguish the Anglican Evangelicals was that they remained parish priests instead of becoming itinerant preachers. Alone among the Methodist leaders, Grimshaw insisted on combining itinerancy with his duties to the people of Haworth. The immense labour involved was the main reason for his early death at the age of fifty-five.

Anglican Evangelicals placed a severe limitation on what lay assistants could do. Grimshaw was more liberal in his use of lay preachers and class leaders than later Evangelicals were to be, but he objected to them administering Holy Communion. In 1755 Grimshaw journeyed to a meeting at Norwich, especially to denounce the practice of lay preachers administering Communion in East Anglia. Embarrassingly two of the culprits were his former proteges, Paul Greenwood and Jonathan Maskew. The inflexibility of the Church of England over itinerancy and lay participation played an important part in the decision to create a separate denomination. Perhaps it was as well for his peace of mind that Grimshaw died before the Methodist Conference of 1770, where the fateful decision was made to ordain their own ministers and begin the inevitable process of separation from the Church of England.

Many of the leading figures of the Anglican Evangelical Movement were inspired by Grimshaw's ministry. One of them the Reverend Henry Foster, was responsible for publishing an account of Grimshaw's work in the form of six open letters. In 1760 John Newton paid Grimshaw a visit and came away highly impressed. Newton was Vicar of Olney, a living in the gift of William, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth, one of the most important patrons of the Evangelical Movement. There he co-operated with the poet William Cowper to produce the first real Anglican hymn book, known as 'Olney Hymns'.

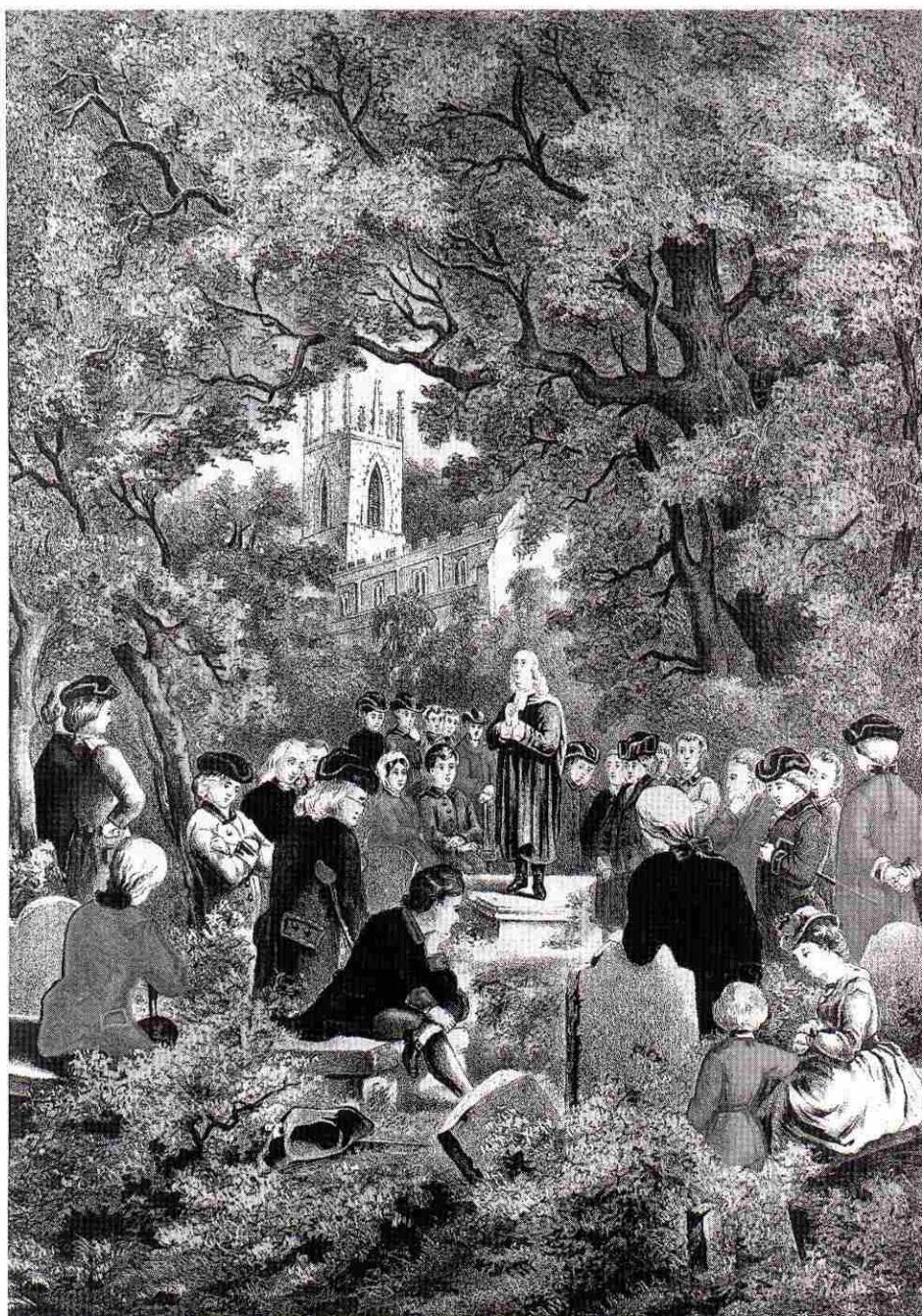
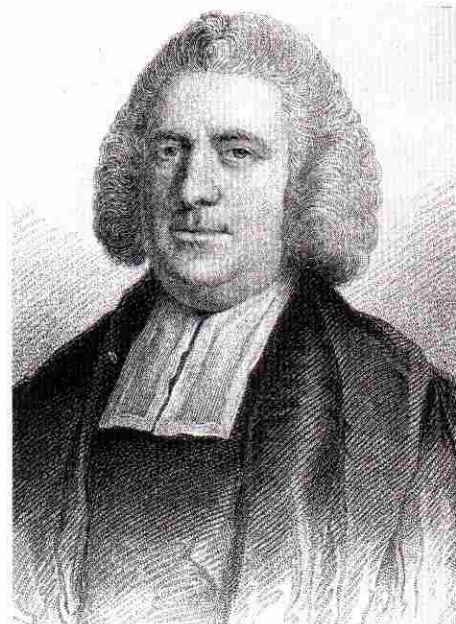
Grimshaw formed a close friendship with the Reverend Henry Venn, Vicar of Huddersfield from 1758-71, the leading Evangelical in the North of England. Venn preached the sermon at Grimshaw's funeral and one of his curates, the Reverend John Richardson, succeeded him as Perpetual Curate of Haworth. In Richardson's time Wesley received as warm a welcome at Haworth as he had when Grimshaw was alive.

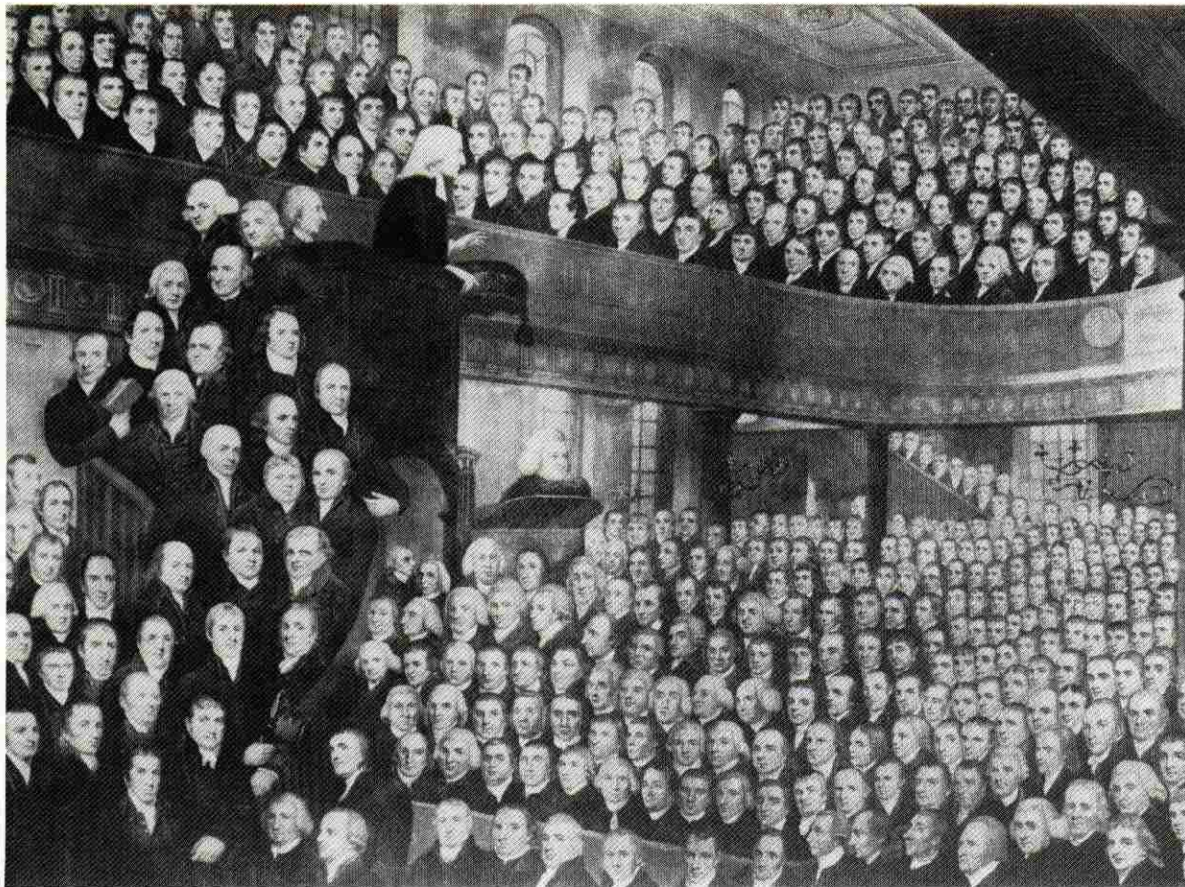
One of Venn's initiatives was to

form a Clerical Society, with the object of raising money to support the training of suitable Evangelical clergy. When Venn resigned from Huddersfield due to ill health the Society was transferred to Elland in the parish of Halifax by one of his curates. There it flourished. Dartmouth headed the subscription list and prominent among the other contributors was William Wilberforce. From the time of his extraordinary victory in the 1784 Yorkshire County election, Wilberforce was the acknowledged political leader of the

(Right) Henry Venn, a leading North Country Evangelical and close friend of Grimshaw.

(Below) John Wesley preaching on his father's tomb: a his intensive itinerant preaching was also practised by Grimshaw.





The first Methodist Conference, held at the City Road Chapel in London: the eventual break with the Church of England placed Patrick Brontë and other Methodist fellow-travellers in a cruel dilemma.

Evangelicals.

Following his resignation, Venn took a small living near Cambridge and he soon became acquainted with Charles Simeon. Simeon was the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge and a Fellow of King's College. He was a convinced Evangelical. The combination of his college teaching and his preaching had a profound effect on a whole generation of theology students. Through Simeon, Venn became aware of the Clapham Sect, founded by the wealthy banker, Henry Thornton, which was very influential in forwarding Evangelical ideas in London. Both Simeon and Thornton figure among the contributors to the Elland Clerical Society.

This background is relevant when considering the early career of Patrick Brontë. Brontë was born in 1777 at Donoughmore in Northern Ireland. His father was an agricultural labourer and his own first employment was as a weaver. However by dint of studying hard in his spare time, he was accepted as a teacher in the Presbyterian school at Rathfiland in 1794. Four years later he transferred to the bigger Anglican school at Drumballyroney. Brontë's closest friend among the Presbyterians was David Barber. Barber had been profoundly impressed by the preaching of John Wesley, who had made regular biennial visits to Ireland during his later

years. The Rector of Drumballyroney, the Reverend Thomas Tighe, was another strong supporter of Wesley. His brother William owned property in county Wicklow and had regularly entertained Wesley on his Irish visits.

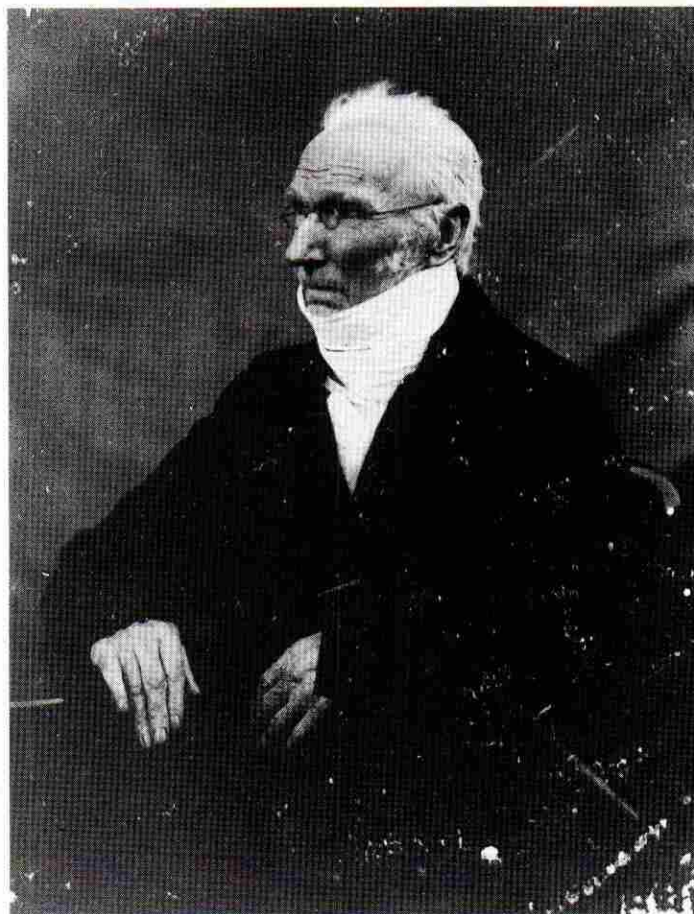
Thomas Tighe, was largely responsible for inspiring Brontë with the idea of qualifying as a minister of the Church of England. In 1802 Tighe got Brontë a place in his old college, St. John's, Cambridge. We have it on the authority of Charlotte Brontë that her father knew Simeon. He may well have attended the social gatherings that Simeon used to hold in his drawing room. When he left Ireland, Brontë took with him his entire savings which amounted to £17. By the end of his first year at Cambridge he had barely £7 left. He was only able to complete his degree because he got a grant from the Clerical Society of £20, £10 of which was subscribed by Wilberforce and £10 by Henry Thornton.

Shortly after his graduation Brontë was appointed curate at Wethersfield in Essex. Simeon must have played a large part in the appointment, because the vicar, Joseph Jowett, was Professor of Civil Laws at the University of Cambridge, and one of his closest friends. After a two-year stay Brontë moved to All Saints, Wellington in Shropshire, where he became a member of the Anglican-Methodist

group which centred around a formidable old lady, Mrs Mary Fletcher. She was the widow of Fletcher of Madeley, who had done so much for Methodism in the Midlands, that Wesley had transferred the succession to him on Grimshaw's death. Ironically he too predeceased both brothers.

One member of the group was Brontë's fellow curate, William Morgan, who was to remain a life-long friend. Another who was to play a large part in his life was the Reverend John Fennell. Fennell was an ordained Anglican minister who combined a job as headmaster of a boarding school, with work as an itinerant preacher on the local Methodist circuit.

A third member of the Fletcher circle was the Reverend John Buckworth, the Vicar of Dewsbury. In December 1809 Brontë moved to Dewsbury as one of Buckworth's curates and in 1811 he was appointed Perpetual Curate of Hartsheadcum-Clifton, a chapelry within the parish. Buckworth was a convinced Evangelical, who wrote hymns in his spare time. With his encouragement Brontë adopted a style very like that of Grimshaw. He preached extempore without notes in simple language. His views were very similar too. He wrote later that 'he would not feel comfortable with a coadjutor who would deem it his duty to



A photograph of Patrick Brontë in old age: the influence of his broad church and anti-sectarian ideas was very powerful both on his daughters' writing and also on their spiritual philosophy. (Below) Brontë's study in the Haworth parsonage.

preach the appalling doctrines of personal Election and Reprobation'. He also encouraged cottage meetings and soon his gaunt frame, supported by his long staff, was a well-known sight all over the parish.

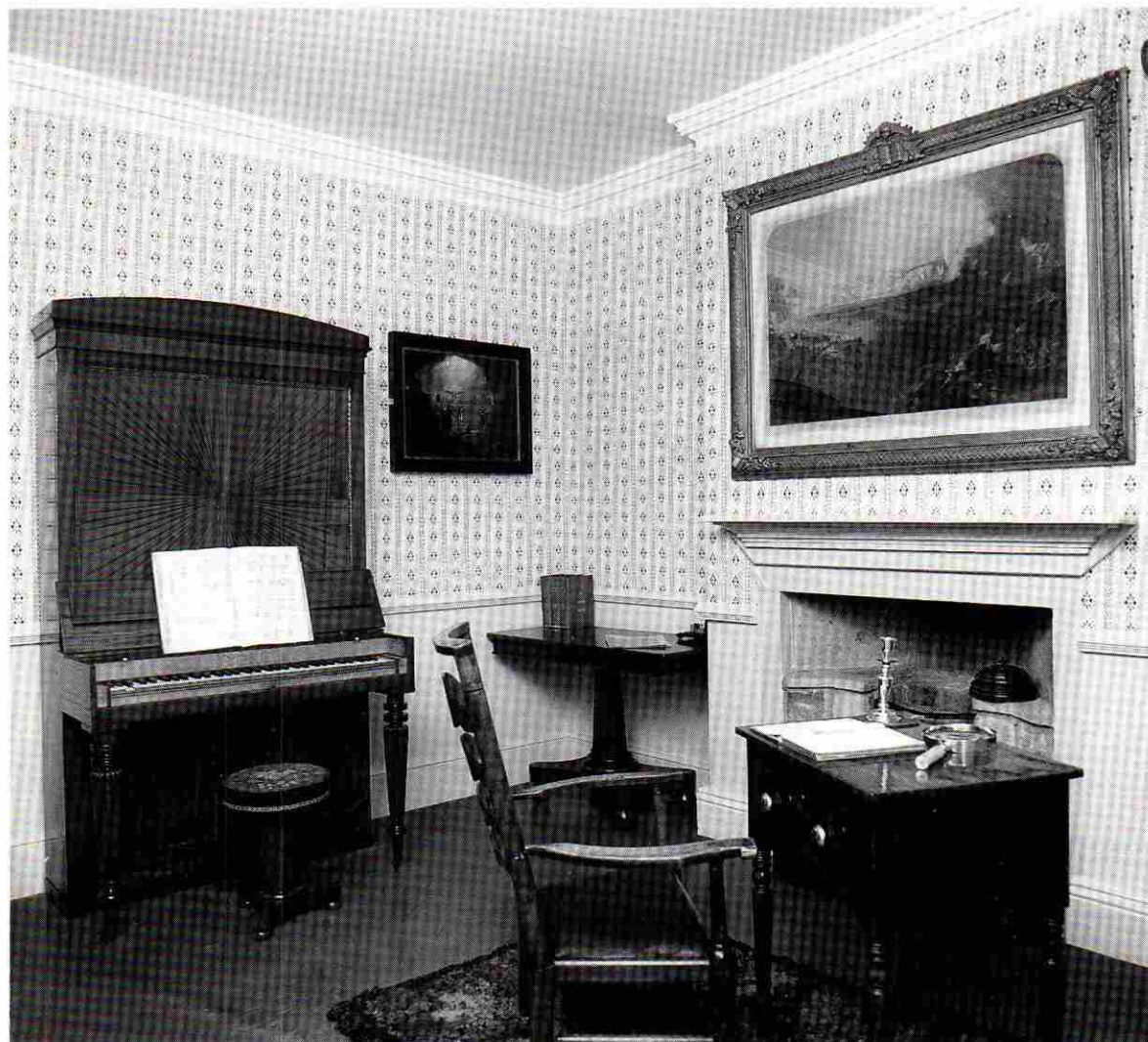
Another feature of Evangelicalism was an emphasis on education, the importance of which the Movement grasped more quickly than the Methodists. With Buckworth's encouragement, Brontë founded a very successful Sunday School.

Brontë's years at Hartshead were to be important for other reasons. William Morgan came north soon after him to be curate of Bierley Chapel within the parish of Bradford. So did John Fennell. He was appointed first Governor of a new school at Woodhouse Grove, situated by the River Aire north of Bradford, and designed for the sons of both Anglican and Methodist ministers. Morgan and Brontë paid regular visits to Woodhouse Grove and both men found wives there. Morgan married Fennell's daughter, Jane, and Brontë his niece, Maria Branwell.

In 1816 Brontë made an exchange with the Perpetual Curate of Thorn-

ton in Bradford and after a four-year stay, moved on to Haworth. The Haworth Trustees wanted Brontë because he was the same sort of Evangelical minister as their three previous incumbents, Grimshaw, Richardson and Charnock. But even before he accepted the living, Brontë was uncomfortably aware that things had changed since Grimshaw's day.

A common practice in the late eighteenth century was for parishioners to attend divine service at the parish church and then go on to the Methodist class, which was a logical development of the cottage meeting. In 1812 the Bradford and Halifax Methodist district decreed that all their chapels should hold regular services in competi-



tion with Anglican ones. This development led to a striking change in Haworth. In Grimshaw's time organised Methodism hardly existed, as Methodist sympathisers were content to attend Haworth Church. As late as the 1790s the Haworth Society contributed little or nothing to circuit funds. But the 1812 decision, combined with the long illness of Charnock, changed all that. Church Methodists were forced to choose and many left. By the time Brontë arrived, Methodism was firmly entrenched as a separate entity.

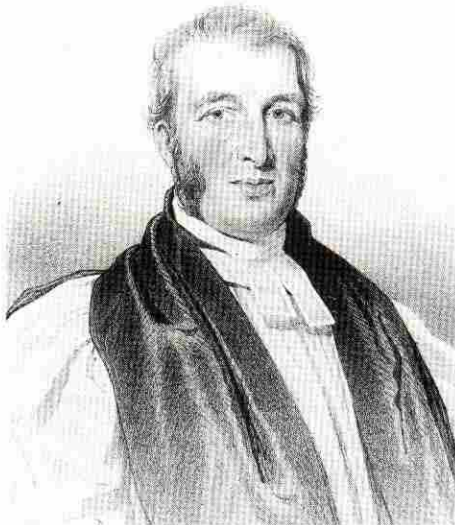
Patrick Brontë was thus faced with a cruel dilemma. Fennell had been forced to resign from Woodhouse Grove because he would not leave the Church of England. Brontë too was a firm supporter of the established church, but his doctrinal principles were exactly the same as those of the Wesleyan Methodists. The sermon he preached at Willie Weightman's funeral showed that cottage meetings were still being held but the strict limitations placed on lay participation put the Anglicans at a severe disadvantage. In any case Brontë's instinct was to co-operate, not compete. There are well attested stories of him attending Methodist functions, when they did not clash with his responsibilities to his own church. Gradually the Evangelical fires died too. More stress was laid on God as a father and less on damnation for sinners.

Brontë's difficulties were accentuated by the Oxford Movement inside the Church of England. His hostility to Calvinist ideas led the Pastoral Aid Society to send him a whole succession of High Church curates. Charlotte commented sardonically on Willie Weightman's High Church views on the Apostolic Succession and her father had temperedly branded Arthur Bell Nicholls, a Puseyite. Even the moderate Joseph Brett Grant came in for his share of criticism. In 1843 advantage was taken of Peel's District Churches Act to carve the new district of Oxenhope out of Haworth chapelry. In the space of ten years Grant was able to raise enough money to build a church, a vicarage and a National School. His reward for his labours was to be pilloried as the begging curate, Dr Donne, in Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Shirley*. One suspects that the curates' chief crime was their wish to fight the Anglican corner and that entailed rivalry with the Methodists.

This did not mean that relations between Patrick Brontë and the Dissenters were happy, but it is notice-



William Morgan: one of Patrick Brontë's friends from the 'Fletcher circle' of Midlands Methodists.



William Carus Wilson: principal of the Cowan Bridge school Charlotte Brontë attended, and the prototype for the dour Reverend Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*.



Charles Simeon: one of the university protagonists of the Evangelical movement in the late eighteenth century.

able that his arguments were usually with the Baptists not the Methodists, just as in Grimshaw's time. Brontë seems to have sympathised with some of the grievances of the Dissenters, particularly over church rate, but whereas the Methodists sought redress for specific injustices, the Baptists would be content with nothing less than the disestablishment of the Church of England. Yet even with the Baptists there seems to have been a notable lack of bitterness. There is the well-known story of how Brontë managed to persuade a leading Baptist, William Greenwood, to accept the position of churchwarden, in order to facilitate the raising of money to repair the church tower.

As a result, Brontë turned in on himself and left the heat of the battle to his curates. After the death of his two elder daughters at Cowan Bridge Clergy Daughters' School he devoted a large part of his attention to educating his remaining children at home. His didactic efforts seem to have been supplemented, perhaps unwittingly, by the argumentative talents of his sister-in-law, Miss Elizabeth Branwell, who ran his household after the death of his wife in 1821. Miss Branwell was brought up a Wesleyan Methodist. Ellen Nussey described how she 'would be very lively and intelligent, and tilt arguments against Mr Brontë without fear'. Not many women could have done that and her example rubbed off, particularly on Charlotte.

With such a close-knit and happy family circle, it is hardly surprising that the ideas instilled in their young heads continually reappeared in the thinking of Brontë's children. Charlotte was the closest to her father. She acquired an antipathy to Calvinist ideas as a result of her experiences at the Cowan Bridge school, whose principal, the Reverend William Carus Wilson figures in *Jane Eyre* as the unpleasant Reverend Mr Brocklehurst. Like her father, she condemned sectarianism of every kind. She could not understand why the dissenters were unable to remain within the fold of the established church nor why those who did dissolved into factions. She told Ellen Nussey 'I consider Methodism, Dissenterism, Quakerism and the extremes of High and Low Churchism foolish but Roman Catholicism beats them all'.

In her later years she seemed to be drifting, like Brontë, towards a liberal theological attitude. Her friendship with Mrs Gaskell, whose husband was a Unitarian minister, may well have

been the influence, which led her to read liberal theologians like Frank Newman and John Sterling. When she visited London she made a point of going to hear Frederick Denison Maurice, who was deprived of his professorships of History and Divinity at King's College, London, because he questioned the doctrine of endless punishment.

Anne seems to have had a deeper spiritual understanding of what lay behind the labels than her elder sister, but her fiction also reflects the prejudices of her father. There is the unflattering portrait of the Reverend Mr Hatfield in *Agnes Grey*. He most of the time declaims on church discipline, rites and ceremonies, apostolic succession and the atrocious criminality of dissent, but can on occasion give a sunless sermon, representing God as a severe taskmaster and not as a benevolent father. Hatfield shows his superficiality by indulging in light banter immediately after a sombre sermon and by crawling to the rich. One can almost hear Brontë denouncing the mercenary nature of all curates.

In his early years Branwell Brontë was more overtly religious than any of his sisters and the family background was probably responsible for his naming William Cowper (alongside William Wordsworth) as one of his favourite poets. His own compositions stress God's forgiving nature in the same way his father's sermons did. He was very musical and many modern critics would endorse his view that Handel's oratorio, *Samson*, was as good as, if not better than the *Messiah*. Though he encouraged Branwell's artistic aspirations, Brontë hoped for a long time that his son would follow him into the church. That was not to be. The wide swings in his moods from flippancy to despondency unfitted him for the cloth. Like others of his family he disliked what he termed the 'hypocrisy of the clergy, and starchy Evangelicals would not have been amused to find that his musical taste included the Roman Catholic masses of Haydn and Mozart. Under the pressure of his personal failures the specifically Christian element fades from his writing, leaving only a sort of Nature God clearly derived from Wordsworth.

Emily's attitude closely parallels that of Branwell. According to Charlotte in her introduction to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* she too shared the family revulsion for the doctrines of personal Election and Reprobation: 'She held that mercy and forgiveness are the Divinest

attributes of the Great Being who made both man and woman'. But Emily drew a more radical moral from the family's intense dislike of sectarian division. In her most famous poem, 'No coward soul is mine' she wrote:

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move mens' hearts, unutterably
vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless
main.

One may argue about whether the source of Emily's inspiration was Christian, but I doubt whether her father would seriously have quarrelled with her view, that God lies within us. He would simply have sug-

gested that the trappings of formal religion played a larger part in fixing Him there than she was willing to concede.

FURTHER READING:

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Michael Baumber was Head of the History Department at Greenhead Grammar School, Keighley. He is author of *Robert Blake, General at Sea* (John Murray, 1989) and is currently researching a history of Haworth.

True believers? The famous 1834 portrait of Anne, Emily and Charlotte by their brother Branwell.

