

## *Friend of the Brontës: Sarah De Garrs Newsome*

W I L L I A M L E E B U R T O N

When Sarah Newsome died in Iowa City on September 8, 1899 at the age of 93, newspapers throughout the state published lengthy accounts of her life, as if she had been a person of national prominence.<sup>1</sup> Actually her existence had been for the most part unremarkable. She had been born in 1806 in Leeds, had been married in 1829 to William Newsome of the nearby town of Bradford, and in 1843 emigrated to America accompanied by the couple's four children. William, who had preceded the family (he arrived in 1841) had gone on to Bridgeport, Ohio, and had established a home there, where the Newsomes lived for the following ten years.

About 1853 the family moved westward and settled in the town of Crawfordsville, Iowa where three more children were born to the couple. After William's death in 1860 Sarah remained there, bringing up her children—two sons became doctors—until at the age of 83 she moved to Iowa City to live with one of her daughters, Mrs. Mary Newsome Stull.

But the thing which caught the interest of the editors was the fact that Sarah, as a teenage girl, had been a servant in the household of one of Britain's most interesting literary families, that of the Reverend Patrick Brontë, his wife Maria Branwell Brontë, and their six children (three of whom became world-famous authors). It was Sarah and her sister Nancy who helped care for Mrs. Brontë during her fatal illness, who took the children for walks on the Yorkshire moors, shared their games, and listened, while preparing meals in the kitchen or doing other household chores, to the imaginative little stories that Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and their brother Branwell made up. It was an experience that Sarah De Garrs never forgot, and as her great-grandson Dr. John De Garrs Stull writes, she "lived up this glorious past to the hilt."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the obituary in the *Iowa City Daily Republican*, Friday, September 8, 1899, which was reprinted in the *Iowa City Weekly Republican* on Wednesday, September 13, 1899.

<sup>2</sup>For furnishing biographical information I wish to thank Dr. John De Garrs Stull, Olney, Illinois.

Late in Sarah's life she was able to add important details to a biography of Charlotte Brontë written by a prominent American novelist of the time, Mary Virginia Terhune, who wrote under the pseudonym of Marion Harland. The book, titled *Charlotte Brontë at Home*, is part of a series published by the G. P. Putnam Company on the lives of famous British and American authors.<sup>3</sup> While it was in preparation, Mrs. Terhune carried on a long correspondence with Sarah and Mrs. Stull, and the published volume contains numerous quotations from Sarah's letters. Unfortunately Sarah never saw the completed work, which was published only a few weeks after her death. One of her obituaries contains a letter written to Mrs. Stull in which Mrs. Terhune acknowledges her indebtedness to Sarah for the information she had given.

Perhaps with the passage of time Sarah may have rather overestimated her importance in the Brontë household. Dr. Stull remarks with some skepticism that "she elevated herself to being governess (her word) to the Brontë children. A much lower status is more probable." But quotations from the book of Mrs. Terhune bear out the contention that Sarah, though nominally a servant, was treated more as an equal and as a valued member of the family. A section from one chapter of the book begins as follows:

Mrs. Brontë brought to Haworth a young girl of fourteen or thereabouts, Sarah De Garrs by name, the daughter of a respected Thornton parishioner, to assist in the nursery and to accompany the children on their walks. Although nominally their nurse, she became at length their playmate, friend, and guardian. Mrs. Brontë sickened visibly that first summer, and by the time winter closed about the moorland Parsonage, was confined to her bed . . .

I have had direct from Sarah De Garrs [author's footnote: now Mrs. Newsome of Iowa City] the story of one day in the overshadowed home . . . The six children, always neatly dressed by their nurse, met their father in his study for morning prayers, and, these over, accompanied him across the hall to breakfast. The fare was plain, but abundant,—porridge and milk, bread and butter, for the morning meal seven days in the week . . .

The morning session over, the children were committed to Sarah De Garrs until dinner-time. To her patient tutelage the girls owed much of the skill with the needle which was remarkable with each at a very tender age. At five, Charlotte's wee fingers made a linen chemise for her own wear, with no other help than the cutting and basting done by Sarah.

"Of course," relates the whilom nurse, "she had been a long while at it, as they only sewed an hour each afternoon. But it was clean and well done. Charlotte was always a thoughtful, neat, womanly child . . ."

The children dined with their father. Little meat was served to them, and that little was plain roast or boiled . . . For sweets there were bread- and rice-puddings, custards, and other preparations of eggs and milk, slightly

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<sup>3</sup>Marion Harland, *Charlotte Brontë at Home* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899). Copy in The University of Iowa Libraries.

sweetened. Pastry and rich puddings were unknown quantities in the family bill-of-fare.

The afternoons spent by Mr. Brontë in parish visiting were the children's happiest seasons. Unless the weather were actually tempestuous, they donned hats and coats and took the uphill path to the breezy downs, accompanied by Sarah De Garrs . . . The sweep and wide reaches of the uncultivated tracts billowing against the sky, the clouds that made the heath black, the sunlight that glorified the livid hillsides,—were their universe. Once beyond the Parsonage fields and environing cottages, their repressed spirits broke forth.

"Their afternoon walks, as they sallied forth, each neatly and comfortably clad, were a joy. Their fun knew no bounds," says the affectionate nurse. "It never was expressed wildly. Bright and often dry, but deep, it occasioned many a merry burst of laughter. They enjoyed a game of romps, and played with zest."

Strolling reluctantly homeward . . . they found tea awaiting them, in the kitchen . . . Mr. Brontë came in later and tea was served in his study. He assembled the children about the table in the parlour when the tea-tray was taken off, for recitation and talk, giving them oral lessons in history, biography, or travel, while the little girls plied their needles . . . The uneventful day was closed by a short visit to their mother's room. While she could listen to them, the little ones said their nightly prayers at her bedside, kissed her "good-night," and stole away softly to "warm, clean beds," as Sarah De Garrs is careful to specify.

Mrs. Terhune recounts, in another chapter of the book, an incident which Sarah recalled, one illustrating the unusual place which she seems to have held in the lives of the Brontë children. Mrs. Terhune introduces the passage as follows:

In excluding his children from the world of people and facts, Mr. Brontë drove the eager minds into the universe of imagination. When they read or listened to a story, they forthwith proceeded to act it. Their "games" were founded upon what Maria read to them from the newspapers, and the tales brought forth from the father's mines of tradition, history, and romance. Nothing escaped them . . .

It is pleasant to find their young nurse cast for important parts in these plays. I copy, from a MS. dictated by her, the account of a *contretemps* that interrupted the orderly progress of scenic adventure:

"As an escaping prince, with a counterpane for a robe, I stepped from a window on the limb of a cherrytree, which broke and let me down. There was great consternation among the children, as it was Mr. Brontë's favorite tree, under which he often sat. I carried off the branch and blackened the place with soot, but the next day, Mr. Brontë detained them a moment and began with the youngest, asking each pleasantly, 'Who spoiled my tree?' The answer was, 'Not I,' until it came to my turn. They were always loyal and true."

The picture that Sarah gives is one of quiet happiness in the face of tragedy. And tragedy, mingled with almost incredible literary achievement, was to be the lot of the Brontë family for the remainder of their lives.

Mrs. Brontë died September 15, 1821, and the two elder daughters, Maria and Elizabeth, only three years later, apparently of "consumption" acquired at a boarding school which they attended. Of the other children, only Charlotte lived beyond the age of thirty, and she was only thirty-eight at the time of her death in 1855.

Some months after the deaths of Maria and Elizabeth, the De Garrs sisters left the parsonage, amid the tears of the children and the grateful thanks of Reverend Patrick, who gave each of them ten pounds as parting gifts. Nancy later married John Malone and spent the remainder of her life in Bradford. Sarah and her husband, after their marriage, lived in Bradford for more than ten years before coming to America. The Reverend Patrick kept in touch with the De Garrs family through letters, and Sarah preserved for many years some of those written to her, until an unhappy incident so upset her that she destroyed all but one or two of them.

This was the publication, in 1857, of a biography of Charlotte Brontë by a prominent novelist of the time, Elizabeth Gaskell. It was undertaken at the request of the Reverend Patrick, and was published only two years after Charlotte's death.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Gaskell either did not know about the De Garrs sisters or chose to ignore their recollections; instead she interviewed a Haworth villager who had been employed for a time as a nurse for Mrs. Brontë but had been discharged for drunkenness. Her biased and spiteful testimony involved even the two young servants, whom she branded as wasteful and slovenly.

A recent study of the Brontë family by John Lock and Canon W. T. Dixon<sup>5</sup> corrects this biased imputation:

Mrs. Gaskell wrote: "There was plenty, and even waste in the house, with young servants, and no mistress to see after them." Both the sisters, thus branded as being wasteful, appealed to Patrick to save them from the imputation. Nancy called on him in Haworth. "Wasteful!" Patrick told her, "had you and your sister been wasteful, I should have found it out; but I can truly say that no master was ever blessed with two more careful and honest servants." So Patrick wrote out a reference for Nancy and gave it to her:

Haworth, August 17th, 1857.

I beg leave to state to all whom it may concern, that Nancy, and Sarah De Garrs, during the time they were in my Service, were kind to my chil-

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<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1857). I have used Winifred Gerin's edition published by the Folio Society, London, in 1971, which is available in The University of Iowa Libraries.

<sup>5</sup>John Lock and Canon W. T. Dixon, *A Man of Sorrow: The Life and Times of the Rev. Patrick Brontë, 1777-1861* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1965), 253. Copy in The University of Iowa Libraries.

dren, and honest, and not wasteful but sufficiently careful in regard to food, and all other articles committed to their charge.

P. Bronte, A. B.

Incumbent of Haworth, Yorkshire

For Nancy, it was a great shock to hear of the violences which Mrs. Gaskell had attributed to Patrick. She was hotly indignant. "There never was a more affectionate father, never a kinder master. He was not of a violent temper at all; quite the reverse." From America Sarah wrote later: "The Brontës were well brought up . . . lively and cheerful in their own home. Mr. Brontë was a kind and loving husband and father, kind to all about him."

The enigma of the lives of the Brontës continues to fascinate literary people down to the present day. How could these quiet spinster daughters, cooped up in a country parsonage with an ailing father and a drunken and dissolute brother, bedeviled by poverty, have written novels and poetry so filled with passion and fire that the world still reads them with delight?

And we can truly thank Sarah De Garrs Newsome, this unassuming housewife from a small Iowa village, for her contributions to what we know about the Brontës of Haworth and the world.

*Letter to Sarah De Garrs Newsome from the Reverend Patrick Brontë:*

Haworth,  
Nr. Keighley,  
England  
June 12th 1855.

Dear Mrs. Newsome:

I have duly received your kind letter, and am glad to learn from it, that you, and your Husband, and family are all well, and doing well, in the new world. May God bless and prosper you all—both in things spiritual and temporal—since you were with me, many solemn, and important changes have taken place, in my domestic concerns— When you, and your sister Nancy first came to us at Thornton, My dear wife, and all my dear children were living—seven in number— They are all, now dead—and, I, bordering, on the age of eighty years, am left alone— But it is God's will— and to this, it is our duty and wisdom to resign— You probably, little thought, that the children you nursed on your knees, would have been so much noticed by the world—as they have been—Emily and Anne, wrote and published *Clever Books*—and Charlotte's writings, and fame, are known in all parts where Genius, and learning are held in due estimation. My dear daughter Charlotte, was the last Child, I had living—she married, the Rev<sup>d</sup>. Arthur Bell Nicholls, a very worthy and respectable Clergyman—and their union was happy, as long as it lasted— But, at the end of nine months this happy union, was dissolved by my daughter's death—and her loving Husband, and, I, are left to mourn her irreparable loss—she died childless—

Your sister, Nancy, [was?] here a few months, since, and from her we learned, that your family were all well— The weather here is favorable, the crops promising, and trade on the improvement— I am glad to learn that America in these respects is in a prosperous condition. My children, and I, often thought and talked of you— Write a few lines, to let me know, whether you have duly received this letter—

I remain, your sincere friend,

P. Brontë  
Incumbent, of Haworth  
Yorkshire

To Mrs. Sarah  
Newsome,  
Crawfordsville,  
Washington-  
Co. Iowa, America.

Haworth,  
Mr. Stigley,  
England,  
June 12<sup>th</sup> 1855.

Dear Mrs. Newcome,

I have duly received  
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and family are all well,  
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They are all, now dead —  
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you have duly received this letter —

To Mr. Sarah  
Newsome,  
Crawfordsville,  
Washington -  
Co. Iowa, America.

I remain, your  
Sincere Friend —

P. Brontë  
Humbleton, of Haworth  
Yorkshire

Letter to Sarah De Garrs Newsome from the Reverend Patrick Brontë. The original of this letter is in the possession of Dr. John De Garrs Stull, Olney, Illinois.