Introduction

The Brontës and Education is the first published full-length investigation of the topic stated by its title, as *The Brontës and Religion* (1999) was of Christianity in the Brontë novels.[1] Like its predecessor, *The Brontës and Education* aims to enrich the reading experience of present-day audiences by increasing their understanding of dimensions in the Brontë fiction that are otherwise easily overlooked. That is not all it attempts to do, however. To a greater extent than *The Brontës and Religion*, this new book looks beyond the works of the Brontës to the wider social context in which those works were created.

All the seven Brontë novels are seriously and variously concerned with education in both its main senses, that of upbringing and that of knowledge acquisition. They were written by professionals in the field: the four of Patrick Brontë's children who survived adolescence all taught for a living. Education was the foremost issue in societal debate throughout their lives, and their lives were constantly touched by education. For that reason, biography plays a more prominent role in this study than in the earlier volume. Fortunately, the last fifteen years have witnessed the publication of first-class biographical research which has done away with many of the myths surrounding the Brontës and laid the foundation for fresh critical scholarship with biographical references.[2]

While *The Brontës and Education* seeks to provide deeper insights into the fabric of the Brontë novels, it has another purpose as well: that of alerting twenty-first-century readers to the fascinating drama of education in nineteenth-century Britain, a drama in which the Brontë family were actors. Throughout the research of which this book is the outcome, two statements by experts on the history of education acquired ever-increasing validity: 'It is a common mistake to regard the history of education as steady uninterrupted progress from the earliest beginnings to the present system';[3] and 'We are fumbling around in education because we know so little about the future and do not bother to know enough about the past'.[4] Studying the

Brontë fiction alongside early-nineteenth-century educational materials, from policy statements to teacher manuals and schoolbooks, is a powerful corrective against the notion that current methods and practices represent the pinnacle of enlightened thinking where education is concerned.

Those who grappled with educational issues in the nineteenth century would have little reason to be overawed by the achievements of their successors in the twenty-first. For one thing, their problems are still with us, unresolved. The difficulty of imparting adequate instruction to each member of a group in which individual capabilities vary wildly is as great and pressing now as it was 200 years ago.[5] The current debates on faith schools and the teaching of 'creationism' raise the same arguments as nineteenth-century disputes over the religious element in education. Even when it comes to the question of what pupils should learn, there are similarities: educationists then and now have often maintained that the possession of factual knowledge matters less than the ability to pursue and locate it when needed, a stance by no means uncontroversial among practitioners (and parents). These resemblances do not mean that there has been no essential progress in education over the past 150 years; but progress has been connected to general developments in society, rather than to the emergence of new and significant educational wisdom.

This book joins the historically contextualising line in Brontë studies that has seen several weighty contributions over the past few decades;[6] but its approach to the historical context diverges from the predominating mindset in modern Brontë scholarship. For one thing, as is clear from the preceding paragraphs, it is not based on an *a priori* assumption that the present is inherently superior to the past. In addition, the focus is not on the 'Victorian' period but on the first half of the nineteenth century, with frequent shifts back into the eighteenth. The traditional idea that the Brontë fiction is an expression of protest against 'Victorian conventions' fails to recognise that Queen Victoria was only about eight months older than Anne Brontë. While the Brontë writings are certainly coloured by a strong libertarian pathos that sometimes manifests itself in criticism of repressive and unjust social phenomena, the forces they attack were formed long before British society under Victoria could be said to have acquired anything like a configuration of values (insofar as it ever did). The ideals, norms and practices with which the Brontë fiction engages – by no means always in terms of disagreement – were to a great extent rooted in the eighteenth century, as ensuing chapters will show.

Another problem with the notion of 'Victorian conventionalism' is that it obscures the realisation that the views, beliefs and principles of

nineteenth-century people were as varied and complex, not to say contradictory, as ours. When venturing into print, or attempting to persuade recipients of letters, our predecessors trod as warily as we do in order not to offend what they saw as the prevailing sensibilities of the time. Not only was it as difficult to distinguish between genuine conviction and mere mastery of shibboleths then as it is now; the same persons spoke and acted in ways we would naturally regard as forward-looking at one time, only to come across as reactionaries at another. The Brontës, father and children, are excellent illustrations.[7] 'Judgementalism' is frowned on in our own supposedly tolerant age, but condemning – or at least patronising – the people of the past who shaped our present has usually been a fairly safe occupation in literary scholarship. The desire to promote understanding is a more constructive approach.[8]

The absence of a censorious attitude to the materials it engages with sets *The Brontës and Education* apart from a good deal of late-twentieth-century Brontë criticism in another respect as well. Like *The Brontës and Religion*, this book does not read the Brontës' works, records of their lives and historical/contextual texts against the grain. To quote the earlier volume, 'I found so much *in* the "grain" . . . that the wish to introduce new perspectives by reading *against* it never arose' (p. 5). The inculcation of 'suspicious reading' in the second half of the twentieth century brought great benefits, training critics to pick up manipulative and conflicting dimensions in texts and thus enhancing awareness of complexity and variety. Occasionally, though, the urge to uncover surreptitious contradictions in a text in a manner somehow hostile to what was perceived as its ostensible 'message' has sent readers rather too far away from its manifest concerns. As the twentieth century progressed, D. H. Lawrence's 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale' was transformed into an exhortation not to trust the tale either. But those who disseminated such teachings were themselves tellers of tales, and it is not immediately obvious why we should trust them more than others. Where tales have not emitted the characteristic odour of insincerity (as happened often enough), I have, by and large, trusted them.

The Brontës and Education is the outcome of the study of a very large number of tales, whose tellers were sometimes mere names and occasionally not even that ('A Lady', 'A Clergyman in the Church of England'). Their 'messages' varied as widely as their tones, registers, scopes and positions, but in one respect they formed a contrapuntal structure without dissonances: they proclaimed the duty of human beings to endeavour to make themselves better people. The self-improvement ethos that was such a strong force in nineteenth-century Britain expressed itself in many different

ways, including projects geared to inspiring the young with 'the necessity of self-culture' and meetings of local 'Mental Improvement Societies'.[9] The Brontë fiction forms part of this great moral structure.

One of the seven novels deviates markedly from the other six in this regard, however. While *Wuthering Heights* makes it clear that Heathcliff's educational backsliding contributes to the rupture of his childhood alliance with Catherine, and that an illiterate Hareton was not an acceptable husband for young Cathy, self-education is never held up as a moral obligation.[10] When people read books and learn things, it is because they want to. In Charlotte and Anne Brontë's novels, by contrast, persons of all ages and stations, and both sexes, are depicted as being aware of the duty to improve themselves through (self-)education. Those who do not feel it, or choose to disregard it, are seen to be ethically flawed, at times even villainous.

In view of the importance of education in the Brontë fiction, it might have seemed natural to discuss these works as *Bildungsromane*, and *Jane Eyre* has often been cited as an example of that genre.[11] However, none of the terms offered by the relevant conceptual arsenal fits even the majority of the novels well enough to form a useful terminological implement. While *Bildung*, *Entwicklung* and *Erziehung* are highly relevant to them all, the process of maturation is not the core issue in them.[12] Self-education projects in the works of the Brontës do not stop with well-adjusted adulthood, nor are they limited to successful socialisation in this world. The end towards which storylines tend is not an adult in harmony with society, but an adult in harmony with herself as part of the Creation, including its spiritual and imaginative-creative aspects.[13] For a Brontë protagonist to lead a successful life, he or she must have an answer to the question posed by the apprehensive teenager Helen Lawrence on the brink of a disastrous marriage: 'What shall I do with the serious part of myself?' (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* XXII.190).

Nineteenth-century definitions of 'education' usually invoke the Latin origin of the word, speaking of how education 'calls forth' or 'draws out' the faculties of the learner.[14] As used in this book, the concept stands for the development of knowledge, skills, abilities and/or character by means of teaching, training, study and experience, including the formation of a young person's personality under the influence of his or her elders, parents as well as instructors.[15] In other words, it is an extremely variegated phenomenon; and the more multifarious the subject, the more helpful a simple organisational rationale is apt to be. Consequently, the outline of

The Brontës and Education was determined by a plain set of interrogatives: when and why; who and where; what; and how.

The first section, 'Education and society', sketches the broad context of the study. Starting out from the *Jane Eyre* passage where the narrator praises the virtues of the British peasantry, it maps the contentious area of popular education in the first half of the nineteenth century. Adult (self-)education is also discussed, with reference to Mechanics' Institutes, phrenology and the mental-improvement culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The last few pages of the section consider ethical and epistemological tensions in the context of the persistent, and persistently troubled, valorisation of truth in the time of the Brontës.

The second chapter in Section II, 'Home and school', also addresses the importance and elusiveness of truth, albeit from a different angle. This chapter, the most extensive discussion of child-rearing – and of relations between parents and children – in the book, brings up the early-nineteenth-century horror of childish mendacity. Another issue raised in it is (male) children's cruelty to animals. The upbringing of boys in *The Professor* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is considered against educationists' constant pleading with parents to foster compassion and kindness in their sons. Subsequent chapters deal with professional instructors in homes and schools, placing the Brontës' own experiences and those of their fictional teachers in the context of the low social status, and the incipient professionalisation, of educators.

The third section, 'Subjects and skills', is by far the longest, as is natural in that it attempts to answer the question of what a good education in the time of the Brontës actually contained. Its five chapters deal, in turn, with the 'academic' subjects studied by girls in the Brontë fiction, and by the Brontës themselves; the so-called accomplishments, on the one hand highly prestigious and on the other attended by a pervasive uneasiness; the place of religion in education; the differences between male and female education in association with the lives and works of the Brontës; and the substance of the sisters' self-study and reading outside the schoolroom. Among the matters addressed in this section are the places of geography and history in the contemporary curriculum, the furore over natural history in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the learning of foreign and Classical languages and the distinction between reading and study.

Pedagogy is the chief topic of Section IV, 'Strategies and methods'. It proceeds from the preoccupation with how children and young people should be taught that generated so much discussion and experimentation in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century Europe. Continental

pioneers inspired British educationists, but the domestic tradition from Locke onwards was also strong. The first of the two chapters ends with a review of the pedagogical principles and practices of M. Constantin Heger. The second chapter looks at what makes a teacher succeed or fail, interweaving contemporary works on pedagogical matters and the experiences of pedagogues in the Brontë fiction.

The fifth, concluding section of *The Brontës and Education* raises issues that were touched on in the preceding ones, but never examined at length. Called 'Originality and freedom', it analyses the responsibility of individuals for their selves, both in this world and the next. The connections between originality, creativity and genius are explored, leading up to a discussion of how Charlotte Brontë fashioned her sisters' literary reputations for posterity. That topic, much debated in recent years, has a direct bearing on the subject of the book in that Charlotte's statement that her sisters were not 'learned' has been regarded as a key factor in the context. Finally, the section reviews the importance of mental and spiritual liberty to the individual's pursuit of self-improvement. Once again, *Jane Eyre* supplies the point of departure; and it is shown that the balancing of reason and feeling, as well as the schooling of principle and judgement, can only be successfully undertaken by a free spirit fully aware of what she owes her own integrity.

I

Education and society

Introductory Remarks to Section I

Books about Britain in the early nineteenth century characteristically refer to the period as one of progress and reform. The title of Asa Briggs's classic *The Age of Improvement 1783–1867* sums up a fundamental belief held by British people at all levels of society during the life-span of Patrick Brontë (1777–1861): the belief that human beings could become better and make their world better by labouring with and for one another.[1] The impulses that guided them and the policies they evolved were diverse, conditioned by social factors as well as by individual inclinations; the latter aspect is important, not least because this was a time when individuality asserted itself vigorously in all walks of life and in members of both sexes. The student of the nineteenth century who attempts to map out consistent lines of development, attaching them to representatives of political parties and philosophical schools of thought, soon becomes thoroughly bewildered. Terms such as 'conservative', 'progressive' and 'radical' fail to do justice to the complexity of movements and people. Reformers are seen to have made common cause across class and party lines.[2] Similarly, causes that posterity regards as enlightened were sometimes opposed by persons whose reforming zeal manifested itself in other contexts. One thing, however, was clear then and is equally so now: in the words of an 1828 review of a schoolbook, '[t]his is truly the age of intellectual improvement, and in every form and manner exertions are multiplied to advance it'.[3]

The Brontë family was part of all this social mobility and variety, as well as of the efforts to improve the 'condition of England', another key concept in histories of the period. As a man and a clergyman, Patrick Brontë had a larger scope for action and debate than his daughters, a scope encompassing political, religious and scientific matters as well as public-health issues. To all the Brontës, however, as to so many of their contemporaries, one sphere

was of paramount importance: the sphere of education. It impinged on their lives at every turn, and their writings touch on every conceivable aspect of it.

This first section of *The Brontës and Education* engages with education as a matter of general societal concern, drawing on the Brontë fiction and on circumstances in the Brontës' lives. Gradually moving from the public to the private sphere, from social to personal improvement, the discussion takes account of educational policies, practices and ideals, ending in a consideration of the ideal of ideals to educators during the age of improvement: the supremacy of truth.