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CHARLOTTE BRONTË
ON THE
EAST YORKSHIRE
COAST

by

the late

F. R. PEARSON, B.A.

THE EAST YORKSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY
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J.R.P.
June '57.

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Frederic Richard Pearson, Senior History Master at Bridlington School, died on the 22nd October, 1951.

Well known as a writer and broadcaster on local historical subjects, he was the author, among other works, of "Yorkshire" (Borzei County Histories, 1928) and "Roman Yorkshire" (1936).

The East Yorkshire Local History Society wishes to express its thanks to Mrs. Pearson for the privilege of being able to publish this paper as a tribute to his memory.

PREFACE

In this booklet I have endeavoured to piece together, from Charlotte Brontë's correspondence with her intimate friends, the frequent references to her holidays on the Yorkshire coast. Apart, therefore, from a brief running commentary, there is little here that is original, and my debt to previous pioneers in Brontë study is naturally considerable. Among the works from which my material has been largely drawn I may mention the following :

Mrs. Gaskell : "The Life of Charlotte Brontë".
The Shakespeare Head Brontë : "The Brontës : Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence".

C. K. Shorter : "The Brontës : Life and Letters".
"The Brontës and their Circle".
"Charlotte Brontë and her Sisters".

Mrs. Chadwick : "In the Footsteps of the Brontës".

H. E. Wroot : "Sources of Charlotte Brontë's Novels : Persons and Places". (Publications of the Brontë Society, No. 4 of vol. VIII, 1935).

P. F. Lee : "Charlotte Brontë in the East Riding".
(Publications of the Brontë Society. Part IV, 1896).

I should like to express my thanks to Mr. F. P. White, Tutorial Bursar of St. John's College, Cambridge, and to Miss F. M. Dodgson, for information regarding the Rev. C. H. Lutwidge, and to the Rev. G. Alcock, Vicar of Reighton, for supplying me with a description of Speeton Church as it was a century ago. I am also greatly indebted to my friend, Mr. H. L. Gee, who has read my manuscript and made many valuable suggestions.

As far as possible, I have tried to reproduce Charlotte Brontë's letters exactly as they were written, with their peculiarities of punctuation, in particular her partiality for the use of numerous dashes rather than the more conventional commas and periods. In this form it seems to me that they reveal more intimately that eager appreciation of homely incident and keen sense of humour, which render her, to a degree not generally realized, one of the really great letter writers of the English language.

September, 1939.

F.R.P.



ALTHOUGH the characteristic scenery of East Yorkshire finds little or no reflection in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, it is worthy of note that the famous authoress had an intimate connection with this corner of her native county. It was here—a hundred years ago—that she had her first glimpse of the sea, a memorable experience never to be forgotten, as her subsequent letters amply testify; it was from an East Riding clergyman that she received her first offer of marriage; and it was to the Yorkshire coast that she returned time and again for rest and refreshment during her short and troubled life.

Charlotte Brontë paid her first visit to the seaside, at Bridlington, in September 1839. She was twenty-three years of age at the time and—apart from her schooldays at Cowan Bridge—the ‘Lowood’ of ‘Jane Eyre’—the whole of her life had been spent in the West Riding. Born at Thornton, near Bradford, the third of the six children of the Rev. Patrick Brontë, she had removed with the family to Haworth when only four years old, and it is with the old parsonage here, now the Brontë Museum, that her memory is inseparably associated.

There can be no need at this time of day, when the world has witnessed so remarkable a revival of interest in the story of the three sisters, to endeavour to evoke again the spirit of that stern and sombre countryside, which has been immortalised in their works. This was done for our Victorian forbears, perhaps with pardonable exaggeration, by Mrs. Gaskell, whilst the spate of stage plays, films, and character studies forthcoming in our own time, has served to make us only too familiar with the forbidding yet fascinating atmosphere of Haworth Parsonage. This is the environment of the novels, and it remains with most of us the authentic picture of Northern England in the first flush of the Industrial Revolution—a region, in Charlotte’s own words, “of smoke dark houses clustered round their smoke-vomiting mills”. But there is another and, even to-day, less industrialised portion of the great county, where the fresh green wolds meet the sea in cliffs of gleaming white, and it is with Charlotte Brontë’s love for this part of Yorkshire that we are here concerned.

Let us see then how she first came to know the East Riding. On leaving the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge, after the death of her two elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, Charlotte spent the following five or six years at home. Here, along with Emily and Anne, she amused herself by writing those childish stories and magazines, some of which, in their incredibly minute handwriting, are among the treasures of the Museum at Haworth.

Then in 1831 she was again sent to school. This time it was with Miss Wooler at Roe Head, between Leeds and Huddersfield. Here, among her fellow pupils, she met Ellen Nussey of Birstall, who became her lifelong friend and the most intimate correspondent of her later years.

The following year, Charlotte left Roe Head and returned to Haworth, for the ostensible purpose of acting as governess to her two younger sisters. Before long, however, the straitened circumstances of the family, and in particular a somewhat grandiose scheme for completing Branwell's education at the Royal Academy in London, rendered it necessary for her to look out for a situation. Hence, in the summer of 1835, we find her once more at Miss Wooler's in the capacity of teacher, and with her sister Emily as a pupil. The next year the school moved to a new home at Dewsbury Moor, where her health appears to have suffered as a result of the change.

It is more than doubtful whether Charlotte Brontë was really suited for the career of a schoolmistress, and yet it was essential that she should earn her own living. After a brief stay, therefore, at Dewsbury Moor, she was again looking out for a more congenial post, and in the early part of 1839 she became governess in the household of Mr. John Benson Sidgwick, a cousin of Archbishop Benson, and a wealthy manufacturer. The family resided at Stonegappe, near Skipton, a house which is now well-known as a Youth Hostel. By all accounts the Sidgwicks were estimable people, though Charlotte does not seem to have been much happier than in her former employment. "I see now more clearly", she writes, "than I have ever done before, that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being, except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil." We can hardly be surprised that within a couple of months she was back again at Haworth, revelling in the freedom of the moors, and thinking anxiously about some change of occupation. It was under these circumstances that Ellen Nussey came to the rescue with the proposal of a holiday at the seaside.

Their first choice was Cleethorpes, on the Lincolnshire coast, but eventually Bridlington was decided upon instead. The reasons for this change of plan are interesting and worth noting in some detail. Only a short time before the date of the projected holiday, Miss Nussey's brother, Henry, had left the East Riding, where he had been acting as curate to the Rev. Charles Henry Lutwidge, M.A., Rector of Burton Agnes, a delightful, picturesque village some five or six miles from the coast. Mr. Lutwidge was in charge of the adjacent parishes of Burton Agnes and Harpham from 1833 to 1840, and is remembered as the uncle of Charles Lutwidge

Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, author of 'Alice in Wonderland'. Charlotte Brontë had been acquainted with Henry Nussey for some years, having visited his family frequently at 'The Rydings', Birstall, and it was doubtless on his recommendation that the two girls decided to spend a holiday at Easton, near Bridlington, in the late summer of 1839.

But the connection between Charlotte and the young clergyman was more intimate still, for in February of the same year she had received from him her first offer of marriage. She appears to have had no doubts, however, as to the advisability of turning down the proposal. Writing to her suitor in March, 1839, at Donnington, Sussex, where he had accepted a curacy on leaving Burton Agnes, she explains in no uncertain terms her reasons for refusing the offer. "I have no personal repugnance to the idea of a union with you, but I feel convinced that mine is not the sort of disposition calculated to form the happiness of a man like you. It has always been my habit to study the character of those amongst whom I chance to be thrown, and I think I know yours and can imagine what description of a woman would suit you for a wife. The character should not be too marked, ardent, and original, her temper should be mild, her piety undoubted, her spirits even and cheerful, and her personal attractions sufficient to please your eyes and gratify your just pride. As for me, you do not know me ; I am not the serious, grave, cool-headed individual you suppose ; you would think me romantic and eccentric ; you would say I was satirical and severe. However, I scorn deceit, and I will never, for the sake of attaining the distinction of matrimony and escaping the stigma of an old maid, take a worthy man whom I am conscious I cannot render happy."

But it was not incompatibility of temperament alone that led Charlotte Brontë to reject Henry Nussey's offer of marriage. Another, and perhaps more tangible reason is hinted at in a letter to Ellen Nussey written only a week later, "Henry says he is comfortably settled at Donnington, that his health is much improved, and that it is his intention to take pupils after Easter. He then intimates that in due time he should want a wife to take care of his pupils, and frankly asks me to be that wife." Here is the old repugnance towards the dull and drab career of a governess, to which the Brontë sisters seem to have been committed by fate, asserting itself with typical forcefulness and candour. Henry Nussey, fortunately, does not appear to have been unduly perturbed by Charlotte's rejection of his suit, for we find him writing in his diary under date, 9th March, 1839, "Received an unfavourable reply from C.B. The will of the Lord be done." It may be worth mention that only a short time before he had been rejected by Mr. Lutwidge's daughter, Mary; and that six months later he became engaged to someone else !

It has been suggested that Mr. Henry Nussey was the prototype of St. John Rivers, the Vicar of Morton in "Jane Eyre", who, it will be remembered, made a desperate but futile attempt to persuade Jane to accompany him as a missionary to India. "He was young", writes the novelist, "perhaps from twenty-eight to thirty—tall, slender; his face riveted the eye; it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline; quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin . . . His eyes were large and blue, with brown lashes; his high forehead, colourless as ivory, was partially streaked over by careless locks of fair hair."

It must always be a thankless task to endeavour to link a character in fiction with its counterpart in the flesh, and Henry Nussey seems from the evidence of his Diary—still preserved in the Museum at Haworth—to have been a far less inspired individual than the high-souled fanatic depicted in the novel. Yet, in view of the fact that Henry Nussey became Vicar of Hathersage, Derbyshire, in 1844, and that Hathersage has been authoritatively identified with the Morton of 'Jane Eyre', we may perhaps be justified in thinking that Charlotte Brontë had the young Yorkshire curate in mind when writing her most famous work. At all events, there is no doubt that it was Mr. Nussey's connection with this part of the East Riding that induced Ellen and Charlotte to fix on the neighbourhood of Bridlington as the scene of their first seaside holiday together.

II

It is amusing in these days of quick travel to read of the extensive and pernickety preparations that were made by the two friends for the long-anticipated trip. Writing to Ellen Nussey on the 26th July—nearly two months before the date finally fixed for their departure—Charlotte waxes enthusiastic over the prospect. "Your proposal has almost driven me 'clean daft'," she admits, with true Yorkshire bluntness. "If you don't understand that ladylike expression you must ask me what it means when I see you—the fact is an excursion with you anywhere—whether to Cleethorpes or Canada just by ourselves—without any ninnies to annoy us—would be to me most delightful—I should indeed like to go—but I can't get leave of absence for longer than a week and I'm afraid that wouldn't suit you—must I then give it up entirely? I feel as if I could not—I never had such a chance of enjoyment before—I do want to see you and talk to you and be with you—when do you wish to go? could I meet you at Leeds? to take a gig from Haworth to Birstall would be to me a serious increase of expense—and I happen to be very low in cash—O Ellen rich people seem to have many pleasures at their command which we are debarred from—however no repining—if I could take the coach from Keighley to

Bradford and from Bradford to Leeds and you could meet me at the inn where the coach stops—on your way to Cleethorpes for I presume you go by the Leeds and Selby Railroad—it would be the most convenient plan for me.”

There appear, however, to have been certain domestic obstacles in the way of the two girls spending a holiday together on the East coast. These are hinted at in a postscript to the above letter. “If I find it impossible to stay for longer than a week, could you get someone else to bear you company for the remaining fortnight? Since writing the above I find that aunt and papa have determined to go to Liverpool for a fortnight, and take us all with them. It is stipulated, however, that I should give up the Cleethorpes scheme. I yield reluctantly. But aunt suggests that you may be able to join us at Liverpool. What do you say?”

But the redoubtable Patrick Brontë, her father, and his sister-in-law, Miss Branwell, cannot have been very persistent in their objections to the proposed plan, for only a week later we find Charlotte again writing to her friend and suggesting a change from Cleethorpes to Burlington—the Bridlington of our own day. “The Liverpool journey”, she says, “is yet a matter of talk, a sort of castle in the air—but between you and I, I fancy it is very doubtful whether it will ever assume a more solid shape—Aunt—like many other elderly people—likes to talk of such things but when it comes to putting them into actual practice she rather falls off. Such being the case I think you and I had better adhere to our first plan of going somewhere together independently of other people—I have got leave to accompany you for a week, at the utmost stretch a fortnight, but no more—where do you wish to go?—Burlington I should think from what Mary Taylor says would be as eligible a place as any.”

Mary Taylor was a friend of Charlotte’s school days at Roe Head, who later emigrated to New Zealand. Evidently anxious to get down to details, she continues, “I had almost forgotten to settle about how we are to join if I take the coach from Keighley to Bradford and from thence to Leeds—I think I could arrive in the latter town by 10 or at the latest 11 o’clock in the morning—will that be soon enough for your plans? and will it suit your convenience to meet me at the inn where the coach stops? If this project should be deemed in some way inconvenient I must conceive some other—on some accounts it would be far better to get to Brookroyd (the house to which the Nusseys had moved from ‘The Rydings’ some two years earlier) the day before—do you know whether there is any daily coach from Bradford runs anywhere within a mile of you? After all I have not yet ascertained whether my limited time for staying at the sea-side will interfere with what is necessary for your health if it would I throw the

whole scheme up at once—write very soon. What luggage will you take? much or little?”

Four days later, on the 9th of August, Charlotte once more takes up the thread of preparation for the trip. “In the greatest haste I scrawl an answer to your letter—I am very sorry to throw you back in your arrangements, but I really cannot go to-morrow—I could not get my baggage and myself to Leeds by 10 o’clock to-morrow morning if I was to be hanged for it. You must write again, and fix a day which will give me a little more time for preparation. Haworth, you know, is such an out-of-the-way place, one should have a month’s warning before they stir from it. You were very kind to try to get me fetched—but indeed Ellen, it was wrong of you—do you think I could comfortably have accepted so unreasonable a favour? my best plan will certainly be to come to Brookroyd the day before we start. I’ll try to manage it”.

But the way was not clear even yet. “I have in vain packed my box”, she writes to Ellen Nussey on August 14th, “and prepared everything for our anticipated journey. It so happens that I can get no conveyance this week or the next. The only gig let out on hire in Haworth is at Harrogate, and likely to remain there, for aught I can hear. Papa decidedly objects to my going by the coach, and walking to Birstall, though I am sure I could manage it. Aunt exclaims against the weather, and the roads, and the four winds of heaven; so I am in a fix, and, what is worse, so are you”.

The outing, however, was only postponed for a week or two, and at last the long anticipated day arrived.

The two girls—Charlotte from Haworth, and Ellen from Birstall—met in Leeds, where they embarked on the tedious and arduous journey to the coast. It was Charlotte’s first experience of travelling by rail, and one can well imagine her feeling of emancipation in escaping, if only for a short time, from the cramping atmosphere of the parsonage at Haworth.

The Railway Mania, associated with the name of George Hudson, the York draper, was just beginning, and the line from Leeds to Selby had been opened only five years before. The Leeds office of the company was in Kirkgate, and passengers were conveyed from here to the railway station in Marsh Lane by omnibus, at a charge of fourpence a head. On reaching Selby, after an hour and a half or so in the train, the friends would have to complete the next stage of the journey, as far as York, by coach, as the York and North Midland line was not opened until the following year. It is interesting to note that the fare from Selby to York was 7/- or 4/6 according to class.

Since, moreover, there was no railway at that date from York to the coast, they had perforce to finish their journey by the same means of transit. Finding, however, that all the seats in the coach were booked, they engaged a 'fly' to take them as far as Driffield. But even now their troubles were not at an end. Mr. Hudson, with whom they were to stay at Easton, near Bridlington, had arranged to meet them at Driffield, but, somehow or other, there had been a hitch in the arrangements, and they were therefore obliged to complete the remaining twelve miles or so by post-chaise.

If she had not unfortunately misplaced her spectacles, Charlotte Brontë would have caught her first glimpse of the sea from the crest of Bessingby Hill, where the road from Driffield leaves the edge of the wolds for the coastal plain. A hundred years ago, the prospect must have been a pleasing one. In the middle-distance were clustered the mellow red roofs of the old market town of Burlington, dominated by the towers of its Priory Church, one of them crowned by the stunted octagon which can be seen on old prints of the church as it was before its restoration. Beyond, on the low, sandy shore, would be seen the fishermen's cottages and little shops, which constituted the Quay, with the chalk cliffs of Flamborough stretching out into the blue of the horizon.

It is a moot point as to whether this district is depicted in any of the Brontë novels. It has been suggested that Bridlington may be the 'Bretton' of 'Villette', and, apart from the similarity in name, the description of the view from Mrs. Bretton's house might well fit the narrow, winding High Street of the old Yorkshire town, "a fine antique street, where Sundays and holidays seemed always to abide—so quiet was its atmosphere, so clean its pavement." Later on in the same book, Charlotte may have had Bridlington in mind when describing the convalescence of Lucy Snowe in Brussels, when she exclaims, on finding herself unexpectedly with friends, "Am I in England? Am I in Bretton?" Hastily pulling up the blind with which the lattice was shrouded, I looked out to try and discover where I was: half prepared to meet the calm, old, handsome buildings, and clean grey pavement of St. Anne's Street, and to see at the end the towers of the minster".

The attempt to disentangle the multifarious impressions fused in the mind of a writer to form a composite picture of some place or person must always be an impossible one. But no one who is at all acquainted with the place where Charlotte Brontë came on holiday in that September of 1839, can help believing that more than a fleeting impression of it passed through her receptive mind when she penned these lines.

III

On this, her first visit to the Yorkshire coast, Charlotte Brontë spent the earlier part of her holiday at Easton, a tiny hamlet of only two or three houses, which lies a short distance inland from Bridlington Quay. The situation is charming, and would be more so a century ago. At this point, the valley of the Gypsy Race—one of the few streams in this countryside of rolling chalk lands, merges almost imperceptibly into the sea plain, whilst along the low ridge to the south runs the old Roman road to Stamford Bridge and York. A little way up the valley is the delightful village of Boynton, embosomed in its woods, the former home of the Yorkshire branch of the historic Strickland family, on whose entailed estate the hamlet of Easton was situated.

The house where Charlotte and her friend stayed may still be seen, on the left of the road from Bridlington to Boynton, though it has been considerably altered since her time. In 1839 it was a two-storied farmstead, with the red tiled roof characteristic of the East Riding, and its front covered with ivy and trailing rose trees; it had a small garden with a laurel border, which was formed into an arch above the little wooden gate.

During her holiday at Easton, Charlotte Brontë painted a small water-colour of the house, a reproduction of which can be seen in the Bayle Museum at Bridlington. In the background is the summer-house and in the foreground, Mr. and Mrs. Hudson—he in a very Victorian top-hat—are sitting on a rustic seat with their pet dog. She also drew the portrait of Mrs. Hudson, but this has unfortunately been lost, as has also a pair of slippers which she worked at the same time.

The members of the Hudson family had been in occupation of the property for some years at the time of Charlotte's visit. The first of them to live at Easton was Mr. William Roundell, who died at an advanced age in the early years of the nineteenth century. His nephew, Mr. John Hudson, succeeded him, and he himself was followed in the tenancy by his son John Hudson, junior; the latter married Miss Sophia Whipp in 1830. It was to this couple that Charlotte Brontë had been introduced by her friend, Henry Nussey, who had made their acquaintance during his curacy at Burton Agnes, a village only three or four miles away.

John Hudson was a gentleman farmer of the old school, kind and retiring in disposition, whilst his wife is described by one who knew her well as "a model of primness and old-world sweetness", though with a more marked individuality than her husband. The household was conducted with a clockwork regularity that must have made an instant appeal to such a lover of neatness and

orderliness as Charlotte Brontë. They rose at half past six in the morning, breakfasted an hour later, had dinner at noon and tea at half past four, and retired to rest at half past nine, unless 'company' happened to be present. The Hudsons retired from Easton to Bridlington in the early seventies of last century, where they died—she in 1876 and he in 1878. Both are buried in the graveyard of the Priory Church. As they had no family, the house passed into other hands on their death.

In such an atmosphere of homely simplicity, the two girls enjoyed their country holiday to the full. This is evident from the letters written by Charlotte in October, soon after their return to the West Riding.

"Our visit at Easton", she tells Henry Nussey, "was extremely pleasant; I shall always feel grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Hudson for their kindness. We saw Burton Agnes during our stay, and called on two of your former parishioners—Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalton. I was pleased to hear your name mentioned by them in terms of encomium and sincere regard". Only a few days before she had conveyed her impressions to Ellen Nussey in similar terms. "I think of Easton very often, and of worthy Mr. Hudson and his kind-hearted help-mate and of our pleasant walks to Harlequinwood—to Boynton—our merry evenings with little Hancheon etc.—if we both live this period of our lives will long be a theme of pleasant recollection".

She concludes this letter with a personal enquiry. "Did you chance in your letter to Mrs. Hudson to mention my spectacles? I am sadly inconvenienced by the want of them—I can neither read, write nor draw with comfort in their absence. I hope Madame Booth won't refuse to give them up". Unfortunately the identity of Madame Booth must remain a matter for speculation.

The reference to "little Hancheon" introduces us to another member of the family circle at Easton. This was John Hudson's niece, Fanny (or Hancheon) Whipp, a lively, interesting child of about seven years of age, who afterwards became Mrs. North of Bridlington, and who died there in 1866 at the early age of thirty-five. Generally speaking, Charlotte Brontë's relations with children do not appear to have been too cordial, and she does not have a great deal to say about them in her works. Whether this attitude was an unhappy inheritance from her father, or whether it resulted from her experience as a governess, can never be determined, but there can be no doubt of her affection and admiration for "little Hancheon". It has been suggested, indeed, that the child may have furnished the original of the portrait of Paulina Mary Home, "the little Countess", whose childlike charm is depicted so enthusiastically in the opening chapters of 'Villette' "a neat, completely-fashioned little figure, light, slight, and straight.—her

neck, delicate as wax, her head of silky curls". If, as has been claimed, it is possible to identify the Bretton of 'Villette' with the Yorkshire Bridlington, it may not be impossible to discern in the picture of the Countess de Bassompierre an idealized portrait of Fanny Whipp. As a further indication of the impression made by the Easton household on Charlotte's mind, it may be worth noting that the landlady of one of the curates in 'Shirley' bears the uncommon name of Mrs. Whipp.

Some years after the events with which we are dealing, Ellen Nussey was again spending a holiday at Bridlington, and in a letter to her, dated 4th March, 1845, Charlotte recalls once more the happy memory of their first holiday together. "Remember me very kindly to Mrs. Hudson, to whom I shall again direct this letter—not knowing your address at the Quay. Tell her that our stay at Easton is one of the pleasantest recollections of my life—one of the green spots that I look back on with real pleasure. I often think it was singularly good of her to receive me, a perfect stranger, so kindly as she did".

IV

Much, however, as Charlotte Brontë enjoyed the quiet autumnal beauty of the countryside, it was the sea which made the chief appeal to her sensibility, and which left the most enduring impress on her mind. "The idea of seeing the sea", she had written to Ellen Nussey just before their visit, "of being near it—watching its changes by sunrise, sunset, moonlight, and noonday—in calm, perhaps in storm—fills and satisfies my mind". Can we wonder then that, during her stay at Easton, despite the generous kindness of the Hudsons, she longed with ever increasing ardour to be within actual sight and sound of the sea? Two days after their arrival, she and Ellen had walked down to the Quay at Bridlington, and here, when she caught sight of the magnificent bay, bounded on the one side by the white cliffs of Flamborough, and on the other by the wasting, sandy shores of Holderness, Charlotte found it impossible to control her emotion. Begging her friend to leave her alone for a while, she was discovered some time later, her eyes red with weeping and her hands trembling—so intense was the effect upon her sensitive spirit of that element which she had never seen before but of which she had dreamed so long and ardently.

After staying, however, at Easton, the two girls persuaded the Hudsons to allow them to spend the remaining week of their holiday in lodgings at Bridlington. A vivid account of their residence here is given in the first volume of Clement Shorter's book, 'The Brontës—Life and Letters', and is itself based on Ellen Nussey's own narrative.

