

Finding Haworth

They told me I shouldn't drive there.

"The best way to go to Haworth is by train," said Colin, his mouth full of spaghetti.

I thought it best not to argue, since I was staying in his house. Actually I thought of the place — a centuries-old crackerbox crammed between two others like it — as his wife's house. The house seemed more like Clare than like Colin — untidy, but earnest and warm. The tiny town we were in, Menai Bridge, sits on the Anglesey side of the narrow waterway dividing the island from mainland North Wales.

Clare did not approve of my plan to drive from Menai Bridge to southwest Yorkshire either.

"It's a four-hour drive at least, and you've never driven in the UK before," she said, pushing spaghetti around on her plate. The spaghetti was for my benefit — Clare thought it appropriate for an American guest of Italian descent.

She was taking my plan very hard, mostly because she was sick of Americans breezing into her country full of "everything will be fine" optimism. I could tell she wanted to crush that optimism, prove it to be misplaced.

Clare had earlier tried to discourage me from even contemplating a trip to Haworth. In her opinion, conveyed to me via email the week before my departure, I was planning too much, trying to cover too large an area in just ten days.

"What you risk," she wrote, "is seeing so much that you really see nothing at all."

Her travel strategy, she said, was to "pick a centre" and settle in to "absorb." Making a detailed itinerary ahead of time, she said, was a big mistake, as it left one no chance to "look about" and decide what was worth experiencing.

Get lost, I thought. "I'm sure you're right, C," I wrote, "but I think I'll do it the way I've already planned." It seemed as if she wanted things to go wrong for me, just so my irritating optimism would suffer defeat.

"You Americans always complain about everything when you get here anyway," she fretted at me just days before

my departure. “You come here with assumptions formed by the realities of travel in America. Don’t you understand that travel in the UK just isn’t like that?”

The Haworth plan had come to me one day while I was making my trip itinerary. I was looking at a Michelin map of central England, which I’d purchased because it included details of Manchester, the city I was flying in to, and of North Wales, where I’d be staying for several days. As I sat looking at the urban blotch of Manchester, the name *Keighley* caught my eye. My heart jumped — I knew that name. Keighley was the nearest big town to Haworth, the village where the Brontë family had lived 150 years ago.

I sat almost breathless. If Keighley were so close to Manchester, Haworth must be as well. There it was, to the southwest. I was already going to Manchester — why couldn’t I go to Haworth as well? It looked to be only a two-hour drive from the Manchester airport. *The parsonage*, said a tremulous inner voice. *The graveyard*. *The moors*. In that moment, I knew I would go no matter what the cost or complication.

I’d always wanted to see England, especially the homes of famous writers like the Brontë family. As an undergraduate, I read *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* and longed to see the places described in those books. Later I read and admired Virginia Woolf’s essay in *The Common Reader* (1925), in which she said of Charlotte Brontë, “In that parsonage, and on those moors, unhappy and lonely, in her poverty and her exaltation, she remains for ever.”

About 15 years after graduating, I was browsing in a secondhand bookstore and came across William Stanley Braithwaite’s *The Bewitched Parsonage*, a biography of the Brontë family published in 1950. Intrigued anew by the reclusive, talented sisters, I bought *The Bewitched Parsonage* and read it that evening. But the Brontë story according to Braithwaite left me cold. Many of his assertions seemed ill-formed, and his negative depiction of father Patrick bothered me. Quick to seek two-dimensional characterizations, Braithwaite makes the story what it need not be: over-dramatized.

Juliet Barker’s 1994 biography of the family, *The Brontës*, which I turned to next, put right what Braithwaite had kicked askew for me. Patrick Brontë was not a cold and uncaring father, though he obviously lacked what today we

might call “interpersonal skills.” Stunned by the death of his wife when all six children were under eight years old, and then by the deaths of his eldest two, Patrick buried himself in work. Should we wonder at his emotional distance from the household? Everything in his upbringing had taught him to take the academic perspective. He read, studied, delivered sermons, and wrote letters to his local newspaper. With two unmarried women in the house to care for the children, he probably saw no reason to do otherwise.

I did not think much about England and Haworth in the two years following my reading of those biographies. Then someone gave me a book of photographs entitled *Brontë Country*. As I paged through the beautiful pictures of Yorkshire, I thought, *I really must go there*. Three years later, when I finally did plan a trip, I did not at first consider visiting Haworth because I thought it was too far north from where I’d be staying. Discovering its tempting nearness to Manchester that day I looked at the map made my proposed trip even more exciting.

As I sat at dinner with Colin and Clare that night before my departure from Menai Bridge, I thought with some apprehension about my upcoming long drive through unfamiliar country. I did not, of course, convey this apprehension to my hosts, lest they find in it grounds for smugness. Instead, I pretended that I wasn’t at all worried. I played the American optimist until it almost made me dizzy.

When I left Menai Bridge early the next morning, I found that Clare had taped a sign to the dashboard of my rented car: DRIVE ON THE LEFT. I laughed, but left it there.

My drive to Haworth went without a hitch, and by noon I had arrived at the famous dot on the map. The village has expanded far beyond the boundaries known to the Brontës, but the real action is still in a cluster of steep, narrow, cobbled streets that all rise toward the church. After parking the car, I went straight to the bewitching Brontës’ former home, which lies just behind the church.

The Haworth parsonage is a big box, divided inside into squares, like an elongated Rubik’s cube. The rooms are so small that at first I couldn’t believe it — the dining room, where the young Brontës did their writing, is scarcely big enough to hold four people in addition to the furniture. Patrick Brontë’s study, the room in which he spent almost all his time,

is smaller than some bathrooms I've been in, and is just across a narrow hallway from the dining room. I was moved by the thought of such big personalities in these cramped quarters. An additional wing, built post-Brontë, invites visitors to linger over exhibits, but one passes through the main section of the building rather quickly. The Haworth parsonage is almost never without visitors, so it's difficult to stand and contemplate in peace.

Once outside the parsonage, I felt disappointed — I had been in the presence of the Brontë ghosts, but had not been spooked by them. The lawn in front of the house is tidy, and surrounded by a well-grown herbaceous border. Along two sides runs a low stone wall which separates the front garden from the church cemetery. In contrast to the immaculate house and grounds, the cemetery oozes decay. The predominant gravestone style is horizontal slab, but the roots of large trees (planted after the Brontë's time) have pushed the stones around, so that almost none lie flat. Because the trees block the sunlight, the slabs, their inscriptions nearly worn away by exposure, are covered with slick moss. If the ghosts inside the parsonage were untouchable, the ones in the graveyard were almost unbearable.

After roaming around the graveyard, I went inside the church, the back door of which lies about 50 yards from the parsonage front door. Inside, a sign says that all the Brontës but one (Anne, who died and was buried at Scarborough) lie below, in the family vault. This church is not the one Patrick preached in, but the tower adjacent to it is original.

Outside the church, a few dozen steps from its front door, is the entryway to the Black Bull Tavern, where Branwell Brontë drank himself to death. Within view of the apex formed by the church door and the door of the Black Bull are establishments making a profit from the Brontë mystique. "Land of Gondal" said one that I avoided. I went instead into a tiny shop which served as a tourist information center.

It was in this shop that I bought a small flyer for 50p which, thanks to sloppy editing, got me lost on the moors that day.

There were six young Brontës when Patrick and his wife Maria moved their household from Thornton, near Bradford, to the rather bleak village of Haworth in 1820.

Charlotte, destined to become the most celebrated of her kin, was the middle child. There were five girls and one boy.

Maria Branwell Brontë, age 38, died just over a year after she and her husband moved to Haworth. The four eldest children, Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Emily spent only a few years in their new home before they went to a boarding school about 45 miles away (Charlotte would later vilify this school in *Jane Eyre*). Maria soon returned home seriously ill with tuberculosis and died without seeing her sisters again. A short time later, Elizabeth returned home with the same disease, whereupon Patrick withdrew Charlotte and Emily. Elizabeth died, and Charlotte thus unexpectedly became the eldest child. After their return from school, she and Emily paired up with younger siblings Branwell and Anne to create two complex fantasy worlds, Gondal and Angria, which they recorded in tiny books written in an almost unreadable script.

After their mother and older sisters died, Charlotte, Emily, Branwell, and Anne spent their childhood under the care of their mother's sister, Elizabeth Branwell, who had come from Cornwall to run the household during her sister's illness. Patrick never remarried, so Aunt Branwell stayed on; she died at the parsonage when the children were grown. This woman was present for most of the literary output of the impassioned, precocious Brontë siblings, but left no diary or notes on the miracle taking place under her Cornish nose.

Aunt Branwell ran the household well by all accounts, but maintained something of an emotional distance from the children. Their other caretaker, Tabitha Aykroyd, offered them a warm kitchen and stolid good humor, as evidenced by some of Emily's "diary papers" left in her portable writing desk. And so the children grew, turning increasingly to each other for solace and entertainment. They became obsessed with their fantasy lands, but kept them a secret from the grown-ups.

The juvenile stories did not, however, lead directly to the publication of their famous novels. Initially, they all attempted other careers: Charlotte and Anne as governesses, and Branwell as a private tutor and railroad employee. Emily, most reclusive of them all, left home only once, for a year's study in Brussels, at the Pensionnat Heger. She went there with Charlotte to learn the essentials of setting up a private school, a plan which Charlotte was convinced would establish an independent income for them.

But their bad Brontë luck took over, and the school never opened (they received no replies to their advertisements). Then Charlotte had another idea: why not publish some of the poems that she, Emily, and Anne had been writing? She overcame Emily's objections and eventually the book of poems was published in 1846 (they paid the publisher £31 to print it). Despite their cautious move in using male pseudonyms (Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell), the book failed: it sold only two copies. Charlotte, undismayed, suggested that the three sisters try novel writing. Brother Branwell, by this time embarrassing the family with his public alcoholism and drug addiction, was not invited to participate.

Over the next few years, the three sisters produced four successful novels among them. Financial independence was finally theirs when tragedy again struck: Branwell, Emily, and Anne all died within the same year. Emily was 30; Anne 29. Charlotte, now alone with her robust father (he lived to 85), went on to fame and fortune as a novelist, and in her 38th year, married Arthur Bell Nichols, her father's curate. The Brontë curse caught up with her as well, however, and she died within a year of her marriage. Not one of the six Brontë siblings reached the age of 40.

Listed in the flyer I purchased at the tiny shop were three self-guided walks on the moors. I chose the shortest, which promised me a hike of just over a mile. One exits the parsonage graveyard through an odd contraption called a "kissing gate," which allows humans but not livestock to pass through. Then you walk along a narrow stone path which runs between two paddocks, each bordered by a low, dry-stone fence. Turn right at the end of the paddock and head straight up a muddy, rocky path wide enough for a car, though certainly not meant for one. After a fairly serious vertical ascent, you reach a plateau, along which runs a narrow, paved road. Cross this road, the flyer said, and you've left civilization behind. You are officially "on" the moors.

As I crossed the paved road, I almost immediately lost sight of the village and surrounding farmhouses. One can't see what's below during the slow climb — the view is cut off by endless rolling hillocks. To see any distance, one must climb to the highest points, which sometimes are jumbles of giant rocks. The flyer directed me to follow a stony path through swathes of heather. Far ahead, I could see a man with

a dog, but otherwise I was alone. I climbed steadily. The heather was dark purple; it riffled as the wind passed through. Huge slabs of rocks were strewn about, some sheltering small pools. The wind was intense, almost violent. I felt, for a moment, just like Jane Eyre:

I struck straight into the heath; I held on to a hollow I saw deeply furrowing the brown moorside; I waded knee-deep in its dark growth; I turned with its turnings, and finding a moss-blackened granite crag in a hidden angle, I sat down under it. High banks of moor were about me; the crag protected my head: the sky was over that.*

The flyer's directions were clear enough, though they relied on some dubious landmarks ("go a little past the pile of dirt"). I took many turns and climbed several hillocks at the bidding of that bit of blue paper. When I came to a fork in the path, the flyer said, "Take the right fork and walk along the stone wall." I obeyed, walking along the wall and then beyond it for some time without encountering the next listed landmark. Where was the paddock with two cows and some sheep I was supposed to come upon? I realized that Something Had Gone Wrong. There was nothing but more hills ahead of me, and the day was wearing on. The sun would soon set — I had to get back to the village. Somehow the flyer had led me astray.

I couldn't see anything from the low place I was in so I climbed a big pile of boulders. Looking back about 300 yards, I could see the place where the path had forked. That was the last flyer landmark I'd verified, so I had to get back there. I turned around and started retracing my way along the stone wall. As the bright sunlight faded, all the hills were beginning to look alike, and I suffered a moment of panic. What if I couldn't find my way before it grew too dark to walk safely? Would that man with his dog find me? If he did, would he help me or hurt me? Would I find myself, in Emily's words, amid "high waving heather 'neath stormy blasts bending?" Nothing in *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* had prepared me for this. I walked on.

Then, at last, there again was the fork. I stood in its midpoint, flyer in hand, thinking hard. My options were either

to take the *left* fork this time (i.e opposite what the flyer said) or backtrack the entire way. I didn't think I had enough sunlight for a complete retracing of my steps, so I went left, gripping the flyer rather fiercely. The path started heading perceptibly downward about 30 yards along, and soon I came upon the expected paddock and livestock. Suddenly, my fear was gone, and once again, I became Jane Eyre: "What a golden desert this spreading moor! Everywhere sunshine. I wished I could live in it and on it."

The rest of my walk was problem-free, and I returned to the village just as the sun was setting.

Wuthering Heights is a book I often want to reread. I encountered it first at age 21 and thought it interesting but odd in its intensity. Several years later, during my second reading, I found a gripping story that left me wishing to stand on the moors myself. I know it was Emily's power, rather than merely the setting itself, that moved me, because *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (also set on the moors) did not have the same effect.

In winter nothing more dreary, in summer
nothing more divine, than those glens shut in
by hills, and those bluff, bold swells of
heath.**

That is how Emily describes her native landscape. But the writer who made the Yorkshire moors famous the world over, who made me want to climb the hills and feel the wind, was ultimately an enigma to her family and to her audience. The closest one gets to Emily is on the land she loved so fiercely. There are many biographies of the Brontës, but one needn't read them to understand what formed the "peculiar music" of their creations. Find Haworth, and you have found the Brontës. Even after 150 years, they are still at the parsonage. And on the moors.

**Jane Eyre*, Chapter 28

** *Wuthering Heights*, Chapter 32