Grasper, Keeper and Flossy

The Brontë Family Dogs in Fact and in Fiction

By

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To Emily and Graham

"As with the biographies of well-, little- and unknown people,
putting the animal subject in his or her broader context
is the most important task of a biographer."

Aaron Skabelund

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Textual note

An earlier version of parts of Chapters 7 and 8 has previously been published as ‘Anne and Agnes, Flossy and Snap: fact and fiction’, in Tim Whittome (ed.) (2023a) *Walking with Anne Brontë: Insights and Reflections*. Xlibris. pp. 278-312.

An earlier version of part of Chapter 12 has previously been published as ‘Canine agency and its mitigation in the characterization of dogs in the novels by Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë’, in *Brontë Studies* (2023) 48/3: 189-206.

Timeline

1812 December 29	Patrick Brontë marries Maria Branwell
1814	Maria born (she was christened on April 23)
1815 February 8	Elizabeth born
1816	Nancy Garrs employed by Patrick
1816 April 21	Charlotte born
1817 June 26	Branwell born
1818 July 30	Emily born
1820 January 17	Anne born
1820 April	The Brontë family move from Thornton to Haworth
1821 September 15	Mrs Maria Brontë dies
	Aunt Elizabeth Branwell comes to help look after the children, and stays
1824 July-November	Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily start at Cowan Bridge School
1824	Nancy Garrs leaves; Tabitha (Tabby) Ackroyd employed as servant at the Parsonage
1825 May 6	Maria dies
1825 June 1	Charlotte and Emily return home
1825 June 15	Elizabeth dies
1828 January	Branwell's earliest known painting ('A sleeping cat')
1828 August 29	Anne's earliest known drawing ('Church surrounded by trees')
1828 September 2	Charlotte's earliest known drawing ('Ruined tower')
1829 January 19	Emily's earliest known drawing ('Mullioned window')
1829	Grasper (probably) arrives at the Parsonage

1829	Dog tax paid by Patrick Brontë
1831	Dog tax paid by Patrick Brontë
1831 January 17	Charlotte starts at Roe Head; befriends Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor
1832 May	Charlotte leaves Roe Head
1834 January	Emily draws Grasper's portrait
1835	Charlotte goes to Roe Head as a teacher and Emily as a pupil
1835 late October	Emily returns to Haworth and Anne goes to Roe Head in her place.
1837 (?)	Grasper dies
1837 December	Charlotte and Anne return from Roe Head
1837-1838	Keeper arrives at the Parsonage
1838 April 24	Emily paints Keeper's portrait
1838 end of September	Emily starts work as a junior teacher at Law Hill
1839 March	Emily returns from Law Hill.
1839	Martha Brown starts to work at the Parsonage
1839 April 8	Anne takes up her post at Blake Hall
1839 May	Charlotte goes as governess to the Sidgwick family, at Stonegappe, near Skipton
1839 July 19	Charlotte leaves Stonegappe
1839 August	William Weightman becomes curate at Haworth
1839 September	Charlotte and Ellen stay three weeks at Easton House, with the Hudsons
1839 December	Anne leaves Blake Hall
1840 May 8 (?)	Anne takes up her governessing post at Thorp Green
1841 March 2	Charlotte takes up her governessing post with the White family, at Upperwood, in Rawdon
1841 December	Chalotte leaves Upperwood
1842 February 15	Charlotte and Emily arrive at the Pensionnat Heger, Brussels

1842 September 6	William Weightman dies
1842 October 29	Aunt Branwell dies. Charlotte and Emily return from Brussels
1843 January 27	Charlotte returns to Brussels alone, as a teacher and pupil
1843 January	Branwell joins Anne at Thorp Green, as tutor to Edmund
1843-5	Flossy arrives at the Parsonage
1843-5	Emily paints Flossy's portrait
1844 January 1	Charlotte returns to Haworth
1845 June	Branwell dismissed from Thorp Green; Anne resigns; both return to Haworth
1846 end May	*Poems* by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell published
1847	*Jane Eyre* published (Smith, Elder and Co.)
1847 December	*Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* published (Thomas Newby)
1848 June	*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* published (Thomas Newby)
1848 September 24	Branwell dies
1848 December 19	Emily dies
1849 May 24	Anne, Charlotte and Ellen leave for Scarborough
1849 May 28	Anne dies
1849 October 26	*Shirley* published (Smith, Elder and Co.)
1851 December 1	Keeper dies
1853 January 28	*Villette* published (Smith, Elder and Co.)
1854 June 29	Charlotte marries Arthur Nicholls
1854 December	Flossy dies
1855 March 31	Charlotte dies
1855 April 13	Patrick purchases Cato
1855 middle	Patrick purchases Plato
1857 June 6	*The Professor* published (Smith, Elder and Co.)
1857 March 25	Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* published (Smith, Elder and Co.)

1861 June 7	Patrick dies
1861 Late September/ October	Arthur Nicholls returns to Ireland, taking Plato with him
1866 late April	Plato dies
1897 November 26	Ellen Nussey dies
1906 December 2	Arthur Nicholls dies

Notes on Structure

(1) While this book takes the reader on a broadly linear 'journey' through the lives of the actual and fictional Brontë dogs, readers can also, I hope, peruse and make good sense of individual chapters, depending on their focus of interest.

(2) 'Chapter' refers to a given chapter in this book. 'Ch' refers to a chapter in the novel in question.

(3) The first time a writer is mentioned in a given chapter in-text (i.e., as part of a sentence rather than just the name and date in brackets), I use their full name, and subsequently in the chapter the surname only. The same arrangement applies in the Endnotes.

(4) The Endnotes themselves are rather extensive. Here I borrow from Tim Whittome (2023a) who sees endnotes as "pertinent observations and further information that would otherwise distract the reader if included in the main running text", but also as observations and information which allow us to "listen to something more interesting and in depth" and which are "akin to the unveiling of a lovely texture of a full and scented rose" (p. 31).

(5) Where no page number is needed, the provided date of a novel is the date of its original publication. Date of original publication is usually provided for the first mention of a given novel in a chapter and sometimes section. Otherwise the date refers to the edition in question.

Preface:
Sources and Methodology

Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë are known worldwide for their novels: Charlotte for *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853) and *The Professor* (1857); Emily for *Wuthering Heights* (1847); Anne for *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). They are as famous if not more so for their lives and the place where they wrote, Haworth, West Yorkshire, in the North of England. Those lives included three dogs, Grasper, Keeper and Flossy, who all spent much, probably most, of their own adulthood with the family. Flossy and Keeper were outlived only by Charlotte and the Reverend Patrick Brontë, father of Charlotte, Emily and Anne[1].

So how does someone who wants to write about these three much-loved canines best justify her 'historidography', and source, synthesise and reference the dispersed and fragmentary evidence? As Aaron Skabelund writes in relation to Hachikō, the Japanese Akita dog remembered for his loyalty to his owner, Hidesaburō Ueno, "Animals leave almost no records, so how can we recover their history?" (2018: 85). Grasper, Keeper and/or Flossy feature in most accounts of the lives of the Brontë family, but almost always peripherally[2]. Neither of the two 'technologies' identified by Skabelund as available for biographies of Hachikō, photography and taxidermy, apply to the Brontë dogs.

Much of what is written about the Brontë family as a whole has tended to be conjecture, or uncritical recycling of hearsay, myth and apocryphal stories, often treated as fact, many writers borrowing hugely from Elizabeth Gaskell's (1857) valuable but partial *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Tom Winnifrith, author of *The Brontës and their Background: Romance and Reality* (1973)[3], critically refers to Brontë biographers' "unwillingness to probe the solid facts provided by primary documentary evidence; and [how] they have depended too often on unsatisfactory printed texts" (p. 3). Accounts of the Brontës and their lives have also tended to be lacking not only in verification. Often a Brontë authority is trustingly cited, but with no indication of what that authority themself based their claim on. Sometimes

a general list of 'Works consulted' is provided, but claims and observations are not associated with specific references. The Brontës' fan base and popularity as arguably the world's most famous literary family may prompt some writers to assume that readers of work on the Brontës do not read 'critically', are happy with the merging of documented fact and unacknowledged speculation, and do not want to be burdened with footnotes and references. But many Brontë scholars and fans recognise inaccuracies and inconsistencies, and when faced by an unfamiliar claim find themselves asking: 'How do they know that?' (If they have not discovered it already, I would direct such readers to Juliet Barker's excellent *The Brontës* (2010), in which some hundred informed and detailed endnotes accompany each chapter.)

This book, then, offers an *evidenced* account of the Brontë dogs. I try to trace 'received wisdom' back to its source (if any), and material objects back to their provenance. Other than when something is widely known and documented, I provide references and indicate where relevant mentions can be found and evaluated. The book does not include any new, recently unearthed information about the Brontë dogs – that would be almost impossible, given the efforts over the decades to bring to light and bring together Brontë-related texts and artefacts (most of which are now housed at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, Yorkshire)[4], and the huge amount of existing research and writing on every aspect of the Brontë family's lives. But it does bring together the many, many relevant fragments — I hope, almost all of them, some unfamiliar or relatively inaccessible — to provide as complete as possible a picture of Grasper, Keeper and Flossy. This in turn sheds light on these dogs' more famous owners, and also allows us to explore a range of different relationships between the real-life Grasper, Keeper and Flossy and the many fictional dogs in the Brontë novels.

Rather than providing three comprehensive dog biographies, then, in this book the account of each dog is best described as a synthesised set of fragments. The methodology is also thoroughly interdisciplinary (see Krebber and Roscher 2018a), and the evidence, which includes images and objects, multimodal. This I hope is a strength rather than a weakness: in writing about Hachikō, Skabelund claims the importance of "good old

historical context" for all biographies, context entailing a wide variety of sources (2018: 101).

Seven types of evidence

The 'evidence' offered for this book is, then, sevenfold. First, I look at what the three dogs looked like, approximately if not exactly, using the primary sources of Anne's and — particularly — Emily's extant paintings, drawings and sketches. A key secondary work here, useful for background information, detailed description and discussion of the various images of Grasper, Keeper and Flossy as well as other dogs, is

- Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars' *The Art of the Brontës* (1995). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

I also include insightful observations on this artwork by artist Chris Phillips[5]. The Brontë artwork itself is the focus of Chapter 2.

Second, I look at what is recorded about the dogs' lives in the primary written sources created by Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Patrick Brontë themselves. Key here are Charlotte's letters, both personal and, in her later years, professional. Around 400 extant ones (or more) are to her long-term great friend Ellen Nussey, who she met while they were both pupils at Roe Head School in Mirfield, West Yorkshire, and about whom she wrote in a letter to her publisher, William Smith Williams, on January 3, 1850, "She is without romance … but she is good – she is true – she is faithful and I love her" (in Smith 2000: 323). Spanning 1832-1855, these letters are rich, detailed, informative and "[a]t their best … have some of the immediacy of good conversation" (Smith 1995: 1) – in short, invaluable. Given the duration and frequency of this correspondence, its likely great importance for both Charlotte and Ellen, and that writing not only reflects but often *aids* thinking, it is possible to see it acting as a form of 'epistolary education' (Wallis 2023) for both women.

It is regrettable – and a real gap in our knowledge and understanding - that we only have one letter from Charlotte to her other great but very different friend from Roe Head, Mary Taylor, and just one from Mary to Charlotte. This is particularly sad, as in her surviving letter to Mary, Charlotte

includes the line: "I write you a great many more letters than you write to me" (September 4, 1848; in Smith 2000: 111)[6]. Mary is known for her politics, her social conscience, her early feminism, her writing and her sense of adventure – she lived in Brussels before Charlotte and Emily travelled there, and emigrated to New Zealand where she remained single, earned her own living and published a novel: *Miss Miles, or a Tale of Yorkshire Life 60 Years Ago.* If Charlotte's long-term correspondence with Ellen constituted an 'epistolary education', Charlotte's with Mary would have been even more so, perhaps politically - and may have given a very different, perhaps more intimate, picture of Charlotte (Wallis 2023)[7]. Mary's biographer Joan Bellamy writes:

> It is more than likely that Charlotte confided in Mary hopes and emotions she knew were outside Ellen Nussey's range of knowledge and sympathies. She … probably confided in her about her feelings towards M. Heger[8] in letters which Mary had thought it better to destroy because she was unable to guarantee their security from other eyes (2002: v)[9].

While this makes perfect sense, it appears that Mary also disposed of a whole range of uncontroversial letters from Charlotte.

Writing from New Zealand between June and July 24, 1848, Mary in her surviving letter to Charlotte responded to *Jane Eyre* with: "Your novel surprised me by being so perfect as a work of art …. You are very different from me in having no doctrine to preach … I will scold you well when I see you" (in Smith 2000: 87). Charlotte may have kept this letter because of these particular words. But included in Mary's letter are also the words "the cat's on the table" - suggesting that Charlotte might just also have made reference to the Bronte pets.

In her letters to Ellen, a far more conventional friend than Mary, Charlotte may then have been presenting her own more conventional side. Elisabeth Jay's take is that "Charlotte's choice of topic and tone … probably frequently reflected Ellen's own narrow and occasionally rather sentimental piety" (1997: xiv). Of course, as Winnifrith (1973) points out, Ellen may also have destroyed the more interesting letters – she certainly

made deletions (Smith 1995). Famously, Ellen resolutely kept most of Charlotte's letters – despite being told (via Charlotte) that Arthur Nicholls, Charlotte's new husband, wished Ellen to destroy them once read. (Charlotte did not keep Ellen's.) One wonders if Ellen had a feeling that Charlotte would one day be famous.

Charlotte's extant letters to Ellen, to (and from) other family members and to others (including M. Constantin Heger in Brussels) can be found in Margaret Smith's rigorous, detailed and as comprehensive-as-possible *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*:

- Margaret Smith's (1995, 2000, 2004) *Letters of Charlotte Brontë* (Vols. 1—3). Oxford: Clarendon Press.[10]

These include several references to the family dogs: Keeper has mentions in the indexes of all three of Smith's volumes and Flossy in Volumes 2 and 3.

Earlier – though less accurate - versions of Charlotte's letters can also be found in:

- Clement Shorter's[11] (1896) *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*. London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Clement Shorter's (1908) *The Brontës — Life and Letters* (Vols. 1—2). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Smith describes *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*, despite some shortcomings, as "the most important and substantial work on the Brontës to appear since [Gaskell's] *Life* of 1857" (1995: 58): early Brontë manuscripts were listed, commentary added, and errors from Gaskell – who included extracts from the letters - corrected. Shorter's (1896) index includes several references to each of Keeper and Flossy. As soon as her own three volumes were complete, however, Smith's collection became indispensable for any serious Brontë researcher[12].

Very few letters from Emily and Anne sadly exist (at the time of writing, just three brief ones from Emily, all to Ellen, and four from Anne, two to Ellen - one of which mentions Flossy)[13]. However, an additional primary source is Emily and Anne's six autobiographical 'diary papers' which they

wrote for each other on their birthdays every four years, from 1834 to 1845. The first two were written together[14], the second two individually.

Emily and Anne's first diary paper (page 1)

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The co-written ones are illustrated, as are both of Emily's solo-written ones – her second one including two images of dogs who are almost certainly Keeper and Flossy (see Christine Alexander with Mandy Swann 2019, also Chapter 2). These diary papers are interesting for their very 'ordinariness' – of which the dogs in Emily's and Anne's lives were a part[15].

The third source of evidence is what *others* who had met or seen the dogs wrote about them: Ellen, who had met all three dogs, and Gaskell, who had met Keeper and Flossy. Four key primary sources[16] here are:

- Ellen Nussey's letter (undated) to Clement Shorter, published in Shorter's (1896) *Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle*, pp. 178-180.
- Ellen Nussey's 'Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë', in *Scribner's Monthly* 2: 1 (May 1871); reprinted in (i) *Brontë Society Transactions* 2: 10 (1899), pp. 58–83; (ii) Margaret Smith, *Letters of Charlotte Brontë* (1995), pp. 589-610; (iii) Harold Orel (ed.) (1997), *The Brontës: Interviews and Recollections*. London: Macmillan, pp. 13-31[17].
- Ellen Nussey's 'A Short Account of the Last Days of Dear A.B', in Margaret Smith ([n.d.?] 2000) *Letters of Charlotte Brontë,* Vol. 2, pp. 739-741.
- Elizabeth Gaskell's (1857) *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. London: Smith, Elder and Co. (numerous revised editions; here I use the 1997 edition).

While Ellen's 'Reminiscences' were written in part to defend Charlotte from accusations of 'irreligion' (Smith 1995: 38), they are hugely important to Brontë scholarship more widely. Ellen knew Charlotte very well, and the 'Reminiscences' constitute not only a first-hand account of Charlotte at Roe Head but, more importantly for this volume, of life at the Parsonage, where Ellen stayed frequently, getting to know all the family members, human and canine. The 'Reminiscences' were first published only 16 years after Charlotte's death, when Ellen would have been 54. Ellen's (1896) letter to Shorter includes mentions of the family dogs, and other animals[18]. Her 'Short account of the Last Days of Dear A.B' also mentions Anne's love of animals.

"Gaskell's personal contact with her subject and those she knew gave her an enormous advantage over other biographers", observes Lucasta Miller (2002: 64). Gaskell only knew Charlotte for a relatively short time, and towards the end of her life; she had never met Branwell, Emily or Anne. Still, she knew Charlotte pretty well, and the importance of this cannot be dismissed. Published in 1857, only two years after Charlotte's death, the *Life* has an evident quality of intimacy, in particular providing moving accounts of the deaths of Emily (featuring Keeper) and Anne, even if those would have come via Charlotte.

Gaskell and Charlotte were brought together in August 1850 by Lady Janet and Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth. (In her 'Introduction' to the *Life*, Jay describes Lady Janet as a 'literary lion-hunter' (1997: x).) This first meeting took place during a visit to The Briery, near Low Wood on Windermere, the Kay-Shuttleworths' summer residence. Charlotte and Gaskell appear to have got on together nicely. As 19th century women novelists, they would have had a lot to talk about, even though they may not have agreed on everything. Charlotte's first letter to Gaskell was written on August 27th of that year, and she subsequently visited her family home in Manchester in June 1851, April 1853, and May 1854, just before her marriage to Arthur Nicholls. Gaskell's first visit to Haworth was in September 1853, when she met Keeper and Flossy. She also met Patrick, and the servants Tabitha (Tabby) Ackroyd, who had been with the family since 1824, and Martha Brown, who had started to work there in 1839. After the visit, Gaskell wrote: "We agreed that when [Charlotte] wanted bustle, or when I wanted quiet, we were to let each other know, and exchange visits as occasion required" (1997: 415).

After Charlotte's death in 1855, Patrick asked Gaskell to write Charlotte's biography. Having agreed with enthusiasm, Gaskell worked on this project assiduously[19]. She talked in depth to Patrick, Tabby and Martha. She also met and talked to Ellen, on whose accounts she relied hugely, and to numerous others who had known Charlotte, including fellow pupils at Cowan Bridge, various Haworth residents, and villagers who had worked at the Parsonage. She even travelled to Brussels to meet M. Heger - Charlotte's married teacher (Barker 2010).

As a result, Gaskell's *Life* provides a fairly full account of Charlotte's domestic life, meaning that, as Sophie Franklin (2016: 56) observes in her own, recent biography of Charlotte, any new Brontë biography "must eventually contend with the spectre of Gaskell". The *Life* documents episodes that we might otherwise never have known about, for example, when Emily was bitten by a possibly rabid dog and cauterised the wound with a hot iron, and when she reportedly punished Keeper severely for lying on a bed (if indeed she did - see Chapter 5, and below). This episode and indeed the *Life* more widely are frequently cited, often very

uncritically. Given the problems with the *Life*, there is a need for a rather lengthy digression.

Much of what Gaskell writes cannot be corroborated and is indeed a matter of her informants' reliability[20], recall – and her own. She presumably documented the meetings, though not necessarily accurately: there were no audio-recorders in the mid-19th century, and it's hard to make comprehensive notes of what someone says when they are talking at normal speed. In particular, she is unlikely to have recorded her informants' exact words. As regards Charlotte's letters, many of which she borrowed from Ellen (who had already carried out her own censorship), Gaskell was highly selective, and not above expurgation or changing words without acknowledgement (Smith 1995).

There are other issues, too. As a professional Victorian woman, Gaskell had to establish her right to be a biographer (Jay 1997). The expectations of Victorian biography were that works should have a moral purpose, but some writers went further: Hermione Lee claims that "the impulses of sympathy and veneration that dominated much 19th-century biography often solidified into hagiography" (2009: 57). Both morality and hagiography are evident in Gaskell's self-avowed aim to "show what a noble, true, and tender woman Charlotte Brontë really was" (1997: 396). She was helped in this by Charlotte's perhaps carefully-targeted correspondence with Ellen, noted above. One of Gaskell's hagiographic strategies was to implicitly contrast Emily with Charlotte, notably through her questionable account of Emily's punishment of Keeper.

In accordance with their agenda, then, biographies of the Victorian period were also characterized by what Lee calls "whitewashing and censorship" (2009: 57)[21]. Notably, despite meeting him, Gaskell did not include an account of Charlotte's desire for M. Heger, a desire which we can now see as informing all four of Charlotte's novels. In aiming to ensure Charlotte's reputation, Gaskell locates her primarily as an inhabitant of the domestic sphere, with all its associated femininity, and secondarily as a novelist - and, Jay observes, appears ambivalent about the novels themselves (1997: xiii).

There is more. As well as being a Victorian, Gaskell was, was, first and foremost, a writer of fiction, with four novels (*Mary Barton, Cranford, Ruth, North and South*) and 18 short stories already under her belt prior to writing the *Life* - which was, in fact, her only biography. Rumours already circulating about the Brontë sisters not being in short supply, Gaskell drew on these to imbue the *Life* with a range of novelistic techniques - perhaps because, as Alan Shelston convincingly argues, she "saw in Charlotte Brontë the living epitome of all the qualities with which she had invested her fictional heroines" (1975: 13), in particular, those appropriate to a suffering martyr. When her subject was teaching in Brussels – an often-challenging job – Gaskell writes for example that "Charlotte's quiet, gentle manner never changed" (1997: 177). Never? And of the story of Emily being bitten by a rabid dog (Chapter 1), Gaskell comments that this "was written down by Charlotte with streaming eyes" (1997: 200). Did Charlotte tell her exactly this?

Gaskell has accordingly frequently been taken to task for writing Charlotte's biography over-dramatically, for putting her own spin on events, and for going beyond exaggeration to inaccuracy. Shelston identifies three aspects of the *Life* which "provoked especial dispute": the descriptions of Patrick, of the school at Cowan Bridge, attended by Charlotte and Emily and their older sisters Maria and Elizabeth, and of Branwell's decline, misrepresentations which Shelston attributes to "the disparity between Mrs Gaskell's fictional imagination and her responsibilities as a biographer" (1975: 26). Jay concludes her own 'Introduction' to the *Life* with the notion that Gaskell's Charlotte was "an imaginative creation" (1997: xxvii). While all this is to look back on the 19th century *Life* with a 21st century eye, and while Miller in her telling (and tellingly named) *The Brontë Myth* concedes that the novel and biography genres may not be unrelated, she rightly points out that "this makes it more, not less, important to keep alive some consciousness of the distinction between historical facts and fictional inventions" (2002: 153).

The *Life* was, however, hugely successful. As Miller reminds us, it:

> would turn out to be arguably the most famous English biography of the nineteenth century … a classic in its own right …. For one

> leading female novelist to publish a full-length life of another was a landmark event in the history of women's writing (2002: 57).

It appeared in at least six editions between 1857 and 1873[22], is still in print, and as indicated is not only widely but often uncritically quoted.

To the above two people who had known the Brontës, Ellen and Gaskell, we can add John Stores Smith (1868), whose 'Personal reminiscences: a day with Charlotte Brontë (1850)' includes a description of the old Keeper. Originally published in the journal *The Free Lance*, it was reprinted as an Appendix in Shorter's (1908) *The Brontës - Life and Letters* (see above).

Since Gaskell, there have been many, many other Brontë biographers: writing in 1979, Katherine Frank identified more than forty 'major lives' of the Brontës[23]. Many of these biographers would have met neither the Brontës nor anyone who knew them. However, for several decades after Charlotte's death in 1855, people could lay claim to have known – if not Charlotte herself, other members of the family and/or the family dogs, or at least people who *had* known them, including Haworth villagers, Parsonage servants[24], and teachers and students from Roe Head and the other places Charlotte, Emily and Anne had worked. Patrick lived until 1861 and Ellen Nussey until 1897, and was in much demand by biographers. Between 1855 and 1900 at least twelve other Brontë biographies drawing on these people – as well as on Gaskell - were published[25]. As noted by one such writer, Thomas Wemyss Reid, Editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, who published in 1877, only twenty years after Gaskell, biographers writing after all the Brontë family members were dead benefitted from this in the sense that (unlike Gaskell) they could write more freely. Nevertheless, although Reid highlighted the importance of Charlotte's time in Brussels, he still played down Branwell's role in Charlotte's life[26].

My fourth source of evidence is therefore early work by writers who had not met any of the Brontë family, but who had met and talked to people who had known them, *and* who also mention the dogs. One such example is Marion Harland, an American writer of fiction and non-fiction, who

titled her ([1899] 2019) biography *Charlotte Brontë at Home*. Of her 'methodology', Harland writes:

> This simple narrative of the domestic life of Charlotte Brontë is as careful and patient and conscience and affection could make it. When practicable, I verified by personal investigation what I had heard and read. When dependent upon information received from others, I consulted what seemed to me the ablest authorities … (p. v).

While Harland and her party talked to parishioners, drinkers at the Black Bull, and the owner of a shop near the church (from whom she bought a picture of Arthur Nicholls), this very provisional and hedged declaration self-evidently contains within it many loopholes[27]. More relevant than Harland for this book is, however, Mary Robinson's earlier biography of Emily (the first):

- Mary Robinson (1883) *Emily Brontë*. Boston: Roberts Brothers. (republished by Good Press, 2019)

Robinson refers to her "many and generous helpers" (2019: 3). Among others, she interviewed Dr. Ingham and Tabitha Brown (Martha Brown's younger sister, by then Mrs Ratcliffe). Interestingly, she reflects that to gain "insights into the character of Emily Brontë … the task has been left too long" (p. 2) - a challenge for most biography, but perhaps Emily really was a special case.

Despite their different perspectives from Gaskell, Robinson's and the other biographies of the time are still characteristically 19th century. They share a tendency to praise, to speculate freely, to paraphrase rather than attempt to accurately document or even recall what was actually said by their interviewees, and stylistically are rather literary and novelistic. They often do not indicate the specific sources of particular details. And a reliance on Charlotte's letters meant using versions which included not only Ellen's deletions, and omissions and paraphrasis by Gaskell, but also even forgery, and sometimes copies or fragments (Smith 1995; Winnifrith 1973). So while these biographers' anecdotes and insights are valuable, they need to be taken with a pinch of salt[28].

It will be clear from the above that because of Charlotte's own extant correspondence, Ellen's 'Reminiscences' and Gaskell's *Life*, far more is known about Charlotte than about Emily or Anne. However, given the closeness of the Brontë family members, and the often-collaborative nature of the sisters' writing, Charlotte's biographers may actually have been even more focussed on her than they need have been. Tim Whittome notes critically that this may have been particularly to the detriment of Anne: "Anne's invisibility in the works of Mrs. Gaskell, Marion Harland, Ellis Chadwick, and May Sinclair are jarring in the extreme" (2023a: 350). It is particularly regrettable for the purposes of this book, given that Charlotte appears to be the least enthusiastic dog-lover of the three sisters.

The fifth source of evidence we can call 'Brontë dog artefacts' – material objects associated with Grasper, Keeper and Flossy, other than the paintings and sketches. These include their possible or (in the case of Keeper) likely dog collars, which tell their own story (see Chapters 4, 5 and 7). To these we can add the needle-case owned and designed by Charlotte, and what is left of Emily's account book, which tells us a little more about Flossy.

Sixth, I draw on two key secondary sources, which have been useful for reliability-checking, some factual information and indeed in helping address the imbalance noted by Whittome:

- Juliet Barker's (2010) *The Brontës*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson
- Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith's (2018) *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

These two works are valuable for their informative, detailed, trusted, verified – and verifiable - insights into the lives of all the Brontë family members, an important backdrop to an understanding of the lives and different significances of the dogs.

Ultimately, of course, as well as giving the 'biographed' some sort of voice, the biographer ultimately creates her own 'order' (in both senses) and meaning. This is regardless of the comprehensiveness of the material available. Part of the order in this book is to allow the first six sources of evidence to inform the chapters on Grasper (Chapter 4), Keeper (Chapter

5) and Flossy (Chapter 7) themselves. But even with this six-fold, interdisciplinary, multimodal set of sources, there are many, many gaps in what we know about these dogs. Lee cites Richard Holmes (1995), biographer of Coleridge and Shelley, who saw biography as a "broken bridge" into the past (2009: 13). In a constructive response, Miller claims that biography ideally should not only (of course!) "obey the constraints of evidence" but also "respond creatively to the challenge of making shape, form and meaning" (2002: 153, 169). Similar is Virginia Woolf's earlier ([1927] 2011) recommendation for biography to be a 'queer amalgamation' of 'granite and rainbow': using established facts, but bringing those facts to life. Accordingly, I speculate and imagine. But speculation and imagination, however informed, when they occur, are just that, and I distinguish between historical fact and informed speculation and imagination. In the interests of veracity, I also use direct quotations from the textual evidence rather than paraphrasis.

Some gaps in our knowledge of the Brontë dogs may be partly, if provisionally, addressed by the seventh source of evidence: the dogs in the novels themselves (the focus of Chapters 6 and 8). Tartar in Charlotte's *Shirley* and Snap in Anne's *Agnes Grey* can for example be seen as fictional counterparts of Keeper and Flossy respectively, *in a sense*, as can the working and pet dogs in Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. These literary representations go beyond the visual, suggesting what the Brontë family dogs may have sounded like, felt like and how they may have behaved. While taking on board Winnifrith's (2002: 181) claim, following a principle of the 'New Criticism' (e.g., Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 1954), in particular the 'intentional fallacy', that: "To seek real life models for [the Brontës'] fictional creations is to belittle the skill of these remarkable authors", which I have no wish to do, these likely fictional counterparts provide a valuable - if indirect - complement to the relatively little we know from the first six more factual sources about the *actual* dogs.

Of course, we have to be careful. However 'autobiographical' a novel, a fictional representation of a fictional dog is not 'objective'. If it is voiced by a character, that character may well have their own agenda for what they say about a given dog. That character is also very unlikely to 'be' the author, even if that character is also the narrator. If the representation is voiced by

a narrator who is not a character (as is the case with *Shirley*), we cannot assume that the narrator is the author either. Fictional dogs therefore offer, at best, indirect evidence of actual ones. At the same time, in the case of the Brontë novels, this 'indirectness' is modified by clear correspondences between certain fictional dogs (notably Tartar and Snap) and what is known about actual ones (respectively, Keeper and Flossy).

More controversially, we can also look at this the *other* way round and explore whether and how Keeper and Flossy as 'inspirational prompts' informed not only some memorable fictional counterparts, but also how – via those counterparts – they may have shaped the novels in terms of plot, characterization of humans, and metaphor. This is the focus of Chapters 9, 10 and 11.

Dog biography

Given that the 'great man' has now been knocked off his perch as the only subject for serious biography (Ferres 2002), the gate is open for work on women, people who were not famous, poor people and, by logical extension, animals. To write a dog biography, or even a set of three fragmentary dog biographies, is then to do what Andre Krebber and Mieke Roscher, writing from an interdisciplinary Animal Studies perspective, call "taking animals seriously" (2018b: 1). Animal Studies explores *inter alia* not only "what nonhuman animals are like" but also animal-human similarities and "how human and nonhuman animals relate to each other"[29]. What Krebber and Roscher (2018b: 7) call "intertwinement with others" is self-evident to any dog owner, themself one of those 'others', for whom 'entwinement' likely involves the dog socialising with their owner. Such relating varies hugely across time, space and with individuals: while Grasper, Keeper and Flossy's middle class Victorian owners were of a time and place, those owners showed considerable variation in their own practices and attitudes. This idea of 'interspecies relationships' (and 'interspecies identification' by fictional characters) is key to this book, not least as it suggests animal-human similarities - without which we could not relate to our dogs. The notion of animal-human similarities challenges any notion of humanity and animality (or caninuity) as a binary. It is also key

because of the implications of canine-human relations for fiction: for plot, characterization and metaphor (Chapters 9-11).

Dog biographies are not new. Several well-known ones exist[30], notably of 'breed dogs'[31] rather than 'mutts' or mongrels ('mixed breeds'). Some have come about because of the dogs themselves, rather than their owners. Two famous examples are those of the German shepherd/Alsatian 'war dog' Rin Tin Tin (Orlean 2011) and Labrador retriever Marley (Grogan 2005). To these we can add the eponymous *Greyfriars Bobby*, whose story is told in Eleanor Atkinson's (1962) part-factual work about the Skye terrier who slept on the grave of his master 'Auld Jock' in Edinburgh for several years after Jock's death[32]; and Hachikō[33] who, rather similarly, waited for his (dead) master for years outside Shibuya Station in Tokyo (Hayashi 1991; see also Skabelund 2018)[34].

Greyfriars Bobby commemorated in Edinburgh © Jane Sunderland

The most literary dog biography, however, must be Virginia Woolf's eponymous *Flush* (1933), the subject of which is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet spaniel, and is an indirect biography of Barrett Browning herself, 'written' through Flush's eyes and nose (see Lee 2009). Woolf – who herself owned a spaniel, Pinka - considers the whole history of the spaniel,

which she playfully and literarily has still running in Flush's veins (see also Chapter 7). And while the book you are reading now is *not* a biography of Charlotte, Emily and Anne through the eyes and noses of Grasper, Keeper and Flossy, these humans' and animals' lives and domestic practices intertwined.

Animals have also been known to tell their own stories, in fictional dog 'autobiographies', using the first-person pronoun – or simply to talk in works of fiction[35]. While this necessarily entails a large dose of anthropomorphism (see Herman 2016), it is a symbolically powerful way of pointing to animals' feelings, thoughts and sense of agency: having them act in a way which may involve choice-making and intentionality (Mazzeno and Morrison 2017). The most famous example is probably *Black Beauty*, by Anna Sewell (1877), a child of its time, given that animal subjectivity was still very much a matter of debate in the 19th century (see Cosslett 2006). *Black Beauty* was originally intended as an "anti-cruelty tract" (Morse 2007b: 187). This was famously followed in the very early 20th century by J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (in its various incarnations), in which the talking dog Nana, Deborah Denenholtz Morse and Martin Danahay nicely observe, "provided comic proof of the animal kingdom's mind and soul" (2007: 1)[36]. These works anticipated the late 20th century concept of *posthumanism*, "a mode of thinking about the intersecting human, nonhuman, and technological worlds", which "treats animals and plants as companion species to humans" and aims to reevaluate "the idea of the human as the center of the universe" (Nayar 2023)[37]. Posthumanism as a concept and stance developed from and soon after the discipline of Animal Studies, but is broader and more ideological in terms of 'decentering the human' and challenging the human-dog binary. This is particularly relevant to Emily's *Wuthering Heights*.

Animal autobiographical non-fiction is rarer, but an example (of a sort) is Caroline Alexander's *Mrs Chippy's Last Expedition* (1997), written in the words of Mrs Chippy, the cat (actually male) who accompanied Ernest Shackleton on the fateful voyage to the Antarctic. This is a sympathetic look at feline sentience and subjectivity, affording a unique insight into Mrs Chippy's cognitive processes (however anthropomorphic). Sadly, the canine equivalent is not available for this volume – would that it were[38]!

Animal autobiographical fiction and non-fiction such as *Mrs Chippy* which allow full rein to be given to animals' sentience and suffering may facilitate readers' empathy with 'non-human animals', including helping them appreciate shared animal-human characteristics (see Morse and Danahay 2007b, Wolfe 2010).

Current, serious animal *biography* is also likely to acknowledge animal sentience, agency and subjectivity as characteristics which are not the sole property of human animals. A posthumanist stance would also challenge human superiority in these respects. In terms of Grasper, Keeper and Flossy, in this book I explore this indirectly through the attribution of agency and cognition to the fictional dogs – Tartar, Snap *et al.* - by their associated human fictional characters. This attribution may have implications for how Charlotte, Emily and Anne saw the agency and subjectivity of their likely real-life counterparts, the actual Grasper, Keeper and Flossy (see Chapter 12). While such attribution may be a literary form of mind-reading on the part of human characters, fictional characters and indeed authors, it can also be a sign of love.

As with *Black Beauty*, the literary attribution of thoughts and feelings may "make the animal more human" (Morse and Danahay 2007b). The reverse may also apply: in *Wuthering Heights*, humans are at times portrayed as animal-like (zoomorphism), or at least as demonstrating animal characteristics (see Chapter 11). Emily can be seen as creating her own posthumanist challenge to the notion of the 'animal-human binary' (Wolfe 2010) here.