

Fermanagh and the Brontës



The Northern Irish ancestry of the Brontë sisters is now well known, with the Brontë Heritage Centre at Ballymascanlon in County Down, birthplace of their father Patrick Branty, but there is also a tenuous and intriguing link to Fermanagh.

The name down the years has also been spelled as Brunty, Branty, or Prunty – Patrick is thought to have taken the modern spelling in honour of Lord Nelson, Duke of Brontë.

The Brontës always claimed that they were from an ancient family, and Douglas Hyde, Ireland's first President, held that they were descendants of a poet by the name of Pádraig Ó Pronntaigh who died in Co. Louth in 1760. Hyde probably makes the claim because he wrote a poem to welcome the newly appointed Catholic Archbishop of Armagh to Ballymascanlon in 1738. The Archbishop had been promoted from Bishop of Clogher, and perhaps Ó Pronntaigh came with him from there, because he gives his full name as '*Pádraig Ua Pronntaigh mhic Néill mhic Seadhain, ó Loch Éirne.*' If he was indeed the grandfather of Patrick Brontë, then he probably returned to Lough Erne at some stage, because it now seems that Patrick's father Hugh was born, or spent his earliest years, in Fermanagh. Hugh was a noted storyteller, and passed on to Patrick the tale of his journey to Drogheda as a child, in the company of a character who might well have been the original Heathcliff.

Hugh might not have known much about geography, since he was only eight years old at the time. He was traveling with his aunt Mary and his 'Uncle Welsh,' who had promised to make him 'a great scholar and his heir' – a promise that would quickly prove false. The journey took five days over rough roads in a horse and cart, often at night. Hugh woke on the first morning near a bridge, with the sun rising over what he thought was the sea beyond a level plain, and mountains rising to the West. His uncle and aunt were arguing; Welsh threatening to kill both the boy and his aunt and '*throw their bodies into the river.*'

The cart could not have traveled more than twenty miles a day. Following Hugh's description of the journey as handed down to his descendants, Edward Chitham has concluded that they stopped near Belturbet and in Dundalk and Ballybay (near both of which families by the name of Prunty were living). The 'sea' that Hugh thought he saw on that first morning was Upper Lough Erne seen from Thompson's Bridge, the level of the Lough being higher in those days than it is now. Hugh's home could have been no more than ten or twenty miles further West, possibly around the area of Cleenish.

Hugh suffered for eight years on his uncle's farm near Drogheda until he finally ran away, heading North to Dundalk.

Who was Uncle Welsh, and how to account for his actions?

As the delightfully named Turtle Bunbury records, there is a family tradition that Welsh was a foundling, like Heathcliff. He was adopted by Patrick Brontë's great-grandfather (also Hugh) a cattle trader who had a farm in County Meath. This elder Hugh often crossed the Irish Sea, and found the child in Wales – hence the name. Welsh later married Hugh's daughter Mary and took over the farm, so estranging her brothers that they were convicted for assaulting him, escaped and fled to America. This would have been in 1750, the year the younger Hugh was born.

The problem with this story is that no Prunty, Brunty, or Branty farm has ever been found in Meath.

Chitham proposes that Welsh was indeed an uncle by marriage, but that Welsh, or rather Walsh, was in fact his surname, and from that he has located a possible site of the farm.

At that time the Earl of Drogheda, whose seat at Townley Hall now commemorates the Battle of the Boyne, had a land steward by the name of Edward Walsh. These Welsh/Walshes had a long-running feud with their neighbours, which had resulted in the murder of one Michael Walsh in 1743. They were a seafaring family, and from Hugh's description of Welsh as 'dark,' Chitham supposes (in an echo of Jane Eyre) that he may have been 'adopted' into that family as a by-blow of the Jamaican sugar trade – a literal as well as a metaphorical bastard.

The truth is that we have no account of the man apart from Hugh's, but the idea makes a certain amount of sense, at least as a story. For whatever reason, one can imagine him as the most despised member of a despised yet powerful family. It would not have been easy for him to make a good marriage, and there may well have been spectacular feuds with the in-laws. Perhaps Mary Branty's brothers did assault him, and flee to America. Perhaps she insisted that the heir to the farm would be someone from her extended family, with none of his blood. And perhaps they went searching for a suitable heir to adopt, visiting relations in Dundalk and Ballybay, until they came at last to Fermanagh.

Perhaps. If that were true, then it would have been Mary even more than Welsh who bound Hugh to the farm, and perhaps that would account for Welsh's treatment of the boy who was supposed to be his heir. And perhaps it would account for the fact that when Hugh decided to run away, Mary was pregnant – a girl, as it turned out.

One last strange fact in this strange tale: when Hugh had a family of his own, he baptised his fifth son – Welsh Branty. Perhaps it is no surprise that the child grew up to be the black sheep of the family.

Jenny Brien Editor

The painting is of Anne, Emily, and Charlotte Brontë, by their brother Branwell (c. 1834). He painted himself among his sisters, but later removed the image.