**The True Story of the Lowood Institution**

Like most writers, the Brontë sisters drew upon their own life experiences in composing their novels and particularly, it is sad to say, in their more tragic elements thereof. The most striking example is the story of Jane Eyre’s experiences at the Lowood Institution, and the heart-breaking death of Helen Burns.

“Lowood” was Cowan Bridge, a Clergy Daughters’ School that was attended by the Brontë sisters, where they were referred to as “charity children,” fed burnt porridge, and made to wash in freezing water. The character of Mr. Brocklehurst was inspired by William Carus Wilson, a Calvinist reverend and moral tyrant who operated the school. Something of his doctrines can be gleaned from a magazine he published, The Children’s Friend, which has been described as “part of a wholesale attempt to christianize fairy stories,” filled with tales of punishment, deathbed conversion and evangelism.

The character of Helen Burns was based upon Charlotte’s older sister Maria Brontë, who, like her other sibling Elizabeth, was not fortunate enough to survive the “cold, implacable cruelty of Mr. Brocklehurst.” Something of their story is related in James Parton’s 1886 book Daughters of Genius:

*“In July, 1824, he [their father Patrick] sent Maria and Elizabeth to a school for clergymen’s daughters at Cowan’s Bridge; in September they were joined by Emily and Charlotte.*

*To the readers of Charlotte Brontë it would be superfluous to describe this school—the “Lowood” of ” Jane Eyre.” Its miserable diet, unhealthy situation, long lessons, rigid discipline, low type of religion, and continual sermons upon humility—nothing is there forgotten, nor is anything exaggerated. Moreover, the descriptions of both teachers and pupils are most of them portraits. Miss Temple and Miss Scatcherd are drawn from the life; and the pathetic figure of Helen Burns is a delineation of Maria Bronte, whose death from consumption was directly due to the hardships she underwent at Cowan’s Bridge. A single incident related to Mrs. Gaskell by a fellow pupil of the Brontë girls of the way in which this studious and sickly child was treated, shows effectually that Charlotte’s picture of Lowood is not overdrawn, and fully justifies the anguish and burning indignation with which she always recalled her sojourn there.*

*Maria had been ill—so ill that it had been necessary to apply a blister to her side, the sore from which was not yet healed. On hearing the rising bell one morning, while in this condition, she said to some of her companions in the dormitory that she did not feel well enough to get up, and wished she might remain in bed. They advised her to do so, but she dared not for fear of the teacher known to us as Miss Scatcherd, who disliked her and seized every opportunity to treat her harshly. She was yet sitting upon the edge of the bed, shivering with cold and slowly drawing on her stockings over her thin feet, when this woman suddenly entered the room and, without waiting for any explanation, seized her by the arm, and with a single movement whirled her into the center of the floor, abusing her at the same time for her untidy habits. She then left the room, and Maria made no reference to the occurrence, except to beg a few of the more indignant girls to be calm. Slowly and painfully she finished dressing and went down to breakfast, only to be punished because she was late.*

*This poor little martyr remained at Cowan’s Bridge until she was so ill that the authorities notified her father, who came and took her home with him, where she died within a few days. Her sisters remained behind; but Elizabeth had already developed consumptive symptoms, and it was not long before she too was sent home to die. Charlotte and Emily then began to fail, and the authorities, remembering the fate of the elder sisters, sent word to Mr. Brontë that the damp situation of the house did not agree with them, and they had better be removed. They therefore returned to Haworth in the autumn of 1825, when Charlotte was a little over nine years of age.”*

Recognizing himself in the novel, Wilson threatened to sue Charlotte Brontë, as revealed in a series of letters that have recently emerged. Brontë was obliged to write an apology, but Wilson has nonetheless been doomed to posterity as one of western literature’s evil characters. What Elizabeth and Maria Brontë might have contributed to society and to literature in particular, we can only guess.

When understood within the context of their authors’ tragic lives, the Brontë novels take on a whole new dimension. Parton’s chapter on the Brontë sisters is an thoroughly gut-wrenching read, but highly recommended to anyone who wants to appreciate their work to its fullest.