



FACTsheet 12

Branwell Brontë in Penmaenmawr

It's likely that you've heard of the Brontë sisters, but perhaps you're not as familiar with the only Brontë son, Branwell. From birth, Branwell's father tried to mould him for success. He was rigorously home-schooled in the classics and the arts, with the intention that when he reached adulthood, he would provide support for his sisters as a respected writer or painter.



Branwell set out as a portrait painter in 1838, but the venture failed. He tried tutoring, but he was sacked by his employer and by 1840 he'd taken a job as a railway clerk. Two years later he was promoted, but he was soon dismissed after some money went missing.

Are you trying to seduce me, Mrs Robinson?

By 1843, Branwell had taken another tutoring position in Thorp Green, where he was to tutor the Reverend Edmund Robinson's young son. It was during this employment that he became infatuated with Robinson's wife, Lydia, who was almost 15 years older than Branwell.

Perhaps the pair made their affair too obvious because by the July of 1845, Branwell had received a letter of dismissal from Reverend Robinson, who intimated that 'his proceedings were discovered'.

After being forced to leave Mrs Robinson and his employment, Branwell's drinking and drug use got worse. He was running up debts and he couldn't support himself. By now, Charlotte Brontë had lost all patience with her brother and he had to seek financial and welfare support from friends.



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Branwell went to stay with John Brown in Liverpool for eleven nights, until his behaviour became so concerning that Brown advised that he should go somewhere to clear his mind and get well. That's when Branwell came to Penmaenmawr.

Penmaenmawr seemed to do him a lot of good. He was inspired by the sea and the mountains, and penned the poem, 'Penmaenmawr', which was later published as part of his body of work. It's a lengthy poem that suggests he is going to try to come to terms with the loss of Mrs Robinson and get on with his life.

After leaving Penmaenmawr, Branwell had a new-found energy. He penned poetry and started working on a book. He even wrote to friends saying that he hoped to be reunited with Mrs Robinson when her husband dies! News of the death of Reverend Robinson reached Branwell in May 1846. He was ecstatic in the hope that he would be able to marry the widowed Mrs Robinson, at long last.

His hopes were dashed when she made it clear that she had no intention of marrying him.

An extract from 'Penmaenmawr' by Branwell Brontë

I knew a flower whose leaves were meant to bloom
Till Death should snatch it to adorn the tomb,
Now, blanching 'neath the blight of hopeless grief
With never blooming and yet living leaf;
A flower on which my mind would wish to shine,
If but one beam could break from mind like mine:
I had an ear which could on accents dwell
That might as well say 'perish' as 'farewell' -
An eye which saw, far off, a tender form
Beaten, unsheltered, by affliction's storm -
An arm - a lip - that trembled to embrace
My Angel's gentle breast and sorrowing face
A mind that clung to Ouse's fertile side
While tossing - objectless - on Menai's tide!



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Thereafter his life seemed to spiral out of control with alcohol and drug addiction, and increasing debts.

Branwell's emotional distress was aggravated by an undiagnosed case of tuberculosis. By early 1848 his health had deteriorated to the point where he could no longer care for himself. He died at home at the age of thirty-one.

Penmaenmawr Museum hopes to discover more about Branwell Brontë's time here and we will continue to research. Apparently he sketched views of Penmaenmawr in his notebooks, which are held in the Brontë museum.

Now back to the title of this history snippet...

The married surname of Branwell Brontë's paramour, Lydia Robinson (née Gisborne), did indeed inspire the name of the character Mrs Robinson in the novella and film 'The Graduate' from which that famous line comes from. You'll see the similarity in the story, with the Mrs Robinson character carrying on an affair with an educated but idle young man.

