

1996

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Recommended Citation

(1996) "Notes and Documents: J. G. Lockhart and Charlotte Bronte," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol29/iss1/21>

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Notes and Documents

A Source in J. G. Lockhart for Charlotte Brontë's Pseudonym

Often quoted is Charlotte Brontë's statement about the names she and her sisters assumed when they published their 1846 book of poems: "[W]e veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because . . . authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice."¹ Barbara and Gareth Lloyd Evans connect the name Currer with Frances Currer, a book collector and friend of the girls' father Patrick Brontë, and Acton with Eliza Acton (1777-1859), a poet.² Winifred Gérin claims the pseudonym *Bell* comes from Arthur Bell Nicholls, their father's curate.³ Yet when the sisters adopted the name, they had known Nicholls for less than a year. Had Charlotte not married him eight years later, his middle name would not have seemed an inevitable source for the pseudonym. We suggest that the choice of a pen surname was very likely influenced by Charlotte's fancied resemblance between herself and

¹"Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell," *Wuthering Heights: An Authoritative Text with Essays in Criticism*, ed. William M. Sale, Jr. (New York, 1963), p. 4.

²*The Scribner Companion to the Brontës* (New York, 1982), pp. 148, 146.

³*Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (Oxford, 1967; rpt. with corrections, 1968), p. 309.

Charlotte Bell, the fallen heroine in John Gibson Lockhart's *Some Passages in the Life of Mr Adam Blair, Minister of the Gospel at Cross-Meikle* (1822).

The precocious Brontë siblings knew Lockhart's work from an early age. In 1828, when Charlotte was twelve, the children chose "all the chief men of the kingdom" to inhabit imaginary islands. Emily, who was ten, chose "Walter Scott, Mr Lockhart, Johnny Lockhart" as the chief men of her island.⁴ This was six years after the publication of *Adam Blair*, the best of Lockhart's four novels. Lockhart was also a principal contributor to *Blackwood's Magazine*, which the young Charlotte considered "the most able periodical there is." At eighteen, Charlotte advised her friend Ellen Nussey to read Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns*. She later wrote to Lockhart that she knew his work: "We beg to offer you one [of the volumes of *Poems*] in acknowledgment of the pleasure and profit we have often and long derived from your works."⁵

Telling evidence that the Brontë sisters knew the novels of Lockhart and would therefore have known his most famous, *Adam Blair*, is found in the correspondence between Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Lockhart's *The History of Matthew Wald* (1824). The connection has been detailed by Joseph Kestner,⁶ who calls *Matthew Wald* a possible source for *Wuthering Heights* rather than declaring the obvious, that the plot of Emily's novel is taken from Lockhart's. Matthew Wald and his cousin Katharine grow up playing together and loving one another, as do Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*. Inexplicably, Matthew's father leaves his estate to Katharine at his death, after which Matthew is treated as a poor relation by her mother and stepfather, just as Heathcliff is mistreated by Hindley Earnshaw after the death of Hindley's father. Eventually Matthew is sent away to school and loses Katharine to the handsome Lord Lascelyne, a situation which clearly anticipates Emily Brontë's love triangle of Heathcliff, Catherine Earnshaw, and Edgar Linton. Years later, Matthew kills Katharine's estranged husband in a duel. Katharine dies of shock, leaving Matthew to live on in wealth but subject to great depression, as Heathcliff is to do after him. Clearly the Brontës knew Lockhart's work well.

The most compelling evidence for Lockhart's influence on the choice of a pseudonym comes from *Adam Blair* itself. The heroine is "the beautiful black-eyed Charlotte Bell." Charlotte Brontë had dark eyes and could have enjoyed

⁴Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (1857; rpt. Harmondsworth, 1975), 115. "Johnny" would have been Lockhart's son, John Hugh, who died in childhood.

⁵Rebecca Fraser, *The Brontës: Charlotte Brontë and Her Family* (New York, 1988), pp. 54, 89, 274.

⁶"John Gibson Lockhart's *Matthew Wald* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 13.2 (Spring 1982): 94-96.

likening herself to the star-crossed heroine with the same initials and the same first name. Adam Blair courts Charlotte's cousin, Isabel Gray, but Charlotte often "sat beside them, smiling with the innocent waggishness of a kind sister." That and the following passage would have leapt out at Charlotte Brontë: "In early and untroubled days, Adam Blair and Charlotte Bell were used to sit together, like a brother and a sister."⁷ Charlotte Brontë's closeness to her brother Branwell is common knowledge. Rebecca Fraser comments that at age twenty-three, Charlotte was "so intimately entwined with Branwell in their glorious imaginative kingdom" that his growing alcoholism and his increasingly morbid turn of mind "contributed to the intense religious crisis which she herself now began to experience." Fraser observes that Charlotte's "closest emotional relationship with the opposite sex had been with her brother."⁸ In Lockhart's novel, Adam and Charlotte become lovers after the death of Isabel. But Charlotte is trapped in a bad marriage, and their adulterous relationship ends unhappily. Charlotte Brontë too might have felt that her life had been blighted by a forbidden love.

Charlotte Brontë could also identify with Charlotte Bell's religious doubts. Lockhart represents Charlotte's mind as having been affected by misfortunes she deems undeserved: she "was far from being an infidel,—but there were moments in which she could scarcely be said to be a believer;—and at all times, when she spoke upon topics of a religious nature, expressions escaped her which gave pain to the unsullied purity of Blair's religious feelings" (p. 116). Of course, Charlotte Bell's misfortunes are largely caused by the indulgence of her passions. Charlotte Brontë's spiritual crisis almost certainly resulted from her passion for her brother; she could not "reconcile the conflict between her imaginings and what her awakened conscience told her were unholy thoughts." She writes to Ellen Nussey, "I am a very coarse, commonplace wretch, Ellen, I have some qualities which make me very miserable, some feelings that you can have no participation in, that few, very few people in the world can at all understand." In a later letter, she alludes to "uncontrolled passions and propensities" and concludes, "I am glad you are not such a passionate fool as myself."⁹

Lockhart several times calls attention to Charlotte's changing her name: "Charlotte would change her name ere the season came to an end"; "the gay lady *sometimes* doubted . . . whether, after all, *Charlotte Bell* might not raise a spirit as well as *Charlotte Arden*" (pp. 65, 70). When Charlotte Brontë was considering a change of name for literary purposes, allusions such as these

⁷[John Gibson Lockhart], *Some Passages in the Life of Mr Adam Blair, Minister of the Gospel at Cross-Meikle* (Edinburgh and London, 1822), pp. 64, 63, 108. Subsequent quotations from *Adam Blair* are cited parenthetically.

⁸Fraser, pp. 102-03, 220.

⁹Fraser, pp. 107, 106, 113.

could have helped recall the Bell name to her mind. She would have remembered Charlotte Bell as having a name similar to her own, enmeshed like herself in an unacceptable passion, twice mentioned as having a sibling-like relationship with her future lover, and like herself struggling with religious doubts. And though she further disguised herself with the first name of *Currer*, she may have privately thought of her alter ego as *Charlotte Bell*. Most of her business letters she signed simply *C. Bell* until she dropped the pen name, reverting to *C. Brontë*.¹⁰

On Christmas Day of 1847, John Gibson Lockhart wrote of Charlotte's first novel, "I think it more cleverly written by far than any very recent one," adding four days later that the author was "far the cleverest that has written since Austen and Edgeworth were in their prime. Worth fifty Trollopes and Martineaus rolled into one counterpane, with fifty Dickenses and Bulwers to keep them company; but"—like Lockhart's own Charlotte Bell—"rather a brazen Miss."¹¹

WILL STEPHENSON
Texas State Technical College—Harlingen

MIMOSA STEPHENSON
University of Texas at Brownsville

¹⁰Gaskell, pp. 322, 472, for example.

¹¹Andrew Lang, *The Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart*, 2 vols. (London, 1897), II, 307, 310.