

Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth and the Brontë Interlude

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The Burnley Group of Hospitals

James Phillips Kay was to spend less than ten years entirely in the practice of medicine. During his undergraduate days at Edinburgh University he already displayed his capacity for an orderly presentation of his views, his contemporary, Charles Darwin, judging him to be the best of the speakers of the Royal Medical Society. In 1827 he became Physician to the Ardwick and Ancoats dispensary in Manchester and subsequently accepted control of the Knott Mill Cholera Hospital when the cholera epidemic reached England from the continent. Contact with scenes and conditions 'too deplorable for description' roused him to publicise issues such as the state of the operatives in the cotton industry. Unsuccessful application to the staff of the Manchester Infirmary, he felt, would debar future scientific study, and since the exacting demands of his involvement with the poor were making inroads into his health he accepted the post of Assistant Poor Law Commissioner when the Board was formed in 1834. He could probably have attained distinction in the medical sphere, for his work on asphyxia gained the Fothergillian Gold Medal and, 90 years later, it drew unstinted praise from Sir James Mackenzie, his future neighbour in Burnley.

To give adequate merit to his achievements as the founder of popular education requires realisation that education was vitally linked to religion in the early nineteenth century, and a major part of his efforts was directed to reconciling the opposing forces in religious politics and overcoming the bitter resentment towards state intervention. Before 1833, the government provided no money for education, there was no compulsion for children to attend school, no law to prohibit anyone opening a school, no supervision of its instructional efficiency, and the masters were of a quality to be described by Macaulay as the 'refuse of all other callings'. Milestones in Kay's public life include the organisation of pauper schools, promotion of primary education, the foundation of the first teacher-training college at Battersea and his appointment as the first Secretary of the Committee of the Council of Education. As the foremost authority of his day on popular education, and in his remarkable capacity to manage unwilling men and refractory institutions, G. M. Young could well pronounce that, 'it is hard to think of any name in the Victorian age which deserves to stand above or even beside Kay-Shuttleworth'.

Janet Shuttleworth, heiress to Gawthorpe Hall, near Burnley, following the death of her father during her infancy, contacted Dr Kay because of her interest in the local school, and their association culminated in marriage in 1842, when Dr Kay assumed by Royal

Licence the name of Kay-Shuttleworth. Repeated reference appears to his relentless drive and to his unyielding devotion and dedication, but in 1848 he was found unconscious in his office and inadequate restoration of his health determined his resignation. His close associate, Carleton Tufnell, witnessed the premonitory pointers: 'Long before his health gave way . . . I could perceive that he put forth such energy in his work, that few constitutions could stand such continued exertion'. A baronetcy was conferred upon him in recognition of his great services.

Descriptions of Charlotte Brontë's appearance at the time of the Kay-Shuttleworth encounter show close agreement: little, plain, delicate, pale with fair straight hair, a broad overhanging forehead, very good expressive eyes and a large mouth with many missing teeth. George Smith, her publisher, affords us an interesting insight — that she deplored her poor looks and would gladly have exchanged her talents and fame for beauty. Notwithstanding, four offers of marriage testify to her attractiveness to the opposite sex.

Haworth, second only to Stratford as a place of literary attraction, lies some ten miles from Gawthorpe Hall as the crow flies, but separated at that time by uninhabited moorland. Charlotte declined two invitations from Sir James to visit Gawthorpe and he thereupon announced his intention of calling upon her. It was for her a period of great sadness and loneliness, for between September 1848 and the following May she had lost her brother, Bramwell, and her two surviving sisters, Emily and Anne. The increasing withdrawal of her father and her own immersion in the writings of her sisters augmented her depression so that she was to declare her 'loathing for solitude grows extreme'. Sir James has been criticised for an over-purposeful and excessively insistent encroachment, but her reluctance was predictable in view of her intense shyness, especially towards one of whom she would have little or no knowledge in her segregated state. She formed a favourable impression of Sir James and his wife, of their comely appearance and lack of pretentiousness, but with the reservation that she wished he were as sincere as he was polished, and that he showed his white teeth with too frequent a smile. Her father persuaded her to accept the invitation to Gawthorpe and she was to record the enjoyment of her stay in the hall, which was very much to her taste, 'near three centuries old, grey, stately and picturesque'; also the talks by the fireside — 'mostly in the form of monologues by Sir James'. The latter observation probably reflects, rather, Charlotte's tendency to silent withdrawal for, as Mrs Gaskell wrote of their first meeting, she hardly spoke.

Lady Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter, tells of a party given in Charlotte's honour, when the anticipated brilliant conversation was not forthcoming and the evening proved gloomy and silent; one guest was to declare it to be one of the dullest evenings she had ever spent in her life.

Following her visit, Charlotte summed up her impressions of Sir James—that he possessed a high mental cultivation with thoroughly practical views and habits but with a sensitivity which had passed into irritability. She was persuaded to accompany them on their projected visit to London but insisted on not being lionised and, although ill at ease, she remained aware of the benefits that would result—'he who shuns suffering will never win victory. If I mean to improve, I must strive and endure.' Again criticism has been levelled at Sir James for the exertion of undue pressure but she evinced confidence in his medical capacity to protect her from undue fatigue and from too many strangers. The ill-health of her father and of Sir James caused alterations in these plans, but her response to the later suggestion that she travel down alone, stopping en route with several of the Kay-Shuttleworth friends, offers a clear example of her tendency to over-reaction: 'I would as lief have walked among red-hot ploughshares'. She was to stay in London with her publisher's mother, Mrs Smith, and then, as on the two subsequent London visits, she complained of Sir James's attempts to monopolise her but with such qualifying remarks as 'he has been very kind'.

In 1850 she was the guest of the Kay-Shuttleworths at Briery Close, near Windermere. Mrs Gaskell had encountered Lady Kay-Shuttleworth at the home of the latter's cousin and expressed her great interest in Charlotte. She accepted Sir James's invitation with alacrity, and so the two ladies met. Lady Kay-Shuttleworth was little in evidence because of indisposition and they were free to spend most of the day together. This ill accords with the accusation of lionising, repeatedly directed at Sir James. His restraint from commandeering their presence hardly justifies the sweeping assertion of Mrs Gaskell after her three-day stay that he was an 'eminently practical man who never indulged in the exercise of any talent which would not bring a speedy and tangible return', but she follows with the mitigating remark, 'he was very kind; and really took great trouble in giving us, Miss Brontë especially, good advice'. Charlotte's comment approaches that of Mrs Gaskell, that nine points out of ten in him were utilitarian, and the tenth artistic, and her qualification that he was 'sincerely benignant to me' is also similar. Mrs Gaskell herself cannot be exonerated from a desire for contact with literary giants; Sir James, who knew Tennyson, then residing in the Lake District, had to cancel their projected visit to him because of inclement weather, whereupon Mrs Gaskell recounted that she held her peace and bit her lips with disappointment.

Sir James's preoccupation with Charlotte was to continue after her marriage to the Rev. Arthur Bell Nicholls in 1854. Having formed a favourable impression, he offered him the living at the new church he had erected in Padiham. It was a most attractive offer in terms of house, church and stipend but had to be

declined because of their obligation to stay on at Haworth Parsonage during the lifetime of Charlotte's father. On their visit to Gawthorpe in January 1855 the offer was tendered once more and again acceptance was not deemed possible. During this stay Charlotte had injudiciously embarked on long walks, traversing sodden lawns in light shoes, and had become ill. On her return to Haworth her health was further assailed by hyperemesis gravidarum; she was to die on the last day of March. The certified cause of death was phthisis, the family scourge, with no mention of pregnancy. Appreciation of Sir James's involvement comes in a letter from her father, written eight weeks before her death, which details Charlotte's illness and expresses his own gratitude for medical enquiries instituted in respect of his cataracts.

Mrs Gaskell and Charlotte had developed a strong mutual regard and she was approached by the Rev. Patrick Brontë to compile a biography that would undo the many prevailing mis-statements. She encountered resistance from him and Mr Nicholls when she desired access to existing manuscripts, copyright of all published and unpublished work being in the latter's right. To reinforce her approach she asked Sir James to accompany her to Haworth. His conduct, she recounts, was without the slightest delicacy or scruple and he would take no refusal, removing many manuscripts, including *The Professor*. This is the description of events most commonly quoted, but he appears in a better light in her communication with George Smith relating her 'most successful visit . . . accompanied by Sir J. P. Kay-Shuttleworth, to whom it is evident that Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls look up—and who is not prevented by fear of pain from asking in a peremptory manner for whatever he thinks desirable. He was extremely kind in forwarding all my objects.' The reaction of Sir James, if over-forceful, would reflect his indignation at any attempt to suppress from the public a completed work of so celebrated an authoress, and which she had on nine occasions unsuccessfully submitted for publication. A literary debt may be owed him for his insistence. Mrs Gaskell feared undesirable revelations of Charlotte's association with M. Heger and although these fears were allayed after she read the text they may have influenced her immediate reaction towards Sir James's insistence.

Mrs Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is, according to Winniffrith, a prime source of the blurring of fact and fiction, and her avowed intent was to 'whitewash' Charlotte. The traumatic experiences she suffered following its publication were to persuade her that all biographical literature was intolerable and undesirable. Lady Kay-Shuttleworth had recounted to her erroneous descriptions of the poverty, deprivation and denial of medical care of the Brontë children, as well as stories of uncontrolled outbursts of the father's rages. The malicious communications originated from a nurse formerly discharged from the Brontë household. Lady Kay-Shuttleworth has been blamed for misleading Mrs Gaskell but the onus for verification must rest with the biographer.

The public figure of Sir James as a giant among public servants has been well documented but the picture of the

man remains dim. He was of deep religious faith, of boundless energy, with an obsessional attention to detail. His extensive reading included poetry and English and foreign works on social, economic and historical subjects. Under John Pyke Hullah he had introduced music to the school curriculum. The literary parties and the meetings between artists and writers which it pleased Sir James to arrange sprang from his belief that art flourished in the society of artists. His own literary efforts had begun long before the Brontë interlude; on their marriage he presented his wife with some, including a masque and poems. His novel *Scarsdale* was published anonymously, clearly at variance with the alleged propensity towards literary lion-hunting. Other works included a further novel, *Ribblesdale*, and a history of Cromwell in the North. Lady Kay-Shuttleworth herself wrote a small book, *The Ladder of Cowslips*, presenting in pleasant form to children the essentials of the theory of music. Their eldest daughter, Janet Elizabeth, was to translate two works from the original German.

Sir James's alleged pursuit of Charlotte as a person of literary renown should be viewed against the background of his existence. His friends and acquaintances, listed by his son, later Baron Shuttleworth, make up a truly formidable catalogue; his prestige in public life, his entry into a family able to trace its lineage back for centuries, and the highly successful careers of his brothers, hardly indicate a pressing need for further personal elevation to be attained by the reflected glory of Charlotte's lustre. Further distinction was to come to him with an honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law from Oxford. A more realistic interpretation may be entertained—that he was actuated by a sincere desire to help, support, and advance so vulnerable a personality of genius.

Some comments of a personal nature reveal significant shortcomings. Matthew Arnold considered that as an administrator he did not attract by person and manner, his temper was not smooth or genial and he left, on many, the impression of a managing and designing man, but he declared that by 'no other means than those adopted by him could a system of public education have been then introduced in this country'. Frank Smith refers to the intellectual strength which made him a formidable opponent so that he was called the 'able', the 'adroit' and the 'wily secretary, a person to be feared, to be watched and even to be suspected. His son observed that he did not suffer fools gladly and faults of conduct provoked his scathing comments. The impression conveyed by Charlotte and Mrs Gaskell is of an overbearing, over-attentive, directing and controlling individual with a tyrannous quality to his benevolence. Such tendencies may have been aggravated by frequent illness during the association, and possibly by his marital situation, since Lady Shuttleworth was to leave Gawthorpe in 1853, never to return.

Charlotte's reluctance towards self-revelation presents an obstacle to the interpretation of her character. David Cecil is struck by her extreme simplicity—that she did not see much but what she saw was wholly black or white with no half-lights; the past and future received little consideration and she lived only in the present. Muriel Spark

notes that she altered her tone according to whom she wrote. To Ellen Nussey, her life-long friend since school days, she gave few confidences and much gossip, her father received conventional respect, to Emily she was gay and confiding, and to those eminent in literature she displayed her intelligence while preserving an air of modesty; only by consideration of each facet as part of the whole can one obtain an integrated conception of her complex nature. Her letters regarding the Kay-Shuttleworths are hardly over-burdened with terms of appreciation of hospitality and kindness received. While Sir James's mode of approach marred his good intent, her obligation towards him is evident. In a period of great emotional distress he had afforded a change of scene and fresh acquaintances, including Mrs Gaskell, his friendship had extended to her father, and the practical aspect of his concern was apparent in offering her husband an improved living. The contrast of the timid, self-conscious, subjective, mystic Celt and the clear-minded, objective, energetic Saxon is emphasised by Frank Smith as the basis for her inadequate analysis of his character. His assured outlook with its absence of doubt, his unbending, vigorous approach and his worldly presence would have overawed her; she, whose existence had to such an extent been occupied with either the preparation for or the practice of teaching, may have resented the reversal of the role of teacher-disciple. To be fair to Charlotte, she remained conscious of her unresponsiveness, and apparently contrite, striving to be grateful for his 'gift of friendship', but she was to continue to be repelled by his dominating approach, unrelaxed and ill at ease in his presence, unable to imbue their relationship with a warm regard. Nevertheless, his flaws of character are hardly of so heinous a nature as to warrant the degree of derogation and belittlement to which he has been subjected in the biographical writings on Charlotte. As Madison Bates concludes: Charlotte and Mrs Gaskell and their admirers owe him a debt so substantial that it deserves full recognition.

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