

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.1 (Spring 2021)

Butcher, Emma. [*The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings*](#). Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 216 pp.

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<1>In the 'Preface' of *The Brontës and War*, Emma Butcher asks: 'Why are the men in the Brontë books so awful, so violent?' This question has intrigued and frustrated many Brontë readers and critics. Butcher's book provides a compelling response, locating the source of the Brontës' 'fascination with authority and violence' in their early writing and, specifically, in their extensive engagement with contemporary military culture (vii). When we think of the Brontës, war is rarely invoked. There are some overt references to the military dotted throughout Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's novels, such as in *Wuthering Heights* when Nelly Dean describes the newly returned Heathcliff's 'upright carriage' as suggesting 'the idea of his having been in the army' (2003 p. 96). And the story of Patrick Brontë bringing home the toy soldiers to Haworth in 1826 is well-known. Yet, as *The Brontës and War* shows, reading war in the early writings and later works of the Brontë siblings opens up rich, expansive critical possibilities beyond these more obvious examples.

<2>As the 'Preface' outlines, this is the 'first full-length book dedicated to a theme in the Brontë juvenilia' (vii), underlining the fact that there is still much more to say about the Brontës and their early work. Due to the comparative lack of surviving juvenilia by Anne and Emily Brontë, *The Brontës and War* focuses on the partnership between Charlotte and Branwell Brontë, who collaboratively and competitively created a sprawling, entangled epic similar in scope to *Game of Thrones*. Butcher's monograph will be of interest to those researching childhood and children's writings, war and its aftermath, play and imagination, military masculinities, the Brontës, and nineteenth-century studies more broadly. The book's aims are fourfold: to demonstrate the significance of the Brontës as child authors; to 'bring Branwell Brontë into the creative writing dynamic'; to reveal the 'collective power' of the Brontës' early works (19); and, ultimately, to position Charlotte and Branwell Brontë as 'important war commentators and historians', offering childhood perspectives on early nineteenth-century military cultures (19–20). The book successfully weaves these aims together to create a complex picture of the Brontë children's creative (and private) investment in war history and military culture. A highlight throughout is Butcher's playful use of language, especially the lively descriptions of the imaginative worlds conjured by the Brontë siblings, especially Charlotte and Branwell: the 'young mind occupies a twilight zone' (3); their 'war world is a meta-meta space' (6); 'a domestic "think tank"' (17); 'a private propaganda machine' (137). This inventive imagery nicely (and perhaps unconsciously) emulates the Brontës' own literary playfulness.

<3>Butcher arranges the book into seven chapters, taking us through the Brontës' military reading and literary influences; the significance of the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon Bonaparte's military celebrity on the Brontës' imaginations; the influence of the Napoleonic Wars; racism and colonial warfare; civil wars and 'localised violence' (169); and after the juvenilia. The introduction, subtitled 'Youth Writing War', provides a crash-course in the convolutions of the Brontë siblings' many sagas, from the Plays to Glass Town to Angria. This chapter also provides an overview of the methodology adopted, influenced by Laurie Langbauer's approach which reads social history through youthful writings. By focusing on juvenilia and giving voice to children's perspectives, an 'alternative critical model of history' emerges (6).

<4>Chapter Two, titled 'The Brontës' Military Reading', details the vast array of military fiction, biographies, and testimonials that influenced the early writings of Charlotte and Branwell Brontë. This is a thorough deep-dive into these military inspirations which lays the foundations for subsequent chapters. It is structured into four subsections: 'Classicism'; 'Late Renaissance to Early Restoration'; 'Romanticism'; and Sir Walter Scott receiving his own subheading due to the centrality of his influence on both the Brontës and their cultural milieu. This chapter showcases Butcher's adeptness in navigating the intricacies of the Brontë siblings' Angrian web, alongside a wealth of contemporary sources. It can be dense at times but the book's layered historicisation of the siblings' juvenilia is one of its main strengths, with its detailed historiography, use of periodicals and memoirs, and carefully researched insights into intertextual references.

<5>The next chapter, entitled 'Wellington and Napoleon', focuses on the importance of these two military celebrities and their famous rivalry in the development of Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's war sagas, as well as the competing representations of soldierhood and militaristic masculinity in their saga's central homosocial rivalry between Duke of Zamorna and Alexander Percy. In terms of the history of masculinity, the Wellington and Napoleon 'myth' (69), as Butcher calls it, is gripping, as it encompasses so many permutations and 'transmogrifications' (78), reflecting the shifts and contradictions embedded in conceptions of masculinity throughout the nineteenth century – all of which the Brontës tracked and reimagined in their war sagas. Chapter Four, 'The Napoleonic Wars', focuses on the impact of the wars themselves on the siblings' juvenilia. It positions Charlotte and Branwell as sensitive commentators on war trauma (before it was recognised medically) and on alcoholism which threatened national ideals of masculinity. Another highlight here is the discussion of Charlotte's use of military memoirs to domesticate warfare by reimagining home life during conflict. There is a tendency to gender reductively the differences between Branwell's bloodier tales and Charlotte's more domestic early stories, with the former read as boyish frenzy and the latter alluded to as a feminine preoccupation. Butcher does neither, instead giving both representations of war equal weight and noting how Charlotte's depictions of the 'household fort' consolidated the 'new humanisation of the soldier in the late-Georgian public mindset' (99).

<6>Chapter Five, entitled 'Colonial Warfare', grapples with Charlotte and Branwell's adoption of 'the racist discourse of the period' and 'violent representations of race in their later works' (127), their commitment to the dehumanisation of the colonised Ashanti people, and how their reimaginings of colonial wars became 'a cathartic outlet' for their 'xenophobic, controversial – although contemporary – outlooks' (143). The siblings' mixing of religious and militaristic

imagery anticipates the ‘muscular Christianity’ coined later in the period (141), but it also reveals the hollowness of Christian values within the juvenilia: no mercy or acceptance is extended to the colonised (and brutalised) Ashanti people. This has a disturbing bearing on the depictions of race within the Brontës’ later works, and raises intriguing questions regarding children and colonialism in the period. Chapter Six, ‘Civil War and Conflict’, turns its attention closer to home, exploring the civil rebellions and unrest that characterised both the siblings’ socio-economic moment and their writing, and encompassing discussions of the American War of 1812, the French Revolution, and the Peterloo Massacre. This chapter packs a lot in, which at times left me wanting more, particularly regarding the compelling final point that ‘discontented people’ can ‘mutate into the military itself’ (170).

<7>The conclusion, subtitled ‘After Angria’, looks beyond the juvenilia to the later work of both Charlotte and Branwell Brontë. This returns us to the opening question of the ‘Preface’, tracing the evolution of Charlotte’s masculine “heroes” in particular. While Charlotte’s artistic journey is familiar to many, Butcher also emphasises Branwell’s own literary achievements, specifically as the first Brontë sibling to publish his poetry. Branwell’s role in the Brontë legacy has often been contested. Following the release of Sally Wainwright’s *To Walk Invisible* (2016), which ends when Branwell dies in September 1848, several reviewers decried the re-centring of the “male heir” within – what they argued was – the Brontë sisters’ story (see Hila Shachar 2019 p. 89). *The Brontës and War* makes a measured case to temper this position by tracing the complexities of Branwell’s oeuvre, its impact on Charlotte’s development as an author (and vice versa), and Branwell’s own legacy of writing that ‘provides a significant socio-historical commentary on war in a recovering nation’ (177). This book places Branwell back in the picture by focusing on his work, not his personal life.

<8>There is much more to be said about how military masculinities inform and are represented in Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë’s later works, as well as other canonical (and non-canonical) contemporary authors; and – as Butcher notes – the examples provided in the final chapter ‘are but the foundations of future studies of how soldierhood is reworked and reimagined in later Brontë literature’ (180). While future work on the military in the Brontë novels is very welcome, *The Brontës and War* – as the first full-length monograph on a topic in the Brontë juvenilia – makes the strong case for the myriad directions of further substantial research on the Brontës’ early writings and, beyond this, the alternative histories seen through the eyes of nineteenth-century children.

Works Cited

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Pauline Nestor (London: Penguin, 2003).

Hila Shachar, *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).