

## Lies and the Brontës

In my new book I publish for the first time the only photograph of Charlotte Brontë's Mrs Jenkins, who found a school for Charlotte and Emily in Brussels, and as the wife of Rev. Evan looked after them. From Mrs Gaskell's famous *Life* we know of Charlotte's occasional vehemence at Jenkins gatherings and how she would gradually turn her back on people she was speaking to. But no biographer researched the Jenkins family – until now. No one even knew her first name: she was born Eliza Jay in 1797. She was my great-great-grandmother.

Seven years ago a photograph appeared on these pages: of myself and a relative of Constantin Heger in a Brussels restaurant. I was at the start of a quest for my ancestors and their connection with the Brontës – not just Eliza and Evan, but also Evan's brother David, a colleague of Patrick Brontë in West Yorkshire. I was horrified to discover fabrications in the biographies. The worst culprit was Winifred Gérin in 1967, but other biographers copy her. Gérin even made up dialogue and invented meetings. I demolish the lies in my book, published on Charlotte's 205th birthday.

Over the years I pieced together the lives of the family. When Charlotte wrote that important letter to Aunt Branwell in September 1841, desperately longing to study French in Brussels, she offered up Mrs Jenkins as giving her 'respectable protection'. Her encounter with Constantin Heger changed her life and her writing, but the Jenkins family were also important. Read *Villette* again – some of my family are there.

Evan was born on a derelict farm south of Aberystwyth in mid-Wales, where I am now doing a doctorate. Nearby was a unique school that took in poor farmers' sons, where he learnt English, Latin and Greek. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge University as a mature student and somehow decided to go to Brussels, to teach and pay off his student debts. He never left. This orphaned Welsh boy ended as chaplain to Victoria and Albert's dearest uncle, King Leopold I.

Eliza was not a clergyman's dull wife. Of Huguenot and Scottish descent, she was born in Rotterdam but spent her childhood with her wealthy family in Edinburgh. Bankruptcy led them to England, where she undoubtedly met the teenaged John Keats; further troubles forced the family to Brussels. Among the Jenkinse's Brussels friends were the man Jane Austen 'doated on' and the brother of Isabella Wordsworth née Curwen, who accused William Wordsworth's son of adultery. Charlotte's time in Brussels was vital for her development as a novelist, and it includes her time with the Jenkins family.

**Monica Kendall:** *Lies and the Brontës: The Quest for the Jenkins Family* (Bristol: SilverWood, 21 April 2021). Available from SilverWood, Waterstones and Amazon.