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Charlotte Bronte and her association with Banagher and some notes on the Bell family

Compiled by Michael Byrne

I have already referred to Banagher's Cuba Court (now demolished) in an article on Banagher's Royal School. The house is said to date from the 1730s and may have been constructed by one George Frazer, a former Governor of Cuba and perhaps to a design of Sir Edward Lovett Pearce. The house was unroofed in 1946 because like so many Irish houses it was ruined by the policy on rates at the time. If the abolition of rates in 1977 was disastrous for the National Debt and local government at least, it may have contributed to the saving of many Irish houses.



Towards the end of the eighteenth century Cuba was the home of Denis Bowes Daly. Bowes Daly was a prominent member of the local ascendancy. Prior to his death in 1821 he had leased Cuba Court to the Army Medical Board as of 1804 on a 61-year lease. The building was but little used as a hospital and the Medical Board was quite happy to give it up to the Commissioners of Education for the purpose of the Royal School. In 1819 the school had some forty pupils. The then headmaster, Thomas Morris, was succeeded by Revd Alan Bell in 1822. Bell purchased the headmastership from Morris for £1,000.

Alan Bell was at the time master of a classical school in Downpatrick and was the son of a County Antrim farmer. He graduated from T.C.D. in 1814. One of his assistant teachers in the late 1830s was Arthur Nicholls, a nephew and a past pupil of Banagher school. Alan Bell died in 1839 and was succeeded by Revd James Hamilton. After a succession of school masters James Adamson Bell, son of Revd Alan Bell, was appointed

in 1848 - at the age of 21. The later agreed, at an inquiry at Tullamore in 1855, that he had not the experience at the time to run the establishment. He graduated from T.C.D. with a B.A. in 1847 and in 1852 became a clergyman. The school improved under his management and had 36 pupils in 1852.

Arthur Bell Nicholls

Arthur Bell Nicholls was born of Scottish parents in County Antrim in 1818. He was orphaned early and subsequently brought up by his headmaster uncle in Banagher. He graduated from T.C.D. in 1844 and became curate of Haworth in 1845. It was at Haworth in the West Riding of Yorkshire that he met Charlotte Bronte, daughter of Patrick Bronte, a clergyman at Haworth. Charlotte was born in 1816 and at 31 published an extremely successful novel, *Jane Eyre*. Her sister, Emily, had earlier published *Wuthering Heights*. Bell was two years younger than Charlotte and was said to be very serious, almost grave, reserved religious young man of strong convictions - highly conscientious in the performance of his parish duties and narrow in his ideas. Phyllis Bently in her book *The Brontes and their World* described the marriage proposal and acceptance as follows:

‘For some time Charlotte had been uneasily aware of constraint and awkwardness in Nicholl's behaviour in her presence, and when one evening in December 1852, just after the disappointing reception of *Villette* by George Smith, Nicholls on leaving Mr. Bronte's study tapped on the parlour door, she guessed in a flash what was coming. But she had not realized how strong his feelings for her were. Pale, shaking from head to foot, speaking with difficulty in a low but vehement tone, Nicholls made her understand what this declaration meant to him. She asked if he had spoken to Mr. Bronte; he said, he dared not. She half led, half pushed him from the room, promising him an answer on the morrow, then went immediately to her father with news of the proposal. Mr. Bronte was furious. Charlotte's own accounts of this courtship and eventual engagement, given in her letters to Ellen Nussey as it went along, could not be bettered in the finest novel in the world. Mr. Bronte's jealous fury, expressing itself as snobbish resentment - a curate with £100 a year marry his famous daughter! Mr. Nicholl's stubborn passion, which almost unseated his reason - he would not eat or drink; stayed shut up in his lodgings at the Browns' (though he still took poor old Flossy out for walks); broke down in the Communion Service, while the village women sobbed around; was rude to a visiting Bishop; resigned his Haworth curacy and agreed to remain till Mr. Bronte found another curate; volunteered as a missionary to Australia but finally took a curacy at Kirk Smeaton, in the West Riding itself. Charlotte, exasperated by Nicholl's lack of the qualities she desired in a husband, infuriated by her father's ignoble objections to the match, conscious of the absence of alternatives. The villagers, torn between opposing parties - some say they would like to shoot Mr. Nicholls, but they gave him a gold watch as a parting present. What a tragic drama - or a roaring comedy, depending on its result. Love, coupled with Charlotte's loneliness and Mr. Bronte's dissatisfaction with his new curate, Mr. De Renzi, triumphed.

The marriage took place at Haworth on 29 June, 1854, just 140 years ago. The honeymoon was in Ireland and if Bell was a poor unknown curate in England - in Banagher he was a member of a respectable family. In a letter quoted by Mrs. Gaskell in her book *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, Charlotte wrote:

"My dear husband, too, appears in a new light in his own country. More than once I have had deep pleasure in hearing his praises on all sides. Some of the old servants and followers of the family tell me I am a most fortunate person; for that I have got one of the best gentlemen in the country I trust I feel thankful to God for having enabled me to make what seems a right choice; and I pray to be enabled to repay as I ought the affectionate devotion of a truthful, honourable man."

She noted of the school in Cuba House where she stayed while in Banagher: "It is very large and looks externally like a gentleman's country seat - within most of the rooms are lofty and spacious, and some - the drawing room, dining room &c handsomely and commodiously furnished. The passages look desolate and bare - our bedroom, a great room of the ground floor, would have looked gloomy when we were shown into it but for the turf fire that was burning in the wide old chimney." Mrs. Bentley felt in her biography that it was difficult to judge whether Charlotte was happy in her marriage. "We've been so happy," she murmured to her husband, and she spoke warmly of his care and affectionate company when she was ill. But to Ellen she wrote: 'It is a solemn and strange and perilous thing for a woman to become a wife.' At least she was no longer lonely, but always occupied, always needed; she had a parish and two men to care for - 'my time is not my own now' - and knew the reality of sex.

In January 1855 Charlotte discovered she was pregnant. it was accompanied by severe illness and she died on 31 March 1855 probably killed by the same illness - consumption - that had killed her two sisters and her brother. The marriage was of short duration - no more than nine months. As to Mr. Nicholls he "remained faithfully with Mr. Bronte in Haworth for the six long years which remained of the old man's life. He was a somewhat stern guardian of the bedridden invalid Mr. Bronte rapidly became, and allowed himself a strong dislike to references to his wife's fame, refusing, for example to baptize infants with the names of any of the Bronte family. Mr. Bronte, learning this, once baptized an infant in his bedroom from a water jug - a sufficient indication of the terms on which the two men stood. When Mr. Bronte died in 1861 Mr. Nicholls returned to Banagher, taking with him his wife's portrait, her wedding dress (of which a copy has been made), some of Charlotte's letters and other mementoes, including Mr. Bronte's dog Plato and Martha Brown. He made a happy second marriage with his cousin, but did not forget Charlotte. Forty years later, when the critic Clement Shorter prepared to write *Charlotte Bronte and Her Circle*, he found at Banagher among other cherished relics two diary notes of Emily and Anne, in a tin box, and some of the minute childhood writings wrapped in newspaper at the bottom of a drawer.

The following report of the pictures he brought from Haworth appeared in 1914 in a local newspaper:

Banagher and Valuable Pictures

The Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery have purchased and placed in Room XXXVII a group and a single portrait of considerable personal value. The group represents the portraits of Charlotte Bronte and her two sisters Emily and "dear", gentle Anne"; the single image is believed to be a long lost portrait of Emily, both pictures from the brush of the brother, Branwell, who was born a year later than Charlotte. The importance of the discovery is indicated also by the reference of the London daily papers. The *Morning Post*, from which the above extract is taken, says further:- "There seems to have been another group of the three sisters by Branwell. Mr. A. B. Nicholls took the picture with him to Ireland, and not caring much for the portraits of his wife, Charlotte, and Ann he cut them out of the canvas and destroyed them. He retained the portrait of Emily, however, and gave it Martha Brown, the Brontes servant, on one of her visits to Ireland. Martha took it back with her to Haworth, and from that date the fragment disappeared until recently rediscovered in the possession of the widow of Mr. Nicholls, and from her acquired for the National Portrait Gallery.

In order to ascertain particulars the editor of the *King's Co. Chronicle* communicated with the Revd. J.J. Sherrard, B.D., Banagher, who, with 'his well-known promptitude' replied on 7th March -

"The Rev. A. B. Nicholls, left an orphan at six, was practically adopted by Rev.A. Bell, Headmaster of Cuba School, which Mr. N. who was a relative, attended as a boy. He returned to Banagher after the death of Rev. P. Bronte, to whom he was curate in Yorkshire, and married Miss Bell, daughter of Rev. A. Bell. The pictures, two in number - one of the three sisters and one of Emily, were found wrapped in brown paper in a wardrobe a few weeks ago in the Hill House, Banagher, by Mrs. Nicholls, who sent them to Mr. Smith, of Smith and Elder, Publishers of Charlotte Bronte's books, and were sold through him to the National Gallery. The enclosed cutting (from the *Morning Post*) is wrong in stating the picture given to Martha Brown was among these. It was not and is believed to be lost.

Subsequent to the publication of the above there appeared in the *Morning Post* a letter from James J. Sherrard of Banagher a letter dated March 8, 1914.

" Sir,

I have received a copy of the "Morning Post" containing an article animadverting on some information I had recently forwarded to the *King's County Chronicle* with reference to the above. I may state that your account of the discovery, &c., of the pictures - though not quite correct- was nearer the truth than any of the accounts I read in other newspapers. The facts are as follows: The pictures sent by Mrs. Nicholls to the National Gallery have been at The Hill House, Banagher, ever since they were brought there by the late Rev. A. B. Nicholls. The single one of Emily - cut out of a large portrait containing three sisters - was preserved by Mr. Nicholls. The rest of picture, with the portraits of his wife Charlotte and Anne, was handed to Martha Brown - who lived at The Hill House for upwards of eight years - not for preservation, but to be destroyed, and it is believed it was destroyed by her. I need not go into all the reasons for this action on the part of Mr. Nicholls. You see, therefore, that I was correct in saying that the picture of Emily forwarded to the National Gallery was never in Martha Brown's possession, though I was mistaken in implying that Mr. Nicholls had ever given any portrait to Martha Brown. I have the above facts on the best living authority. Yours &c."

James J. Sherrard.
Banagher, March 18.



Charlotte Bronte and the Bell Family

Charlotte died in 1855 and her husband at Banagher in 1906. He had married his cousin and spent the last 45 years of his life there. Their writings place the three Bronte sisters on the highest eminence. Today their novels are read with the same avidity as marked their first publication, and promise to be perpetual. Charlotte's , *Jane Eyre*, a romantic love story, met the public eye in 1847, and immediately had an immense circulation, which greatly relieved the straightened circumstances of the family, besides winning lasting fame for its author. Her two other principal works of fiction are known by the names *Shirley* and *Villette*, the former a tragedy appearing two years after the first, and at

which time her brother and two sisters were dead. In both stories nearly all the people appear as living pictures of relatives and neighbours, and both secured a circulation surpassing expectation. Emily's undying fame is due to her novel, *Wuthering Heights*, which saw the light in 1847, but she was not destined to reap the reward of her success as she expired in the course of another brief year, aged 30. The sister Anne's novel, *Agnes Grey*, afforded another evidence of the almost evenly divided genius of the three immortal sisters.

Cuba School, Banagher, was one of the Royal educational institutions in Ireland, and ceased as such about 40 years ago, its last master under the endowment having been Mr. Joyce, who afterwards became a medical doctor. The school turned out not a few who rose to distinction in after life, one of these having been the late Sir William, father of Oscar Wilde.

The Revd James Adamson Bell, the son of Dr. Alan Bell, cousin and brother-in-law to A. B. Nicholls and headmaster at the school when Nicholls and Charlotte Bronte stayed there, died in 1891. His death was reported as follows:

Death of The Rev. J. A. Bell

Among the victims of the epidemic [Russian Influenza] is one who not very long ago was a somewhat conspicuous figure in the Irish Church Synod. The Rev. James Adamson Bell died on Thursday, 28th May, 1891, at his residence at Brixton Hill, of the effects of an attack of influenza, complicated by pneumonia and pleurisy. Mr. Bell became a scholar of Trinity College in 1844. Shortly after taking his degree, and being ordained, he was appointed Head Master of the Royal School at Banagher, of which his father had been Head Master. Subsequently he was made a rector of Ballymore, Westmeath, in which incumbency he was at the disestablishment of the Irish Church. Some years after he exchanged to Banagher, the place of his birth and his early life. About 1882 he travelled in the United States and Canada on deputation from the Irish Society. His lectures and sermons attracted much attention in America, and he was a distinguished preacher. His sermons on behalf of the Jews were numerous and eloquent. He was brother of the Rev. Dr. Bell who was elected to the Bishopric of Meath by the requisite majority of the Synod, but the Episcopal Bench thought fit to chose the present Bishop, Dr. Reichel, on account of the latter's profound erudition as a Hebrew and Greek scholar. The funeral of the deceased clergyman took place at Banagher on the arrival of the 12 train from Dublin on Tuesday, and a large number of old parishioners and other friends joined in paying the last tribute of respect by their presence at the funeral. The funeral service of the Church of Ireland was read by the present Incumbent, the Rev. Mr. Sherrard."

In the same year is noted the death of Rev. Canon Joseph S. Bell and is interesting for the detail provided.

Burial of The Rev. Canon Bell

The train arriving at Banagher at 5.15 p.m. on Monday [December, 1891] brought from Dublin the remains of the Rev. Canon Joseph S. Bell, L L D, whose lamented death occurred in Dublin after an illness extending over some months. At the station a considerable number of the townspeople who revered the deceased and his family assembled to pay their last tribute to one who was connected by many local ties to his native place, where years ago he spent some part of his useful and faithful ministerial life, and where his venerable mother and other relatives still reside. His two sons, Mr. Arthur Bell and Mr. Richard Bell travelled by the same train and on its arrival were met by their uncle, Rev. A.B. Nicholls of Banagher [Charlotte's husband] and other friends. Although the weather was most inclement a large cortege was formed and the remains conveyed in a hearse provided by Mr. M. McIntyre, to the pretty parish church at the top of the town. The coffin was placed on a stand near the Communion rails awaiting the solemn service of the Church of Ireland. The beautiful edifice was lighted with lamps and nearly all the seats were

occupied when the Rev. J. J. Sherrard, the Vicar, read the first part of the service which was all the more impressive by being conducted at night. The coffin remained there until one o'clock next day when it was deposited in the family grave, the officiating clergyman being the Rev. Duncan J. Brownlow, a personal friend who came down specially.

The remains were encased in a suite of coffins, the outer being of polished oak, having massive brass mountings beautifully chased and having on its lid, a shield bearing the inscription:-

REV. JOSEPH S. BELL, Died 10th December, 1891, Aged 60 Years.

The wreaths were numerous but the cards attached to some of the best were lost in transit. Amongst those recognised were a large wreath-shaped tribute composed of white lillies, chrysanthemums, half blown tea roses and maiden-hair fern sent by former parishioners at Kells. The inscription was "In memory of a faithful ministry" written on a card bearing a photographic view of the Kells Church. Another consisting chiefly of choice white flowers came "In loving memory from Ella and Alan Bell" and a further one of exquisite design was inscribed "In loving memory from Hope F. Bell, Gifford." The remainder were sent by his Grace the Archbishop of Dublin, Lady and Miss Deane; Rear-Admiral Philip H. And Miss Columb, London; Rev. A.B. Nicholls, Colonel and Mrs. Cooke, Derby, Colonel and Miss Adamson, Dublin; Rev. Canon Leet, Dr. and Mrs. Ringwood, Rev. R.L. and Mrs. Webster, Mr. G. Howard Montgomery, Major and Mrs. Lloyd, Miss Morris read, Rev. Duncan and Mrs. Brownlow, Miss Annesley, Rev. B.C. and Mrs. Davidson-Honston, Mrs. Jennings Bradley and Miss Tyrrell, Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Healy, Kells Rectory, formerly of Frankford; Mr. Charles F. Newland, and Mrs. Robertson.

The Chief mourners were - Mr. Richard C. Bell, and Mr. Arthur Bell (sons); Mr. Alan Bell, D.I., R.I.C., Mullingar, nephew [about whom there is more below]; Mr. Charles F. Newland, D.I., R.I.C., Kells, (son-in-law), and Rev. A.B. Nicholls, M.A. Banagher, (brother-in-law). Amongst others present were - Rear Admiral Philip H. Columb, London; Colonel Cooke, Derby; Colonel Adamson, Dublin; Dean Butson, Rev. S. Cooney, Moystown; Rev. J. Forde, Eyrecourt; Rev. R.S.D. Campbell, Athlone; Major Armstrong, J.P., Capt. Burdett, J.P.; Mr. James Armstrong, Captain Wheeler, Dr. Kerane, Mr. James Enraght, J.P.; Mr. R. Purefoy, Mr. F. de Waller, J.P., Mr. T.W. Campion, Mr. Patrick Hynes, Mr. Kenny, etc.

Many circumstances combined to cause the deepest sorrow in Banagher. While from 1866 to 1872 Canon Bell was connected with that parish he was beloved by the people. His kindness and benevolence knew no bounds, and extended to all who needed his aid in times of affliction or distress. But he had other claims to the respect that was so markedly paid to his memory by all classes during his obsequies. He belonged to an old and respected family, and his brothers, Arthur and William, Alan and James Adamson, were all like himself. He was last of the five sons of his aged mother, a nonogenarian, who has survived them all, and for whom the tenderest sympathy is felt. It is only about six months ago that the Rev. James Adamson Bell, late Vicar of Banagher, who was also a most gifted clergyman, succumbed to Russian influenza, and few thought at that time that the beloved brother whose funeral we now record, would so quickly follow him.

On Monday the remains were removed from his late residence, Harcourt Street, Dublin, to St. Patrick's Cathedral, where a special choral funeral service was conducted. The coffin, which was covered with wreaths of immortelles, having been borne into the aisle in the nave, the choir and cathedral clergy walked in procession in front of it to the chancel, singing the hymn "Jesus, lover of my soul." The first portion of the service was sung to Morley's setting, and the psalms were chanted to Cosneidy's setting in E minor, and Beethoven's in C minor. the dean of the Chapel Royal read the lesson, and the closing portion of the service was intoned by Rev. Mr. Webster.

The Dean of the chapel Royal (Dr. Dickenson) delivered a brief address, after the Rev. R. G. M. Webster, Succentor, had intoned the closing portion of the service. He said he would not wound the memory of their dear brother by speaking any studied words of eulogy, and neither would he wound his own memories of the patience and Christian humility with which he had borne his trial by speaking of their friend if he were conscious again. They knew what his life had been. He had lived the life of a parish pastor in that and other dioceses, and wherever he had worked he had left his mark for good behind him, and of this he would have many witnesses hereafter before the Throne of God. They knew that his life had not been

unmixed with disappointment, but few knew that as well as he (the Dean) did the chivalrous way and with what high sense of honour of a Christian gentleman he adapted himself to the new duties which fell upon him a few years ago. He was now comforted, after a long period of suffering, but the pain was not unmixed with thankfulness to God; for nothing could have been more touching than the saintly spirit with which he bore his cross.

Pulpit references were made on Sunday at the afternoon service in St. Patrick's Cathedral reference was made to the sad event in feeling terms by the Rev. Canon Tottenham, Canon in Residence, who preached. The prebendal stall, formerly occupied by Canon Bell, was draped in black.

The parish church of Kells, in which the deceased clergyman had laboured for more than fifteen years, was also draped, and a sermon appropriate to the occasion was preached by the Rector, the Rev. Dr. Healy, in which the preacher stated that one of the last things spoken by Canon Bell before his death was that he had the people of Kells in his thoughts.

To review, however, briefly the late Canon's life would be in effect to relate to leading events in the Church, in which he was a leading light. Twenty-six years ago he was ordained to the curacy of Aughrim, and a year after he was appointed deputation secretary for the Irish Society. In this position he laboured with conspicuous ability for three years, subsequently holding amongst other cures the incumbencies of Killiney and Kells. In 1885 he was unanimously elected Canon of St. Patrick's, and in 1887 assistant secretary of the Association for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. It may be mentioned as indicative of the high position that he held in the Church that he was elected Bishop of Meath with a numerical majority, but not the essential two thirds, and the bench of Bishops selected his senior the Dean. He was a ripe scholar, and, at the several examinations in T.C.D. where he took his L.L.D degrees he was awarded honors."



Murder of Alan Bell

A curious sidelight on the Bell family story was the murder of Alan Bell, [a nephew of Canon Bell and a grandson of Dr. Alan Bell, headmaster to the school in the 1830s] in 1920 during the Anglo-Irish war. Alan Bell was a nephew of the Rev. Canon Joseph S. Bell who died in 1891 and whose obituary is noted above. Robert Kee in *The Green Flag* tells the story:

A Resident Magistrate of some experience, named Alan Bell, an Irishman of sixty-two from King's County, who as a young man in the RIC had helped investigate the hidden workings of the Land League, was appointed to try to locate the growing Republican Loan in the labyrinth of 'cover' bank accounts in which Collins had concealed it. Travelling to his office just after 9.a.m. on a Dublin tram, reading his newspaper, Bell suddenly found two young men standing beside him as the tram stopped at a routine halt. 'Come on, Mr. Bell', said one of them. 'Your time has come.' He was so aghast tht he appeared unable to do or say anything. There was a moment of terrible suspense and anxiety in the crowded tram as everyone looked at each other in bewilderment. Nobody said a word. Then one of the young men spoke again: 'Ah, come on,' he said, and he and his companion with the aid of some other young men who came down from upstairs forced Bell out of the tram and along the pavement to where, while he stood erect and apparently unperturbed, they shot him dead. His killers, who were undisguised and were described as 'respectable young men', walked calmly away in a group and dispersed after a hundred yards or so. Of two passengers who came forward to try to do something for Bell, one had the use of only one arm. They called out, 'Is

there nobody to help us?' But nobody dared come forward. The Irish half of the Republican Loan was successfully closed later that year at £357,000.

Hill House where Nicholls spent so many years was sold to Major Bell in 1919. He died in 1944 and his wife inherited the property. Florence Bell died in 1959. It is now once again open to visitors who can enjoy its restored appearance and sense the history of a place connected in a curious way with the Bronte family.