



WRITERSWORLD Newsletter - Issue No. 75

Letters show Bronte feared libel action over Jane Eyre.

By Paul Stokes: First published Daily Telegraph 25/05/2006

Charlotte Bronte had to write an apology to avoid a possible libel action over her depiction of a school in Jane Eyre, according to letters that have just come to light.

The previously unknown wrangle relates to the book's description of harsh conditions at Lowood School, which the author based on her experiences at the Clergy Daughters' School, in Cowan Bridge, Lancashire.

She also used its founder and headmaster, Rev William Carus-Wilson, as the inspiration for Mr Brocklehurst, Lowood's autocratic head.

The letters suggest that Mr Carus-Wilson took exception to the portrayal of the school and himself when the book was published in 1847, and he sought legal advice.

It appears that court action was only avoided when Bronte wrote an apology, pointing out that she had exaggerated the details.

The story of the dispute is disclosed in three letters by Mr Carus-Wilson's grandson, Edward Carus-Wilson, which have been put up for auction by an anonymous London book dealer and are due to be sold at Ludlow racecourse on June 21.

The letters were written in 1912 when Mr Carus-Wilson sold the manuscript of Bronte's retraction to an autograph collector to pay for his child's medical treatment. Richard Westwood-Brookes, a documents expert for the auctioneers Mullock Madeley, in Shropshire, who decided to investigate the contents of the letters further, said: "The Bronte experts at the Parsonage Museum in Haworth were unaware of any kerfuffle involving Jane Eyre at the time it was published."

In one of the letters, Edward Carus-Wilson says: "He [his grandfather] however wrote to Charlotte Bronte to remonstrate with her and the result was that she wrote the sketch that I have in my possession, retracting a good deal of what she had formerly written about the school in Jane Eyre." The author's apology has since been lost.

Mr Westwood-Brookes said: "It is the most tantalising mystery. Somewhere, in somebody's attic, there may well be a manuscript of Charlotte Bronte's retracting an essential passage of Jane Eyre."

The letters are expected to sell for up to £100.....**THE END**

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