

Chapter Two: Heathcliff Connection

We would probably never have heard about Richard Sutton had it not been for Kim Lyon and, subsequently, academic Christopher Heywood, both of whom published works in the 1980s.ⁱ

We first learn about Richard Sutton being a potential role model for Heathcliff in an article entitled ‘Real-life story behind “Wuthering Heights,”’ published in *The Observer*, 30th September 1984 by journalists Robert Low and David Boulton. They conclude,

The real-life model for Heathcliff, one of the most enigmatic and fascinating characters in English fiction, may have been uncovered, thanks to the diligent research of an amateur historian. If Mrs Kim Lyon’s theory is correct, Emily Bronte’s stormy creation in ‘Wuthering Heights’ was based on one Richard Sutton (1782-1851) whose life in the Cumbrian village of Dent mirrors that of Heathcliff to an uncanny degree....’

Before we look at what Lyon and Heywood have to say it is worth noting the ‘uncanny’ similarities between *Wuthering Heights*, and to a lesser degree, *Jane Eyre*, and the Richard Sutton story.

Both Heathcliff and Richard Sutton are taken in by wealthy farmers. They become rich and eventually own the isolated farm house on the hill top as well as the manor house in the valley below; both chose to live in the farm house whilst renting out the manor house.ⁱⁱ Whilst dressing like gentlemen, their manner and speech made it clear they were not.

Heathcliff, Richard Sutton (and Jane Eyre) are orphans.ⁱⁱⁱ All three come into money: we do not know where Heathcliff gets his money from whilst Jane inherits hers from her uncle John in Madeira and Richard Sutton inherits his from Ann Sill who had inherited her wealth from her uncle John in Jamaica. All three stories are set in wild, secluded, moorland.

There are further similarities with William Howitt's telling of the scandal in *The Rural History of England: The Prologue to Wuthering Heights* begins with Lockwood visiting his landlord, the story then goes back 30 years to when Heathcliff was taken in by Mr. Earnshaw. This is strikingly similar to the Richard Sutton story as told by William Howitt who also switches in time between when they visited West House in the present to 40 years earlier when Richard was first taken in by the Sills.^{iv}

Jane Eyre and Heathcliff are treated with contempt by their adopted families; according to William Howitt, Richard Sutton is similarly treated by the Sills.

Lockwood finds out more about the story from Heathcliff's housekeeper Nelly Dean; William Howitt finds out more about Richard Sutton from Ann Sill's confidential servant. Lockwood describes how Heathcliff's "black eyes" withdrew suspiciously under his brows at his approach; Howitt describes Richard Sutton: "***nor had we advanced far from the place, when the man himself came hurrying along and went past us with very Black and inquisitive looks.***"

Howitt paints a picture of Richard Sutton with a 'base' nature who behaved so badly he was banned from seeing Ann Sill; Heathcliff is similarly endowed with a base nature.

There is even a corrupt solicitor: Mr. Green, Edgar Linton's solicitor in *Wuthering Heights*, was meant to have changed Edgar's will to prevent Heathcliff acquiring the Grange but he changes sides resulting in Heathcliff inheriting it. William Howitt implies that Ann Sill's solicitor should have changed her will to exclude Richard Sutton but this did not happen, resulting in Richard inheriting Rigg End and ultimately West House.

The parallels end there but they are striking enough to make it plausible the Brontë sisters were aware of the Richard Sutton story, as portrayed by William Howitt, and they used it, especially Emily, for inspiration.

Kim Lyon

Kim Lyon and her family moved to Whernside Manor (previously known as West House) in the 1960's. She was curious to find out more about the manor house and, whilst conducting research, discovered the similarities between the Richard Sutton story and *Wuthering Heights*. She wrote a story called "Whernside Manor – A House with a Tale to Tell," which was published in *The Dalesman's Yorkshire Annual*, 1979. It is essentially a tale about West House and its owners with an emphasis on ghost stories and includes the story of Richard Sutton but no mention is made of *Wuthering Heights*.

Christopher Heywood, an English lecturer at Sheffield University with an interest in the Brontë sisters, read the story and went to meet Kim Lyon to discuss her findings, it seems Kim Lyon was convinced Richard Sutton was the role model for Heathcliff. Heywood went on to conduct further, academic, research which supported Kim Lyon's theory.

The Dentdale Brontë Trail

Kim Lyon self-published a 28-page booklet, *The Dentdale Brontë Trail*, in 1985. Discussing her research, Lyon says,

I did not drive in those days, there were no computers and I didn't even have a tape recorder! I gleaned a lot of knowledge about the Sills in the old oral story telling way. I spoke to 90 year olds whose grandparents were within living memory of the Sills and their nefarious dealings. I was interested in the history of West House where we lived. I wrote everything down carefully. The little research I did in the Kendal archives and Dent registers bound the stories together... I was researching purely to tie the Dent story to Cathy and Heathcliff.^v

Notwithstanding the similarities already identified between *Wuthering Heights* and the Richard Sutton story, Lyon's evidence, as it appears in *The Dentdale Brontë Trail*, comes from William Howitt's *The Rural Life of England*; interviews with individuals in Dent based on events that happened 140 years earlier; and a few sources from Kendal archives. Modern day access to the internet and archives has proven many of Lyon's assertions to be incorrect.

The Dentdale Brontë Trail is written in a similar style to that of William Howitt. Much of what Lyon says in her booklet has been refuted by local historian Diane Elphick.^{vi} Here are just a few examples revealing how Lyon attempts to link up the Richard Sutton story with *Wuthering Heights*.

Lyon asserts Richard Sutton was adopted by Edmund Sill, "***It is not known the year in which his adoption occurred.***" In fact, there is no evidence Richard Sutton was adopted by the Sill family, only that he was taken in as a servant.

In her quest to link Heathcliff and Richard Sutton, Lyon expands on Richard's so-called 'base' nature by suggesting he had either seduced or raped his own wife's sister:

After the death of John Sill, brother to Ann, Sutton married an Eleanor Constantine. The witness to the marriage was James Sill. This was in 1804, and a succession of offspring appeared. On May 3rd 1829, another Richard Sutton was born, but the mother was not Eleanor, it was Betty Constantine. A second bastard son was born to Betty in 1834. Betty resided at Rigg End, along with the Suttons and her kin Eleanor. There seemed to be no change to the status quo after Richard's seduction of Betty, who must have been related to his own wife. This seduction/rape or whatever it was cannot have pleased Ann Sill too much. Neither did Heathcliff's seduction of 'Isabella' please 'Catherine'.

Records show that Betty Constantine died when she was 17 years old so it is impossible she was the mother of the two illegitimate children; in fact, they were born to Betty Sutton, Richard and Ellen Sutton's daughter.

Lyon says the Constantine family were not local and that Constantine was a Jamaican name. Research shows the Constantine family were from Hawes and the name was common in that area. Lyon also asserts Eleanor Constantine was 30 years old when she married Richard Sutton in 1804, whereas she was actually 19, two years younger than Richard.^{vii}

Despite her errors we do have Kim Lyon to thank for bringing to light the link between the Richard Sutton story and Heathcliff. As she stated with regard to her publication,

If it did nothing else it certainly stirred up a storm...I wasn't looking for glory. Goodness knows I have had plenty of scorn poured on me. However, it made lots of people interested and the research goes on.^{viii}

Christopher Heywood

After conducting his own research Christopher Heywood published several academic articles.^{ix} He expands on these as editor of the Broadview publication of *Wuthering Heights* (2001). Heywood convincingly argues Emily Brontë took her inspiration for the first part of *Wuthering Heights* from the story of the Sills and Richard Sutton.

There are three elements to his thesis: the first is that the landscape described in *Wuthering Heights*, and referred to in the 1850 preface written by Emily's sister Charlotte, does not match the landscape around Haworth. Although the vicarage was on the edge of the moors, Haworth, at that time, was a small town with mills and close to an even bigger mill town, Keighley. Heywood suggests,

The scenery around Ingleborough, Thornton in Lonsdale, Whernside, Kingsdale, and Greygareth, three miles south of Cowan Bridge, forms a landscape which extends to Dentedale. It provides a starting point for a reconstruction of the genesis of the Brontë novels.^x

The Brontë sisters would have seen this, he argues, during the coach drive from Keighley to Cowan Bridge when they attended school there.

The second element concerns access to information about the three main families on which, he argues, Emily Brontë based her novel. The Lintons, he suggests, are based on the Mason family, the Earnshaws on the Sill family and the

Heathcliffs on the Sutton family. The Mason family were known in Dent as far back as the time of Henry VIII; they owned a significant amount of property in the area, including the Westhouses estate which was bought by the Sills and later by Richard Sutton.

Heywood points out that in her preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë,

...hinted that the Lintons, the Heathcliffs and the Earnshaws had originals in the 'secret annals' of a 'rude vicinage' among the 'outlying hills and hamlets of the West Riding of Yorkshire.'

At that point in history, Dent was in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Heywood agrees the key outlines of William Howitt's investigations are preserved in *Wuthering Heights*^{xi} but makes it clear he believes Howitt's version of the Sill/Sutton story to be garbled and biased because of Howitt's informant and argues the Brontë sisters had access to more accurate information via links to *"the Coleridges, the Wordsworths, and others of the Southey circle."*^{xii} Certainly, these authors had links with the area: Coleridge used to teach at Sedbergh grammar school and Wordsworth was Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland; Southey also lived in the Lake District and was a friend of William Westall who was married to Adam Sedwick's sister, Ann. Heywood concludes,

The novels draw on facets of the Sill family's Dentdale estate, using its names, relationships, legal problems, and landscape with persistent accuracy. In so doing, the Brontë sisters displayed a mastery of the family histories which was not achieved by another writer, William Howitt, who first investigated the estate in his book of 1838, The Rural Life of England.^{xiii}

The third element is that the Brontë sisters' novels included hidden themes regarding the abolition of slavery. Both the Mason and Sill family, and by default the Sutton family (and the other beneficiaries of Ann Sill's will including, ironically, Adam Sedgwick, an abolitionist), had links to the slave trade.

Heywood suggests the "*specific traces of African origin which characterize Heathcliff*" relates to the theme of slavery in *Wuthering Heights* whilst at the same time distinguishing "*the literary figure from the known characteristics of Richard Sutton*"^{xiv} who was still alive when the novel was published.

Whilst stating Kim Lyon, "*identified beyond reasonable doubt the historical figures who provided the Dales story material in the first part of WH,*"^{xv} Heywood significantly expands links between the Richard Sutton story and *Wuthering Heights* and so gives academic credence to the connection.

A Regular Black, The Hidden Wuthering Heights

Released in 2009, *A Regular Black, The Hidden Wuthering Heights*, directed by Adam Low,^{xvi} takes up the theme of Heathcliff being Black and has been shown in English Departments at universities around the world as well as at the Brontë Society meeting in Haworth on 10th June 2012. This documentary suggests the Sill story and Richard Sutton form the basis for Heathcliff and *Wuthering Heights*. It includes interviews with Kim Lyon and Elaine Johnson, owner of Whernside Manor when the film was made.

In the film Kim Lyon repeats many of the assertions she made in her booklet. She says the thing that clinched it for her was that Richard Sutton was reputedly in love with the

daughter of the house, Ann Sill, adding, the relationship was never consummated as the family would have been against her marrying a Black man which, she thought, Richard Sutton probably was: ***“I don’t think he was a very nice man or else he was twisted in his youth by the Sills who were a very cruel family.”***

It is unlikely Richard Sutton was Black or dual heritage. He was born in Thornton in Lonsdale to a local farmer and his wife. If he had been Black it is likely William Howitt would have referred to this and the scandal would have been even bigger.^{xvii}

Elaine Johnson says local gossip suggested there were about 30 slaves at West House running the huge estate and the fact that the Sills owned slaves was proven by the advert about a runaway slave. Elphick suggests, on economic grounds alone, it would have been easier and cheaper to use locals. Johnson says the people of Dent are ashamed of the history of area, of the Sills dealing in slavery, and are reluctant to talk about it but admitted there were Black people in the village. She asserts a photograph of the local Band of Hope clearly includes a Black man. After the screening at the Brontë Society a member of the audience, from Dent, said the photograph used in the film was not Dent Band of Hope but from elsewhere.^{xviii}

In her 2003 article for the *Sedbergh Historian*^{xix} Elphick not only challenges the historical inaccuracies made by Lyon, but also gives an overview of the Suttons from when they arrived in Dentdale up to Richard Sutton’s death in 1851.^{xx} This begs the question whether the researchers for the film were aware of her article?

William and Mary Howitt

How likely is it that the Brontë sisters read *The Rural Life of England*? The three main sources of books they had access to were those held at Ponden Hall, Keighley Mechanics Institute, and at the Parsonage. An examination of the lists held at the Parsonage Library for all three sources reveals none of them had copies of *The Rural Life of England*. This does not mean to say there might not have been a copy at the Parsonage because there is no record of all of the books kept there. It is also possible a copy might have been available at Law Hill School in Halifax where Emily taught for a short while in 1838.

Keighley Mechanics did have a copy of Mary Howitt's *Hope On! Hope Ever!* Published in 1845, it is loosely based on events which happened in Dent. Interestingly, the novel switches between different periods of Andrew Law's life, going from his childhood, skipping thirty years to when he is an adult then onto his son's story; his son becomes an orphan and is treated badly by his adopted family – sound familiar? There are even quotes in local dialect.

Given the Howitts were prolific writers and fashionable and that the Brontë sisters would likely have read novels of the time written by female authors, they would certainly have been aware of the Howitts.^{xxi} The Howitts mixed in circles of authors and poets and admired many people the Brontë's admired. Furthermore, they were regularly published in magazines and, indeed, extensive reviews of *the Rural Life of England* were included in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, Vol 7, 1839; *The Eclectic Review*, Vol IV, 1838; *The North American Review*, Vol 151, 1850 and *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol IX, 1838. Extracts were also included in *The Dream*, 1841, a book of poetry by Caroline Sheridan Norton. These reviews sing the praises of

the two-volume publication, which, if one was an author writing about the countryside and country folk at this time in history and slightly earlier, would be an extremely useful reference book; there are descriptions of old English houses and one chapter in particular, “The Terrors of a Solitary House,” includes dogs, a branch blown by the wind scraping against a pane – a perfect setting and atmosphere for a ghost story. Other chapters discuss farmers, farm servants, gipsies and so on.

Other Role Models?

Two other potential role models have been suggested for Heathcliff.

The first is about the Brontë sisters’ great-grandfather, Hugh Brontë. According to the Revd Dr William Wright, Patrick Brontë’s grandfather was a rich farmer on the banks of the Boyne, near Drogheda. He often made trips to Liverpool to sell cattle and on one such journey is said to have found an abandoned child whom he took home. The family adopted the boy and called him Welsh. He quickly became a favourite and took an interest in the family business. The old man came to depend on him and when he died the family, jealous of Welsh, threw him out. But Welsh got his revenge: he became sub-agent for the estate and deceived and married Mary, one of the daughters of the Brontë family. In turn he evicted the Brontë family and took possession of the farm. However, the farmhouse was destroyed by fire and Welsh became impoverished. Not having any male children, Welsh visited one of his wife’s brothers who had become a prosperous farmer in another part of Ireland. He convinced him that he was sorry for his past behaviour and wanted to make amends. He persuaded his brother-in-law to let him adopt Hugh, one of his sons. Hugh was taken back to the old farmhouse by the banks of the Boyne and brought up in poor conditions. He

was treated cruelly by Welsh, being expected to work all hours on the farm. After several years, at the age of fifteen, Hugh managed to escape.

The links with *Wuthering Heights* are obvious, there was even a servant who reported on the shortcomings of young Hugh; as well as a dog called Keeper. The tale was meant to have been told by Hugh Brontë himself, Patrick Brontë's father, about his early life. However, as Dudley Green points out in his book *Patrick Bronte: Father of a Genius*, the story was told some 40 years after the publication of *Wuthering Heights*, in the style of a folk-tale and there is little evidence to substantiate it. Even a sympathetic critic of Wright was forced to conclude,

We do not find in Wright's record any intense or close study of a scholarly kind: his method used intuition, charm, lengthy and capacious but perhaps inaccurate memory, and elegant language.^{xxii}

The other potential role model concerns a chap called Jack Sharp. John Walker, owner of Walterclough Hall not far from Law Hill in Halifax where Emily taught, had two sons but favoured and adopted his nephew, Jack Sharp. Walker trained his nephew to take over the woollen business and when Walker died in 1771, Jack Sharp was in full possession of the Walker estate. However, there was no legal documentation to substantiate Sharp's ownership and after a long battle, John Walker's eldest son, also called John, managed to get Sharp to leave the hall. Before he left, Sharp destroyed most of the fixtures and fittings and carried off the rest, he then proceeded to build his own house, Law Hall close by.^{xxiii} It is argued Emily would have been aware of this history and adapted it for *Wuthering Heights*.

Which of these three is the true model for Heathcliff: Richard Sutton? Hugh Brontë? or Jack Sharp? Or is it a combination of all three or none? Reader, make your own decision.

ⁱ Lyon, K, *The Dentdale Brontë Trail*, 1985; Heywood, Christopher, Yorkshire Slavery in Wuthering Heights, *Review of English Studies*, volume 37 issue 150, 1987; Heywood, Christopher, THE SEDBERGH CONNECTION Hartley Coleridge and The Brontë Novels, *Sedbergh Historian*, Spring 1987; Heywood, Christopher, Editor, Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë, Broadview Editions, 2001.

ⁱⁱ There must have been other sources which revealed to Emily Brontë that Richard Sutton lived in a farmhouse high on the fell and that he rented out (or tried to rent out) West House. Of course it is possible Sutton did rent out West House for six months prior to moving in with his family and that this person was in some way connected to the Brontës. There are several other possibilities although all are tenuous: Heywood suggests Branwell Brontë could have found out more details when he visited Hartley Coleridge in 1840, Coleridge had been a master at Sedbergh school in 1837. Another possible link could have been via the Rev William Matthews who rented Smithy Fold from Richard Sutton. A third possibility is the information came via Adam Sedgwick who was a friend of Archdeacon Charles Musgrave, Vicar of Halifax 1827-75; Musgrave knew Patrick Brontë through his church links, and occasionally preached at Haworth – thanks to Halifax historian David Glover for this gem.

ⁱⁱⁱ Whilst Richard still had a mother in those days someone who did not have a father was considered an orphan.

^{iv} William Howitt's *The Rural Life of England* was not part of the library at Keighley Mechanics, nor at Ponden Hall, nor was it part of the collection from the Haworth Vicarage sold off after Charlotte's death. The Brontë's may have seen it elsewhere. Emily may have had access to it when she taught at Law Hill School. Perhaps Charlotte learnt of the story when she worked for the Sidgwicks in Skipton, cousins of Adam Sedgwick?

^v Correspondence with Kim Lyon

^{vi} WESTHOUSES: The Suttons, *Sedbergh Historian*, 2003

^{vii} The census of 1841 puts her age at 55 and in 1851 as 66. If she had been 30 when she married, as Lyon suggests, this would mean that she was aged 57 years when her youngest son, Thomas, was born in 1831.

^{viii} Personal correspondence.

^{ix} Heywood, Christopher, THE SEDBERGH CONNECTION Hartley Coleridge and The Brontë Novels, *Sedbergh Historian*, Spring 1987 and

Yorkshire Slavery in *Wuthering Heights*, *Review of English Studies*, volume 37 issue 150, 1987.

^x Heywood, Yorkshire Slavery

^{xi} Yorkshire Slavery in *Wuthering Heights*, *The Review of English Studies*, volume 38 number 150, May 1987

^{xii} Heywood, SEDBERGH CONNECTION

^{xiii} Heywood, Yorkshire Slavery

^{xiv} Heywood, Yorkshire Slavery

^{xv} Heywood Christopher, editor, Broadview Edition of *Wuthering Heights*, 2001.

^{xvi} A 30 minute documentary edited by Joanna Crickmay, executive producer Cassandra Pybus and produced by Martin Rosenbaum.

^{xvii} Since starting to write this book both my half-sister in Canada, also a Sutton descendent, and myself have had a DNA test which suggests we are 100% European.

^{xviii} This person told me this after I had challenged the representation of Richard Sutton in the film.

^{xix} WESTHOUSES: The Suttons, *Sedbergh Historian*, 2003

^{xx} I have to thank Diane for both her article and all the research she has done on the Suttons as well as support in writing about this aspect of my ancestor.

^{xxi} A favourable review of *Jane Eyre* was later published in *Howitt's Journal*, edited by William Howitt.

^{xxii} Chitam, *The Brontës' Iriah Background* (Macmillan, 1986) as quoted in Dudley Green, *Patrick Brontë, Father of Genius*.

^{xxiii} The story is told in greater detail in *Emily Brontë, A Biography*, Winifred Gérin, 1971.