

# CHARLOTTE BRONTE AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

by Jane Fryer

**S**PREAD across a huge table in Sotheby's auction house in London are stacks of immaculately preserved 19th-century first editions and manuscripts, a slew of letters in Jane Austen's rigorously disciplined script and a small collection of Charlotte Bronte's hand-sewn books, barely 3in high and filled with writing so teeny it had to be written with a single hair dipped in ink and can only be deciphered under a microscope.

Beside me is a chap called Richard Ovenden, Senior Executive of Oxford's Bodleian Library, who has barely slept he is so excited and, arms outstretched, looks about to combust with joy at this literary haul.

'Bars of gold would be nothing in comparison. This is it. This is the moment we've been waiting for,' he cries. 'This is our culture, our language and literature. These books are one of our greatest contributions to world culture and global civilisation. We have to save them for the nation.'

Because, of course, these are not just any old books and letters.

They are the highlights, or 'greatest hits', of the Honresfield Library — a famous private literary collection amassed by northern industrialists William and Alfred Law in the 19th century and obsessively shielded from public and academic inspection.

Over the past 80 years, so little was heard of the library it was feared broken up and sold, or destroyed, and the longer academics yearned to pore over the contents, the more mythical its status became.

No wonder Ovenden's hands are shaking and, alongside Bronte expert Professor Kathryn Sutherland of St Anne's College, Oxford, he is fizzing with excitement. Because today is the first chance for generations for anyone to get a proper look at it. And it's all here.

**A**MONG the collection is the complete original manuscript of Sir Walter Scott's 1817 novel Rob Roy, with a sale estimate of £1 million.

There's Robert Burns' first Commonplace Book, compiled between 1783 and 1785 when he was a relatively unknown poet, which shows off his 24-year-old thoughts on love.

'This is his apprentice book,' says Ovenden. 'Three years later, he was the toast of Edinburgh. Today there are Burns societies all over the world!'

There are also some breathtakingly personal letters from Jane Austen to her sister, Cassandra, covering her love life and reaction to her published books.

Meanwhile, the first editions — some annotated by their authors — include everything from Jane Austen's Emma, Persuasion and Pride and Prejudice to Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights.

But what has really got Ovenden's heart racing is a set of manuscripts from the Bronte siblings.

The collection includes seven of Charlotte Bronte's famous 'little books' or magazines written at

For book lovers, it's like discovering Tutankhamun's tomb: a collection of priceless literary treasures hidden away for decades. Now the race is on to save them for the nation

Picture: MURRAY SANDERS

the kitchen table in the Bronte parsonage — alone worth an estimated £5 million — a manuscript collection of poems by sister Anne and a small autographed diary note by Emily and Anne.

The real treasure, however, is a small, slim, red-bound exercise book of Emily Bronte's poems, annotated by her sister Charlotte and valued at between £800,000 and £1.2 million.

'This is the Holy Grail,' says Professor Sutherland. 'There is another in the British Library and that's it. This one was for many years considered lost or destroyed. Almost nothing of Emily survived. We can't believe it's here.'

Such is the library's significance that, when it suddenly popped up, largely intact, for sale by Sotheby's earlier this year, it was hailed as the 'Tutankhamun's Tomb of literature'.

Academics went into a frenzy of action to stop it from disappearing forever into wealthy libraries and private collections.

Overnight, the prestigious Friends Of The National Libraries charity formed a consortium of eight institutions including the Bodleian, the British Library, and the National Library of Scotland, which immediately sprang into action.

'We've never done anything like

this before as a group of big research libraries,' says Ovenden. 'But it was an emergency knee jerk. We just had to.'

Within weeks, they had persuaded both the sellers and Sotheby's to postpone the sale until November to give them a window to raise the £15 million required to save the collection for the nation. Indeed, it is seen as so significant that Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden has been briefed on the fundraising campaign and is said to be determined that it stays in Britain.

**W**E HAVE to succeed. There is nothing to touch it,' says Ovenden. 'A single collection, built more than a century ago, that has stayed more or less intact but been seen by no one.'

It all began in the late 19th century when William and Alfred Law, the owner of Durns Mill, near Rochdale, began buying books for their 'plain two-storey red-brick' Honresfield home.

There was an explosion of brilliant British literature at the time, and plenty available for a discerning buyer with money.

They hoovered up works by Scott and Burns as well as Tenny-

son, Shakespeare, Homer, the Grimm Brothers and Elizabeth Gaskell. The Brontes, of course, who lived just 30 miles away and were local celebrities, were already on their radar.

William — the library's driving force — bought and bought.

'He collected because he deeply loved literature,' says Ovenden. 'He loved to read — he read them all — and kept them in wonderful condition.'

Sadly, neither brother married or had children and so, when they died, the library passed to their nephew, Sir Alfred Law MP, and then down the family line.

A few items, including a Shakespeare First Folio, were sold and a tranche of Walter Scott letters were given to the National Library Of Scotland.

Over the years, it moved with the Law family from Honresfield House to Buckinghamshire and, in 1939, was inherited by a gentleman farmer in Jersey, David Law Dixon, and vanished from view.

'Only two scholars in the later 20th century were given access,' says Professor Sutherland.

One chap apparently telephoned the family every August and asked to see the manuscripts. On

**Invaluable: Jane Fryer with the Honresfield Library, inset, one of Charlotte Bronte's tiny magazines**

the eleventh year, they let him in. As the story goes, Law disliked academics and didn't like the way he was asked, but perhaps it was more about privacy and security.

The library is for sale now because the current owners — who have asked not to be identified — have decided that, given the responsibility of maintenance, it was the 'right time to sell'.

There is little doubt that, had the charity not sprung into action, most of it would already have vanished forever as British institutions are routinely outbid by richer foreign buyers.

When ten years ago, the manuscript of Jane Austen's novel The Watsons popped up for auction, the Bodleian bought it, but only after a private Chinese bidder

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had pushed the price close to £1 million.

Of course, sometimes the government is persuaded to place an export ban on specific items — as happened in 2019 with a copy of Lady Chatterley's Lover — but only after the item is sold.

Even then, there is no obligation for the owner to care for it properly (for books and manuscripts, this means keeping them cool, dry, dust free and out of direct light), far less make it accessible to others.

'What good is it if it's locked in a bank safe in London?' says Ovenden. 'It might as well be Qatar or Shanghai. No one will ever see it again.'

The Friends Of The National Libraries also includes Abbotsford — the home of Walter Scott — the Bronte Parsonage museum, Jane Austen's House, the Brotherton Library, and the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, operated by

the National Trust for Scotland. The plan is to raise the money — through a combination of grants, government funding, philanthropy and crowdfunding, which will enable private donors and literary fans to flock to the cause. The consortium plans to ensure that these treasures are spread around and enjoyed by all.

**S**O THE Burns collection would go up to Alloway, The Bronte treasures would go to Yorkshire and so on. The first example of a cultural levelling up, you might say.

'Each bit is so significant it is likely to become the jewel in those collections,' says Professor Sutherland.

For me, the notes and doodles between the Bronte siblings and Charlotte's 'magazines' are the most moving.

Even so, who on earth would pay hundreds upon hundreds

of thousands of pounds for a teeny 3in book? Surely therein lies madness.

But then, with a specialist bone folder and very clean and steady hands, we open the cover and inside discover a thing of great wonder.

A beautifully presented title page and then pages and pages of reviews, poems and stories, all in unfeasibly tiny writing, penned by a 14-year-old genius who, alongside her two sisters, went on to write some of our nation's greatest novels, and died horribly young.

Suddenly, we are transported back to the kitchen table in the Bronte parsonage with the lamp flickering and Charlotte hunched over the table, working away, siblings around her, and it is clear it is worth every penny, and more.

■ *IF YOU would like to help save the Honresfield Library for the nation, go to [fnl.org.uk](http://fnl.org.uk) and click on the 'Honresfield Appeal' button.*

# Andrew Pierce



## Even Lord Freud couldn't analyse tricky Theresa

**A**FTER Theresa May voted against a three-line whip for the first time in 24 years as an MP by joining last week's Tory revolt against a foreign aid cut, Boris Johnson may well be tempted to agree with Ken Clarke's notorious description of his predecessor as 'a bloody difficult woman'.

If so, he would not be alone. Indeed, the author of a new book reckons she was so difficult that he questions why Mrs May was ever made Tory leader at all.

In Clashing Agendas, former welfare minister Lord (David) Freud, great-grandson of Sigmund Freud, describes the battle in David Cameron's government to introduce Universal Credit, which replaced six previous benefits.

He says of May: 'She's very reluctant to think structurally and yet can be extraordinarily obstinate

■ *WHILE he is more at home on a cricket pitch than at a football match, the Leader of the Commons, Old Etonian Jacob Rees-Mogg, draws an interesting historical parallel with England's defeat in the Euro 2020 final.*

*'This country does have a history of heroic defeats that lead on to great victories. Dunkirk led to victory in the end.'*

*That's the spirit, Jacob.*

on points of detail. On top of that, she's got very poor judgment. She is very insecure so was very manipulative about her position.'

Freud adds: 'My father was the grandson of Sigmund Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis, and he made sure I was conversant with our family traditions. I found an awareness of psychological complexities valuable when addressing my ministerial duties.'

Except when it came to dealing with Mrs May it seems.

## Guess who's in the dog house?

**SO-CALLED 'Freedom Day' today just happens to coincide with National Get Out Of The Doghouse Day, which falls on the third Monday in July. It often applies to a spouse or partner who is in the doghouse after having done something wrong, and offers them a chance to make amends. It might work for some, but it's probably too late in the day for Matt Hancock, the shamed former health secretary.**



■ **AS ONE** of Parliament's most prominent black MPs, David Lammy announced in April that he was joining a boycott of social media companies in protest at racist trolling. 'Companies like Twitter and Facebook have failed to take action to eradicate racism and other vile abuse from their platforms,' he said. 'It's time to take a stand.'

The stand didn't last long. In the Commons register of interests, it's revealed the Shadow Justice Secretary was paid £2,870 by Facebook for speaking at one of their functions in London in May.

## Get a jigsaw done!

TO MANY, Boris Johnson is still a puzzle, a man of many parts and difficult to piece together in order to create a clear picture of him. Now the Conservative Party is cashing in on this enigma by marketing a Boris Brexit Jigsaw. The 252-piece puzzle, at £18, shows the PM in blue boxing gloves with each bearing the slogan Get Brexit Done. Just the thing to pass the time for anyone stuck at home isolating or not being able to go abroad on holiday.

## A CARACAS EDITION OF PMQs

DESCRIBED by Tony Blair in his memoirs as 'the most nerve-racking, discombobulating, nail-biting, bowel-moving, terror-inspiring, courage-draining experience', Prime Minister's Questions was 60 years old last week. The very first question was a piece of distinctly underarm bowling by Labour MP Fenner Brockway directed at Tory PM Harold Macmillan. Which

minister would meet with the British ambassador to South Africa, he wanted to know. Tame stuff. Compare it with Boris Johnson's first PMQs in which he was pitched against Jeremy Corbyn, the then Labour leader. 'Jeremy Corbyn thinks our friends are in the Kremlin, and in Tehran, and in Caracas — and I think he's Caracas!' said Bojo. Hard to disagree with that.

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