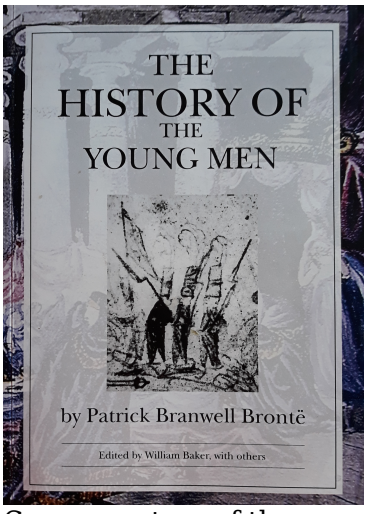
Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: The History of the Young Men by Patrick Branwell Brontë ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/989. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Patrick Branwell Brontë

The History of the Young Men

Australia (2010)

TAGS: Aeneid Aesop Apollo Bible Carthage Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Homer Iliad Latin (Language) Laurel Wreath Oracles Patroclus Punic Wars Roman Empire Roman History Sparta Trojan War



Cover courtesy of the publisher.

General information	
Title of the work	The History of the Young Men
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Country/countries of popularity	Australia, United Kingdom, United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2010
First Edition Details	Patrick Branwell Brontë, *The History of the Young Men*. Edited by William Baker et al., Sydney, Australia: The Juvenilia Press, 2010, 83 pp.
ISBN	9780733428999
Target Audience	Crossover (children (10+) and adults)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk
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Creators



Self-portrait, 1840. Retrieved from Wikipedia, public domain (accessed: January 7, 2022).

Patrick Branwell Brontë , 1817 - 1848
(Author, Illustrator)

Patrick Branwell Brontë, known as Branwell, was educated at home by his clergyman father, Patrick Brontë, learning classical languages and reading freely from the books and periodicals in his home. From an early age, Branwell and his sisters wrote stories based around the imaginary lives of a set of toy soldiers, known to them as 'The Young Men'. Branwell became a regular collaborator with his elder sister, Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855). They developed a complex society around 'The Young Men', located in a fictional colonial version of West Africa. Branwell had hopes of becoming a professional writer or painter. After receiving too few painting commissions, Branwell became a live-in tutor to a family. He was asked to leave; drunkenness and a fathering an illegitimate child (who died) have been suggested as the likely causes of his dismissal. He continued to try to forge a career as a writer, without success. He worked briefly for the railways, but was dismissed. He worked as a tutor in a second household. Another dismissal followed, this time in relation to a probable affair with the mother of his pupils. Branwell never ceased writing poems and stories and translating classical texts, but he died at his family home in 1848 of tuberculosis exacerbated by alcohol and opium abuse.

The History of the Young Men was never published in the Brontës' lifetime. It was edited by William Baker et al. for The Juvenilia Press, non-profit international initiative hosted by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales dedicated to the juvenilia of significant writers.

Sources:

C. Alexander & M. Smith, *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 73–79;

sam2.arts.unsw.edu.au (accessed: March 24, 2020).

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Additional information

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Spin off: Greenberg, Isabella, *Glass Town*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2020.

Summary

This work opens with an extensive Introduction which details the early lives of the Brontë children and the evolution of their creative writing. There is also a section of Notes on the Text, which provides a manuscript history and images of the original. Branwell's introduction provides the history of the acquisition of the toy soldiers who formed the basis of the stories. He adds, "this history is a statement of what Myself, Charlotte Emily and Ann really pretended did happen" (p. 4).

Chapter I. The history begins with a geographical description of the territory. The narrator, Captain John Bud, then refers to its first habitation, which is Ancient British and Gaulish Europeans in AM 2000 (2000 years from the creation of the world). Some say that they eventually returned to Europe, others that they were destroyed at some later date by the Genii (a reference to the Brontë children as all-powerful creators). Once they left the land of Ashantee, "the Natives took possession of the country… with a few interruptions from the Romans inhabiting Carthage" (p. 6). Europeans return in c.1500, but harassment by the 'natives' and the Genii drives them out by 1537. The remains of their architecture are described. African 'monarchs' then ruled as 'emperors' until the 'Wheel of Fortune' turned and they were overthrown (pp. 6–7).

Chapter II. In 1770, a new set of colonists depart from England for Africa – The Twelve. Their characters are described. They sailed along the coast of Spain and on to Trinidad, then back south-east to Ascension Island, where they battled Dutch settlers. They massacre a town of c. 300 inhabitants in revenge for the loss of one of their number, Stumps. Two weeks later, they sight "the coast of Ashantee and the low sunny coast of Guinea."

Chapter III. The Twelve elect a king. They debate the merits of various candidates. This section is laid out like a play. They elect Frederic, Duke of York. Four of The Twelve begin an exploratory expedition in land and discover giant footprints. A terrible storm breaks around them and the massive head of "a terrible monster" appears. The

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monster scoops them up and carries them to "an immense palace". Three other monsters are there, "wraped [*sic*] in clouds and having flames of fire round their heads". Each of the three monsters picks up one of The Twelve, and the first monster tells the other monsters that they may take that mortal into their protection. The chosen of the Twelve are informed that these monsters "would watch over their lives and be their guardian demons". The first monster predicts of the chosen of The Twelve "that ye shall one day be kings." He cries "DEPART!" and the explorers find themselves back in a field. (pp. 24–26). Branwell (as himself) explains in a footnote that this episode is an account of when Branwell brought his toy soldiers to his sisters and granted each sister special care of one soldier (p. 29).

Chapter IV. The other Young Men begin to build a great town. The explorers arrive back and relate what has happened. Crashey, one of The Twelve goes missing, and in looking for him, they see Africans for the first time. They are in a group of 40–50. "They were tall strong well-made and of a black or copper coulor [*sic*]" (p. 28). These are some of the Ashantees. The Twelve shoot six of them from a distance; the Ashantees are astonished. The Twelve shoot four more and the Ashantee pray "to their gods for mercy" as they cannot tell where the killing blows are coming from (p. 29). The Twelve rush them, bayonetting many and taking the others prisoner. Their leader "hautily refused" [*sic*] to answer questions. The narrator, Bud, stops to note the bravery of The Twelve in attacking so big a band when they were so few. Once back at their town, they are visited by the monster, who delivers the missing comrade. The monster introduces himself as "chief Genius Branii", and names the other three chief Genii and the lesser genii. The Genii are "the Guardians of this land"; he prophesises that The Twelve will become great and then flies away on his dragon wings (p. 30). The Ashantee prisoners are ransomed. Eight peaceful years pass. They trade peacefully with the Ashantee, but conflict follows with the succession of a new king, Sai TooToo Quamina. The new king demands that they leave; he has a bitter wish for revenge ever since his capture at The Twelves' hands. Crashey goes to consult the Genii, who issue an encouraging prophecy.

The Twelve travel to the Ashantee capital. There are c. 13,000 Ashantee opposing them. They take up a position in a narrow spot and sluice a waterway, which they then use to sweep away many Ashantee warriors (pp. 33–34). Many Ashantee think that The Twelve must be gods and refuse to fight them. 700 Ashantee warriors advance with their king. The Battles of Marathon and of Thermopylae are said to be

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as nothing in comparison with this great battle and the great feat of 12 standing against 700. King Frederic Guelph is killed. There is a desperate fight for the body of the king (p. 36): "Many were the victims devoted to his shades. The conflict for the dead body of Patroclus on the shores of Troy must sink as nothing before the actions of this memorable day" (p. 36). Once they are down to five of The Twelve, they call on the Genii, who arrive with a storm and renew the vigour of the surviving comrades. They then rout the Ashantee, killing all but their king and 60 warriors, and resurrect all of The Twelve who have been killed, with the exception of King Frederic Guelph who the Genii did not restore (p. 37). The Ashantee sue for peace and Crashey reminds the reluctant Twelve that it is not possible to 'exterminate the inhabitants as they wished' even if it were right, therefore a peace is agreed (p. 38). They prepare to elect a new king. Bud digresses to describe some of the early customs of The Twelve.

Chapter V. The Genii appear having restored the long-dead Frederic Stumps to life. The Genii recommend that Stumps be elected king, as King Frederic II. The Twelve concur. The Ashantee eventually rally and attack the Twelve's city without warning. Some of The Twelve are killed and the Ashantee eat them (p. 45). The remaining Twelve carry out a successful night raid on the Ashantee then beg the Genii to witness the cannibalism and help them avenge it. The Genii restore The Twelve, who pursue the Ashantee home and massacre them before returning "to their own town laden with honour and glory" (pp. 46–47).

Chapter VI. In Europe, the Revolutionary Wars break out, so Prime Minister Pitt sends John Leaf to Ashantee to require one of The Twelve to come home and help. After a consultation of the Genii, Arthur Wellesly [*sic*] returns to Europe. The Ashantee attack again; once again The Twelve fight them off and receive aid from the Genii (p. 52). There is a brief account of the Napoleonic Wars. Wellesly defeats Napoleon then returns to Ashantee with 30,000 of his soldiers. The Twelve are delighted to see them all. King Frederic II abdicates and declares Arthur Wellesly "King Arthur".

Appendix A then details the work done on the manuscript and details of the transcription. Appendix B includes comments from students who assisted William Baker in the preparation of the text. Appendix C is a select bibliography of works owned by the Brontës. There is a section of Explanatory Notes on text, followed by a bibliography of works consulted.

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Analysis

Branwell and Charlotte Brontë began writing about imaginary kingdoms in West Africa in 1826. *The History of the Young Men* was written almost five years into this creative endeavour, when Branwell was thirteen. In it, Branwell takes on the persona of a historian, Captain John Bud, writing a history of the settlement of these lands by Europeans, The Young Men, also known as The Twelve. In this history, Branwell rewrites and extends Charlotte's *A Romantic Tale*, which also related The Twelve's settlement of West Africa (Baker, Introduction, p. xii). In a footnote, Branwell adds that these stories are what he and his sisters "realy [*sic*] pretended did happen" (p. 4). The influence of Branwell's growing knowledge of classical civilisation can be seen throughout the work and even in the very concept of a narrative history stretching back from ancient history through to the modern. Branwell demonstrates knowledge of and interest in the practice of historiography, taking pains to imitate what he has seen elsewhere. Ancient conflicts can be seen here as a lens through which this Georgian-era child has understood and articulated colonial conflicts and concepts of heroism.

Branwell carefully laid out a title-page detailing the subject of the work, the extensive honours of its author, Bud, and a quotation from a principal character in the fictional society expressing the purpose of history in bringing to light "the deeds of former ages" (p. 2). An explicit classicism completes the page: Branwell's illustration of classical figure, complete with flowing white robes, captioned "Mentor", after a wise Homeric figure (*Od*. 2.225; 24.548). The work concludes with a similar illustration of "Justice". With these features, Branwell emulates the conventions of contemporary publishing and the way in which the classical world acts as an indicator of learning and erudition.

The representation of the composition of the history includes many indicators of Branwell's interest in historiography and his effort to convince his readers – in real life, his sisters, fictionally, the contemporary public – of the research that has gone into it. The fictional author is "Captain John Bud the greatest prose writer among them [the Europeans in Africa]" (p. 4). Bud is listed as "Vice President of the Antiquarian Society" of Glass Town, and "Chief Librarian" of the "Royal Glass Town Library" (p. 2, with n. 18). The title page details the history as covering "From AM 2000–AD 1761". AM 2000 here refers to

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the Latin form "Anno Mundi" (p. 5, with n. 20). With this, Branwell demonstrates his knowledge of Latin contractions. When it comes to the writing of the history, Bud remarks knowingly that it is hard to be exact in 1830 about ancient history and events back in AM 2000. We later learn that Bud has made extensive use of a (fictional) work by an earlier historian, Leaf. Leaf is an established character within the Brontë children's Glass Town universe. Charlotte refers to him elsewhere as the "Glass Town Thucydides" (p. 6 with n. 28). Bud includes passages of Leaf's work with a note that some of it has been adapted as language has changed since the olden days (pp. 20–21). Bud makes it clear that he is working with difficult material. There are times when Leaf's manuscript has been damaged so that he must skip over some of the speeches given. This is an effective way of conveying the historiographical process while also avoiding an over-long section of speeches. Later on Bud again bemoans the damage to Leaf's manuscript and the general paucity of information on the period he is relating – all he has are the damaged manuscript and a few inscriptions to work from (p. 39, with p. 52). To this an official proclamation can be added, which Bud has a copy of (p. 23). There is also a transcription of a prophecy, included with the note, "translated from Leaf" (p. 32). Bud has been to numerous libraries in an attempt to find more information (p. 43). Other historians do feature to a lesser degree. Bud refers to, having consulted "my learned friend Proffesor [*sic*] Gifford, PAS" on a matter of historical clothing custom (p. 40); "my highly Talented Freind [*sic*] Capt Flower" – another of Branwell's pseudonyms – has also provided information (p. 50); and, in convincing the reader of the excellence of the Ashantee King Cashna, he refers to, "the authority of every Historian of those times now extant, [who say] that he lived and died as a pattern for all kings who wish to be thought Fathers of their people" (p. 31). Despite these other historians, Leaf is the main source and he even becomes a character in the work when Bud explains how Leaf came to write his history (p. 49).

The conception of the Genii creators in this universe also demonstrates the influence of classical culture as well as that of *The Arabian Nights*. The Genii behave much like classical gods in having their favourites and in their direct yet unpredictable influence on the world of mortals. The Genii are imagined as living atop a mountain in West Africa, much like the Olympians are found on Mount Olympus (pp. 5–6, with n. 25). Up there they dwell in a huge palace: a family unit of immortals taking an interest in the deeds of lesser beings

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below (esp. pp. 24–25). They are to some extent unknowable and nobody knows why they are there (p. 18). Their ability to bring humans back to life (e.g. p. 17; 36; 46–47; 52) surpasses what the Olympians were thought capable of (n. 51 explains that this ability developed as a plot necessity because Branwell killed off the characters so frequently). The Genii offer prophecies to The Young Men, an interaction that reflects aspects of classical and biblical culture. The manner in which Crashey goes out into the desert to commune with the Genii has a particularly biblical feel, and this continues when he arrives back and quotes *Genesis* (18.17–18; p. 30, with n. 72) in predicting future greatness. The prophecy given at the outset of the great conflict has a more classical feel (p. 32). Some of the prophecies are ambiguous, which is a feature more familiar from classical than biblical prophecy. Before the battle, the Genii say that they will "help through terrible dangers", and the narrator adds that they charged off, "inspired by this prediction and never pausing to think what these 'terrible dangers' might be…". This is somewhat reminiscent of the Herodotean account of the prophecy given to Croesus, who famously began a war without considering whose empire would be the one prophesised to fall if he fought. The outcome is more straightforward in Branwell's story, however. The Young Men succeed despite the 'dangers' of battle, making it unclear if the Herodotean story was a real influence or simply a prophecy-themed coincidence. Branwell was learning Greek via lessons with his father and study of Greek literature, but there is insufficient evidence as to whether or not he read Herodotus itself at this time, although it is certain that he was reading other classical literature and books about ancient culture. Overall it is apparent that study of ancient cultures influenced the way in which Branwell (and his sisters) could conceive concepts of power, destiny, and fate. It also provided them with a sophisticated way in which to conceive of their own powers as imaginative players and creative authors.

The overarching conception of history in this fictional history demonstrates an influence from 'real' ancient history. Branwell's narrator, Bud, like many ancient and contemporary historians, sketches the ancient history of the land before providing more details for more recent times. The first people in West Africa are said to have been Europeans – ancient British and Gaulish settlers (p. 5). This appears to function as a way of naturalising the Europeans' right to colonise the land at a later stage, depriving Africans of legitimacy in their complaints about the theft of their territory (as voiced by King

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Sai TooToo Quamina). The reference to 'Gaulish' settlers demonstrates the influence of ancient history in Branwell's perception of ancient France. Ancient history appears again with the Romans influencing other Europeans in West Africa, with their conflict with Carthage making a particular impact (p. 6). This latter example suggests that Rome's wars played a role in Branwell's conception of the history of Europeans in Africa and of his view of colonialism generally. Much like ancient historians, Branwell focuses on the male perspective on the ancient history; there are no female characters in the history, and there is no thought for women's contribution to settlement or culture. The early settlers eventually leave, followed by others in the sixteenth century. There are now "African emperors", but the "Wheel of Fortune" turns against them (pp. 6–7). The "Wheel of Fortune" is an ancient concept that appears to inform Branwell's conception of the rise and fall of empires and cultures and, indirectly, to further naturalise colonialism. The concept occurs again later in the work: once The Twelve are more settled, their kingdoms rise to the top of the Wheel – even 'Persia Greece Rome and England' are overtaken in greatness (p. 48).

The Persian Wars provide the model through which Bud (and Branwell) explores the conflict between The Twelve and the Ashantee. The Battle of Rossendale (pp. 32–37) is explicitly compared to the Battles of Marathon and Thermopylae, with The Twelve playing the role of the Greeks and the Ashantee the Persians. Rossendale is said to be the greater event. In one sense, the battles of the Persian Wars act quite simply as great events to be surpassed. In another, they influence the reader's perception of the dynamic between the antagonists by reversing the invader/invaded dynamic. The Battles of Marathon and Thermopylae were both defensive actions for the Greeks, fighting, outnumbered, against invading armies. In West Africa, The Twelve are the invaders; they wish to defend and extend the land that they hold there, but it has all been taken by conquest. In the sense that they are outnumbered, they are like the Greeks in those ancient battles, but in every other respect, it is the Ashantee who are in the Greeks' position of defending territory against aggression. Branwell here follows a well-established tradition of associating (near)-contemporary Europeans with ancient Greeks, a far-from-neutral representation that ameliorates the image of aggressive colonialism by representing it as heroic self-defence.

The evocation of ancient battles continues. There is a desperate fight for the body of the fallen King Frederic Guelph (p. 36): "Many were

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the victims devoted to his shades. The conflict for the dead body of Patroclus on the shores of Troy must sink as nothing before the actions of this memorable day" (p. 36). This reference to shades brings an ancient Greek conception of death to this modern scenario. The comparison with Troy and the struggle for Patroclus is explicit (see Homer, *Iliad*, Book 17), with Bud/Branwell using his classical learning to add scale and importance to the events. In this comparison, The Twelve are compared to the Greeks as invaders (i.e. attacking Troy), although in this case the sense of the invaders' aggression is lost in the emphasis on the death of one of their number. The *Iliad* features again to help articulate how close the result of the Battle of Waterloo was. This time Branwell/Bud actually quotes Pope's *Iliad* directly (15.360–361.): "for along time 'sat doubtful conquest hovering oer the Field'" [*sic*] (p. 53).

The Persian Wars feature again, albeit less directly, with Arthur Wellesly running six miles in half an hour to warn The Twelve of the approach of the Ashantee (p. 44). This feat reflects the famous run to Athens said to have been made following the Battle of Marathon in order to warn the city of the Persian fleet's approach. Once the city is breached, further classical comparisons kick in: Ross attacks a crowd of Ashantee and although he dies fighting he inspires others "by this Feat of Heroic bravery superior to that of Isadas the Spartan" (p. 45) (Plutarch, *Life of Agesilaus* 34.6–7; Polyaenus, *Strategems*, 2.9.1). It is hard to be certain where Branwell knew this story from – perhaps from Plutarch directly, perhaps from Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788; Rev. Brontë owned the 1797 edition, which was much read by his children). The Twelves' night raid on the Ashantee is also conceived according to classical precedent. They make their raid, "with a bravery like that of Diomed and Ulysses or Nisus and Euryalus" (p. 45; see *Iliad*, book 10 and *Aeneid*, book 9); and when they eventually meet resistance they form a "phalanx" of "godlike heroes" (p. 46). Branwell's conception of excellence and masculinity is shaped by classical, military heroism – ancient figures who represent the importance of martial ability, self-sacrifice through violent death, and exertion of one's physical power over another form the basis of what is admirable.

Bud's frame of reference is frequently classical. The achievements of The Twelve are "crowned with all the Honours, encircled with all the glories' reaching 'the highest seat in the temple of Fame." (p. 18). Naturalised Greek crops up in Bud's wish that the Ashantee king's son had 'but an iota' of his virtue; and there is a rather Herodotean feel to

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his preceding remark that it 'would have been better for his own country and the 12s' had that been the case (p. 31). This sort of anticipation is well-used in classical historiography to draw the reader into the next phase and to convey the narrator's god-like omniscience. Bud also takes an interest in constitutional matters throughout, at one point discussing the merits of elected rather than hereditary kingship and describing the rights and limitations of The Twelves' king (p. 39). This reflects the sort of political discussions that Branwell and his sisters read in *Blackwood's Magazine* and other publications; in turn it continues the debates raised in antiquity.

The Twelves' customs and expressions frequently take a classical shape. One refers mockingly to another as "this perfect Apollo" (p. 22). Like ancient Hellenes, they are great in war and in peacetime pursue hunting, wrestling, boxing, and running (p. 44). They are "noble looking and muscular men" (p. 50). When conflict erupts, they expect an official declaration of war in ancient style; they (and Bud) consider the Ashantee barbarous for beginning and attack without an official declaration. They raise stone tombs with Latin inscriptions when one of their number dies; it becomes a custom among them to make a pilgrimage there and to leave offerings at temple nearby (p. 37). Branwell attempted a part-English-part-Latin inscription for the tomb of King Frederic Duke of York, which he includes neatly in a footnote.

Branwell was writing for an imagined adult audience and for his elder and younger sisters. His use of classical references enables him to demonstrate his learning, and there appears to be an assumption that his sisters would follow them to some extent at least – and in that sense his demonstration is done in an inclusive rather than excluding way. More significantly perhaps, these references are a crucial way in which Branwell is learning to add texture and depth to his writing, with classical metaphors, similes, and quotations helping to convey values, to direct reader interpretations of characters and events, to add realism to his depiction of European society, and to express the dynamic between a creator and their creations.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Aeneid Aesop Apollo Bible Carthage Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Homer Iliad Latin (Language) Laurel Wreath Oracles Patroclus Punic Wars Roman Empire Roman History Sparta Trojan War

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Adventure Adversity Authority Boys Child, children Childhood Child's view Conflict Death Diaspora Diversity Friendship Heroism Hierarchy Historical figures History Journeys Magic Magic powers Masculinity Nation Past Peers Prediction/prophecy Travel Violence War
Further Reading	Alexander, Christine, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1983; Alexander, Christine and Smith, Margaret, *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Juvenilia Press (accessed: March 24, 2020).
Addenda	*The History of the Young Men* is part of the Angria writings (series). Country of the First Edition: Australia (written in UK). First Edition Date: 2010 (written 1830–1831). Genre: juvenilia

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