the mythological. He studied at Oxford University when young, and from that time on was a great admirer of W.B. Yeats, sharing 'The Fascination of What's Difficult', the need for classical and Celtic analogues to key situations and characters, and an obsession with the woman Helen of Troy who, Janus-headed, stalks *A Winter by the Sea*. The poet's own loved one continually brings Helen to our imaginative attention; she was 'impassioned beauty incarnate' when he loved her beside the North Sea. She represented for him then the 'City of the World', a platonic *Sancta Civitas*. This she subsequently betrayed by moving to a modern city of worldly values, where, 'tarnished' as likely as not, she 'now wanders, old and embittered, and recognized by no one.' The reason for this cruel fate lies in the terrifying paradox that, through her very beauty, she (like Helen of Troy before her) brought about that first city's destruction. 'Who shall perceive the sense / of emptiness and ages? / Where towers stood battled, tense? / burning, she too can mark / mere fullness of time's pages.' The parallel with Yeats ('When Helen lived' etc.) scarcely needs further comment.

Of the ten sections five are 'groups' of poems – sections I, III, VI, VIII and X – and five – sections II, IV, V, VII and IX – are 'series'. In a 'group' the poems are numbered and should be taken as separate entities, even if themes and images link them; in a 'series' the poems, unnumbered, follow on one from another, and, read consecutively, have cumulative effect. Section I establishes the woman loved by the poet and the North Sea setting of their passion, Section II introduces and imposes on us the tragic, destructive, analogous figure of Helen. In Section III humanity stretching back to antiquity is apostrophised; Section IV is a beautiful, disquieting 'intermezzo' of only two poems, showing today's world under threat from 'alien powers' envoy'. Section V (a 'series') brings us back to the woman herself, recalled in her disappearance, Section VI (a 'group') reveals consequent developments in the poet's own psyche. Section VII is another intermezzo, dealing again with hostility to the world from without; Section VIII is arguably the most personal of all – or, rather, *supra*-personal since the lovers are depicted as inspirited by characters from the past. Section IX 'sings the beloved's departure' while not foregoing sombre recognition of her avatars; Section X (a 'group') attempts not so much resolution as lyrical reconciliation to loss as being inextricable from experience.

Adriaan Roland Holst (1888-1976)
Picture taken by the Dutch poet Lucebert
© Het geheugen van Nederland

Every so often the writer – not for nothing was he called 'The Prince of Poets' – rises to solemn musical heights, and his translator with him:

Where did the time go? How
long has it been snowing?
A mirror's silence now
holds this room hostage, no
more sign of life is going
through. What if she were lying
– alone, as I am so
alone – somewhere and dying.

PAUL BINDING

A. Roland Holst, *A Winter by the Sea*, translated into verse by Roger Kuin. Ian Jackson, Berkeley, 2017 (limited edition of 250 copies), 148 p. (ISBN 978 1 944769 58 1).

A Piercing Eye Alert to Every Detail

Charlotte Brontë's Brussels Legacy

It's easy to think of novels set in London, Paris or New York, but no one has ever written the great Brussels novel. The city's most famous writer, judging from the number of plaques dotted around

the city, is the French exile Victor Hugo. Other than that, there isn't much for Waterstones bookshop to shelve under the heading Brussels fiction.

Unless of course you count Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). The novel is set in a fictional city, so it isn't strictly a Brussels novel, but it is clearly based on the city where Charlotte studied and later taught in 1842-1843.

Many Brontë experts have described Charlotte's impressions of Belgium, but few have considered what the Belgians thought of Charlotte. The Brussels-based writer and translator Helen MacEwan now fills this gap with her second carefully researched Brontë book: *Through Belgian Eyes: Charlotte Brontë's Troubled Brussels Legacy*.

In the course of fourteen chapters, MacEwan builds up a detailed portrait of life in Brussels during the 1840s. She draws on a wide range of sources, including old newspaper articles, travel pieces and archive prints to create a rich panorama of Brussels life.

MacEwan is a sharp observer who charts the urban transformation of Brussels in the nineteenth century. She describes the new boulevards and grand museums that were intended to turn Brussels into a mini Paris. But she also describes the depressing destruction in 1909 of the famous Pensionnat Heger that formed the setting for Charlotte's *Villette*.

MacEwan has dug deeply in French and Dutch sources to find out every possible nugget linked to Charlotte Brontë's stay in Brussels. She has even translated a *De Standaard* article by Kristien Hemmerechts in which the Flemish writer forgives Charlotte for her unflattering description of the Flemish. 'Whatever she may have said, it is thrilling that this great English author wrote about "us",' Hemmerechts said.

While MacEwan's book is rooted in nineteenth-century Brussels, the author realises the Brontë story has a modern resonance. In a chapter on the immigrant experience in Brussels, she unearths a book on migrants in Brussels by historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver which unexpectedly cites Lucy Snowe's experience in the city as an example of a young immigrant woman finding her place in a foreign city.

The book is dotted with other unexpected observations that might seem odd in a book about Charlotte Brontë. Who would have thought there was any connection between the author of *Villette* and the Brussels comic book writer François Schuiten? But MacEwan has found it in the buried section of the Rue Isabelle, close to the site of the Pensionnat, where Schuiten locates a passage to a fictional 'obscure city'.

The Pensionnat Heger in Brussels

The author's determination to uncover every last Brontë crumb is evident in the chapter titled *The Brontës in Africa and Charlotte in the Congo*. It seems a puzzling title, since the Brontës never set foot in the Congo, which moreover was only acquired by King Leopold II in 1885. But MacEwan has uncovered a 1956 article, *Les Brontës en Afrique*, by the author Marie Gevers, in which she reflects on the Brontës during a trip to the Belgian Congo.

But it is the love affair, real or imagined, between Charlotte and her teacher Constantin Heger that brings most people to the Isabella Quarter in Brussels. MacEwan's book doesn't try to resolve the nature of Charlotte's 'hopeless romantic love'. But her forensic examination of Charlotte's letters to Heger prove that it was a complex infatuation that we will probably never properly understand.

Not many writers have succeeded in producing an authentic portrait of Brussels. Most authors, from Baudelaire to Bill Bryson, have contributed nothing much more than another caustic essay in Brussels bashing. But MacEwan shows that Charlotte Brontë, while often critical, was alive to every detail in the city, from the distinctive pistolet rolls to the dreary daily routine in a Catholic girls' school.

Like her subject, MacEwan has a piercing eye that is alert to every detail of Brussels urban life. Her detailed and nuanced book deserves to be read by anyone interested in Charlotte Brontë or the city she wrote about in such a compelling way.

MacEwan cites several newspaper articles in which eminent Belgian writers and critics have urged the city to put up a memorial to the Brontës.

Their efforts have so far failed to convince the authorities, but we at least have MacEwan's rich and readable book to remind us of an extraordinary moment in European literary history.

DEREK BLYTH

Helen MacEwan, *Through Belgian Eyes: Charlotte Brontë's Troubled Brussels Legacy*, Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne, 2017, 312 p.

A Soldier at a Typewriter

Alfred Birney's Novel about Java

Alfred Birney's (1951) book *De tolk van Java* (The Interpreter from Java) makes its readers shiver. It is a novel about a traumatised father, Arend, who murdered dozens of people in Indonesia during the war, a war which for him simply continued within the family he subsequently began in the Netherlands. That war only ends for Arend's son, the first-person narrator of the novel, with his father's death. 'I won't fight anymore, this is where it ends', states the final sentence of this rich novel about identity, trauma, racism (in Indonesia, in the Netherlands and in the Dutch army), the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, the bloody battle of the Dutch against Indonesian independence, a father who abuses his children and the boarding-school life which begins for the narrator and the four other children from the family when they are sent away from home. The reader will find no sweet nostalgia here (that is a 'lie', writes the father, and the narrator wants nothing to do with it either) or a description of childhood paradise, as is often the case in famous Dutch literature about Indonesia.

Birney has lived with this theme for years, but his novel came along at the right moment: in 2016, the year in which *De tolk van Java* was published, the Netherlands saw the reopening and deepening of a discussion of war crimes committed by the Dutch army, which was tasked with restoring the colonial administration in Indonesia after 1945, and about the government which did not wish to accept independence. Until then the official version had stated that the main issue had been incidental 'excesses' (rape, robbery and plundering), rather than structural war crimes, covered up by the colonial administration, the Dutch government and the military judiciary. After new research it can no longer be denied that the Dutch army was responsible for systematic war crimes.

De tolk van Java begins with a sentence about Arend which stretches over more than a page, describing what he saw and heard, stating who he betrayed, and that he was tortured and helped the Allies. These are stories which Arend always told his son, his son who hates him, who sees him as a mass murderer and who accuses him of largely ruining his life. Arend raises his children as he himself was raised: harshly and with liberal use of his fists, confirmed in his path by his traumatic war experiences. He always sleeps with a knife within reach, even taking it with him in his bicycle pannier when he goes into town, and one day he pursues one of his suspected enemies in The Hague carrying it.

Birney makes his father the central character and his identity is far from unambiguous: born in Java as the illegitimate son of an Indo-European father, who refuses to acknowledge him, and a Chinese mother, he is the only one in his family to identify with the Netherlands. While his fellow soldiers keep pin-ups on their walls, above his bed hangs a portrait of the queen of the Netherlands. Due to the turbulent events in Indonesia, Arend regularly changes sides and doubts his choices: together with Indonesian friends he fights the Japanese occupiers, but after 1945 he sides with the Dutch against his compatriots. Indonesia is not his country, he says: as an illegitimate child he has been humiliated by the 'Indo' (Dutch-Indonesian) people and as an Indo boy he found himself caught between the Dutch and the Indonesians. His son doubts his principles and suspects that Arend simply always took the side of the strongest party. Just before his departure for the Netherlands, Arend plans to change his name to Noland, in order 'to distance himself from colonially tinted Indo-Europeans and similarly white Indonesian Dutch people'. It is a name which speaks volumes for his hybrid identity, and one which also has predictive power, as he will never feel at home in the Netherlands either. His intended paradise turns out to be a country riddled with racism.

When I say that Birney's novel makes me shiver, it is an allusion to a pronouncement by a member of the Dutch House of Representatives, who in 1860