

*The Lady and the Luddite* is an historical romance by English-born Northern Territory writer Linden Salter. Salter has taken characters and incidents from Charlotte Bronte’s second novel *Shirley*, and shaped an exciting tale of class revolt and forbidden love, set in Yorkshire in Regency times. The Industrial Revolution, and its violent opposition by the Luddites, working men driven to destroy the machines which are stealing their jobs, forms the setting for both novels. However, while Bronte’s heroine, the heiress Shirley Keeldar, marries against the wishes of her family, her husband is an educated man of a good though impoverished family; whereas Salter’s Shirley falls for a working-class hero, a Luddite named Tom Mellor. She doesn’t mention it, but surely Salter had Lady Chatterley’s lover Oliver Mellors in mind when she chose the name for her sexy, rebellious Yorkshireman – one of the few characters who has no equivalent in Bronte’s novel.

Salter has rearranged the elements of Bronte’s story to suit her own purposes. Her Shirley is recognisably Bronte’s heroine, but other characters have been altered with varying degrees of subtlety. Bronte’s imperfect but ultimately worthwhile hero Robert Moore becomes Salter’s villain – a heartless industrialist and a would-be rapist. Caroline Helstone, who loves Robert Moore, is, for Bronte, a character as interesting and central to the novel as Shirley, whereas in Salter’s novel she is shadowy and somewhat insipid. Bronte’s novel is peopled with a large cast of characters, while Salter’s, at less than half the length, dispenses with many minor and some major characters. *The Lady and the Luddite* is told in the first person by Shirley, while Bronte uses an interesting mix of third person narrative and first person reportage: we are never privy to all the facts but the character we know the most about is Caroline Helstone, rather than Shirley. Many parts of the story are similar, although Salter’s Shirley consents to an engagement of convenience which Bronte’s Shirley scorns to consider. To Bronte, it is patently immoral to accept a proposal from a man one cannot love and respect; but Salter allows her heroine, in a more lackadavisical modern fashion, to enter an engagement with the vapid Sir Philip Nunnely, whom she ‘liked well enough,’ feeling that ‘in the real world of husbands and wives … passion had no part’, only to reject him when she finds he doesn’t suit her after all. The fact of Shirley’s attraction to the Luddite makes the later novel more politically charged: for Bronte, the political and social elements were important but not so very central to the plot.

Salter’s sex scene would also surely displease Charlotte Bronte. Bronte’s writing is as erotically charged as possible without being explicit – perhaps even more so, but when Salter’s Shirley and Tom finally get together, it is all rather matter-of-fact and cheerful, without the wordless and self-forgetful ecstasy which Bronte would have described had she been less circumscribed by the sexual mores of the Victoria age.

This is not to say, however, that Salter is not subject to a set of sexual conventions which might be just as restrictive in their way. The exciting scene in Bronte’s novel where the spirited Shirley is subdued by her lover would offend modern sensibilities: instead, Salter’s Shirley offers herself to the loving but honourable Tom Mellor in a rational, articulate speech: ‘It’s because it’s our
last chance, and because we’ll regret it the rest of our lives if we don’t.’ There’s no lack of emotion, but the morality and sensibility belong to our own age. The insistent male, who in Bronte’s world might press his suit unwisely but thrillingly, but would not dream of rape, becomes in Salter’s world a despicable bully whose violent advances must be fought off and is condemned, even, finally, by his hitherto spineless wife.

We can’t, of course, criticise *The Lady and the Luddite* any more than *Shirley* for being characteristic of its time. They are both well-written and exciting novels, with attractive, intriguing characters and solid historical background. Reading Salter’s novel impelled me to read Bronte’s, and for that I am grateful: as she says in her prefatory note, *Shirley* is neglected, and unfairly so: to me it is at least as good as *Jane Eyre* and in many ways more interesting. But, quite apart from its literary antecedents, *The Lady and the Luddite* is a intelligent, cleverly constructed novel and jolly good read in its own right. I won’t give away the ending, but I will say that Salter leaves herself scope for a sequel with a setting rather closer to home.

*Gillian Dooley*