

MRS. GASKELL'S
LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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WITH AN APPENDIX ON SOME NEW GASKELL LETTERS
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IF Lytton Strachey was right when he claimed in the preface to *Eminent Victorians* that biography is "the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing", we should not perhaps be surprised that Mrs. Gaskell was able to produce one of the finest examples of the genre in English literature. In four novels written between 1848 and 1855 she had already demonstrated her delicate appreciation of life and her humane understanding of her fellow-beings before she came to write the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. These novels demonstrate her capacity for fine observation, sensitive appreciation and sympathetic concern for the human condition. To these was added an intimate acquaintance with the remarkable woman who formed the subject of her study.

Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë had known each other for only five years, from 1850 to Charlotte's death in 1855, but it was a friendship of tremendous warmth and attachment on both sides. Charlotte Brontë had sent Mrs. Gaskell a copy of *Shirley* in November 1849, but they did not meet until 19 August 1850—at Briery Close, Windermere, the house of Sir James and Lady Kay-Shuttleworth. Charlotte had stayed with them at Gawthorp Hall, Burnley for three days in March.¹ It is probably to this occasion that Mrs. Gaskell is referring in a letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, in which she also mentions her desire to meet Charlotte. This must be quoted at some length²:

¹ *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence* (Shakespeare Head Brontë), ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (1932), iii. 81-82. (Hereafter referred to as "S.H.B.").

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No! I never heard of Miss Brontë's visit; and I should like to hear a great deal more about her, as I have been so much interested in what she has written. I don't mean merely in the story and mode of narration, wonderful as that is, but in the glimpse one gets of *her*, and her modes of thought, and, all unconsciously to herself, of the way in wh. she has suffered. I wonder if she suffers *now*. Soon after I saw you at Capesthorpe I heard such a nice account of her, from a gentleman who went over to see her father, and staid at the inn, where he was told of her doings as well as her sayings and writings. I should like very much indeed to know her: I was going to write to 'see' her, but that is not it. I think I told you that I disliked a good deal in the plot of Shirley, but the expression of her own thoughts in it is so true and brave, that I really admire her. I am half amused to find you think I could do her good. (I don't know if you exactly word it so, but I think it is what you mean.) I *never* feel as if I could do anyone good—I never yet was conscious of strengthening anyone, and I do so feel to want strength and to want faith. I suppose we all *do* strengthen each other by clashing together, and earnestly talking our own thoughts, and ideas.

Lady Kay-Shuttleworth seems to have displayed a rare perceptiveness in foreseeing the beneficial influence that Mrs. Gaskell might exercise on Charlotte, but our main interest in this extract lies in Mrs. Gaskell's attraction thus early to the mind and emotions of the individual behind the novelist.

Mrs. Gaskell has left a number of accounts of this first meeting, but for our purpose it is sufficient to quote from only one of these, a letter to Mrs. Froude¹:

Miss Brontë I like. Her faults are the faults of the very peculiar circumstances in which she has been placed; and she possesses a charming union of simplicity and power; and a strong feeling of responsibility for the Gift, which she has given her. She is very little & very plain. Her stunted person she ascribes to the scanty supply of food she had as a growing girl, when at that school of the Daughters of the Clergy. Two of her sisters died there, of the low fever she speaks about in *Jane Eyre*. She is the last of six; lives in a wild out of the way village in the Yorkshire Moors with a wayward eccentric wild father,—their parsonage facing the North—no flowers or shrub or tree can grow in the plot of ground, on acct. of the biting winds. The sitting room looks into the church-yard. Her father & she each dine and sit alone. She scrambled into what education she has had. Indeed I never heard of so hard, and dreary a life,—extreme poverty is added to their trials,—it (poverty) was no trial till her sisters had long lingering illnesses. She is truth itself—and of a very noble sterling nature,—which has never been called out by anything kind or genial.

It is obvious from this extract that Mrs. Gaskell was much impressed by Charlotte's character and attitude and also by the

¹ Reproduced by kind permission of the New York Public Library (Berg Collection).

version she gave of her life and surroundings, "the very peculiar circumstances in which she has been placed". Closer acquaintance did little to modify the vivid impression of Charlotte's life which she gave to Mrs. Gaskell at this first meeting.

Charlotte stayed with the Gaskells in Manchester for a day or two in June 1851¹ and again in April 1853 and May 1854,² whilst Mrs. Gaskell visited Haworth in September 1853.³ In a letter quoted in the *Life* Mrs. Gaskell referred to the journey on "a dull, drizzly Indian-inky day, all the way on the railroad to Keighley". She goes on :—

The day was lead-coloured; the road had stone factories alongside of it,—grey dull-coloured rows of stone cottages belonging to these factories, and then we came to poor, hungry-looking fields;—stone fences everywhere, and trees nowhere. Haworth is a long, straggling village: one steep narrow street . . . [and] the church;—moors everywhere beyond and above. The crowded graveyard surrounds the [parsonage] house.⁴

This first view of Haworth must have reinforced the impression of Charlotte already received. The very locality in which she lived assisted those other "very peculiar circumstances in which she [had] been placed". All around was gloom, harshness and severity. Mrs. Gaskell visited Haworth again after she was commissioned to write the *Life*. She was there on 23 July 1855,⁵ and in a letter to the Haworth stationer and friend of the Brontë sisters, John Greenwood, she spoke of going over again "probably from Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth's in August".⁶ This was doubtless the famous occasion on which Sir James accompanied her and which she describes in a letter to her publisher George Smith, the visit in which Sir James brusquely bore down all resistance and they left with the manuscript of *The Professor*, the beginning of a new tale and Mr. Nicholls (Charlotte's husband's) reluctant agreement to allow his wife's portrait to be photographed. These later visits do not appear in any way to have modified Mrs. Gaskell's first sombre assessment of Haworth and its environs.

¹ See S.H.B. iii. 254.

² Ibid. iv. 64, 121 and *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 3rd edn. (1857), ii. 295-8 (hereafter referred to as *Life*. Quotations from 3rd edition except where otherwise stated).

³ *Life*, ii. 305-12.

⁴ Ibid. ii. 306.

⁵ S.H.B. iv. 191.

⁶ 25 July 1855. Quoted by permission of Mrs. M. Preston of Haworth. (Later references to letters belonging to Mrs. Preston will be noted as Preston.)

Mrs. Gaskell thus brought to the task of writing the biography a deep interest in an unusual personality, a tender concern for her friend and a definite opinion about the circumstances and environment of her life. The news of Charlotte's death on 30 March 1855 was given to Mrs. Gaskell by John Greenwood. Replying to his letter on 4 April¹ she wrote :

I cannot tell you how *very* sad your note has made me. My dear dear friend that I shall never see again on earth! I did not even know she was ill. . . . Strangers might know her by her great fame, but we loved her dearly for her goodness, truth, and kindness, & those lovely qualities she carries with her where she is gone.

The letter ends :

I loved her dearly, more than I think she knew. I shall never cease to be thankful that I knew her : or to mourn her loss.

This profound attachment was no doubt a compelling factor in Mrs. Gaskell's decision to write a memoir even before Charlotte's father asked her to do so. On 31 May she wrote to George Smith²:

If I live long enough, and no one is living whom such a publication would hurt, I will publish what I know of her, and make the world (if I am but strong enough in expression) honour the woman as much as they admired the writer.

Less than a week later Charlotte's friend, Ellen Nussey, was writing to Mr. Nicholls complaining of an article in *Sharpe's Magazine* and wishing

Mrs. Gaskell, who is every way capable, would undertake a reply, and would give a sound castigation to the writer. Her personal acquaintance with Haworth, the Parsonage, and its inmates, fits her for the task.³

As a result, Patrick Brontë requested Mrs. Gaskell to undertake the task of writing an account of Charlotte.⁴

An authorized biography, however, is a very different thing from what Mrs. Gaskell had originally proposed, and it may perhaps be appropriate at this point to consider some of the problems which every biographer must face. Biography is essentially a study of human relationships focused upon a central figure. It is an art that demands truth and candour, and, if

¹ Preston.

² Quoted by permission of Sir John Murray. (Later references to letters belonging to Sir John Murray will be noted as Murray.)

³ S.H.B. iv. 189, letter of 6 June 1855. ⁴ *Ibid.* iv. 190-1, 16 June 1855.

Dr. Johnson is to be believed, it even requires that the writer should be personally acquainted with his subject. Boswell reports him as saying that "Nobody can write the life of a man but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him".¹ Whilst such an acquaintance is likely to provide an intimate knowledge and even understanding, its very intimacy may lead to bias, to a loss of detachment, a failure or inadequacy in truth and candour. It is obvious from her comments that Mrs. Gaskell was concerned to portray Charlotte Brontë in the best light possible, and it is clear also from her reaction to Patrick Brontë's request that she immediately found herself hindered in that task by her inability to say what she would have said about many circumstances of Charlotte's life :

I shall have now to omit a good deal of detail as to her home, and the circumstances which must have had so much to do in forming her character. All these can be merely indicated during the lifetime of her father, and to a certain degree in the lifetime of her husband.²

Nevertheless, she was determined to be as little inhibited as possible. With what results we shall see later. This letter, however, reminds us that the biographer's consideration is not limited to his or her view of the central subject, but must also include attitudes towards all the other persons referred to. It confronts us with the problem of relevance in various forms—how far, for instance, should an author explore the character and activities of such persons and to what extent should he comment upon them either implicitly or otherwise? Indeed, there is the question as to how far the writer should comment at all. All these questions arise in a criticism of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The Branwell Brontë-Lady Scott affair would provide a test-case here.³

Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of this episode reminds us of another problem which particularly beset the biographer in Victorian times, that of relation to the contemporary ethos. What did the audience expect? How much might it be prepared to accept? And, as we consider the question, how much is to be expected from the biographer himself? Carlyle, commenting on criticisms of

¹ *Life*, ed. Hill and Powell (1934), ii. 166.

² Letter to George Smith, 18 June 1955 (Murray). ³ See below, pp. 474 ff.

Lockhart's *Life of Scott* for being too indiscreet, too outspoken, remarked :

How delicate, decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth ! A Damocles' sword of *Respectability* hangs for ever over the poor English life-writer (as it does over poor English life in general), and reduces him to the verge of paralysis. . . . The English biographer has long felt that if in writing his Man's Biography, he wrote down anything that could by possibility offend any man, he had written wrong.¹

Mrs. Gaskell did not spare Lady Scott. Indeed, her daring disregard for respectability in this aspect of the matter led to her being threatened with a libel action and to withdrawal of offensive passages. These very passages, however, in their indignant moral condemnation are not free from the influence of Mrs. Gaskell's own adherence to Victorian attitudes. As Virginia Woolf remarked, "the Victorian biographer was dominated by the idea of goodness".² Though there was no sentimental heroine-worship, Mrs. Gaskell was certainly intent on exalting the goodness of Charlotte ; and because of Charlotte's goodness amid the greater than normal trials of her life, Mrs. Gaskell attacked all the more fiercely the person responsible, as she thought, for Charlotte's unnecessary sufferings. She did not spare Lady Scott's moral turpitude, especially as the latter was still considered *respectable* and accepted in London society.

I have said that Mrs. Gaskell was intent upon exalting Charlotte's goodness. This is an estimate of character, and reminds us of yet other problems, those of psychological analysis and judgement. Here perhaps we twentieth-century readers may easily set forth a desire which the biographers in centuries before our own rarely, if ever, set out to fulfil. Even though in this case the biographer was a novelist, there is but little effort to interpret the inner life of the subject. Mrs. Gaskell, it is clear, began with a firm idea of Charlotte's character based on their friendship and intimacy. She conceived of her task as being to place her subject's character in its setting, to relate Charlotte to those around her, to trace her history and, as far as possible, to do so by letting her speak for herself. There was to be no close or

¹ Review of Lockhart's *Life of Scott* in *The London and Westminster Review*, January 1838, p. 299.

² "The New Biography", *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 October 1927.

intricate psychological exploration and analysis. Indeed, on the penultimate page of the work Mrs. Gaskell explicitly disavows her capacity for such an undertaking: "I cannot measure or judge of such a character as hers. I cannot map out vices and virtues, and debateable land."¹ One may perhaps take leave to question Mrs. Gaskell's modesty, but certainly in the *Life* she did not attempt the task which here she says she could not carry out.

I said above that she sought to let Charlotte speak for herself. In preparing the *Life* Mrs. Gaskell not only tried to visit every place at which Charlotte had stayed—Haworth, London, Cowan Bridge, even Brussels—but also to see and use as many of Charlotte's letters as possible. Writing to George Smith in August 1856, she said: "Her language, where it can be used, is so powerful and living, that it would be a shame not to express everything that can be, in her own words."² Mrs. Gaskell thus recognized the point made by a nineteenth-century critic, namely, that

letters, written in the genuine confidence of self-disclosure, offer, certainly, the most important materials to biographical composition . . . letters lay open the communication of [the writer's] very thoughts and purposes.³

Ellen Nussey supplied over three hundred and fifty letters, the earliest being written in 1832, and continued up to a few days before Charlotte's death.⁴ These form the basic substance of the book. It is interesting to contrast the reliance Mrs. Gaskell placed on the letters with her estimate of the recollections of others, assiduously as she sought after and collected these. As soon as Greenwood informed her of Charlotte's death, she urged him: "I want to know *every* particular. Has she been long ill? What was her illness?"⁵ This same urgent curiosity extended from her desire for details of the last days to other matters. A month later she writes: "*Every* thing you can tell me about her and her sisters—of *her* especially is most valuable. . . . When did *you* first know of 'Currer Bell'?"⁶ This was no doubt in part

¹ *Life*, ii. 335.

² Murray.

³ J. F. Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (1813), q. J. L. Clifford, *Biography as an Art* (1962), p. 71.

⁴ Murray. Cf. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work* (1952), p. 165.

⁵ Letter of 4 April 1855 (Preston).

⁶ Letter of 5 May 1855 (Preston).

the response to a ready informant. She sent some of Greenwood's letters to George Smith on three occasions in June 1855, but on the last she comments: "One can see that poor John Greenwood takes things according to the impulse of the moment, from the contradictory accounts of Mr. Nicholls that he sends."¹

In fairness to Greenwood one should perhaps say that at this stage, difficult as she felt that Nicholls might be from things that Charlotte herself had said, Mrs. Gaskell had not yet entered into the most trying period of her relationship with him. After her visit to Haworth in 1855 Mrs. Gaskell reported to her daughter Marianne that she liked Mr. Nicholls.² The August visit with Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth no doubt sadly enlightened her, and in the letter I have already quoted about the vividness of Charlotte's own letters, she asks Smith not to allow

the letters to assume a prominent form in the title or printing; as Mr. Nicholls has a strong objection to letters being printed at all; and wished to have all her letters (to Miss Nussey and every one else) burned.³

By November she was in despair. H. F. Chorley had informed her that permission for publication rested not with the correspondent, but the executor, and that Nicholls might therefore forbid quotation. She concludes: "Oh! if once I have finished this biography, catch me writing another!"⁴

Even with letters, however, and with the subject's own reminiscences there is the question of credibility. How far is her statement accurate? How far is it coloured by factors for which allowance must be made? Attitudes towards the topic under discussion, attitudes towards the correspondent or interlocutor, the characteristic inclinations and attitudes of the writer herself must all be allowed for. In other words, the biographer must try to read between the lines. Mrs. Gaskell tried to do this, for instance, in the Cowan Bridge episode. Were things as bad as Charlotte had said? In July 1855 she told George Smith of her enquiry to the Miss Temple of *Jane Eyre*:

I think that she may give me some particulars of that Cowan Bridge time, & possibly some explanations which may modify that account of the school in *Jane Eyre*, which took such a strong hold on the public mind.⁵

¹ Murray.

² 27 July 1855. Letter in the Brotherton Collection, University of Leeds.

³ Murray.

⁴ 15 November 1856 (Murray).

⁵ Murray.

This episode, the Lady Scott incident and Mrs. Gaskell's own remarks about heeding the feelings of Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls reminds us of another of her problems. Having collected her material, how was she to use it? How was it to be arranged? What were to be the criteria of selection, and not least of exclusion? The basic arrangement she determined very sensibly was to be chronological. The picture of Charlotte she wished to paint required as little exclusion of material as possible, and her insistence on this brought about the troubles which followed the book's publication. On one subject, however, Mrs. Gaskell insisted on omission. That was the matter of Charlotte's relationship with Monsieur Héger, the Brussels teacher, to whom she went in 1843. An article in *The Times* of 29 July 1913, together with four letters of Charlotte's, revealed the full story of her deep but unreturned passion for M. Héger. This stage in Charlotte's life presented difficulties of representation. M. Héger's position had to be protected, but Mrs. Gaskell did not want to present Charlotte in a bad light. Yet she had to explain the reasons for the estrangement of Charlotte and Madame Héger. Mrs. Gaskell blamed it on Madame Héger's reaction to Charlotte's outspoken Protestant criticism of that lady's Roman Catholicism.¹ She even goes so far as to say that it was "a silent estrangement . . . of which, perhaps, the former, i.e. Madame Héger was hardly aware". This scarcely fits in with Madame Héger's refusal to see the friend of Charlotte Brontë when Mrs. Gaskell visited Brussels.

Did Mrs. Gaskell see these letters? Miss Hopkins has discussed this question at some length in her biography of Mrs. Gaskell² and concludes that M. Héger probably showed Mrs. Gaskell the letters and prepared the extracts for her. I am not sure that she actually saw them, because she refers in a letter to Smith³ to "hearing" the letters. She certainly knew them well enough to know that they were dangerous. This explains her anxiety about the proposal of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth for publishing Charlotte Brontë's novel *The Professor*. She knew this referred to the Brussels era of Charlotte's life, and

¹ *Life*, i. 311-12.

² *Op. cit.* pp. 195-7.

³ Murray, ? 1 August 1856.

dreaded lest the Prof. should involve anything with M. Héger . . . I believed him too good to publish those letters—but I felt that his friends might with some justice urge him to do so.¹

The two passages quoted in the *Life*² consist in the first case of two paragraphs, one from the first letter, the other from the second, and in the second of a further passage from the first letter. Was this all that M. Héger allowed her to have? Whatever be the answer to that question, we now know more fully than Mrs. Gaskell allowed us to know what lay behind Charlotte's remark in a letter of 23 January 1844: "I suffered much before I left Brussels. I think, however long I live, I shall not forget what the parting with M. Héger cost me."³ It is no wonder that Mrs. Gaskell was so apprehensive about Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth's enthusiasm to publish *The Professor* which she felt related more to M. Héger even than *Villette*. In the letter to Smith already quoted, she wrote: "I can not tell you how I should deprecate anything leading to publication of those letters of M. Héger's." Her fears about what *The Professor* might reveal were stilled when she read the book⁴ and realized that nothing in it would compel M. Héger to publish the letters. It is difficult to know exactly what course Mrs. Gaskell ought to have pursued, but I am unable to go as far as Miss Hopkins in believing that "she was entirely right in protecting both Charlotte and her correspondent".⁵ Even if Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls were hanging on every word she wrote,⁶ it seems to me that the utmost brevity and even omission of reasons would have been preferable to the distortion that results from the deliberate exclusion of the real cause and the consequent exaggeration of what at best must have been a subsidiary reason for Charlotte's estrangement from the Hégers.

Though the circle of Charlotte Brontë's life was narrow, her experience ran deep and all the more intense for her own nature. In addition to this, her life was surrounded by an almost unrelieved tragic aura. "All her life was but labour and pain", wrote Mary Taylor,⁷ who next to Ellen Nussey, was her closest

¹ To Emily Shaen, 8 September 1856.

² i. 330-1, 336.

³ *Life*, i. 316.

⁴ Letter of 13 August 1856 (Murray).

⁵ Op. cit. p. 194.

⁶ Ibid. p. 197.

⁷ *Life*, ii. 336.

friend. Her mother dying when she was five, Charlotte was left one of six children with a remote and eccentric father in a bleak moorland village. Going to a school whose conditions and discipline seem to us today to be hardly credible, she there saw her two elder sisters decline and shortly afterwards die. Her second school (Roe Head) was a better one and brought her the acquaintance of the two people who were to become her most intimate friends. Thereafter, however, there were two unsuccessful governess-ships, the failure to start a school with her sisters, the sad culmination to her stay in Brussels, and, as literary fame was developing, the terrors of the dissipated Branwell and the deaths of her two remaining sisters. Finally, after a brief nine months of marriage, came Charlotte's own death. There could be no better rhetoric to conclude the history of such a life than the simple, bare description, the controlled understatement with which Mrs. Gaskell ends her account of Charlotte :

Early on Saturday morning, March 31st, the solemn tolling of Haworth church-bell spoke forth the fact of her death to the villagers who had known her from a child, and whose hearts shivered within them as they thought of the two sitting desolate and alone in the old grey house.¹

Mrs. Gaskell ended her story where she began it, reminding us of the child who grew up in this place and among this people. I have referred above to the letter which she quotes describing her visit to Haworth in 1853. The *Life* begins with a similar account, first describing Keighley and the view of Haworth one gets approaching from that direction,

on the side of a pretty steep hill, with a background of dun and purple moors . . . wild, bleak moors—grand, from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous and illimitable barrier.

Here, incidentally, is that economy of means which always served Mrs. Gaskell so well in her pithily suggestive passages of description. Next, she gives us a picture of the village, the steep, cobbled street, the stone-houses, the church and the parsonage, then the interior of the church, and finally the Brontë memorial tablet, with its record of so many premature deaths, the mother in her thirty-ninth year, the children, eleven, ten, thirty,

¹ *Life*, ii. 333.

twenty-nine, twenty-seven, and nearby the tablet to Charlotte herself, like her mother, in the thirty-ninth year of her age. Thus ends Chapter One. Mrs. Gaskell goes on with a racy account of the independence and, even, rebelliousness of the Haworth populace, telling of the rough treatment they meted out to Red-head, Patrick Brontë's predecessor, who, as they thought, had been wrongly thrust upon them. This with other anecdotes establishes that sense of place, which Charlotte herself described as one of "barbarism, loneliness and liberty".

A chapter is given next to the Brontë parents and the children's early life. Thus due prominence is given to the strangeness of Patrick Brontë, though later, and perhaps in the circumstances understandably, Mrs. Gaskell does not seem to notice explicitly enough the possibly hereditary influences in the children's temperaments. Enough, however, is implicit for us not to regret this omission overmuch. The next chapter deals with Cowan Bridge and the searing impression that that experience left on Charlotte. Then on to a chapter about the juvenile writings, which she describes in a letter to Smith as "the wildest and most incoherent things. . . . They give one the idea of creative power carried to the verge of insanity."¹ She compared them with the work of Blake. This shows Mrs. Gaskell's recognition of their literary power. It is a pity that she did not spend more time upon them, for she would, I think, have recognized their importance. As it is, one must agree with Miss Hopkins that, with the *Life* as we have it, it appears that Mrs. Gaskell "probably did not understand their full significance"²; or if she did, she recoiled from something she did not like. Is that the meaning behind the reference to "the verge of insanity"? The next two chapters conclude the story of Charlotte's girlhood on a more tranquil note, with the accounts of Roe Head and her return home to Haworth.

The second half of the first volume covers the period from 1835 to 1846. It deals with the two spells as governess, the stay in Brussels, the increasing difficulties caused by Branwell's behaviour and the advent of the curates to Haworth. It is concerned also with the family's literary attempts, their letters to Wordsworth and

¹ Murray.

² Op. cit. p. 172.

Southey ; and the volume ends with the publication of *Poems* by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. The letters in which Charlotte describes her governess experiences illustrate particularly well that vividness which led Mrs. Gaskell to want to allow them to tell their own tale. A brief sentence or two will illustrate the point :

I will only ask you to imagine the miseries of a reserved wretch like me, thrown at once into a large family, at a time when they were particularly gay. . . . In that state I had charge given me of a set of pampered, spoilt, turbulent children. . . . At times I felt—and, I suppose, seemed—depressed. To my astonishment I was taken to task by Mrs. [Sidgwick] with a sternness of manner and a harshness of language hardly credible.¹

Charlotte was not made to be a governess, and she knew it :

No one but myself can tell how hard a governess's work is to me—for no one but myself is aware how utterly averse my whole mind and nature are for the employment.²

Mrs. Gaskell seeks some explanation in the motherless childhood, but it would seem better to trace it to that delicate and hypersensitive nervous and emotional organization which is evident at every stage of Charlotte's history. Mrs. Gaskell knew how sensitive she was, and one can feel the effort involved in restraining herself when she introduces this phase of Charlotte's life with the declared resolution "carefully to abstain from introducing the names of any living people, respecting whom I may have to tell unpleasant truths, or to quote severe remarks from Miss Brontë's letters".³

With the single exception of the Héger episode Mrs. Gaskell refused to shirk the unpleasant duty of telling unpleasant truths. Early in the second volume she narrates the last days of Branwell's ill-starred career. Apart from the need to explain the sisters' suffering at his hands, she adduces another reason :

It is well that the thoughtless critics who spoke of the sad and gloomy views of life presented by the Brontës in their tales, should know how such words were wrung out of them by the living recollection of the long agony they suffered.⁴

Mrs. Gaskell was throughout intent on explaining the writers by the individuals who lay behind them. Hence *Cowan Bridge*, hence the governess episodes, hence even the description of

¹ *Life*, i. 201.

³ *Ibid.* 197.

² *Ibid.* 234.

⁴ *Ibid.* ii. 50.

Haworth's bleak environs, though Mrs. Gaskell seems signally to have failed to appreciate Emily's sombre vision.¹

The second volume begins with the account of Charlotte's first adventure into fiction with the writing of *The Professor*, and thus it covers the effective career of Charlotte as a writer. It is therefore devoted mainly to her novels, the impact they made and the introduction to the great world which they brought her. There is more of Currer Bell than Charlotte Brontë, but, to say truth, the vivid moments of the second half of the *Life*, with the exception only of the visit to London and the stay at the Chapter Coffee-House, belong to the private life of the family circle rather than the public world of the novelist. Even the Chapter Coffee-House episode derives most of its appeal from its quaintness of situation—ignorant provincial young ladies on a visit to London, staying at the only place they know about, and that an out-moded tavern, once the resort of booksellers, later of country clergymen. The whole incident is one of comedy and pathos. Here were the two young sisters in a strange place, "a place solely frequented by men. . . . Few people slept there. . . . The old 'grey-haired elderly man', who officiated as waiter . . . touched from the very first with the quiet simplicity of the two ladies, . . . tried to make them feel comfortable and at home in the long, low dingy room upstairs, where the meetings of the publishing Trade were held."²

These lines show Mrs. Gaskell's capacity to capture and represent the essence of a situation in a few strokes. The same ability shows itself in the comparatively rare occasions on which she was able to use dialogue. In a short scene she manages to suggest the remoteness, condescension and pleasurable surprise of Patrick Brontë. The occasion was the publication of *Jane Eyre* :

"Papa, I've been writing a book."

"Have you, my dear?"

"Yes, and I want you to read it."

"I am afraid it will try my eyes too much."

"But it is not in manuscript; it is printed."

¹ Cf. letter of 9 December 1857: "I cannot say I agree with you in preferring "Wuthering Heights" to their other works—notwithstanding its wonderfully fine opening" (quoted by permission of Harvard University Library).

² *Life*, ii. 72-73.

“ My dear ! You’ve never thought of the expense it will be ! It will be almost sure to be a loss, for how can you get a book sold ? No one knows you or your name.”

“ But, Papa, I don’t think it will be a loss ; no more will you, if you will just let me read you a review or two, and tell you more about it.”

So she sate down and read some of her reviews to her father ; and then, giving him the copy of “ Jane Eyre ” that she intended for him, she left him to read it. When he came in to tea, he said, “ Girls, do you know Charlotte has been writing a book, and it is much better than likely ? ”¹

Both these incidents and that which I go on to describe come from the long second chapter of the second volume, covering the years 1847 and 1848. Eventful these years were, both happy and sorrowful. Mrs. Gaskell’s resources were more than sufficient for the task of covering such various emotions. Her handling of the paragraphs describing Emily’s illness and death is a masterpiece of arrangement and emphasis. She begins with a quotation of Charlotte’s biographical notice of her sisters :

My sister Emily first declined. . . . Day by day, when I saw with what a front she met suffering, I looked on her with an anguish of wonder and love. I have seen nothing like it ; but, indeed, I have never seen her parallel in anything. Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone. The awful point was, that, while full of ruth for others, on herself she had no pity ; the spirit was inexorable to the flesh.²

A brief comment by Mrs. Gaskell, then quotations from two of the letters giving details of Emily’s weakness and Charlotte’s anguish :

A more hollow, wasted, pallid aspect I have not beheld. The deep tight cough continues. . . . She resolutely refuses to see a doctor. . . . God only knows how all this is to terminate.³

That was on 23 November 1848. There is another letter of 10 December, from which Mrs. Gaskell cleverly includes a second paragraph about visitors and estrangements, so suggestive of Charlotte’s anxiety to turn to some other subject ; but in vain for the letter returns to Emily at the end : “ If Emily were but well, I feel as if I should not care who neglected, misunderstood or abused me ”, and Emily’s thanks for a cheese—“ I wish she were well enough to eat it ”.⁴ Mrs. Gaskell takes up the story again,

¹ *Life*, ii. 36-37.

³ *Ibid.* 81.

² *Ibid.* 80.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 83.

describing Charlotte's visit to the moors in wild December "for a lingering spray of heather—just one spray, however withered—to take in to Emily" and doing so, Charlotte "saw that the flower was not recognized by the dim and indifferent eyes".¹ This incident suggests in its brevity and concentration the deep attachment of the sisters, Emily's affinity with the wild heathland, and thus the terrible pathos of her indifference to its beloved flower and the consequent poignancy of Charlotte's suffering on seeing such indifference. Then, by sudden contrast, Mrs. Gaskell speaks about Emily's independence to the last, of her insistence on getting up and trying to sew . . . "the servants looked on, and knew what the catching, rattling breath, and the glazing of the eye too surely foretold; but she kept at her work".² She died that same day, before two in the afternoon. Then there is a letter of Charlotte's, expressing the relief and the calm . . . "the anguish of seeing her suffer is over. . . . No need now to tremble for the hard frost and the keen wind. Emily does not feel them". A final paragraph tells of Keeper, "Emily's fierce, faithful bull-dog", following her to her grave, and then lying at her bedroom door and howling for days after. The last sentence of the chapter reads with laconic matter-of-factness: "Anne Brontë drooped and sickened more rapidly from that time; and so ended the year 1848."³ Anne's last days are described in contrast with those of Emily. They were quiet and touching; she slid into death.

In one sense the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* was an intentional piece of hagiography. As its author said, her purpose was to "show what a noble, true and tender woman Charlotte Brontë was".⁴ This aim is intermingled with the continual indication of Mrs. Gaskell's sorrow for Charlotte's lot and regret for what in better surroundings she might have become. Mrs. Gaskell considered that Haworth and Charlotte's home exercised an influence, predominant indeed, but also baneful. In a letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth of 7 April 1853⁵ she wrote: "What would have been her transcendent grandeur if she had been brought up in a healthy and happy atmosphere no one can tell;

¹ *Life*, ii. 83.

² *Ibid.* 83-84.

³ *Ibid.* 85.

⁴ *Ibid.* 277.

⁵ Quoted by permission of Hon. Mrs. Bernard James.

but her life sounds like the fulfilment of duties to her father, to the poor around her, to the old servants." Yet this was in the years of Charlotte's literary fame, those years of contact with the great world, of visits to London and meetings with celebrities such as Thackeray. These years indeed supplied something of that "craving for keen enjoyment of life" mentioned by Mrs. Gaskell in this same letter, and mentioned disapprovingly as being excessive. Such craving was no doubt the reaction to the general dullness of life, but it was probably also accentuated by the extreme excitableness and sensitive nature of Charlotte's own temperament. We see this, for instance, in her response to rebuke as a governess. It probably affected and exaggerated her passion for M. Héger. It may also have determined that settled pessimism, the "absence of hope"¹ which Mrs. Gaskell found even in the early correspondence. Surely it manifests itself again in Charlotte's exhaustion, headache and sickness resulting from her first interview with her publisher George Smith during the Chapter Coffee-House visit. Mrs. Gaskell remarks on this nervous shyness at some length when discussing Charlotte's stay in Manchester with them.² Greater intercourse with the world at large did nothing to reduce this affliction.

Charlotte's concern about her appearance is another reflection of her exaggerated sensitiveness. She thought herself extremely ugly, but if people were struck by her appearance, it may well have been by its peculiarity rather than its ugliness. Mrs. Gaskell describes her features³ as "plain, large and ill-set . . . the crooked mouth and the large nose", but she mentions these to say that they were forgotten by reason of the fact that the eyes "large and well shaped; their colour a reddish brown" with the iris composed of a greater variety of tints, and "power of the countenance over-balanced every physical defect".

The interplay of heightened expectation and frustrating actuality in life may have been the determining influence in Charlotte Brontë's writings, out of which arose that uncontrollable, spontaneous, self-directing power to which she refers in a letter to Lewes about *Jane Eyre*⁴:

¹ *Life*, i. 134.

³ *Ibid.* i. 104-5.

² *Ibid.* ii. 296-7.

⁴ Quoted *Life*, ii. 53.

When authors write best, or, at least, when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them which becomes their master—which will have its own way—putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words, and insisting on their being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature.

Mrs. Gaskell did not fully understand such a concept of authorship, and this may explain her attempts at times to apologize for Charlotte,¹ as, for example, in the lines in which the sisters' experience with Branwell is used to excuse some of the more violent passages of the novels. This same attitude reveals itself again in the letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth quoted above²: "I am sure she works off a great deal that is morbid *into* her writing, and *out* of her life." Charlotte probably did, but Mrs. Gaskell seems to see it as altogether too deliberate, almost as an act of psycho-therapy rather than, as Charlotte herself saw it, the outworking of overpowering inspiration.

We associate this phenomenon among the Brontë sisters most closely with Emily and with *Wuthering Heights*. Mrs. Gaskell speaks of "the immature, but very real powers"³ of that book, and in introducing her reference to it, she quotes Charlotte's preface to the second edition at some length, stressing Emily's isolation from human contact and her sombre imagination. Mrs. Gaskell did not understand Emily's literary power, and though she tried to describe her accurately and without repugnance as "that free, wild, untameable spirit, never happy nor well but on the sweeping moors that gathered round her home—that hater of strangers doomed to live among them",⁴ she did not really like her. Indeed, an awed fascination permeates the narrative as Mrs. Gaskell describes Emily, that strong strange character, beating her fierce bulldog and loved pet, Keeper, into cringing submission for his repeated disobedience in sleeping on the beds.⁵ Keeper was the model for the bulldog Tartar in *Shirley* and Shirley herself was based on Emily. Presenting this fact, Mrs. Gaskell makes her most forthright statement about her own view of Emily: "All that I, a stranger, have been able to learn about her has not tended to give either me, or my readers, a pleasant impression of her."⁶

¹ Cf. e.g. ii. 288-9.

³ *Life*, ii. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.* i. 318-21.

² pp. 468-9.

⁴ *Ibid.* i. 168.

⁶ *Ibid.* ii. 116.

There were others also in the Brontë circle that she did not much like, but she could not always say so. I have mentioned some of the difficulties she had with Mr. Nicholls and, before that, she had feared from what Charlotte told her that their friendship might well be affected by his Anglican hatred of Dissenters. In the *Life*, however, she pays tribute to his love for Charlotte and to his conscientious work as a minister of religion, though not without one or two oblique references of another sort, such as "He was not a man to be attracted by any kind of literary fame".¹ The qualification in the opening paragraph of the chapter from which this quotation comes may also be intended to say more than appears; in writing the biography, Mrs. Gaskell states that she resolved to withhold "nothing, though some things, from their very nature, could not be spoken of so fully as others".²

Elsewhere, of course, she was not so reticent, not even about Patrick Brontë. Mary Taylor saw what should be said and the difficulties of saying it. In a letter to Ellen Nussey she spoke of the "gloomy anger" with which she contemplated "Charlotte's sacrifices to the selfish old man".³ She goes on: "But how on earth is all this to be set straight! Mrs. Gaskell seems far too able a woman to put her head into such a wasp nest, as she would raise about her by speaking the truth of living people." Mary Taylor was speaking particularly about Patrick Brontë's original opposition to Charlotte's marriage. Because of this, Nicholls departed in June 1853, but returned within less than a year. Mrs. Gaskell is careful to conceal the reasons for Patrick Brontë's change of mind, and there is only oblique reference to his selfishness as an important factor determining Charlotte's acquiescence in the original refusal. "Thus thoughtfully for her father, and unselfishly for herself, [she] put aside all consideration of how she should reply, excepting as he wished!"⁴ The degree of Charlotte's self-sacrifice is ubiquitously evident; practically every letter includes some reference to her father's health, her concern for him, her efforts on his behalf.

But if Mrs. Gaskell was discreet here, she was not discreet enough in her original description⁵ of him. There, drawing on

¹ *Life*, ii. 278.

² *Ibid.* ii. 277.

³ *S.H.B.* iv. 198.

⁴ *Ibid.* ii. 279.

⁵ *Ibid.* i. 56-59.

the accounts of villagers and servants, she spoke of his "strong passionate Irish nature", his long, lonely walks, his "strong and vehement prejudices"; but she did not confine herself to these. She also described his eccentricities and harsh behaviour. A short paragraph in the third edition¹ refers to his attempts to make the children hardy, but the first edition had contained more detail. It described the servants' putting coloured shoes by the fire to warm in readiness for the children's return from the moors in the rain and of Mr. Brontë's burning the shoes because they were "too gay and luxurious for his children". Other incidents excluded from the third edition include the slashing of one of his wife's dresses, his custom of firing pistols out of the back-door when he was annoyed, his burning the hearth-rug and sawing up chairs.² All this, with the exception of the slashing of the dress, Mrs. Gaskell had, she says, from "a good old woman who came to nurse Mrs. Brontë"³ in her last illness. The dress-cutting episode she attributed to Charlotte's telling.⁴ In a letter of 25 August 1850 to Catherine Winkworth she referred to "an old woman at Burnley who nursed her at last",⁵ going on to give details of the kind mentioned above, but concluding "All this Lady K.S. told me". George Smith must have been worried about stories such as these, for in a letter to Ellen Nussey of 9 July 1856 Mrs. Gaskell indicates that he had objected to certain passages, but she comments: "I thought that I carefully preserved the reader's respect of Mr. Brontë, while truth and the desire of doing justice to her compelled me to state the domestic peculiarities of her childhood."⁶ Patrick Brontë was at first satisfied by the *Life*. His letter of 2 April 1857⁷ contains only congratulations, no complaints, just a reference to "a few trifling mistakes"; but within a few days he was complaining, and the work of excision had to begin.

There were numerous objectors, from Martha Brown, the Brontë's servant, to Harriet Martineau. The former complained of a reference to a story told to Mrs. Gaskell by Patrick Brontë⁸

¹ *S.H.B.* i. 56.

³ *Life*, i. 54.

⁵ *S.H.B.* iii. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.* iv. 220-1.

² *Life*, 1st edn., i. 51-52.

⁴ Letter to Miss M. Martineau, 24 August 1857.

⁶ *Ibid.* iv. 203.

⁸ *S.H.B.* iv. 194.

of the grief of a young village girl who had been seduced and whom Charlotte had befriended. Mrs. Gaskell altered the word "seduced" to "betrayed".¹ Harriet Martineau complained of a statement made by Charlotte in a letter that is quoted to explain the misunderstanding that arose between them over Harriet's criticism of *Villette*. She is pacified by a footnote.² Patrick Brontë had to give the sisters Sarah and Nancy Garrs, his former servants, a signed testimonial that they had been kind to the children, honest and not wasteful.³ John Stuart Mill objected to quotation of Charlotte's comments⁴ on an article about the emancipation of women written by the woman he was to marry and published in the *Westminster Review* which he edited. He too had to receive a footnote. G. H. Lewes resented the suggestion that his review of *Shirley* had been disrespectful of women, and so the third edition inserts the clause: "Now although this review of 'Shirley' is not disrespectful towards women. . . ." ⁵

These were some of the objections. There were still others, and Mrs. Gaskell anticipated them, for in a letter of 2 October 1856⁶ she wrote to Smith: "Do you mind the law of libel—I have three people I want to libel—Lady Scott that bad woman who corrupted Branwell Brontë, Mr. Newby & Lady Eastlake—the first and last not to be mentioned by name, the mean publisher to be gibbeted." The mean publisher was T. C. Newby, who brought out *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* and in what amounts to sharp practice sold the American rights of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as being another book by Currer Bell.⁷ This was the reason for the Chapter Coffee-House visit to prove both to Newby and to Messrs. Smith and Elder that Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell were not, as Newby conveniently alleged, one and the same person. Lady Eastlake was attacked for her cruel review of *Jane Eyre* with a veritable flurry of rhetorical questions and emotion-charged phrases, of which the following is a sample:

Has he [the reviewer], through trials, close following in dead march through his household, sweeping the hearthstone bare of life and love, still striven hard for

¹ *Life*, ii. 335. Cf. *S.H.B.* iv. 227.

² *Life*, ii. 289-90.

⁴ *Life*, ii. 233-4.

⁶ Murray.

³ *S.H.B.* iv. 226.

⁵ *Ibid.* ii. 143.

⁷ *Life*, ii. 66.

strength to say, "It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth to Him good"—and sometimes striven in vain, until the Kindly Light returned? If through all these dark waters the scornful reviewer have passed clear, refined, free from stain,—with a soul that never in all its agonies, cried "lama sabachthani",—still, even then let him pray with the Publican rather than judge with the Pharisee".¹

This attack did not bring retaliation, but there was a vigorous reaction against Mrs. Gaskell from the defenders of Lady Scott and of Rev. William Carus Wilson, founder of Cowan Bridge School. The third edition's sentences on the Branwell-Lady Scott affair: "of the causes of this [Branwell's] deterioration I cannot speak"² and the paragraph "Whatever may have been the nature of Branwell's sins. . . . Let us read of the misery caused to his poor sisters in Charlotte's own affecting words"³ are but the poor relics of the extensive and unmitigated attack in the first edition. There one reads:

The story must be told. If I could, I would have avoided it; but not merely is it so well-known to many living as to be in a manner, public property, but it is possible that, by revealing the misery, the growing, life-long misery, the degrading habits, the early death of her partner in guilt—the acute and long-enduring agony of his family—to the wretched woman, who not only survives, but passes about in the gay circles of London society, as a vivacious well-dressed, flourishing widow, there may be awakened in her some feelings of repentance.⁴

Mrs. Gaskell goes on to refer to this "mature and wicked woman", Lady Scott's (then Mrs. Robinson) making love to Branwell in front of her children. She speaks about Branwell's lingering of conscience which caused him to reject her suggestions of an elopement. Then she moves on to a veritable crescendo of denunciation:

The case presents the reverse of the usual features; the man becomes the victim; the man's life was blighted, and crushed out of him by suffering, and guilt entailed by guilt; the man's family were stung by deepest shame. The woman—to think of her father's pious name—the blood of honourable families mixed in her veins⁵—her early home, underneath whose roof-tree sat those whose names are held saintlike for their good deeds,—she goes flaunting about to this day in reputable society; a showy woman for her age; kept afloat by her reputed wealth. I see her name in County papers, as one of those who patronise the Christmas

¹ *Life*, ii. 88.

² *Ibid.* i. 326.

³ *Ibid.* i. 336-7.

⁴ *Life*, 1st edn., i. 316-17.

⁵ She was Lydia, daughter of Thomas Gisborne and Mary Babington, granddaughter of Thomas Babington and great-niece of Zachary Macaulay, and thus descended from prominent Evangelical families of the "Clapham Sect".

balls ; and I hear of her in London drawing-rooms. Now let us read not merely of the suffering of her guilty accomplice, but of the misery she caused to innocent victims, whose premature death may, in part, be laid at her door.¹

What the truth of the relationship was we shall never know. Some like Sir James Stephen rejected the whole thing as a figment of Branwell's diseased imagination, but then he was Lady Scott's cousin by marriage. Others like Margaret Lane think that "there *was* a love affair, and that Mrs. Robinson's denials covered a skilful retreat from a dangerous position".² The family certainly believed the story. Patrick Brontë applauded Mrs. Gaskell's pictures of "my brilliant and unhappy son, and of his diabolical seducer",³ and Charlotte wrote: "A worse woman, I believe, hardly exists."⁴ Mrs. Gaskell's account derived from information presumably supplied by Charlotte on the basis of letters said to have been found in Branwell's pockets at his death, but this was hardly evidence on which to make such an outspoken attack. Not only were Mrs. Gaskell's words unbalanced ; they were also unwise, and not even necessary. She was prompted by her feeling for the Brontë sisters' suffering beyond her usual discretion. She may also have been affected by the view she derived of Branwell's misspent talents. The end of it all was that, threatened by a libel action, Mrs. Gaskell instructed her solicitors to insert a public retraction in *The Times* of 30 May 1857 of every statement "which imputes to a widowed

¹ *Life*, 328. Cf. letter to Smith, 29 December 1856 (Murray): "About Lady—(did I tell you the name?) I see you think me merciless,—but details of her life (past & present) which I heard from her own cousin when I was staying at Sir C. Trevelyans & which were confirmed by Lady Trevelyan (also a connection) showed her to be a bad heartless woman for long and long,—& to think of her going about calling, & dining out etc. etc.—(her own relations have been obliged to drop her acquaintance.) while those poor Brontës suffered so—for bad as Branwell was,—he was not absolutely ruined for ever till she got hold of him, & he was not the first, nor the last. However it is a horrid story, & I should not have told it but to show the life of prolonged suffering those Brontë girls had to endure ; & what doubtless familiarized them to a certain degree with coarse expressions such as have been complained of in W.H. & the Tenant of Wildfell Hall. However, I will not name that she was a clergyman's wife—nor that she is a *Lady* anybody. But you see why I wanted to contrast the two lives, don't you?"

² *The Brontë Story* (1953), p. 170.

³ 2 April 1857, quoted W. Gérin, *Branwell Brontë* (1961), p. 241. (N.B. The last phrase is not printed in *S.H.B.* iv. 221.)

⁴ July 1848 (*S.H.B.* ii. 240).

lady, referred to but not named therein, any breach of her conjugal, her maternal, or of her social duties, and more especially of the statement contained in chapter 13 of the first volume and in chapter 2 of the second volume, which imputes to the lady in question a guilty intercourse with the late Branwell Brontë ”.

The Cowan Bridge controversy had begun over a month before this, with W. W. Carus Wilson (the son of the founder)’s letter to the *Daily News*. It continued until August, with Mr. Nicholls taking a notable part on Mrs. Gaskell’s side. This was, to some extent, the result of the attacks being directed more against Charlotte than against Mrs. Gaskell. Changes, however, were made in the text. Mrs. Gaskell suppressed passages such as that in which Carus Wilson is said to have replied to complaints about the food “ to the effect that the children were to be trained up to regard higher matters than dainty pampering of the appetite, and . . . he lectured them on the sin of caring over-much for carnal things ”.¹ Another deleted passage referred to his possessing “ so little knowledge of human nature as to imagine that, by constantly reminding the girls of their dependent position, and the fact that they were receiving their education from the charity of others, he could make them lowly and humble.”² Here, however, Mrs. Gaskell might have drawn on supporting testimony from many of Charlotte’s contemporaries at Cowan Bridge. She was thus in a stronger position than in the Lady Scott affair.

Mrs. Gaskell had been warned that she was stirring up a hornet’s nest, but, anxious as she was to be out of England when the book was published, she appears to have desired this mainly to escape the reviews, favourable or otherwise, rather than because she anticipated such an outburst of criticism and controversy. On 16 June 1857, less than three weeks after her return, she gave Ellen Nussey an account³ of the various objections. Then in lines instinct with feeling, she continues :

I am writing as if I were in famous spirits, and I think I *am* so *angry* that I am almost merry in my bitterness, if you know that state of feeling ; but I have cried more since I came home than I ever did before ; and never needed

¹ *Life*, 1st edn., i. 72.

² *Ibid.* 77.

³ Letter in the New York Public Library (Berg Collection).

kind words so much—and no one gives me them. I *did so try to tell the truth*, & I believe *now* I hit as near the truth as any one *could* do. And I weighed every line with my whole power & heart, so that every line should go to its great purpose of making *her* known & valued, as one who had gone through such a terrible life with a brave & faithful heart.

Mrs. Gaskell amply succeeded in her purpose. However distressing the contemporary circumstances may have been, she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had tried to tell the whole truth. As the ever forthright Mary Taylor put it in a letter to Ellen Nussey¹: “As to the mutilated edition that is to come, I am sorry for it. Libellous or not, the first edition was all true.” Mrs. Gaskell’s biography presents a strange sad life amid strange sad surroundings. It delineates a peculiar genius with a most sympathetic and understanding pen. Small errors of fact and graver errors of judgement there were, as Miss Hopkins has very sagely remarked.² Even in emphasis and interpretation we may now feel that Mrs. Gaskell was sometimes wrong; but when all has been said, the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in its sustained and acutely perceptive evocation of a person and a place, is worthy to be ranked with the great biographies of English literature. Charles Eliot Norton aptly remarked of it: “I know of no biography that has so deep and touching an interest as this of Miss Brontë—none other written so tenderly, sympathetically and faithfully.”³

APPENDIX

MRS. GASKELL’S LETTERS TO JOHN GREENWOOD REGARDING THE BRONTËS

By

ALBERT H. PRESTON

Interest has been shown in letters from Mrs. Gaskell to John Greenwood, a resident in Haworth during the time of the Brontës, which are now in the possession of Mrs. Mary Preston of Haworth, great-grand-daughter of John Greenwood.

¹ 28 January 1858 (*S.H.B.* iv. 229).

² *Op. cit.* p. 199.

³ To J. R. Lowell, *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*, ed. Sara Norton and M. A. de Wolfe Howe (1913), i. 172.

A man of many parts, Greenwood was born in 1807 and was originally a wool-sorter but subsequently became a sign-writer. Having met with an accident which prevented him from continuing with his usual occupation, he opened a shop in Haworth's main street for the sale of books and stationery. In later years the paper on which the Brontë novels were written, was bought by the famous sisters at his shop. Indeed, Mrs. Gaskell tells a story of his walking to Halifax for half a ream of foolscap when his stock ran short "as they seemed so distressed about it if he had none".¹ It was Greenwood who informed Mrs. Gaskell of the death of Charlotte Brontë², as may be seen from her letter dated 18 April 1855 in which she referred to the fact that Charlotte, on a visit to Manchester in 1854, had asked her, "You will send some message to Mr. Greenwood, won't you?" and to Charlotte's own observation to Mrs. Gaskell that "Mr. Greenwood was the one friend she had in Haworth". It is likely that he was as intimately connected with the family as anyone outside their own immediate circle.

The letters show that Mrs. Gaskell travelled a great deal, as they were written from various addresses in England and Scotland. The covers are not without interest. Transit time from Manchester in the 1850's was no longer than that of today, letters being delivered in Haworth next day. In addition to the date stamp of the office of posting, each cover is superscribed with the postmarks of Leeds, Keighley and Haworth at which offices presumably the letters were sorted. Considering that mail was only carried by rail to Keighley, and then forwarded by horse van to Haworth, the fact that the letters were received at Haworth the same day as they went through the Leeds office shows that the Post Office service of those days was as good as, if not better than, the service of today.

In her first letter dated 4 April 1855 (No. 1),³ Mrs. Gaskell mentions her great regard for Charlotte and requests Greenwood to let her have every particular regarding the illness and death of

¹ *Life*, i. 343.

² Cf. letter from Patrick Brontë (Manchester University Library) acknowledging Mrs. Gaskell's letter of sympathy (Hopkins, *op. cit.* p. 158).

³ This numbering refers to the order of the letters as they are printed below.

her great friend. Mrs. Gaskell was fully aware of the importance of the Brontës in the world of literature and realized that their works would become even more famous. Her correspondence with Greenwood certainly helped her to compile records to be used later in her Brontë biography. In the first instance Greenwood was reluctant to send the details, being afraid that such action might be construed as "meddling". Doubtless Mrs. Gaskell's careful yet insistent approach helped to overcome his initial fears, and it is clear that his information helped her considerably and was greatly appreciated. In the same letter, something of Charlotte's true character is highlighted when Mrs. Gaskell remarks to Greenwood, "Strangers might know her by her great fame, but we loved her dearly for her goodness, truth and kindness, and those lovely qualities she carries with her where she is gone". In conclusion she emphasizes her great regard for her fellow novelist: "I loved her dearly, more than I think she knew. I shall never cease to be thankful that I knew her: or to mourn her loss."

Did Patrick Brontë have a portrait taken surreptitiously by Greenwood during Charlotte's absence from Haworth on honeymoon? Mrs. Gaskell hazards a guess in her letter of 12 April 1855 (No. 2) that such might be the case: "All this—and more that I don't repeat, makes me think that Mr. Brontë *must* have concealed his portrait from her. He might have hung it up while they were on their wedding tour, and taken it down before their return from a sort of shy feeling at having had his portrait taken, however unconsciously, when he so often said that he would not."

In her letter of 5 May 1855 (No. 3), Mrs. Gaskell pursues the subject: "It is so extremely unlike her, whom we both mourn so truly, not to welcome and meet . . . more than half way any little friendship and attention that might be offered. So much so that I incline to think that it must have been the extreme and growing languor of ill health which made her perpetually delay thanking you for your picture of her father." She further suggests that Greenwood might ask Mr. Nicholls (Charlotte's husband) at a later convenient time what she thought of it, rather than "puzzling and puzzling" about it. In mentioning

some slight indisposition of Greenwood's, Mrs. Gaskell refers to Charlotte's stoicism at all times: "remember how brave *she* was, all through her many sorrows; and to Whom she always looked as the Sender both of Sunshine and of Storm. She was a wonderful creature, and her life was wonderfully appointed; full of suffering as it was." Here was Mrs. Gaskell the Unitarian speaking, but nevertheless she never spared any opportunity to be complimentary to her adored Charlotte; there was no doubt of her genuine regard for her.

Towards the end of July 1855,¹ Mrs. Gaskell, accompanied by Miss Catherine Winkworth, paid a visit to Haworth Parsonage to see Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls. They stayed so long at the Brontë home, for there would be much to talk about, that they were unable to call on John Greenwood as intended. A few days later (25 July) (No. 4), Mrs. Gaskell wrote to him advising that Mr. Brontë had asked her to "write his daughter's life" and "I am sure that I may trust you not to name *to any one*, the request that Mr. Brontë has made to me of writing his daughter's life". That Mrs. Gaskell should write so confidentially to Greenwood shows the high esteem in which she held him, but she would also be well aware that his knowledge of Haworth and the Brontës would be most useful as a source of material for her biography. She also comments "I saw your likeness of Mr. Brontë hanging in his study opposite to the windows, and both the lady who was with me and I were very much struck by the likeness".

A letter from Silverdale, postmarked Lancaster, 5 August 1855 (No. 5), asks Greenwood to copy for her the "Tablet over the Communion table, exactly", as she fancied that some of the dates Mr. Brontë had given her (of Maria's and Elizabeth's deaths) were incorrect. "I dare say I shall have many another kindness to ask from you", she continues. Although Mrs. Gaskell could have written to Mr. Nicholls for the information, she preferred to approach Greenwood. This suggests that she was not as friendly with Mr. Nicholls as she had been with his

¹ Mrs. Gaskell was asked to write the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* in a letter of Patrick Brontë's dated 16 July 1855 (*S.H.B.* iv. 190-1). She visited Haworth on 23 July (Letter to Ellen Nussey, *ibid.* 192).

wife. However, in all her enquiries she was both careful and tactful and never anything but courteous and fair when mentioning him. The prime mover in requesting the *Life* to be written was Mr. Brontë, with the fame of his daughter still ringing in his ears. Mr. Nicholls above all hated publicity and detested the attempts by Mrs. Gaskell and others to pierce the veil of his married life with Charlotte.

There is a gap of some ten months in the correspondence, which is partly explained in a letter from Plymouth Grove, Manchester dated 21 June 1856 (No. 6). Mrs. Gaskell writes: "I have been so extremely busy. I still am so, what with working at Miss Brontë's Memoirs, and other unceasing occupation. My health does not give way however, thank you. I am unable to write any letters, but those of business, and I have several lying by me, which I have never even read." Greenwood, however, continued his correspondence with Mrs. Gaskell, and a year later, on 23 June 1857 (No. 7),¹ she again wrote apologetically for not answering one of his letters, and requested him to ascertain from the memorial tablet whether Anne Brontë died when she was only 27.²

That there would be criticism of Mrs. Gaskell's attempt to write the "Life of Charlotte Brontë" was to be expected. Greenwood must have expressed sympathy with her in her difficulties, to which she replied on 16 July 1857 (No. 8) as follows: "I feel I have tried my utmost to write the *Life* as truthfully as it has been in my power to do, if I have failed I only regret it very much." One senses a feeling of disappointment on her part, in marked contrast to the buoyant hopes with which she accepted the task given to her by Mr. Brontë a brief two years previously. Greenwood would certainly keep Mrs. Gaskell informed with news and gossip of the village which no doubt helped her greatly in summing up the character of the local people. It must be remembered however that when the *Life* was published, the people of Haworth insisted that Mrs. Gaskell's picture of the place was grossly inaccurate and exaggerated. That this view was shared by the Rev. Patrick Brontë was attributed

¹ This letter is in Meta Gaskell (Mrs. Gaskell's second daughter's) hand.

² Cf. *Life*, i. 8-9.

to him and quoted at the time. " I think she tried to make us all appear as bad as she could do ", was his remark to one who spoke to him on the subject a few years before his death. In a letter from Manchester, undated but probably following that of 5 May 1855 (No. 9),¹ some tit-bit of local information was acknowledged to be treated confidentially : " You may depend upon it that any thing you wish me to keep secret, shall not be revealed "; to induce further information, however, she continues " I could never be tired of hearing about my dear friend, and her early days ; indeed all about her. Will you tell me what you know about that first visit to London as " Curren Bell ", when you have leisure for a little more writing." The same letter proceeds " I have looked for Mr. Macarthey's character in Shirley, and I find it exactly corresponds with what you have told me of Mr. Nicholls, and also with what she herself has said to me before now." She also speaks highly of Mr. Nicholls : " Yet it shows something fine in him to have been able to appreciate her."

There are other matters mentioned, but perhaps this is a good note on which to end these observations on this interesting " one-way " correspondence. Discussion and criticism of the *Life* there has been, but fundamentally it is a standard work on the history and achievements of the Brontë family and it has been, and still is, a valuable source of information to the Brontë student and writer. The foregoing are just a few of the letters written by one famous novelist about another, even more famous. To those who might be inclined to judge and question Mrs. Gaskell's biography, these letters emphasize her desire for accuracy and her wish to portray the *Life* as truthfully as could be ascertained. That she sought some of her information from an ordinary self-taught man of the village is a compliment to the hard-thinking, self-reliant and well-informed character which the North produced in the nineteenth century, and which, in some capacity or another, is still inclined to linger in its moorland hills.

¹ For letters Nos. 3 and 9, cf. Hopkins, *op.cit.* p. 205.

1

17 Cumberland Terrace
Regent's Park
London
Wednesday, April 4

My dear Sir,

I can not tell you how very sad your note has made me. My dear friend that I shall never see again on earth! I did not even know she was ill. I had heard nothing of her since the beginning of December when she wrote to a mutual friend saying that she was well, and happy. I was meaning to write to her this very day, to tell her of the appearance of a copy of my new book, which I was sending to her. You may well say you have lost your best friend; strangers might know her by her great fame, but we loved her dearly for her goodness, truth, and kindness, & those lovely qualities she carries with her where she is gone.

I want to know every particular. Has she been long ill? What was her illness? You would oblige me extremely if you would, at your earliest leisure, send me every detail. I am writing by this post to Mr. Brontë. You do not name Mr. Nicholls. Pray let me hear again from you, dear Sir. I loved her dearly, more than I think she knew. I shall never cease to be thankful that I knew her: or to mourn her loss.

Yours truly & obliged
E. C. Gaskell

Will you direct the letter I hope to receive from you to T. B. Price's Esq.
11 Princes Terrace
Princes Gate
Hyde Park
London.

2

11 Princes Terrace
Hyde Park
London
Thursday

My dear Sir,

Your letter had been awaiting me at the friend's house where I am now staying for some days; which must be my apology for being so long in thanking you for it. I am extremely—more than I can put into words—obliged to you for it, most drearily, and painfully sad as it is. How I wish I had known! I do not wonder at your reluctance to write, when you feared it might be construed into "meddling", and it is no use regretting what is past; but I do fancy that if I had come, I could have induced her,—even though they had all felt angry with me at first,—to do what was so absolutely necessary, for her very life. Poor poor

creature! I can not understand it all. Her not seeing you more frequently for instance! It is nearly a year since she was with us; but I remember as if it were yesterday her turning to me & saying "You will send some message to Mr. Greenwood, won't you," and then speaking about you to my husband with such true, warm regard & appreciation; saying you were the one friend she had in Haworth. All this—and more that I don't repeat makes me think that Mr. Brontë must have concealed his portrait from her. He might have hung it up while they were away on their wedding-tour, and taken it down before their return from a sort of shy feeling at having had his portrait taken, however unconsciously, when he so often said that he would not. It is so unlike her not to be ready to acknowledge a kindness, even though her thanks came more through her eyes and the grasp of her hand than her tongue. Dear dear Miss Brontë. I wish I could do anything in my power for those whom she has loved, and left behind her! I shall be very much obliged to you, dear Sir, if from time to time you will let me know how Mr. Brontë & Mr. Nicholls go on & are in health; and I shall also always take a great interest in all your own personal concerns; and if I can do anything to forward any of your wishes, you must be sure, and let me know, for her sake. I almost think I shall try and come over for a day to Haworth this summer, & see Mr. Brontë; but, as I know he would not like the idea of it, beforehand you had better not mention it. Did you see the notice of her in the "Daily News"? If you did not, & will let me know, I will send you a copy. I, and most others believe it to have been written by Miss Martineau[.] I need hardly say how completely confidential I consider your most interesting letter. Anything else you can ever remember to tell me about her will be most valuable. Remember me kindly to Mrs. Greenwood, and believe me to remain, dear Sir,

Yours most truly
E. C. Gaskell

On Monday next I return to Plymouth Grove, Manchester.

3

My dear Mr. Greenwood,

I have thought a good deal about all that you have said, since receiving your two last very interesting letters, and I must confess that a great deal of it remains still incomprehensible to me. It is so extremely unlike her, whom we both mourn so truly, not to welcome and meet even more than half way any little kindness and attention that might be offered. So much so that I incline to think that it must have been the extreme and growing languor of ill health which made her perpetually delay thanking you for your picture of her father. Are you not on sufficiently intimate terms with Mr. Nicholls to ask him, at some future time, what she thought of it? It is possible that for some reason she did not approve of your becoming too much interested in something that might distract you from your business, (mind! I know nothing about this,—) but I judge of you by myself when I say that I think you would rather know the truth, than keep puzzling & puzzling about it. Of course you could not ask Mr. Nicholls just yet, & from what you say I am afraid it may be some time before you have the opportunity.

I should like to know how he and Mr. Brontë are. Do you know if Mr. Thackeray has ever written to Mr. Brontë? I am anxious to know, for he had heard of her death, & was much shocked by it. I can hardly believe it myself! I often find myself thinking of things that I will tell her, or of subjects that we will talk over when next we meet. There are some lines by Mr. Matthew Arnold in this month's Fraser's Magazine called *Haworth Churchyard*,—falling into the same mistake Miss Martineau did. I have not seen them, but I hear they are very striking. He inspected the Dissenter's schools in Yorkshire, for some short time, & told me some time ago that he had been at Haworth on that business.

About the Marble Tablet—I see this great difficulty. I do not quite think we have the right to take any plan of this sort out of the hands of Mr. Nicholls, who may have wishes of his own that ought to be attended to in the matter. If I could ever get to know him I should find out. But I bear your suggestion in mind, & let us have patience, & not forget our dear friend, & the time may come when we may do her some little tribute of honour & love. Every [thing] you can tell me about her & her sisters—of her especially is most valuable.

I wish they would allow her portrait to be daguerrotyped¹ for her friends. But I am sure it is too soon to name or propose it to them as yet. Was there a new study built at Haworth Parsonage last summer? One of the newspapers says there was. When did you first know of "Currer Bell?"

I hope, dear Sir, you are feeling better. I know how great a trial her loss must be to you in some measure. But remember how brave she was, all through her many sorrows; and to Whom she always looked as the Sender of both Sunshine & of Storm. She was a wonderful creature, & her life was wonderfully appointed; full of suffering as it was. Remember me to your wife, & believe me ever, dear Sir

Yours most truly
E. C. Gaskell

Plymouth Grove,
Manchester
Saturday, May 5th

4

Plymouth Grove
Wednesday, July 25th

My dear Sir,

I was so extremely sorry that my plan of going to see you was baulked by a variety of unforeseen circumstances on Monday. We thought that we could have gone on to your house from the Church, to which we had asked Martha to take us; imagining that perhaps it might be too painful to Mr. Nicholls to take us there; but he expressed a wish to go with us. Then we planned to call, as we were passing in the car on our way back to Keighley, but just at last there was some necessary

¹ Mrs. Gaskell put the proposal to daguerrotype Richmond's portrait to the publisher George Smith (of Smith, Elder) in a letter of 31 May 1855 (see Hopkins, op. cit. pp. 159–160).

and unexpected business to be done, as Mr. Nicholls brought me a few old letters of his wife's to see, and that kept us from starting when we expected to do. As it was we were too late, & had to sleep at Skipton that night.

I believe however that, as Mr. Brontë has asked me to write his daughter's life that I shall soon have occasion to go over to Haworth again; probably from Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth's in August; when I shall make a point of coming to see you at first, and not wait for an opportunity which it may be difficult to find at last. I am sure I may trust you not to name to any one, the request that Mr. Brontë has made to me of writing his daughter's life. I saw your likeness of Mr. Brontë hanging in his study, opposite to the windows, and both the lady who was with me, & I were very much struck by the likeness. Believe me to remain dear Mr. Greenwood ever yours very truly

E. C. Gaskell.

5

Lindeth Tower
Silverdale near
Lancaster

My dear Sir,

I was very glad indeed to receive your letter, & to find that you understood how the difficulty at the last moment had prevented my calling to see you. The lady with me was a Miss Catherine Winkworth, who has long been a great friend of mine, and who made our dear Miss Brontë's acquaintance at our house.

Now I should be very much obliged to you if you will do me a favour, which is to copy for me that Tablet over the Communion table, exactly. I meant to have done it myself, but I could not well, with Mr. Nicholls with me; and I fancy some of the dates Mr. Brontë has given me (of Maria & Elizabeth's deaths,) are incorrect. I dare say I shall have many another kindness to ask from you; but just now I can only write in the greatest hurry. Pray remember me to Mrs. Greenwood; whose forgiveness I can easily fancy will be more difficult than yours to gain for any fancied slight to her husband; and ever believe me

Yours very truly
E. C. Gaskell

6

Dear Sir,

I received your letter several days since, but I have really not had time to write before to-day—I have been so extremely busy. I still am so, what with working at Miss Brontë's Memoirs, & other unceasing occupation. My health does not give way however, thank you—I am unable to write any letters, but those of business, and I have several lying by me, which I have never even read.

I hope very much that the improvement in Mr. Brontë's health will continue.

Yours very truly
E. C. Gaskell

Plymouth Grove,
June 21st 1856

7

Plymouth Grove
June 23rd 1857

Dear Sir,

I must apologise very much for not [one word deleted] having answered your letter and for not returning you the document you were so kind as to send me. My time really has been so fully occupied that I have not been able to answer half my letters.

Would you kindly see for me if on the monument to the Brontë family in Haworth Church Anne Brontë died when she was only 27.

Believe me to remain
Yours very truly
E. C. Gaskell.

8

Plymouth Grove

My dear Mr Greenwood,

Thank you very much indeed for your kind note of sympathy with me in my difficulties. I feel I have tried my utmost to write the Life as truthfully as it has been in my power to do, if I have failed I only regret it very much. Thank you also for the flowers you sent me.

Believe me to remain
Yours sincerely
E. C. Gaskell

9

Plymouth Grove
Saturday

My dear Mr. Greenwood

You can not think how your letter interests me. You may depend upon it that any thing you wish me to keep secret, shall not be revealed; but I could never be tired of hearing about my dear friend, and her early days; indeed all about her. Will you tell me what you know about that first visit to London as "Currer Bell", when you have leisure for a little more writing. I have looked for Mr. Macarthey's character in Shirley, and I find it exactly corresponds with what you have told me of Mr. Nicholls, & also with what she herself has said to me before now. Yet it shows something fine in him to have been able to appreciate her. And I know of better curacies being offered to him, & one living indeed, the refusal of which also seems to prove that he is not a worldly man, so that I can not understand how he should slight any one for another, inferior in character &

attainments, but superior in fortune. A man who could do that would have snatched at opportunities of improving his own worldly condition. I don't like to believe him guilty of meanness because I could not then respect him as I like to respect her husband. Now I can respect a bigoted person although I may suffer from their bigotry. The one is an error of head, the other a fault of heart.

I am surprized at Mr. Thackerays never writing to Mr. Brontë. I wrote myself to tell him of her death ; I have never heard from him in acknowledgment, & I thought that he might not have received my note. But he must have learnt of her death through the public papers.

Will you remember me to your wife ; and with Mr. Gaskell's respects to you,

Believe me to remain

Yours most truly

E. C. Gaskell