

THE NOVELS OF MRS. GASKELL ¹

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“OUR readers need not be alarmed at the prospect of penetrating the recesses of Manchester.” Thus ran a comment in *The North British Review* in 1851 upon some contemporary novels about social conditions, *Mary Barton* amongst them. I begin with this quotation to remind us that there are two Mrs. Gaskells, that there is not only the Mrs. Gaskell of *Cranford* with its genteel manners, quiet humour and delicate pathos, but also the Mrs. Gaskell of *Mary Barton*'s Manchester with its industrial strife, overcrowded dwellings, malnutrition, disease and death. Though Mrs. Gaskell is immediately and inevitably associated with Knutsford, from which she drew the inspiration for her best-known book, it is but right that she should be remembered here in Manchester where the greater part of her life was spent. It is particularly appropriate that we in the University should remember her and pay tribute to her memory, for she has special links with this place. Her husband, by the amalgamation of the Working Men's College at which he lectured with Owens College, may be considered one of the first lecturers in English literature in this University; and I calculate that the Gaskell's first married home, 14 Dover Street, probably occupied a site not far from where the Electrical Engineering Department's electronic computer is now situated. So time brings its changes. The opening paragraph of *Mary Barton* tells of black and white farmhouses in Green Heys Fields, and from her correspondence it appears that Mrs. Gaskell later kept cows in Plymouth Grove.

With one who belonged so entirely to Knutsford and Manchester and whose work is so much dominated by these two places, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (*née* Stevenson) was born at a house not far

¹ A Paper read in the University of Manchester to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Mrs. Gaskell's birth.

from Battersea Bridge—on 29 September 1810. She came of Unitarian stock. Her father William Stevenson had been a minister, but like Mr. Hale in *North and South* he resigned on grounds of conscience. Her mother was a Holland of Sandlebridge, and through *her* family Elizabeth was distantly related to the Darwins and the Wedgwoods. Her mother died when Elizabeth was thirteen months old, and following that event the young child moved to her mother's sister, Hannah, "Aunt Lumb", at Heathside, Knutsford. There she grew up until in 1825 she went to school at Stratford-on-Avon, followed in 1827 by two years with her father in London until his death in 1829, when she went to stay with her friend, Ann Turner, daughter of a Unitarian minister, first in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, then in Edinburgh, and finally with Ann's sister, the wife of the minister of Cross Street Unitarian Chapel, Manchester.

There she met the assistant minister, William Gaskell. He was to be minister of Cross Street till his death in 1884. Elizabeth Stevenson and William Gaskell were married in the parish church of Knutsford on 30 August 1832, and after a honeymoon in North Wales they settled at 14 Dover Street on Elizabeth's twenty-second birthday. There followed thirty-three years of married life, her husband absorbed in the religious and social responsibilities of his work, she herself assisting him, rearing her family and later writing novels and travelling widely both in this country and abroad. With the birth of children and their increasing social obligations the Gaskells moved to larger houses, first in 1842 to 121 Upper Rumford Street and finally in 1849 to 42 (now 84) Plymouth Grove, the only one of their three Manchester houses still standing.

The Gaskells had six children, of whom four, all daughters, survived. The death of their only son at a few months old in 1845 was a very great blow. To one of her friends (Annie Shaen) she wrote of "the evenings reading by the fire and watching my darling *darling* Willie, who now sleeps sounder still in the dull, dreary chapel-yard at Warrington. That wound will never heal on earth."¹ It was in an attempt to distract her from her sorrow that William Gaskell persuaded his wife to take up writing.

¹ A. B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1952), p. 66.

The result was *Mary Barton*, published in 1848. Her reputation was immediately established, and there followed over the years a host of short stories, the major works by which she is now chiefly remembered (*Ruth* (1853), *Cranford* (1853), *North and South* (1855), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) and *Wives and Daughters* (posthumously—1866)), and her one biography, a classic in its own right, the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Her life was a busy one and her literary work must have been followed often under extreme difficulty, but there is a sense of calm, an unruffled quality about her. She died as quietly as she appears to have lived. Staying at the little country house near Alton in Hampshire, which she had bought as a surprise for her husband, she suddenly collapsed and died on 12 November 1865. Her body was brought back to Manchester and now lies buried in the grounds of Brook Street Unitarian Chapel, Knutsford.

Let me begin my consideration of her work with the book that her early life in Knutsford inspired. The first thing to be said about *Cranford* is that it is not really a novel, but a series of episodes loosely connected together. The second thing I might say is that, contrary to what is sometimes assumed, it is not set in the reign of Queen Victoria. It belongs, as, for instance, the beginning of Chapter VII indicates, to the time of King William and Queen Adelaide, the early eighteen-thirties. Not, however, that we should be too strict about dating everything in Mrs. Gaskell. The bank failure, for example, may have been suggested by that of the Bank of Manchester in 1842 or by that of Ryle and Daintry of Park Green, Macclesfield, in 1841 as mentioned by Ward in his introduction to the Knutsford edition of Mrs. Gaskell's works. Ward, by the way, is not always to be trusted in matters of fact. He calls the Ryle-Daintry bank the "Royal Dantery" and says it failed in 1823,¹ and his statement that "Within a month after her birth she (Mrs. Gaskell) lost her mother" is wrong by a year.²

"The beginning of *Cranford* was one paper in 'Household Words'; and I never meant to write more . . .",³ so Mrs. Gaskell told Ruskin. Much in this first paper (the first two chapters of the work as we have it) together with other incidents

¹ *Cranford*, p. xv.

² *Mary Barton*, p. xviii.

³ Hopkins, p. 104.

later in the book was taken over from an essay, "The Last Generation in England", which she had written for *Sartain's Magazine* in 1849. Portions of *Cranford* appeared irregularly in *Household Words*, which was edited by Dickens, from 13 December 1851 to 21 May 1853.

Cranford is a book that is lovingly written. This no doubt arises, to some extent, from the fact that Mrs. Gaskell was writing of a town she loved and of people from whose lives she constructed the characters of her work. Places in the town have been readily identified and the incidents likewise have been associated with actual counterparts. But it is with an authenticity other than the historical that I want to deal. I refer to that of the characters. They ring true to life. By that I do not mean that Mrs. Gaskell was seeking to be realistic. I mean rather that together they form a society in which we can believe. The achievement is the greater for the whimsicality that pervades the book, for there is nothing more threatening to conviction than whimsicality. The source of Mrs. Gaskell's success is the affection and sympathy with which she regarded her characters, an affection and sympathy which was heightened rather than diminished by her clear-sighted appreciation of their faults and foibles.

Cranford provides only a very narrow social group. As the opening sentence states, "In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons". Hardly Amazons perhaps, but at any rate the sex is right. But not only are the main characters women, they are women of a particular age and class. They are middle-class and elderly spinsters and widows. The men are absent, the servants, with the exception of the admirable Martha, are below stairs, the tradesmen are dealt with but hardly recognized, and the aristocracy are honoured at a distance in the remoteness of their country-houses. "Our Society" of the first chapter is a world of well-defined attitudes and precise distinctions, a world where things are "done" and "not done". "I dare say your mamma has told you, my dear, never to let more than three days elapse between receiving a call and returning it; and also, that you are never to stay longer than a quarter of an hour."¹ And if Miss Jessie Brown did not possess the tact or discretion

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 3.

to conceal the fact that her uncle was a shopkeeper in Edinburgh, then Miss Jenkyns must try "to drown this confession by a terrible cough—for the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson was sitting at the card-table nearest Miss Jessie, and what would she say or think if she found out she was in the same room with a shopkeeper's niece".¹ This reminds us that the world of Cranford was also a world of appearances, a world in which the impecunious—and it is the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson who is referred to—made thrift a virtue rather different in character from that in which we are usually content conventionally to regard it. In Cranford it was "Elegant economy!". . . There, economy was always 'elegant', and money-spending always 'vulgar and ostentatious'.² Mrs. Gaskell, however, is the commentator as well as the reporter. This sentence concludes with a description of this attitude as "a sort of sour grapeism which made us very peaceful and satisfied". The use of the first person plural reminds us of the skilful position the narrator is made to take up in *Cranford*, a position at once involved with, and yet detached from, the characters of the book. It enables her to strike a note of actuality (very necessary when you are dealing with Betsy Barker's cow) and at the same time to stand apart and criticize; but yet to moderate that criticism by reminding the reader that she, the story-teller, belongs to, and has an affection for, the group she is describing.

At the centre of it stands—or perhaps more appropriately, sits in some state—Miss Deborah Jenkyns (Deborah, because her father "the Rector" said that was the pronunciation of the word in Hebrew), the personification of correctness. Beside her, her gentle sister, the lovable Miss Matty, the character whose kindness shows how much better that quality is than correctness, who represents human values over against social conventions. Yet formal and strait-laced as Miss Jenkyns is, in real need friendship triumphs over formality. She appeared to be rather fierce, but much *was* mere appearance. With Miss Matty, however, all is transparent sincerity and benevolence. With her, elegant economy is accepted for what it is, not as a form of keeping up appearances.

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 9.

² *Ibid.* p. 4.

We may criticize her sister, but we appreciate why *she* does not. Indeed we admire her devotion and humility. The reference to the meal-time ritual¹ provides a good example of the different way in which we regard the two sisters. The forms were those which were observed in "my father, the rector's house", that is, all Miss Jenkyns's stiff traditionalism. The description, however, refers to an occasion after Miss Jenkyns's death, an event which made no alteration to the ritual, for, even though Miss Matty had objected to certain aspects of domestic regulation in the lifetime of her sister, sisterly love for her memory prevented any change after her death. That is, formality has now been changed to humanity. Miss Matty is lovable, and also pathetic. How she misses her sister—"Oh! how must I manage? . . . If only Debōrah had been alive she would have known how to deal with a gentleman-visitor."² How perfectly Mrs. Gaskell catches this character—the fussy, timorous, refined elderly spinster—her amusing attempts to evade a meeting with the man she had rejected over thirty years before, her friend Miss Pole's cousin, then their dinner with him ("It is very pleasant dining with a bachelor, . . . I only hope it is not improper; so many pleasant things are!"³); and finally, after his sudden death, her taking to caps made after the style of those worn by widows, and her permitting Martha to have her boyfriend in once a week.⁴

Amusing and pathetic, but the pathos deepens as we travel back over the lives of these two spinsters. We are led to see Miss Matty the old lady as a young and happy girl, the girl of whom we are reminded at the end when her brother, returned after long years in India, chaffs her about her failure to marry Holbrook. He did not know of the family pressures which, on grounds of class, had prevented Miss Matty from accepting him. Mrs. Gaskell makes much of the pathos of the irrevocable past in the history of the Jenkyns, with the "old letters", those, for instance, "interchanged between my ever-honoured father and my dearly-loved mother, prior to their marriage in July 1774", the father's "full of eager, passionate ardour", the

¹ Knutsford edition, pp. 30-1.

³ Ibid. pp. 40-1.

² Ibid. p. 32.

⁴ Ibid. p. 47.

mother's, the "girl-bride" as Mrs. Gaskell describes her, notable mainly for their expression of "a longing for a white paduasoy",¹ a longing not to be satisfied in her lifetime; but ironically, the day after her death one arrived from the long-lost Peter, "just such a shawl as she wished for when she was married, and her mother did not give it her".² The pathos is deepened by her husband's resolve that she should be buried in the shawl she had longed for but never seen.

The humour of the book does not quite match the pathos, but it is nevertheless delightful and, within the limits that the book allows, quite varied. We smile at the ways of Cranford, their undue seriousness and their magnification of the trivial. Sometimes, as in the case of the cow with the flannel waistcoat, it is almost farcical, but more often it is humour exactly in character with the people who often all unwittingly provide it, Miss Matty, for instance, during the burglary scare: "It was very unpleasant to think of looking under a bed, and seeing a man concealed, with a great, fierce face staring out at you; so she had bethought herself of something—perhaps I had noticed that she had told Martha to buy her a penny ball, such as children play with—and now she rolled this under the bed every night: if it came out on the other side, well and good; if not, she always had her hand on the bell-rope."³

Cranford is not the slight piece, the merely interesting tale, that it is often thought to be. It reveals a remarkable penetration into the thoughts and feelings of people apparently, but only apparently, uninteresting; it manifests an insight into unsuspected depths; and in Miss Matty with "her patience, her humility, her sweetness, her quiet contentment with all that she could not do",⁴ it presents a noble self-effacing heroine.

With *Mary Barton* we remove from the slow-moving, gracious, middle-class world of Knutsford to "dull ugly smoky grim grey Manchester".⁵ It is one of that large class of novels concerned with social conditions which appeared in the two decades from 1845 to 1865. Its sub-title is "A Tale of Manchester Life",

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 52.

² *Ibid.* p. 70.

³ *Ibid.* p. 118.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 158.

⁵ Letter of Mrs. Gaskell, quoted in Hopkins, p. 229.

and it is based on conditions in Manchester during the early years of the "Hungry Forties". Mrs. Gaskell wrote out of avowed sympathy for "the careworn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want".¹ She intended originally to entitle it *John Barton* after the man who is really the central character in this story of industrial strife, class-hatred, poverty, starvation and death. Alongside this social theme we have the account of Mary Barton, beloved of Jem Wilson and desired by the young employer Carson. This particular version of the eternal triangle, the lover poor but honourable, the rich would-be seducer, and the girl apparently the more attracted by the latter's advances, represents one aspect of the novel's crudity. Another is the persecution of innocence in Jem Wilson—tried, and only rescued at the last moment from suffering death, for the murder of young Carson. That this should happen to Jem, the true lover, kind son, bold hero of the mill fire! The fault is that of over-simplification. The colours are bold, but not convincing. The fault derives in good part from the moralizing intention of the work. This is also responsible for another effect of over-simplification, for the sentimentality which sometimes creeps in. There is a veritable profusion of death-scenes, but what is even less acceptable than these is the character of Margaret Jennings, contrast to Mary, the good girl who goes blind and suffers in uncomplaining resignation—and then at the end has her sight restored.

As with many a first novel, sureness of touch and disciplined control are lacking, but also as with many a first novel, *Mary Barton* lives because it says something that was crying out to be said. Moreover, the fervour—and the imaginative fervour is derived from, and co-existent with, the moral fervour—is matched by knowledge. She knew the place and the people she was writing about. From its pleasant beginnings with walks in Greenheys Fields and a tea-party in days of moderate prosperity the book descends to strife and suffering, to Berry Street, "unpaved: and down the middle a gutter forced its way, every now and then forming pools in the holes with which the street abounded . . . women from their doors tossed household slops of every

¹ Preface.

description into the gutter. . . . Heaps of ashes were the stepping-stones, on which the passer-by who cared in the least for cleanliness, took care not to put his foot", and to Davenport's cellar—"It was very dark inside. The window-panes, many of them were broken and stuffed with rags, which was reason enough for the dusky light that pervaded the place even at mid-day. . . . The smell was so foetid as almost to knock the two men down . . . [and there they saw] three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up; the fireplace was empty and black." ¹ This is not exaggerated. The reports of commissions and individual investigators confirm its accuracy, but even if they did not, the passage is self-authenticating. Beneath the matter-of-fact detail one senses the passion which informs it.

Her descriptive power is one of Mrs. Gaskell's strongest qualities both in *Mary Barton* and elsewhere. Yet another is her ability to tell an exciting story; the chase after the ship *John Cropper* as it left Liverpool to find the vital witness, Will Wilson, is an example of this. (She used to tell ghost stories at night before her company retired to bed; Charlotte Brontë could not stand this practice.) A third quality is her sure grasp of social reactions especially among the working classes, the way in which they help each other so readily in distress or again the way in which certain prejudices (the lingering conservatism about machines) ² and folk-attitudes (the sociology of bereavement with the funeral meal, "a grand affair, well-nigh twenty people to breakfast" ³) are displayed amongst them. Details such as these give to Mrs. Gaskell's novels about social conditions a precision and authenticity of atmosphere that is missing, for instance, in Dickens's *Hard Times*. A better contrast perhaps is provided by Disraeli's *Sybil* where the detail is present, but has a theoretical air about it, giving the impression of intelligent reporting rather than sympathetic description.

Yet another example of Mrs. Gaskell's intimate knowledge is her description of the employer and his family. The elder Carson is the self-made man, rugged, harsh, prepared all the time to fight his workers but with a respect for them even if it is

¹ Knutsford edition, pp. 65-6.

² *Ibid.* p. 97.

³ *Ibid.* p. 49.

only for them as his opponents. His son, born to wealth and power and position, is less aware of them as individuals with thoughts and passions. For him they are merely the opportunity for a joke. When the men had entered the room for their meeting with the employers, "Mr. Harry Carson had taken out his silver pencil, and drawn an admirable caricature of them—lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-stricken. Underneath he wrote a hasty quotation from the fat knight's well-known speech in *Henry IV*".¹ That "silver pencil" is enough to show the power that Mrs. Gaskell can derive from detail. It is a symbol of the luxury and extravagance that finds yet vaster and more vulgar expression among the wives and daughters of the employers than is found among themselves.

For that caricature Harry Carson died. With something of Hardy's sense of the terrible consequences that may arise from small events, but without his feeling of the inexorable malignity of fate, Mrs. Gaskell portrays one of the men as asking a waiter for the drawing to take it to his little son at home. Not till he receives it do the men realize that they had been the butt of Carson's wit, but when they do, they swear vengeance which by lot John Barton is appointed to carry out. Like certain other incidents in *Mary Barton*, this may appear rather melodramatic, but it is not. There is nothing false in the delineation of their characters, and in that of John Barton Mrs. Gaskell has achieved one of her triumphs. He is a man of goodwill, tainted, admittedly, from the first with the class-feeling it is difficult to avoid in the environment in which he lives, but nevertheless content with little, a man at first hopeful in suffering, then driven in turn to despair and vindictiveness. "The mind became soured and morose. . . . It ceased to hope. And it is hard to live on when one can no longer hope."² Not until he is faced by the enormity of the murder he has committed and by the revengefulness of the elder Carson does he really begin to think and feel again. Then resignedly he accepts the justice of punishment. But John Barton is to die before the penalty of the law can be imposed. He dies, in a moment of symbolic reconciliation in the arms of Carson, who has been compelled to come to the

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 213.

² *Ibid.* p. 194.

Barton home by a reading of the Gospel. This may appear all very didactic, and in a sense it is, but we must be careful to read the right lesson from it. Mrs. Tillotson is right when she states that the story is not simply "a moral fable showing why working men turn Chartists and assassins; it is the timeless history of how a man full of human kindness is hardened into (and by) hatred and violence".¹ John Barton's dying words surely support this view: "All along it came natural to love folk, . . . I think one time I could e'en have loved the masters if they'd ha' letten me."² As Mrs. Tillotson has again so wisely remarked, in Mrs. Gaskell we constantly find "the quiet assumption that to know is to understand, to forgive and even to respect".³

That statement is true again of her novel *Ruth*, published in 1853. *Mary Barton* had met a mixed, and in some places stormy, reception on its appearance. Critics alleged that Mrs. Gaskell had been unfair to the employers. *The Manchester Guardian*, for example, said that the book "sinned generally against the truth in matters of fact, either above the comprehension of its authoress or beyond her sphere of knowledge" (28 February 1849). It was on the grounds of morality rather than of accuracy that *Ruth* was condemned. *Ruth* is the story of an unmarried mother or, as the Victorians would have said, a fallen woman. Again we have a conventional initial situation, the poor girl "innocent and snow-pure"⁴ seduced by the rich young man and eloping with him to North Wales, becoming pregnant of his child, and then his falling ill and being taken away by his mother who exhorts Ruth to repentance, reminding her, "You will not have your own guilt alone upon your head, but that of any young man whom you may succeed in entrapping into vice".⁵ Ruth is rescued in her distress by a Dissenting minister and his sister on holiday and taken to live with them as a widowed relative. Eventually, however, the truth comes out. The book ends with Ruth heroically nursing victims of a fever epidemic and dying from the disease as she cares for her former lover, now the local

¹ *Novels of the Eighteen Forties* (Oxford, 1956), p. 211.

² *Mary Barton* (Knutsford edn.), p. 431.

³ *Op. cit.* p. 222.

⁴ Knutsford edition, p. 43.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 91.

Member of Parliament. "Why should she die?" asked Charlotte Brontë.¹ There was indeed no artistic reason for it; the death is a concession to the storm that Mrs. Gaskell anticipated would break over the novel. It did. Reviewers condemned it, circulating libraries refused to handle it, and men forbade their wives to read it, and of her own home Mrs. Gaskell wrote: "Of course it is a forbidden book in *this* as in many households".² Yet many were found to commend it, among them F. D. Maurice, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, and Florence Nightingale. I do not propose to dwell on the book, not because I am squeamish about it, but because I find it tediously moral. It is not only in the sequence of events that Mrs. Gaskell keeps one eye so steadily upon moral requirements; the whole structure of the book—theme, development, characterization—is confined within the limits of a too insistent moral intention.

The next novel, *North and South*, represents in some ways an advance on what had gone before. It is about Milton (or Manchester) and its inhabitants with "their energy, their power, their indomitable courage in struggling and fighting, their lurid vividness of existence".³ As the title indicates, it is in large measure a contrast of two ways of life; of north and south, of Manchester with its industry, its strife of the classes and the sturdy independence of its people, and of Helstone in Hampshire, agricultural and with a patriarchal philanthropy at work. The Hale family provides the connecting link. Mr. Hale resigns his living at Helstone on grounds of conscience and becomes a private tutor in Milton. It is through his daughter, however, that we see the faults and virtues of Milton, partly through the adjustment she herself has to make to the new surroundings, but mainly through her contacts with the two sides of industry at a time of dispute and strikes. In this novel Mrs. Gaskell took care not to bring more accusations of bias and unfairness upon herself. The choice of Margaret, an outsider, through whom to express the novel's point of view is one indication of this care. Mrs. Gaskell is scrupulous also in her presentation of the employers' side of the argument (there is too much argument pure and

¹ Quoted by Hopkins, p. 123.

² Quoted by Hopkins, p. 125.

³ Knutsford edition, p. 496.

simple in this novel), and in Thornton she shows us a manufacturer aware of the economic pressures at work upon him also gradually becoming enlightened and willing to make paternalistic experiments. The sum of all Mr. Gaskell's preaching represents a high ideal. As Mr. Hale puts it of the Union—it "would be beautiful, glorious,—it would be Christianity itself—if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that of merely one class as opposed to another".¹ She is emphasizing our common humanity as the creatures of God. The chapter from which I quote ends: "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm."² It is all very admirable but also very vague. She has no social remedy to prescribe. Of course, you may reply that this is not the novelist's job.

In her sensitive and earnest appreciation of people Margaret is a useful character through whom to focus events for the reader and at the same time she is contrasted with all the other characters of the book. This is not to say that she is perfect. At the beginning she shows a marked snobbishness towards Milton and its people, but her humanity prevails. Later, she is agonized by the fact that in shielding her brother, an exile and a fugitive from the law for protecting sailors against a tyrannous captain years before, from arrest, she told a lie and Thornton knew that she had. Here again Mrs. Gaskell's kindness comes to the fore in the comfort administered to Margaret by her father's friend, Mr. Bell. Despite these faults, Margaret shines by contrast with others, notably Mrs. Thornton and her daughter. The latter is too slight to be fully effective, but there is enough of her to show how shallow she is. Mrs. Thornton is a more substantial character, a hard woman, a product of her environment, but redeemed somewhat by a single quality, her complete and unwavering love for her son.

Mrs. Thornton's drawing-room is a perfect reflection of her character—harsh, heavy, and vulgar. The passage in which Mrs. Gaskell describes it is a fine example of her feminine eye for detail.

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 276.

² Ibid. p. 277.

The furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence. The walls were pink and gold ; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window-curtains were lace ; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting or knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. In the middle of the room, right under the bagged-up chandelier was a large circular table, with smartly-bound books arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of its polished surface, like gaily-coloured spokes of a wheel. Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. . . . Wherever she looked there was evidence of care and labour, but not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment ; solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction.¹

The vulgarity in evidence here finds a real-life parallel in a letter of Mrs. Gaskell's to Parthenope Nightingale (later Lady Verney). She writes : " I have been trying to sell Miss Stuart MacKenzie's cameo to some of our rich Manchesterians but, thank you, it is not ' large ' enough for them, and cutting and execution is nothing to size." ²

The fidelity of detail in the passage quoted above represents one of Mrs. Gaskell's strongest qualities. Another is the essential verisimilitude in her portrayal of Manchester life and people. There are occasional lapses. The invalid Bessy Higgins is a concession to the strong sentimental trait in her work. Her last words—" Give her [Margaret] my affectionate respects ; and keep father fro' drink " ³—are surely unsurpassed in bathos, and their effect is not improved when three pages later father has to be kept from drink. The contrast of the north and the south, however, shows the certainty with which Mrs. Gaskell was capable of handling the one as compared with the other, a certainty which also serves to emphasize another of the novel's shortcomings. By contrast with the reality of the north, the south is too idyllic, even allowing for the chapter " Looking South " which reveals some of the suffering and poverty of rural areas. This strength of north over south is also to be seen in the characterization. Apart from Margaret, none of the southern characters, not even Mr. Hale, really comes alive. One or two, the servant

¹ Knutsford edition, pp. 130-1.

² In the Verney collection, quoted by kind permission of Sir Harry Verney, Bt.

³ Knutsford edition, p. 257.

Dixon and Aunt Shaw, produce some effective comedy, but the people really envisaged as individuals are "northerners", Thornton and his mother, the Higgins family and especially Nicholas Higgins, the counterpart in this novel of John Barton.

North and South inevitably invites comparisons with *Mary Barton*. It is a better constructed novel than its predecessor and its principal characters are more carefully conceived and delineated, but it lacks the spontaneity and fervour of that work. It is altogether more deliberate. It is also too long. Dickens, for whose *Household Words* it was serialized, became increasingly impatient with it, and this may perhaps explain the rather sudden and insufficiently convincing ending. In the preface to the first edition Mrs. Gaskell said that she "was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close". She tried to remedy this defect by adding a number of chapters, but the attempt did not succeed. What was already too long in serial became yet longer but not more effective in book-form. Mrs. Gaskell was inclined to be long-winded. *Sylvia's Lovers* is at least a hundred pages too long by that section added to meet the requirements of Victorian three-decker publication; and her last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, is hardly remarkable for conciseness, and that was unfinished at her death.

Sylvia's Lovers is unique among Mrs. Gaskell's works in both the time and place in which it is set—Monkshaven (or Whitby) in the seventeen-nineties. Sylvia Robson's two lovers are her shopkeeper-cousin Philip Hepburn and the whaling-boat speck-sioneer, Charlie Kinraid. Sylvia favours Kinraid, but he is seized by the press-gang and everyone—except Philip who knows the truth—thinks he is dead. Sylvia marries Philip. Kinraid returns, now a naval lieutenant, and Philip's failure to tell Sylvia of Kinraid's seizure is revealed. The marriage, never very happy, collapses, and Philip goes away. The book should have ended there, but instead we have those last hundred pages of Philip's very unlikely enlistment, his saving Kinraid's life at the siege of Acre, his return to Monkshaven as a broken-down ex-soldier and the rescue of his child from drowning, his own dying and a death-bed reconciliation with Sylvia.

The most important event in all this is the last, because it concentrates within itself the simplicity and intensity of Mrs. Gaskell's beliefs that most of our failures come not from wickedness but from weakness, from the inability to conceive the ill we are creating ; and that for our weakness there is an infinite compassion. Sylvia is distraught at the thought of the malice she has entertained towards Philip :

“ Will He iver forgive me, think yo' ? I drove yo' out fra' yo'r home . . . and when yo' come back, poor and lone, and weary, I told her for t' turn yo' out, for a' I knew yo' must be starving in these famine times. I think I shall go about among them as gnash their teeth for iver, while yo' are wheere all tears are wiped away.” “ No ! ” said Philip, turning round his face, forgetful of himself in his desire to comfort her. “ God pities us as a father pities his poor wandering children ; the nearer I come to death the clearer I see Him. But you and me have done wrong to each other ; yet we can see now how we are led to it ; we can pity and forgive one another . . . but thou must remember this: God knows more, and is more forgiving than either you or me, or me to you.”¹

In isolation this may seem very pointedly didactic. It springs, however, from the serious religious feeling which pervades the book and which is centred upon the Quaker group of which Philip Hepburn is a member. There is a note of piety in most of Mrs. Gaskell's works. Occasionally as in the case of Bessy Higgins in *North and South* it is sentimentalized, and occasionally it is rather obtrusive, but it has to be recognized as a fundamental part of her vision of life.

Sylvia's Lovers is important most of all for the ways in which it marks the advance that Mrs. Gaskell had made on anything she had written before. This is particularly noticeable in two directions. One is in her sense of inter-relationships between characters and in the way in which she conveys the impression of the characters developing under her hand. The other is in the power with which she suggests the influence of external forces on the lives of her people. It might be said that both these are noticeable in her other novels, and in a sense it may be conceded that they are ; that, for example, Margaret Hale undergoes a development as a result of living in Milton and that the life and death of John Barton is very much governed by the pressure of external forces. But in *Sylvia's Lovers* there is a difference.

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 524.

Whereas Margaret Hale changed with her surroundings yet remained essentially the same character, Sylvia Robson really develops from a rather flighty girl through various stages into an embittered wife. Again, whereas the external forces in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* are large and make the people what they are, in *Sylvia's Lovers* the force is in itself smaller, that of the incident rather than of the whole social setting, and its significance is not in itself alone but in the violent reaction which it causes in association with certain predispositions in the character who becomes involved in it. One such example is the attack on the press-gang, where opportunity collaborates with Daniel Robson's eagerness, and the end of that moment of weakness is on a gallows at York. Again and more important there is the central fact of Philip Hepburn's concealment of his knowledge that Kinraid is not dead but taken by the press-gang. This action of Philip's also provides a fine example of Mrs. Gaskell's subtler study of feeling in this novel. He has been portrayed as a rather dull, unattractive character beside the dashing Kinraid. That is how Sylvia regards them and *we* agree with her. Not unnaturally Philip is jealous, but he acts as he does not out of jealousy alone. As we recognize and as we are reminded right up to the last meeting before he disappears, he was thinking also of Sylvia and of the stories surrounding Kinraid and "his false, fickle ways".¹ In a manner again reminiscent of Hardy the seed of disaster lies dormant while Philip prospers. He is allowed to profit from his concealment, to marry Sylvia and to be happy. A daughter is born to them, and a chapter ends: "Perhaps on that day Philip reached the zenith of his life's happiness." The next chapter, entitled "Evil Omens", begins: "The first step in Philip's declension happened in this way."² Disaster is inescapable. After he has concealed his knowledge (notice how the concealment of an important fact is a recurrent topic in Mrs. Gaskell's work—it occurs in *Ruth*, *North and South*, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Wives and Daughters*) and is profiting by it, Philip becomes a more, not less, attractive character, thereby preparing for the downfall that is to come. He is not, however, allowed to appear faultless. Alongside his very deep kindness, for

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 403.

² *Ibid.* p. 372-3.

instance, there is often an insensitive streak, a quality that results in his asking Hester Rose, the girl who has quietly loved him for years, to be bridesmaid to Sylvia at her request. There is an obtuseness of feeling here that would be incredible, were it not completely in character.

There is something more to be said about Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of external pressures in this novel. The chief of these pressures is represented by the presence of the press-gang. It constitutes a blighting influence on the life of Monkshaven, and this comes out particularly in her description of the whaling fleet's return, of the mixture and conflict of gladness to be home and foreboding as to what may happen, of the difference between past happy years of streets "full of blue-jackets, rolling along with merry words and open hearts" and the present where "men dodged about their daily business with hatred and suspicion in their eyes".¹ Mrs. Gaskell is now confident enough to let her description make its own impact. The press-gang is condemned implicitly; there is no recourse to comment as there would have been in earlier novels. Because this is so and the reader is allowed to formulate his own conclusions about the press-gang, the part which the gang plays in the death of Daniel Robson and the whole tragic tangle in the lives of Philip Hepburn and Sylvia Robson appears all the more heinous. In the handling of incident, the interplay of outside pressures and personal inclination, the development and interaction of character, in these and other ways *Sylvia's Lovers* is at once a more complex and more controlled novel than any that had gone before.

Mrs. Gaskell's last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, has enjoyed a minor revival of later years. Rosamond Lehmann in her introduction to the Chiltern Library edition (1948) made great claims for it, considering it a "neglected Victorian classic".² It exhibits a complexity and control similar to that found in *Sylvia's Lovers* and, in addition, it displays a finer sensibility. It is this last quality which makes this novel alone worthy of the comparison that has sometimes been made of Mrs. Gaskell with Jane Austen. It is possible to compare. Phoebe Browning in a flutter about some detail of local gossip is not unlike Miss Bates; Molly

¹ Knutsford edition, p. 265.

² Title of article in *Penguin New Writing*.

Gibson is as upright and as helpful as Fanny Price, but fortunately she is rather more spirited; and if there is a fictional character more exasperating than Mrs. Norris, it is Clare, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, later Mrs. Gibson. Mrs. Gaskell's fine sensibility comes out well in her delineation and judgement of characters such as these. The comparison is only valid, however, to this limited extent. The wit, irony and crisp lucidity, that characterize Jane Austen, are, if not entirely absent, yet present only in flashes in Mrs. Gaskell's work.

In one respect, however, *Wives and Daughters* might be said to surpass the novel of Jane Austen. Both deal with the society of small places, but within that type of society Mrs. Gaskell treats a wider range. She includes the aristocracy and the servants, and about all the strata of society with which she concerns herself there is a remarkable authenticity. One thinks of Lord Cumnor, sufficiently confident of his rank to enable him to establish a kind of familiarity, albeit a special kind, with his tenants, of Lady Cumnor, more remote, standing more upon rank and protocol, of Lady Harriet, eccentric and outspoken, of these at one level, and at others the middle-class ladies of Hollingford, the Miss Brownings and Mrs. Goodenoughs, the successors of the ladies of Cranford, or the Gibson servants, or the old dying labourer on the Hamley estate. Mrs. Gaskell was always able to suggest the background of place and people, but in her last novel she excelled herself. In her novels about industrial and social conditions the background itself was strong, a potent element in the development of the theme and the unwinding of the story. In *Wives and Daughters*, however, we are hearing of apparently quiet lives in a quiet place. It is at once correspondingly more difficult and yet more necessary to provide an effective background.

The lives are only apparently quiet. Beneath the veneer of polite middle-class society Mrs. Gaskell works out a fairly complex history of personal relationships, of Doctor Gibson and his new wife, the former governess to the Cumnor family at the Towers and widow of Mr. Kirkpatrick, of the strains between this vulgar, calculating, self-seeking, self-pitying, unperceptive, superficial, hypocritical, snobbish, destructive woman and her

long-suffering step-daughter, innocent, kindly Molly Gibson, of the contrast between Molly and her step-sister Cynthia Kirkpatrick, who cannot be better described than in Miss Lehmann's words, "worldly yet simple in her tastes, cynical but swiftly responsive to moral goodness ; incapable of deep love yet warm, generous and disinterested in some of her affections ; a prevaricator, yet truthful ; unprincipled and secretive, yet unusually honest and self-critical".¹ Characters like these are Mrs. Gaskell's greatest, and worthy to rank among the great in English fiction.

The relations of Molly and her step-mother form one main topic in the novel, and Cynthia's ability to attract the attention of men forms the other. Her mother tries to entice Osborne Hamley to her, but she does not know that Osborne is secretly married. This secret marriage, and indeed the whole of Osborne's character is, by the way, the most unsatisfactory part of the book. When Mrs. Gibson hears, however, (or rather overhears) that Osborne is likely to die at any moment of heart disease, she immediately switches her proxy attentions to his younger brother Roger, and though Cynthia is not very enthusiastic, eventually an engagement is arranged. Cynthia's unwillingness proceeds from some mysterious association with the Cumnors' land agent Preston. It later turns out that he secured a private arrangement from her on the strength of a loan she had been compelled to ask of him. In the last chapters of the book Cynthia is married to a London barrister, to Mrs. Kirkpatrick a much finer "catch" than a dull scholar like Roger Hamley. She would have considered that word "catch" vulgar, but it exactly describes how she regarded the whole matrimonial business.²

On one occasion Cynthia tells Molly : " I've never lived with people with such a high standard of conduct before ; and I don't quite know how to behave." ³ With Cynthia this is a regrettable shortcoming, but it shows her mother up for what she really is. " Mr. Gibson had been compelled to face and acknowledge the fact, that the wife he had chosen had a very different

¹ Introduction to the Chiltern Library edition, p. 13.

² Cf. Knutsford edition, pp. 743-4.

³ Ibid. p. 475.

standard of conduct from that which he had upheld all his life, and had hoped to have seen inculcated in his daughter." Mrs. Gibson's words at the end would have come more appropriately from her husband: "One learns the baseness of human nature with advancing years."¹ But he need not have feared for Molly. To the very speech in which these words occur she gave such an answer as showed that her standards were true enough: "All sorts of thoughts cross one's mind—it depends upon whether one gives them harbour and encouragement."²

The editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*, Frederick Greenwood, was right in the concluding remarks which he affixed to the novel when he said that "in this novel of 'Wives and Daughters', in the exquisite little story that preceded it, 'Cousin Phillis' [I have regrettably had no time to speak of Mrs. Gaskell's short stories nor of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*], and in 'Sylvia's Lovers', . . . Mrs. Gaskell had within these five years (1860-5) started upon a new career with all the freshness of youth".³ In these last novels there is a new technical control, a deeper investigation of individual behaviour, a fresh awareness of the intensity of human passions. Of her it may certainly be said that she died in the fullness of her powers.

I would not attempt to gloss over her failings, her prolixity, moralising and occasional tendency to melodrama, for instance, but it is her achievement that really matters. Her freshness of outlook, clarity of vision, intense sympathy with human nature, upright yet gracious moral sense, all these make her an attractive writer to read. She had her limitations both in the depth and extent of her vision and also in her technical powers as a novelist, but it can be said of her now as it was in the remarks at the end of *Wives and Daughters*, that she was a wise and kindly woman. To this I would only add that, although she may not be a major novelist, she is certainly a major minor novelist.

¹ Cf. Knutsford edition p. 448.

² *Ibid.* p. 744.

³ *Ibid.* p. 758.

APPENDIX

GASKELL MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL IN MANCHESTER

1. *In the John Rylands Library*

English Manuscripts 726-34, presented to the Library by the executors of Miss M. E. (Meta) Gaskell (Mrs. Gaskell's daughter) include :

English MS. 727. *Letters of W. S. Landor*. 5 items, c. 1854-8, etc. Nos. 1 and 2 to Mrs. Gaskell, No. 3 to Rev. W. Gaskell, No. 4 a MS. poem "To the author of *Mary Barton*".

English MS. 729. *Letters from Charles Dickens to Mrs. Gaskell*. 30 items, 1850-62. All to Mrs. Gaskell except Nos. 14, 18, and 30, which are addressed to the Rev. W. Gaskell.

English MS. 730-1 : *Letters to Mrs. Gaskell and the Rev. W. Gaskell*. 113 items. I (730). 1-58, A-K. c. 1847-68 ; II (731). 59-113, L-W. c. 1840-67.

English MS. 732-4. *Miscellaneous letters*. 208 items. Evidently Mrs. Gaskell's collection of autographs.

On all the above see R. D. Waller's *Letters addressed to Mrs. Gaskell by celebrated contemporaries*, Manchester, 1935.

(English MS. 726 is the original manuscript, much corrected, of Dickens's *A child's dream of a star*, and English MS. 728 contains 3 items by Thackeray.)

Other Gaskell items in the Rylands collections are :

English MS. 341/134. Letter from Mrs. Gaskell to Mrs. Scott. [? 1860].

English MS. 343/1b. Letter from her to an unidentified correspondent. 4 June [no year].

English MS. 343/1a. Photograph of Mrs. Gaskell, apparently the last she had taken.

English MS. 876. *The Grey Woman*. 1861. 72 ff. Original MS. with author's corrections.

English MS. 877. *Wives and Daughters*. c. 1864-6. 920 ff. Original MS. with numerous corrections.

2. *In the Central Library*

MS. 823.894 Z1. *Crowley Castle*. c. 1863. 45 ff. Original MS.

MS. 823.81 B7. One page from the MS. of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (described in J. A. Green's *A Bibliographical Guide to the Gaskell Collection in the Moss Side Library*, 1911, as from "an unnamed manuscript").

MS. 928.23 G47. Volume containing :

Letters to Mr. (?) and Mrs. Schwabe. 5 items.

Miscellaneous letters of Mrs. Gaskell. 6 items.

Fragment—amusing description of a young French girl.

Copy of two stanzas from *In Memoriam* for Mrs. G. L. Banks's collection of autographs.

Letter of Rev. Patrick Brontë to Rev. W. Gaskell. 23 July 1856. With references to Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Letter of Mrs. Gaskell to (?) Ellen Nussey. July 1855. Concerning the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Copy of a letter of Charles Dickens to Mrs. Gaskell. 6 November 1852.

Letter of Charles Dickens to Mrs. Gaskell. 6 December 1852.

Both these refer to Mrs. Gaskell's *The Old Nurse's Story* for the Christmas number of *Household Words*, 1852.

Letter of Mrs. Gaskell to Sir John Potter, 16 August [1852]. Contains a reference to the murder in *Mary Barton*.

3. In the University Library

Autograph letters of Charlotte Brontë to Mrs. Gaskell. c. 1850-4. 21 letters to Mrs. Gaskell: 1 from C. B. to Polly Taylor, 4 September 1848, apparently forwarded from New Zealand to Mrs. Gaskell in 1856; 1 from M. Heger to Mrs. Gaskell with extracts from letters of C. B.; 1 from Patrick Brontë to Mrs. Gaskell, 2 April 1857; 2 exercises in French by Charlotte Brontë and 1 by Emily Brontë.

Letters of Charlotte Brontë's father to Mrs. Gaskell, referring to the latter's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1855-60. 19 items (16 letters to Mrs. Gaskell, 1 to Rev. W. Gaskell, 1 copy of a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, a memorandum of facts for the *Life*).

Life of Charlotte Brontë. 1855-6. 685 ff., with extra leaves inserted Original MS. with author's corrections.

The Crooked Branch. 1859. 65 ff. Original MS.

Letter of Mrs. Gaskell to Mrs. Heald [n.d.].

4. At the Unitarian College

8 letters of Mrs. Gaskell: 1, imperf., to Mr. Steinthal [? Rev. S. A. Steinthal], respecting homes for factory girls [n.d.]; 1 to an unnamed correspondent, concerning arrangements for Mr. Gaskell to visit Palestine [n.d.]; 5 to Dr. Beard, respecting the release of Mr. Gaskell from his various employments to take a holiday [1863]; 1 to Dr. Beard about placing a girl in a boarding school, 18 Dec. [no year].