

ROUND THE SOFTWARE: POST, NOSTALGIA AND POST-NOSTALGIA ON THE GASKELL DISCUSSION LIST

A discussion, by gaskell-l and friends

Edited/annotated by David Kellogg

'[...T]hings are very different to what they were in my youth," began Elizabeth Gaskell in her 'round robin' of stories 'Round the Sofa'. 'Then we, who travelled, travelled in coaches, [...] making a two days' journey out of what people now go over in couple of seconds with a whizz and flash, and a screaming whistle enough to deafen one. Then, letters came in but three times a week: [...]--but letters were letters then; and we made great prizes of them, and read them and studied them like books. Now the post comes come rattling in twice a day, bringing short, jerky notes [...] Well, well! they may all be improvements,--I dare say they are; but you will never meet with a Lady Ludlow in these days.' (MLL, p. 1)

Except, perhaps, on the Gaskell discussion list, our own Gaskellian email round-robin, notice for which readers may note on the copyright page of this journal. But Lady Ludlow and friends on line surely prove Gaskell's observation: the emails do not exactly rattle in twice a day, but the contributions on the list, when they do come in, are studied like books all over the world.

Why, just January last, David Newton remarked that that he had discerned a certain pastoral nostalgia in 'Mary Barton'. From Mary's hometown of Manchester, Alan Shelston begged to differ, and in a whizz and a flash the discussion vaulted into inboxes across the planet.

From Professor Carol Bock, in Duluth, USA:

'I would like to concur with Alan Shelston's point that Gaskell's attitude toward the past was "complex." Both "Cranford" and (especially I think) "My Lady Ludlow" nicely show this. [...] I do agree, however, that it is possible to interpret portions of "North and South" as participating in a kind of Tory nostalgia for the rural past (though my reading is that this is Margaret's early and rather mistaken view of the matter rather than purely Gaskell's).'

Yes, our discussion demands not only that letters be studied li

ke books, but also that books be studied like letters. We have Margaret Hale, speaking of her bucolic rural past from 'hard, prosaic' Milton-Northern (somewhere in the vicinity of present-day Alan Shelston), adding:

'All the other places in England that I have seen seem so hard and prosaic-looking after the New Forest. Helstone is like a village in a poem-in one of Tennyson's poems...' (NS p. 8)

Following the intertextual (internextual?) thread, we obtain this "contribution" from the Poet Laureate:

'Unloved the sun flower, shining fair
Ray round with flames her disk of seed
And many a rose-carnation feed
with summer spice the humming air[...]

'As year by year the labourer tills
His wonted glebe, or lops the glades;
And year by year our memory fades
From all the circle of the hills...' (In Memorium, the epigraph to NS Chapter 6)

And verily, Margaret's memory, or at least her conception, of her natal village changes, for she replies:

'It's sometimes in heavy rain, and sometimes in bitter cold. A young person can stand it; but an old man gets racked with rheumatism and bent and withered before his time; yet he must just work on the same, or else go the workhouse.' (NS p. 132)

Unlike the 'short, jerky' notes of latter days, the threads of the discussion are not simply tied end to end, but create an elaborate web between books and letters, readers and writers, with a pattern like an Indian shawl. In addition to Margaret's views, Professor Brock had also suggested that:

'(...i)t would be interesting to look at what was published in and around "North and South" in "Household Words" to see what kind of attitudes toward the past were being communicated elsewhere in the magazine. If it was filled with such nostalgia, one might argue that Gaskell's book would more easily [have] been seen as sharing th

at attitude [...]. I haven't looked at the pertinent issues in HW--does anyone know about this?'

Yes, indeed. Alan Shelston argues that HW's editor handpicked Gaskell for a consciously non-nostalgic stable of writers: "The Dickens link is important I think--one of the reasons why he picked EG out so quickly after Mary Barton was surely because he saw her as a novelist of the here and now.'

Elizabeth Williams has the actual issues at hand, and quotes copiously from actual actual articles: forward-looking ones championing, inter alia, Eurotunnel ('the Coming Man is the most likely man we know, to run a railway link under the sea') and backward-looking ones ranging from patronizing ('...our great grandfathers; with whom a journey of twenty miles into the country was an event to be talked about for the rest of the year') to downright perjorative ('Shadows of Dark Days').

In a Lady Ludlow-like spirit of fair play, Elizabeth Williams warns that her look at the data was cursory and that it might be partisan, as she herself sees Gaskell as a complex, post-nostalgic writer. And so it was that your humble editor took the liberty of repeating her experiment with the 1853 volume of 'Household Words', coming up with a certain "Tale of the Good Old Times" (p. 103). Mr. Blenkinsop, a Beetlebury worthy who "even more admired the wisdom of our ancestors than he did their furniture", converts to the cause of progress after midnight potations and a colloquy with a bronze statue, which, reviewing two thousand years of British ignominy, sonorously declares: "These are the best times that we know of--bad as the best may be. [...] The true good old times are yet to come."

Of course, another work which Dickens, who was certainly the editor and possibly the author of this tale, published 'in and around' HW and 'North and South' was his own 'industrial novel' 'Hard Times', with its invidious comparisons of "facts" and feeling. Pace Dickens, our Gaskell list discussion includes both. David Newton, preferring 'North and South' to 'Hard Times' precisely because of the country scenes, argues that the facts (later used by Engels in his contemporaneous Manchester-based study) would strongly support a certain 'nostalgia' in a grieving mother:

'According to the Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842), the average age of death of labourers and their families in Manchester was 17, but in rural Rutlandshire, 38 (higher still for farmers); and for professional persons and their families in Manchester, 38 and Rutland 52. These disparities between urban and rural life may well be the reflection of a still higher infant mortality rate. Surely Mrs Gaskell, having just lost her own infant, would have felt some nostalgia for a countryside where, statistically at least, her child like others, was more likely to have survived.'

Alan Shelston insists that Gaskell's vision bases itself not on personal experience or government statistics, but rather on her vision of community and society. (In passing, he picks up a trace of ironic foreboding in the deprecating 'whizz and flash and deafening whistle' reference she opened 'My Lady Ludlow' with.)

'Engels's numbers are appalling, and he makes a point of emphasizing them, particularly where the underclass are concerned. By contrast Elizabeth Gaskell presents Manchester as a city made up of communities - in MB at least. But I stick to my point that EG was very much of her time - a great railway traveller amongst other things - and her view of the past is often a very critical one...'

A Gaskell lister in South Korea, currently illustrating the interiors of 'North and South' for a new Chinese edition, notes that Gaskell, like Dickens's Mr. Blenkinsop, covets the upholstery of our ancestors. But does it follow that she admires their wisdom? To put it in terms that have sadly degenerated since Gaskell was a girl, was she more of a Tory, or more of a Red?

'...Of course, North and South is replete with [...] nostalgia, [...] often actually built into the furniture (Jo Pryke has commented that the contrast between Thornton's fancy drawing room with mirrors and the Hale's simple but more comfy one with windows open to nature has precisely this effect. But when Mr. Bell and Thornton confront each other in chapter 40, Margaret is clearly on the side of progress [...] "a democrat, a red republican, a member of the peace society". On the other hand (to link this to a previous thread on the list) she rather disparages the Irish contribution to the working class movement (s

ee her otherwise gratuitous comments on "Irish blood", N & S, end of Chapter 37).'

This last, because this is the Gaskell list, where issue leads to issues and letter leads to letters, eventually led to a discussion of Gaskell and anti-Irish prejudice, which at the time of writing is in full flower. Those who would join in (or just lurk) need only email the words 'subscribe gaskell-l' to <majordomo@creighton.edu> anytime. For, as Gaskell wrote, or would have written had she lived to be one hundred and eighty-nine years old, this "Round the Software" is no story: it has neither beginning, middle, nor end. (MLL, p. 1)