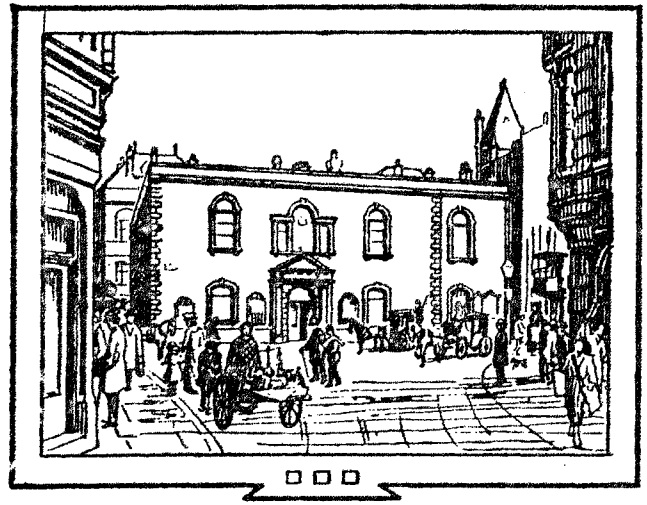
If you have any material or suggestions for future Newsletters, please contact Mrs Joan Leach, Far Yew Tree House, Over Tabley, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 OHN (Tel: 0565 634668)

ISSN 0954 - 1209

The Gaskell Society



CROSS STREET CHAPEL

NEWSLETTER

MARCH 1992 NO. 13

Editor's Letter

I have tried to get this newsletter to you a little earlier than usual as our spring meeting is on 28 March, instead of at the end of April - Easter dates and Cross Street Chapel commitments make this necessary. All meeting details are on the loose sheet.

The Society has its usual programme of events, but Knutsford's 700th anniversary of its town charter is keeping me very busy in various ways. Our AGM weekend has been put on the official programme for the year and we hope Knutsford will be en fete. I am struggling to turn myself into a medieval scholar!

Elizabeth Gaskell enjoyed meeting people and having a sociable life, and we in the Gaskell Society like to get together when possible; we hold meetings in Knutsford, Manchester and London, and also take part in The Alliance of Literary Societies meetings in Birmingham. After the success of our first residential conference, with The Brontë Society at Ambleside, then Scarborough, we hope to go on to other similar events.

EDINBURGH 1993. We were planning this for the end of July and were told that our venue was available then BUT recently found that a language school takes place then so we must re-think. Please let me know if the first weekend in September would be a good alternative. How would this suit OVERSEAS members? There would be an option for members to add days before or after our weekend so that more time could be spent in Edinburgh.

We do not understand how it has happened, but we find a shortage of 1991 JOURNALS; we would be grateful for any returns and also for any Vols 1 and 2.

PLEASE return slip from loose sheet so that our address list can be updated.

Thoughts on Mrs Gaskell's 'Life of Charlotte Brontë'

by Brenda Colloms

I must start by confessing that I had not read this biography before, although I respect Mrs Gaskell as a writer, and am interested in her as a woman set in her time, and in her circle of family and friends. The explanation is that I have never felt in tune with the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and indeed found myself happier with Anne Brontë, although she is a minor writer compared with her powerful sisters.

As I am a biographer, I approached the 'Life' with a personal interest. And there are two points where I found myself very close to Mrs Gaskell, one concerned with my first biography, of the Rev Charles Kingsley, and the second concerned with a later one, 'Victorian Visionaries', which is a group portrait of the Founders of the Working Men's College. I shall return to this later. Another coincidence, which I mention in passing, is that the Rev Patrick Brontë is one of my collection of clerics in 'Victorian Country Parsons'.

Indeed, I recall that when I was researching him, rather than his children, I was somewhat surprised to find him a highly interesting and even sympathetic character; surprised because obviously I had a general impression that he was a bizarre, even sadistic father. Much of that must, I am afraid, be owing to Mrs Gaskell's compelling story of her heroine, Charlotte Brontë.

Here we come to the nub of what makes her biography so interesting. It is a novelist's book, and although she did all the right things a careful researcher should do, the biography reads like a story. Indeed, Mrs Gaskell was blessed among biographers in that first, she had a passionate desire to write a memorial to her dead friend - not a literary criticism, we note, but a tribute to Charlotte's nobility of character. This would once and for all remove the imputation of 'coarseness' which had been raised by critics and readers. Mrs Gaskell, of

course, had smarted painfully under similar remarks for her first three novels, 'Ruth' especially. Second, Charlotte's father welcomed her as a biographer, Charlotte's friend, Ellen Nussey, showed her masses of letters, and even the Rev Arthur Bell Nicholls, the grieving widower who did not like Unitarians, was prepared to let Mrs Gaskell have use of Charlotte's letters, which at her death had become his property.

Mrs Gaskell journeyed to Yorkshire, soaking herself in its atmosphere, its past and the traditions and customs of its inhabitants. She went to Brussels, and saw Madame Heger, although not the Professor.

All this was in the spirit of a loyal, if not religious, duty to her friend, a gifted storyteller paying tribute to a writer of genius. However, it is the woman, and not the writer, who is the subject of this book. And what so impresses Mrs Gaskell is the religious quality of the duty which Charlotte feels, especially to her widower father. It is even possible to see that her marriage to Nicholls (and we should remember that at least two other men proposed to her, three if we guess that the curate, William Weightman, wanted to propose) was predicated on her father's consent, first, but also on Nicholls' promise to live in the parsonage, as Mr Brontë's curate, until the old man died. As it happened, Charlotte died first, and Nicholls did stay until his father-in-law died, upon which Nicholls returned to his native Ireland and began a second life. He remarried, and died in 1906.

Mrs Gaskell cannot bring herself to make Nicholls an attractive character, partly I think because she feared that with his strong Evangelical beliefs he would disapprove of her friendship with his wife, and Charlotte Nicholls would - of course - obey her husband. We know from Mrs Gaskell's letters that she was not a feminist - she believed that men had superior judgement in all serious matters, and that obedience to a husband was a sensible and natural matter.

She also believed utterly that the best chance of happiness and fulfilment for women came with marriage and children. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, she writes - 'I think an unmarried life may be to the full as happy in process of time, but I think there is a time of trial to be gone through with women, who naturally yearn after children.' *(Collection of Gaskell/Norton letters. Ed. Jane Whitehill. p.44, No.16. London 1932)*

I cannot help wondering whether part of Mrs Gaskell's admiration for Charlotte Brontë's devotion to 'duty' was partly due to a suspicion that she, Mrs Gaskell, might not have been able to bear to immure herself in a lonely, gloomy, bleak village, and to lead a poverty-stricken life with so few companions, duty or no duty.

At the same time, Gaskell the story-teller cannot help but be fascinated by the unusual, dare one say melodramatic, family background of the Brontës. All that set against the lonely moorland houses; the dour people taking a pride in harbouring lifetime grudges; the winter winds; the damp stone parsonage set practically inside the graveyard.

There is a special quality about this biography which its readers were quick to perceive and to praise. Let me quote Charles Eliot Norton writing to his friend, James Russell Lowell, and he says -
'... "The Life of Miss Brontë", which is almost as much an exhibition of Mrs Gaskell's character as of Miss Brontë's - and you know what a lovely and admirable character she has - - I know no biography that has so deep and touching an interest as this of Miss Brontë - none other written so tenderly, sympathetically and faithfully.' *(Whitehill collection. p.xxiii)*

Once started on her book, and assured of assistance from Patrick Brontë and Charlotte's friends, Mrs Gaskell set to work with a will, travelling wherever necessary, and writing fluently and rapidly. Deeply involved as she felt with her friend, it was inevitable that she would

have been indignant towards the 'villains' of the story - the adulterous wife who led young Branwell astray, and the owner and manager of the school which she believed was responsible for the deaths of the two eldest Brontë girls. Moral indignation led her to paint them in dark hues, throwing into sharpest contrast the shining purity of Charlotte Brontë.

After Mrs Gaskell's visit to Brussels, where apparently Madame Heger showed her some of Charlotte's letters to her husband, Mrs Gaskell became aware of the extent of Charlotte's emotional attachment to Clementin Heger, the 'crush' of a clever pupil for her professor. (Incidentally, one of the features which Miss Brontë admired so much about her professor was his voluntary social work. Was she looking for a father figure? Did she see likenesses between the Belgian and Patrick Brontë?)

After much deliberation, Mrs Gaskell decided to tell the truth, that Charlotte wrote him some letters, but not the whole truth, that is, any comment on the tone of the letters. Here Mrs Gaskell behaved exactly as a nineteenth century biographer was supposed to behave - with discretion. Literary figures, knowing the temptations which could beset future biographers, sometimes took steps to confound them, by destroying letters and papers, leaving instructions to heirs that such things should be done, or writing to correspondents demanding their letters back, so that they could be destroyed. Harriet Martineau had done the latter. Mrs Harriet Grote destroyed all letters in her possession because of her disapproval of contemporary trends in biography - and she died in 1878, over twenty years after Mrs Gaskell wrote the biography. Among the Grote collections were a number from Sidney Smith, who once said, speaking of her eccentricities, that Mrs Grote was the origin of the adjective 'grotesque'.

At this point I might make a personal point. The Kingsley book was my first attempt at a full-scale biography, and I learned that an old lady, a descendant

of Kingsley had some interesting letters, but that she did not want them used in a biography. At the time I was busy on other things, and by the time I was free to visit her, she had, alas, died, and the letters had gone to a younger relative, a niece who placed no such embargo upon them.

It so happened that I was dealing with Kingsley as much from a social history point of view, as from a personal one, whilst unknown to me at that time Susan Chitty was writing a psycho-biography of Kingsley the man. She visited the niece, obtained permission to publish, and revealed to her readers that Kingsley, a highly-sexed man, frustrated by his long courtship of Fanny Grenville, flagellated himself every Friday night. (The equivalent, I suppose, of the English cold bath. Incidentally, according to a television programme, certain members of the Catholic organisation, 'Opus Dei', are instructed to flagellate themselves regularly. It is, I take it, only one step further than a hair shirt?)

The reason I mention it is because had I seen the letters before Lady Chitty, I should have had to decide how much to disclose. It would, I feel, have been impossible not to mention the flagellation, but I certainly would not have made a song and dance about it. Faced with a similar dilemma, Mrs Gaskell in the mid-1850s, effectively concealed both Charlotte's need for love, and her attachment to M Heger.

Here I would like to quote George Orwell, from a passage used by Michael Sheldon in his recent biography of Orwell. Orwell in 1944 is reviewing a new biography of the French poet, Baudelaire -

'What is one to think of a "life" of Baudelaire which never once mentions that Baudelaire was syphilitic? ... This is not merely a piece of scandal: it is a point upon which any biographer of Baudelaire must make up his mind. For the nature of the disease has a bearing not only on the poet's mental condition during his last year

but on his whole attitude to life.' *('Orwell' Michael Sheldon. London 1991. p.5, Introduction)*

For those interested in reading fine print, the disagreement between Charlotte Brontë and Harriet Martineau about 'too much love' in Charlotte's books, a disagreement which pained Miss Brontë excessively, is part of the Belgian experience. And anybody reading 'The Professor' can see that the need for love was a crucial part of its author's make-up.

Discretion by biographers has not been confined to the nineteenth century. I have been reading a new biography of Barbara Leigh Smith, later Madame Bodichon, by Sheila Herstein, originally her PhD thesis for Yale University. In 1949 Hester Burton had published a biography, entitled 'Barbara Bodichon', and in the 1970s Burton wrote to Herstein, confessing that the Smith family had prevented her from mentioning the illegitimacy of the Smith children (an open secret at the time, and one of the factors which made Mrs Gaskell hesitate to like Barbara); Barbara's long-drawn out love affair with John Chapman; or the mental instability which apparently troubled both Barbara, and her Aunt Julia.

Let me touch upon what some late twentieth century women might regard as self-sacrifice taken to an impossible degree - Charlotte's 'duty' to her father. Here is Mrs Grote, writing to a friend in 1856 - almost exactly when Mrs Gaskell was writing the 'Life' -

'Many a time have I reflected upon the usefulness of Protestant Sisterhoods, whose lives at least could wear away without perpetual conflict with worldly temptations. What more unfair than to tie a living being to a post in sight of all manner of enjoyments and various curious objectives! Yet this is what happens to a single woman in civilized society. Accordingly, self must be crushed if she would avoid anguish. The safe course is to engage in a course of self-sacrifice, which supplies lively emotions, even though they be of an ascetic character, and thus the individual escapes the

pitfalls which beset the paths of pleasure. *(Elizabeth Rigby's 'Life of Mrs Grote', p.150)*

Poor Branwell. He certainly did not escape the pitfalls. His sister, Charlotte, made sure that she did.

I quote Mrs Gaskell. 'Her life at Haworth was so unvaried that the postman's call was the event of her day. Yet she dreaded the great temptation of centring all her thoughts upon this one time, and losing her interest in the smaller hopes and employments of the remaining hours. Thus she conscientiously denied herself the pleasure of writing letters too frequently, because the answers (when she received them) took the flavour out of the rest of her life; or the disappointment, when the replies did not arrive, lessened her energy for her home duties.'

(I am reminded of Barbara Pym's splendidly reserved novels of Christian ladies with a sense of duty.)

In with my own book, 'Victorian Visionaries', I was, like Mrs Gaskell, writing for a cause - to introduce the founders of the Working Men's College to the general public, so I can well understand her cause of wishing to introduce the 'true' Charlotte Brontë to the general public.

Lastly, and very briefly, coming to the book as a whole, which is what my local library would call 'a good read', I found so many deft touches, so many set-pieces, so many sudden surprises, that I do not know where to start. Take the first chapter - the matter-of-fact description of what Mrs Gaskell calls a 'common-place' church - and then suddenly, the reader is faced with a facsimile layout of that tragic Brontë family history given by the sparse memorial tablets on the wall at the side of the communion table.

After that initial shock, Mrs Gaskell uses the device of 'flash-back' to build up interest as sympathy for her

heroine. And what could be 'stranger than fiction' than the amazing literary creations of the young Brontë children, politicised at an early age by their Tory father, and devoted to public heroes like the Duke of Wellington?

I also remember some touching lines when the biographer-friend counters Charlotte's own description of herself as 'small and plain' with the remark that 'the grave, serious composure which, when I knew her, gave her face the dignity of an old Venetian portrait.' *(Chapter VI, pp.124-5)*

Lastly, I enjoyed immensely all the descriptions of the Yorkshire countryside, and its inhabitants and past history. These, I felt, set the Brontë family very firmly in a realistic background.

Visit to Holybourne

by Howard F Gregg

On Friday 2 August, after some of us had visited Jane Austen's Cottage at Chawton, 8 members of the South of England branch met for lunch at the White Hart at Holybourne. We were pleased that John Chapple was able to join us from Hull. After lunch we walked to the Church of the Holy Rood where Mrs Gaskell went for afternoon service on the day she died. The bells had been run some weeks before to welcome the new occupants of The Lawn. By the church we saw the pond, much overgrown, which is the source of the Bourne, which flows through the grounds of The Lawn, to which we re-directed our steps.

We were given a warm welcome by the Manager, Mrs Septekin, who allowed us to wander round the lovely grounds, enhanced by a beautiful summer day, and see the Bourne with miniature cascades and footbridges and

complete with ducks - an anxious mother seeing three young ones into the water at our approach. Roses were still in evidence and the lawn, parts of which were left wild, swept up to the house.

We were given a splendid tea in the drawing room where Mrs Gaskell died, at afternoon tea, on 13 November 1865. There is a reproduction of the Richmond portrait with Elizabeth Gaskell's signature underneath on one wall of the room. The spacious room had lovely views of the garden to the Bourne on one side and to the 250 year old cedar tree on the other. This last inspired a poem by Victor Brydges, "To Mrs Gaskell", written on the centenary of her death which Brenda Colloms was able to copy. It was easy in this setting to see why Mrs Gaskell so liked the house and poignant to recall, in Thurstan Holland's words, 'she had just got everything into order and readiness and was rejoicing in the carrying out of her wish.'

The photograph of the house in Winifred Gerin's biography, opposite page 239, shows the drawing room with three large windows on the lower storey of the building. The two on the left look down to the Bourne and the third, facing the lady in the photograph, looks towards the cedar tree. The house is now a home for the elderly with much new building added, recently visited by Princess Margaret. We were shown around and were impressed by the accommodation and facilities and the care and affection which exists there. Mrs Septekin showed us a portrait, possibly of Elizabeth Gaskell, but none of us could identify the artist.

We were glad to be encouraged to visit The Lawn again and are going to present Mrs Septekin with a copy of Winifred Gerin's biography as a mark of our appreciation for a happy and moving visit. The brief association of the house with Mrs Gaskell is clearly cherished. Our thanks to Richard J Beckley for arranging the visit.

William Gaskell's Peaceful End

On 12 June 1884, Beatrix Potter wrote in her diary:
'Papa heard from Mr Steinthal (minister at Cross Street Chapel) that Mr Gaskell died at five yesterday morning. Dear old man, he has had a very peaceful end. If anyone led a blameless peaceful life it was he. There has always been a deep child-like affection between him and me.'
When she was 8 she had knitted a scarf for his birthday present and he wrote to thank her: 'Big as I am I could not have done it one-tenth as well. Every time I put it round my neck, which during the winter will be every day, I shall be sure to think of you.'
On 14 June 1884 she added to her diary:
'Four o'clock Saturday afternoon. Mr Gaskell is just being buried beside his wife. We have sent some flowers.'*

This was the scene on that day:
'The earthly remains of the late Rev William Gaskell were buried on Saturday in the grave-yard of Knutsford chapel, beside those of Mrs Gaskell. Only a few friends had been asked to attend, but a large number, including many members of the Cross-street congregation, were present; among whom were Unitarian ministers from all parts of the northern district, the Mayor of Manchester, and several prominent citizens, as well as deputations from a number of institutions and public bodies. The hearse, followed by a single carriage in which were the Misses Gaskell, left the city early, proceeding by road to Knutsford. The other mourners went by a train which arrived about half-past four. The funeral carriage was upon the railways bridge when the train come in, and as the mourners passed into the road it went slowly by, the people falling in behind it. The hearse was open and admitted a view of the coffin, which was covered with white flowers. It is only a few yards from the railway gate to the Unitarian chapel. In the small burying ground which adjoins it Mrs Gaskell is buried. It is a quaint old-world place. The little chapel, built 200 years ago, is covered to the eaves with ivy. Scarcely

BROOK STREET CHAPEL
1947 *by John Carsberg*

anything of it is visible but its grey sloping roof. The burying ground is shut in on all sides with green branches, and a great plane tree in front of the chapel overshadows almost the whole of it. When the funeral party entered the air was vocal with the singing of birds, and an odorous breeze rustled in the sun-lit leaves. The coffin, with its load of flowers, seemed hardly to forbid this gladness of the summer. The chapel was soon filled. There was, indeed, room only for a small proportion of the mourners. In the dimly lighted edifice a solemn feeling rested on the silent congregation. The bare white walls seemed cold and sombre in the pale green light which came upon them through the trees. The silence was broken by the organ, and as "O rest in the Lord" was softly filling the chapel the coffin was brought in and set down in front of the pulpit.' (From the Unitarian Herald, June 1884)

*Information from William Gaskell 1805-1884 by Barbara Brill. Manchester Literary & Philosophical Publications 1984

An Oxford Ghost

by Barbara Brill

Augustus J C Hare was a prolific Victorian writer, with travel and guide books being his speciality: Walks in Rome was widely read (it went into 22 editions). Wanderings in Spain, Florence etc and he also wrote autobiographical works including Memorials of a Quiet Life and The Story of My Life* from which the following extracts are taken. He was related to the Stanleys of Alderley and Leycesters of Toft and was nephew of Archdeacon Julius Hare. His taste for continental travel and his Cheshire connections may have encouraged a friendship when he met Mrs Gaskell at Oxford in 1860 and they continued to correspond.

He wrote, "Everybody liked Mrs Gaskell. I remember that one of the points that struck me about her at first was not her kindness but her extreme courtesy and deference to her own daughters.
While she was at Oxford the subject of ghosts was brought forward for debate at the Union; she wished to have spoken from the gallery and if she had she would probably have carried the motion in favour of ghosts at once. Here is one of her personal experiences:"

Hare goes on to relate how Mrs Gaskell was staying with Quaker cousins at Stratford-on-Avon when they took her to Compton Winyates. They stopped at Eddington for tea on their return and talked about spirits; Mrs Gaskell asked if there were any ghost stories associated with the village and she was reproved by the father of the house for light and vain talking. After tea she went for a walk with the cousins and was told about a former resident of the village who had gone as a lady's maid to London leaving behind her fiancé, a carter. In London she met and married another man.

After his death some years later, she returned to her native village, re-met the carter and, after a fortnight's short courtship, they married. A few weeks later she returned to London to sell up her property.

Her husband did not like London so did not accompany her but she did not return home and shortly the husband heard that she had been found dead in the street.

The carter husband became unaccountably ill and told people it was because his wife sat beside him moaning and lamenting all night long so that he could not sleep.

Mrs Gaskell asked to meet the man and hear his story. She and her cousin called at his cottage. They got no reply at the front door but saw through the window a woman in a lilac print gown looking out. As they could get no reply at the back door either they called on a neighbour who told them the man was out for the day and there was no one in. 'Oh!' said Mrs Gaskell, 'we have seen a woman in the house in a lilac print gown'. 'Then' said the neighbour, 'you have seen the ghost. There is no woman in the house but that is she'.

*The Years with Mother by August J C Hare
Paperback edition by Century Publishing. In Century Lives and Letters series.
This is an abridgement of the first 3 vols of The Story of My Life

Ed. As we said, Hare was prolific! His first guide/travel books were for Murray's Handbooks - Berks. Beds. and Oxfordshire, and Northumberland and Durham. 1861-3. Many others followed with a number on Italy and France, also Holland, Scandinavia and even Russia.
He also wrote a two volume Life and Letters of Frances, Baroness Bunsen 1879; Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth (2 vols) 1894. His own autobiography The Story of My Life took 6 volumes and was his final work completed in 1900.

He also throws light on the remark in GL 108a:
'How are the Dickens? Wretch that he is to go and write MY story of the lady haunted by the face; I shall have nothing to talk about now at dull parties.'

Hare was at a house party at Birtles Hall near Macclesfield in Cheshire, in 1866, when Mrs Birtles related the story of 'the lady haunted by the face' as 'it had been told to her by Mrs Gaskell the authoress, who said that she felt so greatly the uncertainty of life, that she wished a story which might possibly be of consequence, and which had been entrusted to her, to remain with some one who was certain to record it accurately. Three weeks afterwards, sitting by the fire with her daughter, Mrs Gaskell died suddenly in her amchair.' (The Years with Mother p.246) Hare dutifully records the story at length. Please can a Dickens scholar identify this story?

If Hare is correct about Mrs Gaskell having told this story in 1865, then Dickens' plagiarism did not deter her from continuing to relate the story in drawing rooms and who can doubt that she did it with memorable effect?

Sir Henry Holland, Mrs Gaskell's cousin, moved in high society in London (and was one of Prince Albert's doctors in attendance at his death). He is said to have refused a title several times but accepted for the pleasure of his second wife, Saba, daughter of Sydney Smith. She used to say jokingly that she was not the real Lady Holland as, of course, the name was familiar to all from the Holland Park set. Hare recorded in his diary 'the bon mot of Mrs Grote, when asked how this Lady Holland was to be distinguished from the original person of that name said, "Oh, this is the New Holland, and her capital is Sydney".'

COBER HILL. SHORT STORY WEEKEND
26-28 June

This is now fully booked unless we double-up on single rooms.

Book Notes

by C Lingard

'Countries of the mind: the meaning of place to writers' by Gillian Tindall. The Hogarth Press, £18.00

A study of the use of place in a wide range of nineteenth and twentieth century British and French novels. The author is, herself, a novelist and biographer, setting several of her books in France. Novels discussed in her book were written from personal experience and show that the varying use of place is a metaphor crucial to the writer's aims.

In the chapter Those Blue Remembered Hills she discusses novelists who appear to present a nostalgia for a romantic rural ideal. Gaskell, however, while seeming to fall into this category in North and South is in fact much more realistic and honest in dealing with the changes of her time.

Sex and Subterfuge: women writers to 1850 by Eva Figes. Pandora Press, £8.99

This book, also written by a novelist is a reprint of a book originally published in 1982. It discusses the reasons for the increase in the early nineteenth century of the number of novels written by women. Fanny Burney marked the beginning of a movement in which women came to dominate the novel and created a new classic form. Books were shorter than in the eighteenth century and much less likely to be restricted by the serial format used by men. Mrs Gaskell was particularly unhappy using this method.

In fact, she marked several new departures. She was not restricted by the home as the centre of her world, for her experiences as a minister's wife gave her a broader view of life. She was unique among her contemporaries in giving her working class characters a voice of their own.

She believed problems were caused by the inability of the rich to communicate with the poor and used women as an instrument of change. Mary Barton is compared with Shirley to make the point. Though laying themselves open to accusations of political naivety both authors identify with their characters and do not patronize.

'Problems for feminist criticism' edited by Sally Minogue (of the University of Kent). Routledge, £35.00

This is a collection of essays by several authors intending to analyse and challenge feminist critics as well as providing a critique in its own right. It also includes essays on Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens and Laurence among others.

In her essay Gender and Class in Villette and North and South the editor herself makes several similar points as Ms Figes - giving the working classes a voice of their own and the use of women as an instrument of change. By discussing books in terms of one oppressed group - women and excluding the class issue, modern feminist critics have failed the novels justice and have missed the universal truth they contain.