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: 01565 634668)

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The Gaskell Society

NEWSLETTER

MARCH 1996 NO. 21

EDITOR'S LETTER

It is fortunate for our Society that Elizabeth Gaskell was not as attached to Manchester as her husband William was. She enjoyed travel, new scenes and society and we have been able to follow her footsteps for our conference venues and outings - the Lake District, Whitby and Scarborough, Edinburgh and Oxford.

At our most recent conference at Oxford we almost felt under an obligation to enjoy it as much as she had done on her several visits. All our members will share our lecture programme through the next Journal. Our outings to Dumbleton Hall, once the home of her cousin, Edward Holland and to Barford where she first went to school were relevant and pleasant. Some of us also saw Stanton Harcourt Manor, which she visited in 1864 and Sudeley Castle, though the Cotswolds were baked brown by the hot summer. We think we got the right mix between our academic programme and outings, but what makes our conferences special is the pleasure shared and the meeting of friends.

We are always happy to get feedback (on all our programmes) and will try to allot more time for discussion in our next conference. This will be at Chester so that we can have a Welsh theme.

Several of our members have not been in the best of health recently. We send good wishes for their recovery to Geoffrey Sharps, Dudley Barlow and Richard Beckley.

We have had a very pleasant and unexpected boost to our finances. Member Mrs Daphne Carrick from Norfolk died in August and named our Society as a legatee. We share one sixth of the residue of her estate with The National Trust, Friends of Norwich Cathedral, The Brontë Society, The Dickens Fellowship and The George Eliot Fellowship. We hope this will help us in efforts to preserve the Plymouth Grove house, to refurbish the Gaskell grave in Brook Street Chapel graveyard and similar endeavours. We are only sorry that we cannot thank the donor, because it is much appreciated.

I am very grateful, too, for the gift made to me by the Society to mark our 10th Anniversary: The Life of Charlotte Brontë (2 vols 1857) and Cranford with Hugh Thomson illustrations in colour, all specially bound.

MRS GASKELL AND CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

by Graham Handley

In 1932, well before the modern interest in Mrs Gaskell, Jane Whitehill sensitively edited the correspondence between the novelist and Charles Eliot Norton, the young American whom she had met in Rome in 1857. Owing to the warmth of her letters to him, biographical speculation has suggested that Mrs Gaskell may well have been in love with this talented and cultivated young man (he was born in 1827) who was brought up in the Unitarian faith which she also embraced. Certainly the feeling in the letters they exchanged is imbued with loving concern, a harking back to those halcyon days in Rome, a recognition of mutual interests, sympathies, and a delight in each other's different, shared-at-a-distance family joys and tribulations. Norton is much more than Elizabeth's (I can't call her Gaskell) epistolary toy-boy, and she is much more than a surrogate mother to him (his own mother in fact died 14 years after Mrs Gaskell, in 1879). His first letter to her is prelude to the relationship and sets the sympathetic tone which always subsists between them. He tells her how Cranford, so often read aloud in the Norton family home at Shady Hill, provided his dying father with diversion and solace during his last days, adding 'You may imagine what sacred associations it [Cranford] now possesses for us'. Within two years they had met each other, and when she returned to Plymouth Grove Elizabeth wrote him the first of a memorable sequence of gossipy, warm, confiding and stimulating letters, in which her daughters feature markedly (obviously they were drawn towards Norton too). Her own interests are in turn stimulated: she wants to go to America (more, and typically, she wants Mr Gaskell to go but he refuses to budge), and she wants Norton to visit them, telling him affectionately, kiddingly, 'I don't believe from what I hear of your looks, that a republic agrees with your health; do try a little aristocracy, and as a step to it try a visit to us, who are admirers of that "effete institution"'. She writes of her pride in her daughter Meta, reflects on her husband's dislike of change, tells Norton how she lost the chrysanthemums she had been lovingly nursing by leaving them outside so that they were

frozen. And she is anxious, too, to record for her literary friend her admiration for Scenes of Clerical Life, "Janet's Repentance above all, still", and providing him with a potted (and inaccurate) sketch of 'Miss Marianne Evans'. Her critique of Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) includes the delicious 'At any rate I wait to be convinced that I am nothing but a modified fish'.

Mrs Gaskell's humour in these letters sometimes takes the form of whimsy, as when she tells him that she dreams that she is in America, but that it always looks like home 'whh I know it is not'. In relation to 'My girls, my darlings' Unitarian young men don't appear to be forthcoming, and those of wider cultivation are restrained by the more bigotted fathers of the last generation from too much intimacy with Unitarians'. Like her, Norton is a morally, spiritually and socially committed activist but with a practical emphasis: he tells her of 'our model lodging houses' for the poor. In response she goes up-market, telling him of her visit to Oxford in 1860. Touchingly, he can't remember exactly what she looks like, and welcomes the fact that she is sending him a photograph of herself. Their exchanges are an intimate fond record, full of lively debate and sympathetic mutuality, even to the extent of Elizabeth telling him how much he is liked in the downstairs world of her servants ('We wish he'd come again'). This is no flurry of flattery, but a genuine delight in his warmth of personality: there *is* love between Mrs Gaskell and Norton, but it is a giving love, an unselfconscious recognition, a quietly insistent joy. When he receives a letter from her he feels that he hears her voice describing the events. He lectures her on art, maintaining that its one end 'is truth', asserting that the real artist's aim should be 'the development of character through his work'. We note the rigour and vigour of Norton's mind, but we note too his natural sympathetic sincerity when he feels for Mrs Gaskell's servant Mary, whose fiance has been seriously injured. He explains to her the perspectives of the American Civil War, she tells him of the current English prejudices about it (and the suffering): always she probes for the truth, being dismissive of the celebrated war correspondent of the Times, W H Russell, noting his 'Panorama painting'.

In March 1862 he tells 'My dearest Mrs Gaskell' of his forthcoming marriage, asking her, Meta and Marianne to love his wife, to let her 'share' what they have given him in abundance, the generous affection which for him is one of 'the permanent blessings of life'. She responds warmly to 'My dearest Mr Norton', saying how glad she is that he is going to be married, feeling 'almost as if you were my own son'. It is a revealing emphasis. She greets the birth of the Nortons' first child much more perfunctorily, passing on to discuss the war situation, but her last letter to him (written in September 1865) is filled with her self-hugging delight in confiding the secret that she has purchased the house near Alton which she has chosen for her husband William's retirement. It is a positive assertion of her intimate need of him.

There is a postscript to this which, I think, provides a wry indication of their mutuality. In 1863 Sylvia's Lovers, which had cost her much labour, was published. Norton is greatly moved, and tells her that 'having had the happiness of knowing you loving you' he has read it 'with such feeling'. His wife too is part of the experience, and the novel is 'happy & yet half sad, quickening all true sympathies, widening our charity, & making part of our united, sacred secret treasury of precious common memories and affections'. We should read this in the context of Mrs Gaskell's dedication to the first American edition of Sylvia's Lovers, published some two years before the end of the Civil War. 'This Book is Dedicated To all My Northern Friends with the truest sympathy of an English Woman, and in an especial manner to my dear Friend Charles Eliot Norton And to his Wife who though personally unknown to me is yet dear to me for his sake'. This has all the rushing impetuous sympathy which is characteristic of Mrs Gaskell: it subserves her anti-slavery stance, and is bold, even courageous as a public utterance. The dedication of the first English edition of the novel may be set beside it: 'This Book is dedicated to My Dear Husband By Her Who Best Knows His Value'. This is dutiful and studied, and the tone of each dedication is superbly a measure of the personality of the recipient. Norton, himself a distinguished man of letters, called out in the distinguished novelist a warmth and

immediacy, a relaxed freshness of utterance which was part of *her* personality. Convention ensured that they did not even use each other's Christian names, yet their underlying love for each other is clear, unencroaching, expressive and unpossessive. I suggest that it gave her a greater fullness of being, and that Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters, as well as Lois the Witch and Cousin Phillis, owe something at least to the radiance Norton cast on her life and which she so fully returned to him.

(All references in the above are to Letters of Mrs Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton 1855-65: Edited with an Introduction by Jane Whitehill, Oxford University Press, 1932)

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MEETING MRS JANE WHITEHILL

by J Geoffrey Sharps

Mrs Jane Whitehill was the Jane Revere Coolidge whose incomplete typescript of a study of Mrs Gaskell is in the Brotherton Collection at the University of Leeds Library (see bibliography of my Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention).
For many years she lived near Boston, USA, her husband holding a high position at the Boston Athenaeum. When in England some years ago she visited my wife and myself at Scarborough, where she also met Professor J A V Chapple. A gracious lady, she was an admirable pioneer American Gaskell scholar; and both Charles Eliot Norton and Mrs Gaskell would have been delighted for her to edit their transatlantic correspondence.

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Our new cover picture, from a George du Maurier print, is available as a notelet, one of a series of ten. These are sold in packs of 5 at £2.20 or £2.50 by post.
This one illustrates North and South.
Our US Secretary, Lucy Magruder, had these made for us from woodblock prints she owns, all illustrating Gaskell works.

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS - AN ALTERNATIVE ENDING

The Knutsford Edition of Wives and Daughters ends with 'Concluding Remarks', by the editor A W Ward. Although Elizabeth Gaskell died before the ending was written, her daughters were able to tell how they thought their mother intended the story to end.

Members of a WEA course held at Stamford, Lincolnshire, enjoyed reading the book and set themselves the task of writing the last chapter. Here is Pamela Sharp's version. Another member of the class, Peter Scriven, conjectured Wives and Daughters as the first book in a trilogy and outlined the second and third parts.

Wives and Daughters
a new Conclusion by Pamela Sharp

Whilst Roger was away he sometimes feared that Molly might not have missed him or would still think him fickle. But Molly's letters were long and full of little pieces of news and served to keep her dear image before his eyes. How different from the short,uncaring, self-centred missives which Cynthia had sent to him. And so, Roger, by turns, felt both pessimistic and optimistic of Molly's love for him: he felt that perhaps Molly was being her own kind self in writing these letters, to make him feel less lonely while he was away. Suppose, thought Roger, another man should have come along to pay his attentions to the sweet girl.

At last, the months wore away until Roger (and Molly, too, but unbeknown to him) could count now in weeks the time until the traveller's return. How their reunion would take place had much exercised Roger's mind, alone in his little hut in Africa: how should he greet his beloved? Should he tell her that he was coming ... or should it be a sudden surprise when he arrived at Hollingford?

It so happened that at about the time of Roger's return, Cynthia and Walter Henderson were staying at Hollingford with their new son and heir. They had come to show off this bonny child to his Grandmamma and Aunt. All

Hollingford was in a bustle, and the house not a little put about to accommodate the proud parents, the doted-upon child and his nurse. Indeed, for poor Molly, it was the first real distraction to her secret thoughts and longings to see dear Roger again.

On a fine, sunny, June morning Cynthia had the Henderson carriage brought around to the front door, as she wished to go into the little town to choose some fresh ribbons for young Walter's cradle. Mrs Gibson had decided, as the day looked fine (and she had a new gown), to accompany her daughter.

It was thus that, as Cynthia and her mother were examining the wares in Dunn's drapery store, Mrs Gibson chanced to look up and to see passing by an upright, well-built figure of a man:

"Look Cynthia, I declare that is Roger Hamley", she cried, waving strenuously in his direction, and hoping to catch his eye, as he passed the bow window of the shop. For all her poise and self-confidence, for a moment, a tremor ran through Cynthia's body.

"Hush Mamma, we do not want Roger coming in here - er - into a woman's store, I mean", she faltered. In spite of herself, Cynthia blushed deeply. Events in her life had not left her time to speculate upon how she would behave towards her former lover when he returned from Africa. The serious matter of ribbon selection soon put Roger's appearance out of the minds of mother and daughter, and in time - a much longer time that Mr Gibson had expected, for he was at home awaiting his dinner - they returned. Baby Walter had to be petted and kissed and the ribbons essayed on his cradle before the meal could be placed upon the table. Then a detailed account of all their doings and deliberations had to be recounted for the benefit of husband, grandfather and aunt. It was not until the dessert was set before them that Mrs Gibson remembered another piece of news ...
"Oh! Mr Gibson, you will not be able to guess who I saw in town today", she began, completely oblivious of the impact of her impending disclosure upon Molly. Molly looked up.

Her heart pounded; the colour arose in her cheeks, and she thought that she would choke.

"Can you think who it could be, Molly, child", she asked, looking at Molly across the table. Cynthia remained silent. Walter interjected: "Could it be that explorer fellow, Hamley?" "I heard from the groom that he was back last night."

Roger back - and he had not come at once to see her? Molly's eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, and looking so well", went on Mrs Gibson, pleased at the impact of her news. "I suppose he will come to call upon us when he can find the time. He will be so pleased to be acquainted with your husband, Cynthia, and, of course, he will know nothing of darling little Water", she babbled on.

Mr Gibson looked grave. He was not unaware of the constancy of Molly's feelings for Roger, and he kept his eyes averted from his daughter, as she murmured some excuse and stumbled from the table.

His eyes followed her into the garden, where he saw her hastening towards the arbour and the old rustic seat within it, where she had spent so many hours with a book in her lap, over the past months.

Molly was all of a tremble - she did not know how to calm herself - her mind was in a whirl, and she needed time to think.

"Roger back - where was he? Would he come this very day?" "Or was she not the first thought in his mind, as he was in hers?"
Molly closed her eyes: the thought of Roger being home and not having come at once was like a knife in her heart. Suddenly, she felt a shower of petals fall from the rose whose branches grew around the sweet-smelling arbour. Opening her eyes and looking down at her lap, she saw that they were not fresh petals, but petals of a much darker hue - dried and made brown by long-keeping. As

she looked up, it seemed to Molly that time had flashed back: back to that other time when she had sat perplexed and Roger had come to her ... for there he was again, watching her with tenderness upon his face.

This time he did not ask her what was troubling her, but came and sat beside her and took her in his arms.

Mr Gibson, who had followed Molly into the garden, as soon as he had been able, saw them from afar, and a deep feeling of contentment stole over him - he who had seen so much of life and death. He shed a tear for his own long-lost love, and, indeed, for the impending loss of his beloved Molly: then he marched determinedly towards the stable for his horse, as he remembered the round of afternoon visits to be made.

Time enough, later, for all the announcements to be made inside the house - this present interlude was for Molly and Roger alone.

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If you were to go into Hollingford Church, and to look there in the Register of Marriages, you would see there an entry in a fine copper-plate hand, which runs thus:

29th August 183 - Roger Stephenson Hamley (batchelor)
natural philosopher, Fellow of Trinity
College, Cambridge aged 26 years

to
Mary Sarah Gibson (spinster) aged 20 years

In the presence of:
Robert Alexander Gibson (father)
and Cynthia Clare Henderson
Witnesses

JULIET BARKER, THE BRONTES AND MRS GASKELL

(Juliet Barker: 'The Brontës'. Weidenfield & Nicholson 1994)

by Roy Winstanley

This book was formally reviewed in the Gaskell Society Journal, Vol 9, last year. What follows here is to be regarded in the light of an extended footnote, expressing my own personal opinion and point of view.

In many ways, 'The Brontës' is an excellent book. The author has made good use of her time as Librarian of the Brontë Society at Haworth. Her volume is comprehensively researched and written in a lively and attractive style. It is emphatically both a work of considerable scholarship and a "good read".

It is all the more disconcerting to find that, in the matter of interpretation and judgement passed on the various personalities in the Brontë story, the author's otherwise finely balanced sense of proportion appears sometimes to desert her. Looked at in one way, the book is not far from being a celebration of three persons, all men, who are strictly speaking peripheral to the story of the three famous literary sisters. Their father, "that selfish old man", as Mary Taylor, far and away the most intelligent of Charlotte Brontë's Yorkshire friends called him, is written of terms almost of hero worship. He is called "Patrick" throughout - I think mistakenly.

We could look at him in the light of certain actions in which a modern reader might conclude that he played anything but a sympathetic part. Soon after his wife died, he approached a Mary Burder, whom he appears to have jilted some years back, with the glib suggestion that she should marry him and look after his six motherless children. Her reply to this enticing proposal, only part of which is quoted by Ms Barker, is a masterpiece of controlled indignation. He made two more attempts to persuade a woman into matrimony, before he reconciled himself to a celibate life. Not long after this, he shipped off four of his five daughters, including Emily who was all of five years old, to the notorious Clergy

Daughters' School, which Charlotte implicitly believed had killed two of her sisters. Ms Barker imputes only the very highest motives to him. It was vital for them, she says, when they grew up, to earn their own living, since as children of a poor man they would not have the dowries, without which their chances of contracting a satisfactory marriage would be remote. Accounts of Mr Brontë's relations with his daughters comes mostly from a time after they had grown up. It is possible that he did not care much for the proximity of very young children. At all events, he did not apparently take much notice of what was going on at the school - its appalling mortality rate, for example - and he did not bring them away until two of them were actually dying.

Then there was Branwell, for whom few commentators on the family history have ever spared a kind word. The author undoubtedly finds Branwell an attractive personality. She greatly overpraises his ability as a writer, and the only tedious part of her book is that which deals with the fantasies of his imaginary realms, treating them as though they were serious history. It is true that his sisters began in the same way, but the immeasurable distance between them was that they were able to break clear of "Angria" and "Gondal" and write work which could be produced in public, while he remained helplessly trapped in this dream-literature, so long as he was able to write anything at all. Ms Barker's account of the affair with Mrs Robinson of Thorp Green - if indeed that is what it was, and not a web of lies or monstrous self-delusion on his part - is seen entirely from his standpoint. And in her anxiety to turn Branwell into a complete man of the world, Ms Barker even provides him with an illegitimate child, based on some of the shakiest evidence I have ever seen.

The last of this triumvirate of favoured characters is Arthur Bell Nicholls, Charlotte's husband. There can be little doubt that Charlotte was intellectually slumming when she accepted this man, perhaps the most unsuitable of the four suitors who proposed marriage to her. She began by disliking him intensely, and lampooned him as one of the comic curates of 'Shirley'. It is through

manifestations of the principle like the Nicholls marriage that we see with the utmost clarity how desperately unfair it was to women. Not only was marriage and subjection to a masculine will held to be the crown of every woman's aspiration, but women themselves largely accepted and believed in it. Charlotte Brontë, a highly successful creative artist, so rapturously happy in her new and diminished role, was far worse off than she had been in her father's household, where the three sisters had managed to save and preserve the inventive, individual part of their lives. But there was no escaping Mr Nichollas and all we can say is that she did not live long enough for an otherwise inevitable disillusionment to emerge. The marriage saw the extinction of her literary gift, reflected in his crass remark, after she had made an attempt to begin writing again, a small pitiful venture that did not get beyond a few pages. It began in a school and the husband, probably thinking of 'Jane Eyre', said that the critics would accuse her of repeating herself. But for Ms Barker, Nicholls can do no wrong. Even the harmless Ellen Nussey, upon the whole a good friend to Charlotte, and one who never resented the heavily patronising way in which Charlotte treated her, is harshly criticized, and for no better reason than that Ellen could not bear Nicholls at any price.

Ms Barker rather sweepingly assumes that the work of all previous Brontë biographers has gone into the creation of legend. "The Brontë story is riddled with myths". If Charlotte herself began this process in what she wrote of her sisters, it was Mrs Gaskell, our author says, who was most influential in her enthusiastic embroidering of the legends. The authors of the Brontë novels, books which lay beneath the imputations of immorality and coarseness, were turned into what Ms Barker calls "graduates of the school of adversity, writing in all innocence about the barbarous society in which they lived because that was all they knew". There is a certain amount of truth in this judgement. But elsewhere in her long book its author pays just tribute to the power and eloquence of the famous Gaskell biography.

Ms Barker strikes me as being on firm grounds when she

deals directly with the three famous sisters who, after all, must be at the heart of all the books about the family. She is good on Charlotte, well analyzing her complex and not altogether attractive personality. She highlights Emily's ruthless egotism, in preserving her own way of life from Charlotte's well-meaning attempts to run it for her. She deals quite devastatingly with many of the famous Brontë stories, such as the one which has Anne Brontë in love with the handsome curate William Weightman. At the same time, I am not sure whether we can follow her when she states that it was Charlotte herself who was greatly attracted to Weightman, and that she began to jeer at him, calling him "Miss Celia Amelia" in letters to her women friends, only after he had shown his lack of interest in her.

The reader of 'The Brontës' will have the argumentative pleasure of disagreeing with perhaps a small part of the book, and the much greater satisfaction of admiring and responding to most of it. It is a biography that everyone with a sympathetic interest in the Brontës, as writers or simply as human beings, should not miss reading.

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JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS

Back numbers are out of print but in demand. We plan to reprint but would welcome returns (£2 a copy for Journals).
Please send to our Treasurer: Brian Williams, 15 Cawley Avenue, Culcheth, Warrington WA3 4DF

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AVAILABLE FOR SALE AT MEETINGS OR BY POST:

Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society offprints:
Family values: Friedrich Engels and Elizabeth Gaskell by Alan Shelston, from Vol. 90 (1994) £1.50 or £2 by post

Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton: A Novel of 1848? by Angus Easson from Vol. 86 (1990) £1.50 or £2 by post

BOOK NOTES
by Christine Lingard

Elizabeth Gaskell 'We are Not Angels'; Realism, Gender, Values, by Terence Wright (lecturer in the Department of English, University of Newcastle). St Martin's Press, £35.
A straightforward yet detailed analysis of Gaskell's writing, which does not try to score points against other novelists but lets the quality of the books speak for itself. Each novel (Life of Charlotte Brontë is omitted) is devoted a chapter. Cousin Phillis, My Lady Ludlow, and most welcome, Lois the Witch are given equal treatment with the longer books and there is a full chapter on the short stories. All goes to show that the variety of her writing parallels the variety of the woman herself, and above all reveals a sensitive and poetic style.

Moorland Cottage and Other Stories by Elizabeth Gaskell, edited by Suzanne Lewis of the University of Sydney; World's Classics, OUP, £5.99.
A companion volume to Dark Night's Work edited by Lewis in the same series. This collection also includes Sexton's Hero, Christmas Storms and Sunshine, The Well of Pen Morfa, Heart of John Middleton, Morton Hall, The Manchester Marriage, and Crowley Castle, a selection which is loosely connected by the theme of love. Many of them, incidentally, were published as Christmas books. There is an extensive introduction which provides welcome critical analysis to a neglected section of Gaskell's work.

Curious, if True: Strange Tales by Mrs Gaskell, selected by Jenny Uglow; Virago Modern Classics, £6.99
Another selection of shorter writings, never published together before, namely Old Nurse's Story, The Poor Clare, Lois the Witch, The Grey Woman, as well as the title story. These serve to illustrate Gaskell's fascination with the macabre and uncanny.

Elizabeth Gaskell by Kate Flint (University Lecturer in Victorian and Modern English Literature and Fellow of Linacre College, Oxford); Writers and their work, Northcote House in association with the British Council. £6.95

This is a comparative rarity among Gaskell studies - a short, basic introduction for the general student. It is part of a series which will cover more than fifty authors. There is a brief biography, a chapter on each of the major novels including Cousin Phillis but omitting Life of Charlotte Brontë. The short stories are included in the chapter on Cranford.

Subversive Heroines: Feminist Resolutions of Social Crisis in the Condition of England Novel, by Constance D Harsh, Associate Professor in English at the Colgate University. University of Michigan Press, £27.60
A new evaluation of the social problem novels of the 1840s and 50s with which Gaskell is so often compared. Mary Barton and North and South are discussed, alongside Hard Times, Sybil, Alton Locke, Michael Armstrong (by Frances Trollope) and Helen Fleetwood (by Charlotte Tonna) in particular the way in which social problems are so frequently resolved by the female characters. A final chapter shows the effect of these novels on later books not always seen as industrial novels, such as Wives and Daughters, Felix Holt and Little Dorrit.

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321104 - SEPARATE SPHERES
Lectures by Fran Cannon, BA MLitt Linda Shaw, PhD

Although rarely studied*, Mrs Gaskell's fiction is valuable both as literature and as social history. Both these aspects of her work will be studied in this course which will re-evaluate Mrs Gaskell's "industrial" novels and selected short stories and will show how her portrayal of tensions in the family and the workplace reflect the rapid changes in society during the first half of the nineteenth century. We will also explore Mrs Gaskell's Manchester connections in her work and with a field visit.
A book list will be sent on enrolment.
Thursdays 10.30 am-12.30 pm University Humanities Building. 10 meetings beginning 18 April 1996. Fee £32 (£25/£17). Enrol by 4 April. Further information from Courses for the Public, Humanities Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

*Please note these lecturers will be introduced to The Gaskell Society to correct such misapprehensions.

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN "AN ITALIAN INSTITUTION" BY E GASKELL

Elizabeth Gaskell has recently been rediscovered in Italy. In fact the publication of La vita di Charlotte Bronte (1988), Storie di bimbi di donne e di streghe (1988), and of Mia cugina Phillis (Marisilio 1993), adds to the 1929 edition of La cugina Fillide, two existing versions of Cranford (1935, 1951), the 1981 translation of Mary Barton, and to the essays on her works produced mainly from the end of the '70s. In her novels, which today maintain a great appeal, not only for their artistic content but also as documentaries of the period, Gaskell narrated a generation's reaction to the oppressing experience of industrialism, class conflicts, and the former rural world, describing the obscure existence of weavers and labourers, prostitutes and unwed mothers.

A friend to artists and progressive intellectuals, Elizabeth Gaskell was an active philanthropist and a reformer as is testified also by the socio-political character of many of her non-narrative writings. On March 21st, 1863, Gaskell published an article on the Neapolitan Camorra [*Camorra - a mafia-like protection racket*]. The piece, which has a strong literary flavour in the dramatic picture of the action, was motivated by the attention given by Gaskell to themes of social relevance and the consideration of the effects of the class differences. She aims to give to the English public opinion an image of the Camorra that goes beyond the folklore clichés of the time in the representation of the South of Italy, and substitute the traditional oleographic description of the methods of the "organization", with a critical reading of what might have been the socio-cultural and political causes of the phenomenon. "An Italian Institution" which the review *Segno* publishes in the first Italian version, appeared in London in the Dickensian periodical "All the Year Round" to which Gaskell was a contributor as she had been to "Household Words".

She had been to Italy in 1857 and on that occasion may have visited Naples, since on her second journey in 1863 it seems she arrived only as far as Civitavecchia. She must

have gathered other information on the subject not only from conversation (especially with William Wetmore Story) and from correspondence (with another admirer of Italy and intellectual companion Charles Eliot Norton, whose Notes of Travel and Study of Italy - 1960 - she admired), but, presumably, also from texts on the subject such as the one registered among the volumes of her library by The Gaskell Sale Catalogue (namely La camorra by Mareo (sic) Mounier).[1]

The camorra question would not have been new to the English reader - the customs and habits of the South were part of the fashionable model Italian itinerary of the time. What was uncommon was the image communicated to the vast heterogenous public of such a well-known periodical, so different from the rhetoric of the clichés and from the merely "observant" tone of other English representations of the time.

Speaking first about the camorra as a 'system of extortion' grown to "institution", "so extended and organized as to apply to every walk in life and every condition of human industry", with a government that protects it and uses its protection, the article did not limit itself to the description of the 'methods' of the organization, but aimed at exploring the causes of the phenomenon, exposing them with a certain sense of drama made more incisive by a bitter ironic spirit. Charles Dickens himself who in Pictures from Italy had noted his many impressions of Naples, had preferred not to make any "grave examination into the government or misgovernment of any portion of the country", abstaining himself "from the discussion of any such questions with any order of Italians ...". Gaskell's clearly critical approach, though not without some populist overtones, expresses the desire of liberal artists and intellectuals to understand better - even from a historical point of view - the social reality of the South by tracing it back to its political context rather than relying on easy commonplaces or, what was worse, fixing, once and for all, the traditional representations of the Neapolitan "character", on the basis of a sort of "anthropological explanation".

Certainly the text reflects the movement among English progressives and reformers of attraction to and solidarity with the Italian cause.

Besides confirming the authorship of the article, documents and letters provide evidence of Gaskell's discussions with Patrick Bronte about Italian politics, exchanges of information on Garibaldi's activities with Charles Eliot Norton, and relations with Emily Winkworth, her friend and fervid supporter of Mazzini. We also learn about the possible existence of a second article of the author's on the camorra ("that unlucky piece of work") refused by "The Cornhill". Did it perhaps criticize the 'current governors'? "An Italian Institution" is, at any rate, marked by scepticism, if at the beginning the author declares herself to be still 'far from believing that the current governors are able to dominate the phenomenon', she closes the article laconically by affirming that the camorra 'has penetrated and now permeates every public branch, abounding in the 'ranks of the army''. The social commitment of Elizabeth Gaskell in all her work, and which is so evident in this article, while inspired by her unitarian principles, deserves much more appreciation given the reticence of the writers of the time on such subjects, given the range of the audience to which the piece was addressed and, especially, given all the implications of the fact that the author of the piece was a woman.

[1] For source information we relied particularly of J G Sharps (ed.) Mrs Gaskell Observation and Invention, London, Linden Press, 1970. The Italian version is based on the text contained in the Knutsford Edition, The Works of Mrs Gaskell, edited by A W Ward, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1906, vol. VI, pp. 531-34.

This article is an edited translation of Professor Daniela Corona's introduction to the Italian version: E Gaskell, "La Camorra, un'istituzione italiana". *Segno*, Anno XVI n.117-118 settembre-ottobre 1990 pp.34-42

One aspect of the Camorra as described by Mrs Gaskell seems relevant today:

'In the lottery, the Camorra played a distinguished part, the news of the successful numbers being transmitted hither and thither by the fraternity ...

... As the lowest venture in the state lottery is four carlini, or about a franc and a half, on the Saturday, the last day of the venture, it is rare for the poor Neapolitan who has played during the entire week to find a single grain in his pocket. With, however, the very smallest coin he can scrape out of it, he repairs to the office of some secret Camorristo and by his intervention is able to associate himself with others as poor as himself, and by whose conjoint efforts the requisite sum is made up.'

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The Spectator - 24th February 1996
Books on Tape review by Robert Cooper

Wives and Daughters, Mrs Gaskell's final novel, (Cover to Cover, unabridged, £44.99) has been called the most underrated novel of the 19th century. Listening to Prunella Scales read this classic tale of 'youthful folly' you can see why. It was written in 1866*, and Mrs Gaskell died barely a chapter from its completion, leaving just a few loose ends to be tied. Andrew Davies, the reigning King of TV adaptations, is said to be making a close study of Gaskell's work. Let's hope that Wives and Daughters is high on his short list: sharp witty, dialogue with no shortage of tragedy and a host of memorable characters - Prunella Scales should play them all.

Finding a way to fill the void after being gripped by 25 hours of rural life may be a problem. Fathers and Sons by Ivan Turgenev (Cover to Cover, £19.99) could be the answer.

*Ed. note: Hardly likely as Elizabeth Gaskell died 12th November 1865!

SOUTH OF ENGLAND BRANCH
1996 MEETINGS

Saturday 27 April
2 pm Francis Holland School
'Snobbery: a light-hearted look at Class-Consciousness in the novels of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell' -
E Margaret Perry

Saturday 14 September
2 pm Pimlico School, Lupus Street, London SW1V 3AT
'Sybil' and 'Mary Barton: A Historian's Perspective' -
Howard F Gregg

Saturday 9 November
2 pm Francis Holland School
'Gaskell's Gothic' - Jenny Uglow, Vice President of the Gaskell Society, author of 'Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories' and other works of literary criticism.

When meetings are held at the Francis Holland School anyone who wishes to do so is invited to meet at 12 noon at the entrance to Sloane Square underground station for a light lunch at the Royal Court Tavern (also on Sloane Square).

Please note that the April and November meetings will be held at the Francis Holland School. The September meeting will be in the library at Pimlico School.

For travel directions or other information please contact Dudley J Barlow, 44 Seymour Road, London SW18 5JA (Tel: 0181 874 7727)