

# Elizabeth Gaskell

## *A Biographical Sketch*

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By Andy Fabens

Born in 1810 and died in 1865, Elizabeth Gaskell was a near-exact contemporary of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and she was from the same era as many other noted Victorian writers, including other women, such as George Eliot and Charlotte and Emily Bronte. She enjoyed popularity and financial success in her time, but fell into disregard. Thanks to a swell of critical attention during our feminist era and the dogged persistence of a dedicated fan base, her stock has risen. In 2010, at the bi-centenary of her birth, she finally joined the Greats by the installation of a stained-glass panel in a window at Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. A great-great-great granddaughter laid a wreath. Her life and work do, in fact, well deserve our attention and respect.

Born Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson in Chelsea, London, on September 29, 1810, she was the youngest of eight children of whom only she and her brother John, 12 years older, survived infancy. Her father William Stevenson had been a Unitarian minister at Failsworth, Lancashire, but had moved to London in 1806, having resigned his orders on conscientious grounds. He had expected to go to India as private secretary to the Earl of Lauderdale, who was to become Governor General of India, but that fell through; instead, he was named Keeper of the Treasury Records.

Her mother, Elizabeth Holland, died 13 months after her birth. Her mother's family, the Hollands, were established among other prominent Unitarian families in Lancashire and Cheshire. Her father sent baby Elizabeth to live with her mother's sister Hannah Lumb in Knutsford, Cheshire, where Elizabeth remained for most of her growing up as a permanent guest at her aunt's and maternal grandparents' house.

Her father remarried in 1814 and had two more children. She was said to have been devoted to her father but saw him inconsistently. Her brother John often visited her in Knutsford. John had been thought destined for the Royal Navy, like his grandfathers and uncles, but no such preferment materialized. He instead joined the Merchant Navy in the East India Company's fleet. John went missing in 1827 during an expedition to India.

She was described as a beautiful young woman, well groomed, gentle and kind. From 1821 to 1826 (aged 11 to 16) she attended a school in Warwickshire run by the Misses Byerley and received the traditional education in arts, the Classics, and decorum given to relatively wealthy young ladies at the time. Her aunts gave her classics to read. She was encouraged by her father in her studies and writing. Her brother John sent her modern books, and descriptions of his life at sea and other experiences abroad. She finished school at 16 and spent the next few years being young and beautiful and gentle and kind. She spent time in London with her Holland family cousins and traveled elsewhere in England visiting family friends, even venturing as far away as Edinburgh. In 1832, at age 21, she married William Gaskell and moved to Manchester, where he was minister at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel.

Their first child, a daughter, was stillborn in 1833. But three healthy daughters followed: Marianne in 1834, Margaret Emily (known as Meta) 1837, and Florence Elizabeth in 1842. A son William was born in 1844, but died in infancy. Another daughter Julia Bradford was born in 1846. Elizabeth was a very engaged mother. She kept a diary on her eldest daughter's development with notations on the values she placed on her own role as mother, her faith, and later the relations between her two eldest.

She readily took to the role of minister's wife. Cross Street Unitarian was a substantial congregation, prominent and well respected in the Unitarian Church, its membership including civic leaders and industrialists; but the ministry also included aiding and counselling the less advantaged. Elizabeth was drawn to the plight of the poor, particularly the working poor of Manchester, powerless in the face of management power at this early stage of the industrial revolution. She was a keen and sympathetic observer of the social changes brought on by the rapid industrialization of Manchester, but also had contacts that brought her news of changes and issues in the rest of the country.

Her written output proved to be considerable, particularly in view of her full focus on her duties as wife and mother. She projected herself as the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of femininity, right down to styling herself "Mrs. Gaskell", in contrast to the Bronte sisters, who used their own names, and George Eliot, who used a man's. Many of her themes were hard hitting and gritty, perhaps seeming the more so, as having been written by a gentle lady.

In 1836, she co-authored with her husband a cycle of poems, *Sketches among the Poor*, published in Blackwood's Magazine in January 1837. Some travel vignettes and short stories of hers were published in the 1840's attributed to "A Lady" or under the pseudonym Cotton Mather Mills. Her first major success was the novel *Mary Barton* published in 1848. The catalyst for it had been the tragic death of her infant son in 1845. Her husband had encouraged her to throw herself into writing as a way to personal recovery. It was an enormous success, bringing the teeming slums of manufacturing in Manchester alive with depth of feeling; and her turn of phrase and description were praised as the greatest since Jane Austen. It was the first of her so-called "social" novels.

In 1850, the Gaskells moved to a handsome Palladian villa in Manchester at 84 Plymouth Grove. From there she continued to write her remaining works and her husband held welfare committees and tutored the poor in his study. There, they gathered a social circle of writers, journalists, religious dissenters, and social reformers. Charles Dickens and John Ruskin visited at Plymouth Grove, as did Harriet Beecher Stowe. The conductor Charles Halle lived nearby and taught piano to one of their daughters. 84 Plymouth Grove stayed in the family until the early 1900's, when it fell into disrepair. It has recently been restored and is open to the public. It serves as a center for the Elizabeth Gaskell Society and is available as a wedding venue.

Mrs. Gaskell is recognized chiefly for her "social" novels, of which *North and South* is one. She also wrote a great variety of short stories, novellas, as well as a few ghost stories, generally published in the magazines of the time – perhaps, most notably, Charles Dickens' magazine *Household Words*, the longer works coming out in serial form.

Reportedly, she had planned to write *North and South* in 22 weekly episodes starting publication in September 1854. She clashed with Dickens, who had been publishing his own novel *Hard Times* in serial form in that magazine earlier in the year. Dickens dealt with the same themes, but was giving Manchester a satirical treatment as "Coketown". Elizabeth was hampered in her writing by concern that

Dickens would write about a strike. Six weeks into the *North and South* series, sales dropped considerably and Dickens demanded her work be shortened. As a result, the series was compressed from 22 to 20 episodes. Even so, Dickens complained of Mrs. Gaskell's "intractability" in resisting his demand for conciseness and said he found the story "wearisome to the last degree."

A novel that did not treat of urban social problems was *Cranford*, set in a small town of that name, clearly a version of Knutsford, the town in Cheshire where Elizabeth grew up. It is a happier, sunnier setting than Manchester with entertaining small town characters and humorous situations, although the tension is the perceived threat to this idyllic place by the coming of the railroad and its link up with burgeoning Manchester. A BBC film version of *Cranford* aired for two seasons several years ago. It is available now on BritBox and is fun to watch. The credits indicate that it is actually a re-write from several works of Mrs. Gaskell. Jim Carter, the actor who played Mr. Carson on *Downton Abbey*, has a prominent role. I find it interesting that this idyllic town of Mrs. Gaskell's childhood is actually only 14 miles southwest of Manchester and, thus, the dichotomy between the North and the South of England that Mrs. Gaskell sets up in *North and South* is really more a state of mind than a matter of geography.

[You can also watch a BBC miniseries of *North and South* on BritBox. There is another actor from *Downton Abbey*: Brendan Coyle, who played Mr. Bates. There are several changes in the plot, mostly, I think, for the better; and it cuts to the chase in the romance, perhaps achieving a conciseness, that Dickens might have approved.]

A noteworthy departure from Mrs. Gaskell's fiction was her biography of Charlotte Bronte. Elizabeth had been friends with Charlotte, who died at quite a young age. Written at the request Charlotte's father, it was published in 1857 and well received. It added to Elizabeth's growing reputation, but the modern view is that it was badly flawed in that it omitted or white washed significant details from Charlotte's personal life that Elizabeth thought unseemly to publish. Interestingly, Elizabeth had been bold enough to describe prostitution in *Mary Barton* and illegitimate birth in another early novel *Ruth*, although she did forbid her daughters from reading *Ruth* until they reached the age of 18.

As her career advanced and, no doubt, the demands of home lessened, Mrs. Gaskell was able to travel, and made extended visits, independent of her husband, in France and Italy. She was even independent enough to buy a house for herself in Hampshire. It was there that she died quite suddenly of a heart attack in 1865. She was in the middle of the serial publication of what proved to be her last novel *Wives and Daughters* in *The Cornhill Magazine*, begun in August 1864. It was completed and published posthumously in book form early in 1866 in both the United States and Britain.

Mrs. Gaskell was a woman of many parts, some parts contradictory of others. She described it in letter to a friend written in 1850 (published in 1966) claiming she was plagued by "a great number of Me's" -- "One of my Me's is, I do believe, a true Christian -- (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my Me's is a wife and mother, and highly delighted by the delight of everyone in the house. ... Then again, I've another self with full taste for beauty and convenience, which is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members?"

I think Mrs. Gaskell achieved a remarkable degree of independence and self-satisfaction, and she did it gracefully, by marshalling her faith and social conscience and her maternalism, and putting it in writing.

A.L.F.