

## Sermon delivered at Unitarian Church of Vancouver

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### Elizabeth Gaskell: A Unitarian Novelist in Industrial Manchester

Elizabeth Gaskell has always been a well-liked novelist, but the discovery of her as one of the great novelists belongs to our own time. While her industrial novels sold well and were much discussed, the Victorians fell in love with her rural stories of *Cranford*, the popularity of which gave the Bloomsbury intellectuals of the 1930s, in revolt against the Victorians, the opportunity to dismiss Gaskell as too “feminine” to be taken seriously. Since then, two major aspects of her fiction have been praised separately, but they fit well together.

In the 1950s and 60s, Marxist-oriented critics launched a new appreciation of her portrayal of the working-class in her novels of industrial Manchester, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. In the second wave of reappraisal, starting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the present, feminist critics have explored Gaskell’s deep interest in the role of women, especially all the obstacles to the development of women as individuals posed by the gender stereotypes of Victorian society. This is central to her fiction set in the country as well as the city.

These themes are closely related. What I would like to suggest is that Gaskell saw a close relation in her society between the situation of women and of the industrial working class. Both were seen as second-class people, or, especially with the working class, as people who didn’t exist at all—who were allowed no voice in social issues. Gaskell intently pursues both problems, but often finds them beset with overwhelming difficulties. As far as I know, Margaret Hale, heroine of *North and South*, is the only one of her female characters who achieves enough independence to be able to rethink her experience and decide her own destiny.

Elizabeth Gaskell was born in 1810. Her father, William Stevenson, was a Unitarian minister of somewhat volatile personality; he gave up the ministry because he objected to being paid for it. He believed in absolute equality and felt that getting a salary made him superior to other members of his congregation. He then tried scientific farming, but found that it didn’t pay. Thereafter he made a living of sorts by writing intellectual books and articles. Elizabeth’s mother died a year after she was born. Her father did not feel equal to caring for an infant and shipped her off to her mother’s female relatives, also staunch Unitarians, in Knutsford, a prosperous farming town in Cheshire, about thirty miles south of Manchester. This displacement may have made Elizabeth feel a bit like an orphan, but she found Knutsford a great place to grown up in. The town of Knutsford was the basis for the much-beloved *Cranford* stories. Though she later took a strong interest in Manchester, it also seemed like a place of exile.

Her strong-minded female relatives saw to it that she got a sound Unitarian education. Unitarians believed that women should get the same kind of education as men: they should be

well-versed in languages, history, politics, and science. Both her relatives and her teachers encouraged her first efforts at writing. From this background Elizabeth developed a strong conviction that everyone had a right to achieve self-realization and to develop their abilities—women as well as men. She also had a sense of how strongly the conventions of her society could be opposed to the mental development of women; this would produce some powerful conflicts in her novels.

On the other side of the family, Elizabeth had a difficult relationship with her erratic and emotionally distant father, perhaps mainly because he had married again and the step-mother didn't like her. The required visits to her father in Chelsea every summer were not happy times. Perhaps this accounts for the number of unreasonable, weak, and even criminal fathers who dump oppressive responsibility on their daughters in her fiction. Through her father, however, Elizabeth did gain some sense of the intellectual world of London.

At the age of twenty-two she married an energetic and socially-conscious Unitarian minister, William Gaskell, and became a resident of Manchester, where he had his ministry and would become well-known for his preaching and commitment to social reform. At this point Manchester had become the forefront of the industrial revolution and the battleground between mill owners and trade unions. Class-hatred was manifested in bitter strikes, riots in which workers and police were killed and the army fired into crowds, and even the murder of mill owners. A young German businessman living in Manchester, Frederick Engels, thought that this would surely lead to revolution, and said as much in a book entitled *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, based on Manchester. (Published in German and not translated into English until the 1890s.)

Both the Gaskells were deeply interested in the situation of the working class of the city. William felt that he had a special mission to convert the working class to Unitarianism, which, he thought, would, in its reforming zeal and straight-forward rationality, be the ideal religion for them. This was not entirely successful—the working class continued to prefer Methodism—but the project led the Gaskells to acquire a genuine acquaintance with the culture and problems of the working class. Elizabeth taught in schools for working-class adults and children, visited factories, and got to know working-class people as equals. She also visited a young thief and prostitute in prison and tried to help her to emigrate when she was released. I should add that the Gaskells also had a lively social life. Elizabeth liked to be on the floor for every dance at a ball. She was very sociable and an excellent conversationalist. Later on, as she became well known, she was on friendly terms with many of the important figures of her time.

Elizabeth shared many interests with her husband; they worked well together, but she also wanted her independence. She did not intend to become totally taken over by the duties of a minister's wife. He acknowledged this, and strongly supported her writing. Elizabeth disliked doctrinal controversies and never used the word "Unitarian" in her fiction, but it is clear that her fiction is dominated by Unitarian ideals, especially regarding the relation between the individual and society. Among the most basic assumptions of Unitarianism in her time, from the influence

of Joseph Priestley and others, would be a complete rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin and of the hopeless depravity of the unredeemed individual. On the contrary, Unitarians believed that humans are basically good unless perverted by an absence of love and care in childhood and/or they become embittered by an unjust society. Hence “sin” really takes the aspect of error, and error can be corrected if acknowledged. The best route to reform of character would be to appeal to the residue of goodness that must remain in any individual, no matter how degraded.

This assumption led to a strong interest in the influence of social environment on the moral development of the individual and an equally strong emphasis on the importance of education. Of course, the ultimate education must lie in one’s understanding of one’s own experience of life, and in one’s willingness to discuss this with others.

There are few real villains in Gaskell’s fiction (except for her gothic stories). Inhumane acts usually stem from bad environment or limited understanding of oneself and others. Improvement of character through new understanding is always a possibility. Regaining one’s moral self-confidence might be the best cure. Gaskell is possibly the least judgmental of mid-Victorian novelists.

Gaskell was writing in a period of sharp but creative controversy in the Unitarianism world due to the shift from Joseph Priestley’s enlightenment rationalism to a world-view influenced by the Romantic movement and, especially, the teachings of William Ellery Channing. The new Unitarianism was less interested in abstract propositions and more in the feelings, in individual cases—the influence of one person on another—and practical reforms that would be of immediate benefit.

This new emphasis on the individual suited Gaskell’s fiction. She disliked dogmatic positions, Unitarian or otherwise, and “controversy about doctrines—about which I am more and more certain *we can never be certain* in this world” (Gaskell’s emphasis; Webb 155). In a letter she confessed, “I hate sermons”—perhaps even her husband’s had too much of a moral point. When confronted by controversy she said that she preferred not to take absolute positions, but instead to write stories about problems that interested her. In her mature fiction she provides a sympathetic but non-committal narrator, while her characters are given strong positions and argue with each other. A good outcome would not be that they would agree with each other but would depend on whether they can come to understand and respect each other’s positions. In her fiction, being unable or unwilling to express one’s own feelings or refusing to listen to someone else’s can result in catastrophic misunderstanding, but frank discussion can bring healing. I would say that both her religion and her fiction are essentially dialogic.

Gaskell had experimented with stories, but wrote her first novel as the result of a family tragedy. After having three daughters she had a son who seemed to be thriving, but died quite suddenly at the age of two of scarlet fever. She was plunged into a terrible depression—lost all interest in life. Her husband suggested that the cure might be to write a novel about the working class in Manchester—to become involved in lives and troubles outside her own grief. Elizabeth

tried it and it worked. The result was *Mary Barton* (1848), a very controversial novel and a best-seller—a great launch for a career in fiction.

The novel is set in the depressed years of the late 1830s and the equally bad years of the Hungry Forties (about the same period as Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*). Except for an intransigent mill owner and his shifty son (who tries to seduce the heroine), the characters of this novel are entirely working class.

These characters are a complete departure from the usual depiction of the lower classes in Victorian fiction as abject, passive, and ignorant and, of course, totally different from the author and reader. Gaskell's characters are independent minded, skilled and conscientious workers, who struggle to maintain a good quality of life, but are constantly threatened with losing their jobs, or at least having their work-hours much reduced because of fluctuations in trade, from which they know the mill owners suffer much less than their workers. Gaskell makes clear that the workers and their families are always ready to help each other in times of distress, in situations where they get no sympathy from the mill owners.

At the beginning of *Mary Barton* we see the neat, pleasantly furnished home of the Barton family. As the father loses work through a decline in trade and his reputation as a radical, we see their house being stripped bare as all the furniture winds up in the pawn shop (the poor person's bank). Finally they lose the house because they can't afford the rent. The mother dies and Mary and her father begin to "clem." This is a much-used word in the Lancashire dialect meaning to starve, or at least to have to deal with a decline in energy because one isn't getting enough to eat. The verb "to clem" was used in a very matter of fact way--simply a situation one had to deal with from time to time.

With her working-class characters Gaskell makes copious use of the Lancashire dialect. She wants to make clear that this is a valid language with nuances of its own. Her husband provided footnotes to dialect words, giving examples of their use in medieval literature or early English. The point is made here and again in *North and South* that to understand people you have to understand their language or even be willing to speak it. Being from Lancashire was something that Gaskell, her characters, and her local audience would have in common.

The opposition between speech and silence in this novel is closely related to its political background. The main action is set in the year 1842, the grand climax of the Chartist Movement and the shocking refusal by Parliament to even receive the Peoples Charter, a huge petition with over three million signatures. The Charter demanded very reasonable reforms in the electoral system: its main propositions were the right to vote for the entire male population, secret ballot, no property qualifications for being a Member of Parliament, and salaries for Members of Parliament. As a delegate chosen by the movement to address Parliament, John Barton, Mary's father, is surrounded by working-class people telling him the grievances he should mention in his speech. Parliament also refused to allow any of the delegates to speak. After returning home from the great defeat in London, Mary's father falls into a bitter silence, refusing to discuss the outcome with anyone. After sinking deep into a self-enclosed depression, and hearing of the mill

owners' offensive rejection of an attempt by the union to protest a reduction in wages, he murders a mill owner's son who has gone out of his way to insult the workers.

The absolute refusal of Parliament to hear the voice of the people leads to John Barton's silence and moral degeneration, while his daughter Mary is alone with her knowledge of his guilt and also feels forbidden by the rules of propriety to speak of her love for a working-class suitor whom she spurned when she thought the mill-owner's son wanted to marry her. These silences lead to her lover being accused of the murder and a near-catastrophic conclusion. Though Mary and her working-class lover finally manage to marry, they have become so suspect in their community that they must emigrate to Canada to save their reputations. However convenient for the lovers, their emigration has not solved the problems of Manchester.

After *Mary Barton*, Gaskell tackled another serious social problem in *Ruth*, a novel about the struggles of an unwed mother, and, as a vacation from this very difficult and controversial theme, turned to composing the delightful rural stories of *Cranford*, reminiscent of the world of her childhood in Knutsford. *Ruth* received some good reviews but was widely disapproved of because of its supposedly indecent subject. A member of her husband's congregation made a point of burning it.

Six years after *Mary Barton*, Gaskell returned to the problems of Manchester with *North and South* (1855). (Perhaps to create some distance the city in the novel is called Milton-northern, but is unmistakably Manchester.) In this second novel of Manchester she seems to have rethought her treatment of the main themes of her first: here her depiction of both the mill owner and the union is more sophisticated.

In *Mary Barton* the mill owner is a crude bigot with lazy and selfish children, while in depicting a union meeting Gaskell followed the Victorian tradition of making it something like a witches Sabbath; the meeting ends by voting for the assassination of the mill owner's son, to be carried out by Mary's father. After *Mary Barton* was published Gaskell heard from infuriated mill owners. Also, I think it very probable that union members might have told her that motions to assassinate mill owners would were not likely to be on the agenda of union meetings. In *North and South* the mill owner is a basically good-hearted person in private life, but also obsessed with having absolute control over his workers, perhaps due to his own very difficult childhood, while the union spokesman, if filled with class-antagonism and rather blunt in his speech, turns out to be a model of moral integrity demanding that the strike be non-violent. This balanced approach facilitates a series of intense discussions between the characters, discussions to which the narrator remains sympathetic but usually neutral. In my opinion, *North and South* may be the best industrial novel of the nineteenth century.

The main character who carries the narrative, Margaret Hale, is an outsider plunged suddenly into the alarming world of Manchester. Margaret is a poor relative of the aristocracy and the daughter of an Anglican vicar who decides that he must leave the clergy because he no longer believes in the Thirty-Nine Articles. This makes him a virtual Unitarian. It has been argued that Mr. Hale's explanation echoes the *Apology* of Theophilus Lindsey, an Anglican

minister who left the church because he could no longer accept Anglican doctrine and founded a Unitarian church in London in the late eighteenth century. A Unitarian reader of Gaskell's time might well have recognized this affinity. Mr. Hale, however, does not join any church, but goes to Manchester to teach the classics to a group of businessmen who want to improve their education. He is good at mediating disputes and sometimes plays the role of unofficial minister. He seems a Unitarian in all but name. Margaret, his daughter, remains a staunch Anglican. She privately thinks his apostasy incomprehensible and somewhat misguided.

In the course of looking for a servant—very hard to find in a city where young women would rather work in factories—Margaret meets Nicholas Higgins, a strong union supporter, and his daughter Bessie, dying of workplace pollution. Bessie's ecstatic, otherworldly religion may stand for Methodism. Higgins is a skeptic, close to being an atheist. He wants to improve the situation of the working class through the union movement and thinks of religion pretty much as "pie in the sky," especially as mill owners who profess Christianity have no intention of practicing its principles.

A strike looms because all the mill owners have agreed to reduce wages due to a supposed decline in trade. (All the strikes in Lancashire around this time were caused by the lowering of wages.) Higgins, a member of the strike committee, demands that the strike be peaceful; strikes have failed in the past because of violence.

After Bessie's death Margaret takes Higgins to her father for some ministerial consolation. Mr. Hale is happy to talk to a worker, and the three of them argue over union policies. Margaret and her father strongly object to the practice of putting workers in Coventry who won't join the union or accept its discipline. (Very likely Gaskell, with her Unitarian respect for the individual, feels the same.) Higgins replies that if this is wrong it is the fault of the mill owners, who are all out to crush the union. The union has only the strength of numbers and must keep its members in line. Since there is no response to this argument it is left unrefuted, for the reader to think over—a characteristic method in this novel. As their discussion ends, Mr. Hale asks Higgins to join in family prayers. "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm." Surely this a Unitarian moment.

The opponent to Higgins is John Thornton, a dynamic mill owner and student of Margaret's father who becomes a personal friend. Thornton has the manners of a gentleman and is attracted to Margaret, but repels her with his fanatical adherence to the doctrines of the Victorian laissez-faire ideology known as "political economy", what Carlyle called "the dismal science." Arguing authoritatively with Margaret, Thornton delivers the following propositions: industrial workers are morally inferior, as anyone capable of self-discipline will rise to the management level; they are morally children who require to be despotically ruled over in the factory; a strike will only make their situation worse because wages must be determined strictly by the law of supply and demand; the same law will cause some industrialists to fail and many workers to be unemployed, and that's the way it goes.

Margaret finds this disturbingly impersonal. She argues that workers and owners are part of a joint enterprise and should be able to talk to each other, and that Thornton's attitude excludes any possibility of "the equality of friendship." She wonders how he can seem a warm-hearted friend of the family and yet be so cold in everything to do with business.

Thornton's fanaticism may be explained by his past. His father, once a wealthy business man, was ruined by dishonest speculation and committed suicide. As a boy Thornton had to leave school and work behind the counter in a drapery shop to support his mother and sister and finally accumulate enough money to pay off his father's creditors. This exemplary Victorian success story sets a hard standard by which he judges his workers, and could explain the seeming contradiction in his personality. This contradiction could also be the basis for a change for the better.

Confronted with the strike, Thornton, to assert complete ownership of his factory, makes a move more extreme than any other mill owner. He imports a large number of workers from Ireland to permanently replace his striking workers. This predictably causes a savage riot. The second half of the novel involves sorting out the consequences.

Thornton's business begins to slide towards ruin as he discovers that his Irish workers simply lack the skills to operate complex machinery. So it turns out that he needed his Lancashire workers after all. As he becomes personally acquainted with Higgins his attitude towards his workers changes and he begins to suggest to them putting a kitchen in his factory to provide meals as they often have inadequate facilities for cooking at home. At first they resist all his suggestions, but he finds that if he waits for a while, they will make similar suggestions to him, as though they had thought of them themselves. This is the beginning of a dialogic relationship, and he deeply regrets the possibility that he may lose his factory.

Thornton has now become one of that small minority of mill owners who try to improve the condition of labour in their factories in cooperation with the workers. As he explains to a member of parliament who is interested in his experiment, he wants to set up projects which "bring the individuals of different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life." He wants to establish "that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find ways and means of seeing each other, and becoming acquainted with each other's characters, ... and even tricks of temper and modes of speech. We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more." When asked whether this new understanding "may prevent the recurrence of strikes" Thornton replies that there will still be strikes but that a mutual understanding "may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been"(Chapter 51). In acknowledging strikes as a legitimate mode of bargaining, we are on the verge of modern labour relations. Gaskell is at least fifty years ahead of her time.

Marxist critics have found a strong element of paternalism in Thornton's reforms. I would disagree. Whatever authority Thornton may still retain as mill owner, the dialogues

reported here seem to be based on what Margret calls “the equality of friendship,” which she found so lacking in his exposition of the laws of political economy.

In this novel many points of view are hotly argued, but no over-all solution is provided. The only solution may be to understand why various people think the way they do, and try to mediate between them, as Margaret’s father tries to do. In the end, Thornton, the stern industrialist, seems to have learned something from his teacher. The significance of dialogue here goes beyond labour relations; it pervades the whole atmosphere of the novel.

After *North and South*, Gaskell never returned to the theme of Manchester. After her brilliant spurt of creativity she undertook no full-length novels for eight years, but published her famous biography of her friend Charlotte Bronte and many short stories and novellas, of which the best known is “Cousin Phyllis.” In addition to realism, Gaskell had a liking for the gothic. Perhaps her best dark story is “Lois the Witch,” a study of the murderous effect of religious fanaticism in the Salem witch trials. Also, I am fond of a ghost story, “The Old Nurse’s Tale,” which provides strikingly surreal images of abandoned daughters and an evil father-figure. Her next full-length novel was *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863), depicting life in a small whaling port in the late eighteenth century. Her last novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), certainly one of her best, is a charming but also rather dark study of gender problems set in the countryside where Gaskell grew up. Unfortunately she died quite suddenly, at the age of fifty-five, when she had almost completed it.

### **Some sources:**

Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*. Faber and Faber, 1999 (paperback). A wonderfully detailed and readable biography. Her chapters on the novels are insightful.

R. K. Webb, “The Gaskell’s as Unitarians,” in *Dickens and Other Victorians*, ed. Joanne Sharrock, Macmillan Press, 1988. My sense of the Unitarian background owes much to this.

Angus Easson, “Mr. Hale’s Doubts in *North and South*”. RES New Series, Vol. XXXI, No. 121 (1980), 30-40. A well-known Gaskell scholar, Easson argues that Mr. Hale’s explanation for leaving the Anglican Church contains a hidden reference to Theophilus Lindsey’s reasons for doing the same. This would explain why Gaskell chose to raise the issue of religious doubt here. She wanted, without actually saying so, to indicate that Mr. Hale has a Unitarian sensibility.

Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell*. Twayne, 1984. Very readable and informative.

Patsey Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell-- second edition*. Manchester University Press, 2006. A very interesting feminist approach. Does full justice to the social issues.

*Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*. Ed. Lesa Scholl, Emily Morris, and Sarina Gruver Moore. Ashgate, Dorset Press, 2015. A collection of contemporary interpretations.

from SFU website

## Mason Harris

Mason Harris received his BA from Harvard University in 1961 and his PhD from the State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNY-B) in 1971. His dissertation was on the fiction of George Eliot.

He started teaching in SFU's Department of English in 1966, the second year of the university's existence. He taught in the department until his retirement. His main subject has been Victorian fiction, and he has been interested in two genres that started in the 19th century and became very popular in the 20th: science fiction and the detective novel.

He has published on George Eliot, Charles Dickens, H.G. Wells, George Orwell, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Ursula K. Le Guin, and has written a book on the fiction of Joy Kogawa. He has also co-edited a collection of essays from a conference on racism and published a scholarly edition of H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Broadview Press, 2009), setting this macabre tale in the Darwinian ideas of its time.

### Previously taught:

- Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South: Owners and Workers in Victorian England* (55+) PLUS147
- *Love, Death, and the Tragically Divided Self in Wuthering Heights* (55+) SCFC935
- *Identity and Revolt in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre* (55+) SCFC879
- *Happy 200th, Pride and Prejudice!* (55+) SCFC773
- *Charles Dickens's Bleak House* (55+) SCFC733
- *Charles Dickens* (55+) SCFC659
- *The Science Fiction of H.G. Wells: Darwinism, Decadence, and the Macabre in the Late 19th Century* (55+) SCFC579
- *Who Done It? The Detective Novella in the Victorian Era* (55+) SCFC460
- *The Rise of the Detective Novel* (55+) SCFC396