

Elizabeth Gaskell

29th September 1810 - 12th November 1865

A worship resource to celebrate the
200th anniversary of the birth of Elizabeth Gaskell



God has made us so that we
must be mutually dependent.
(Margaret Hale in *North and
South*)

- Worship materials
- Background information
- Directory of events
- Contacts

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Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell was a life-long Unitarian, whose education and social life were predominantly within Unitarian circles. She was a complex woman, with many aspects to her character, some of which are revealed in this worship pack.

A worship service to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Elizabeth Gaskell can be developed from the contents of this worship pack. **Sections 2 – 9** contain most of the material that can be directly used in worship. Some of these sections can be used as they stand, others may need abbreviation or adaptation – using different ‘voices’ will add interest to longer passages. **Sections 10 - 16** contain useful background information, expansion of themes in earlier sections, a directory of some of the more relevant events organised in this anniversary year, contacts, and further reading.

1 Elizabeth Gaskell as a Unitarian

During Elizabeth’s lifetime British Unitarianism developed and changed considerably. The law declaring denial of the trinity illegal was repealed in 1813, and by 1850 many of the old Presbyterian, General Baptist and other rational dissenting congregations declared themselves to be Unitarian. The Dissenters’ Chapels Act of 1844 ensured that congregations which had been Unitarian for over 25 years could keep their buildings and trust funds. Some Unitarians followed James Martineau and others to develop a faith where authority is based on internal conscience rather than scripture, and with two colleges, at least two publications, and various national bodies, the movement was in danger of splitting. Elizabeth had been brought up in an undogmatic Presbyterian style, tutored by William Turner of Newcastle, and much influenced by the theology of Joseph Priestley. John Gooch Robberds, the senior minister at Cross Street Chapel, considered that too much emphasis on doctrine tended to divide congregations, and he had an irenic style of ministry.

Elizabeth declared that she had little interest in theology, though clearly she was more knowledgeable than she admitted. Her works of fiction do not include any mention of Unitarianism by name, though its values permeate both her life and her writing. She kept out of denominational controversies, but her letters indicate that she favoured the more traditional Unitarianism of Priestley rather than the ‘anti-supernaturalism’ of Martineau; she did not enjoy the company of the Martineau family, finding their conversation too solemn and full of ‘sense by the yard’. Elizabeth much preferred the company of the ‘old school’ Unitarians.

She declared herself to be an Arian with regard to the person of Jesus. (Her remark that she was not a humanitarian meant that she did not regard Jesus as only human, and should not be taken out of context to refer to her attitude to the whole human race.) In common with many other Unitarian women of her day, she preferred sermons to be spiritually uplifting rather than about doctrine, and wrote to a friend ‘oh, for some really spiritual devotional preaching instead of controversy about doctrines, - about which I am more and more certain *we can never be certain* in this world.’

When away from home she, with her daughters, often attended the local Anglican church (as she had done at boarding school). On these occasions she wrestled with the competing demands of spiritual satisfaction and reverence for truth, and advised her daughters not to go to the Anglican service too often. It would be wrong, she told them, to deaden one’s ‘sense of its serious error by hearing it too often’; they should go preferably to the evening service, when only the Doxology could offend against ‘one’s sense of truth’. This stress on the importance of truth in the everyday events of daily life as well as in theological questions is an important element of Elizabeth’s Unitarianism. Her refusal to oversimplify matters sometimes made her appear inconsistent or indecisive, but this would be to do her an injustice. She considered that she had to study and seek to understand before she could reach an opinion. This went with a typically Unitarian valuing of education and intellectual growth. Her trust in a benevolent God showed itself in many ways; she wrote in a letter of her sense of God ‘being above all in His great sense of peace and wisdom, yet loving me with an individual love tenderer than any mother’s.’ She took care to introduce this loving image of God to her children at an early age, and not, as did many Victorian parents, talk of a God who punishes sins. Elizabeth did indeed think that evil deeds brought about consequences, and in this she followed the associationist teaching of Joseph Priestley; but she had a very strong sense of the importance of conscience and duty.

2 Chalice Lighting *(David Dawson)*

In the 200th anniversary year of the birth of Elizabeth Gaskell, we celebrate her life and work. We light our chalice as a reminder of the way she expressed her Unitarian faith in her writing by addressing:

- + issues of social justice
- + reconciliation in society
- + sharing resources more fairly
- + women's rights

Our chalice flame still needs to burn brightly for these today.

3 Prayers

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Spirit of Life and Love,
We meet together to give thanks for all that sustains our lives;
for the earth that is our home, giving food and shelter,
for work that gives meaning to our lives,
for people who need our care, causes that are worth striving for.

We give thanks for those who nurture and challenge us,
for artists who delight our senses,
for writers who enlarge our understanding and sympathies.

At this time we offer particular thanks for Elizabeth Gaskell,
whose life and work we celebrate today.
May her insights move us to embody those values
of love and concern that span the ages
and unite us in bonds of sympathy with all beings.

Amen

God of compassion, in whose image we are formed,
we acknowledge our struggles to live good lives in an imperfect world.

We pray for strength and wisdom, so that we may learn:
to tread more carefully on our fragile earth,
to understand the lives and concerns of people different from ourselves,
whether they be neighbours or live in distant lands.

We pray that we may
seek truth - even when this makes us uncomfortable;
work for justice - especially when we need to confront our own privileges;
and show compassion to all who suffer.

In silence we each bring to mind and heart our concerns for our world and ourselves...

(a period of silence)

May we companion others on the journey, becoming answers to our prayers.

Amen

(Sections 4, 5 and 6 could provide readings and/or background material for an address)

4 Religion in the Writings of Elizabeth Gaskell

*An extract from part of a lecture given by Kay Millard
to the South West England Group of the Gaskell Society © 2001*

Elizabeth Gaskell witnessed to her faith in her writings, and fulfilled her potential as a writer, speaking her truth to those who sometimes found it uncomfortable to hear. In that, she was a true Unitarian.

Those who burned their copies of *Ruth*, on its publication in 1853, did so because of moral objections to the sympathetic treatment given to a young woman who bore an illegitimate child. Yet the religious theme of the book is made clear by Revd Thurstan Benson in chapter 27, when he attempts to justify his course of actions. He and his sister have offered Ruth the opportunity for self-salvation. Even that archetype of Victorian censure, the unmarried mother, is redeemable in their eyes, by her own efforts and with the grace of God. The sacrifice of her own life to save others in the epidemic of fever achieves her redemption even in the eyes of those who regarded her as morally contaminated. The Unitarian principle of seeing the potential for good as ever-present, even if marred by circumstances, could hardly be more apparent.

Self-sacrifice, inspired by love, is also a theme of *Sylvia's Lovers*. Here, the rather intellectually religious Philip Hepburn, who tries to teach Sylvia to read the Bible, is rejected; only the insight brought to him by suffering can bring him to loving self-sacrifice and ultimate salvation.

Life experience is indeed one of the great teachers for characters throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's novels. Margaret Hale is profoundly changed by her life in Milton in *North and South*; John Barton is even made a murderer by the bitterness aroused by the tragedies of his life in *Mary Barton*; and Squire Hamley is softened by the profound experiences of life and death among his family in *Wives and Daughters*. It was axiomatic of the Unitarianism of Gaskell's day that life experience profoundly affects the individual, rather than innate predisposition.

Conscience was also axiomatic. Critics of Unitarianism have said that without a creed Unitarians can believe what they like; but adding the primacy of conscience is intended to ensure that Unitarians sincerely believe what they *can*. Many characters in Gaskell's writings wrestle profoundly with matters of conscience. John Barton cannot live with the terrible act he has committed; Mr Hale struggles with an undefined but life-changing decision about his religious faith in *North and South*; and Philip Hepburn in *Sylvia's Lovers* is made distractedly unhappy because of the lie he told Sylvia regarding the death of his rival. If matters of conscience are treated more lightly in *Cranford* - such as Miss Matty's determination to pay the cost of her bank's failings (see chapter 13) - they are nevertheless treated sympathetically, and with full knowledge of the consequences.

Another aspect of the Unitarian approach to humanity is apparent in Gaskell's treatment of characters at the lower end of the social scale. Always, but particularly in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, they are treated as fully rounded human beings. Their customs are respected; their language is used as part of their own culture, rather than as any attempt to patronise them by suggesting that they have not been taught to speak properly. Margaret Hale, for example, begins to use their words herself, and claims this is no different from her cousin Edith's adoption of upper-class military slang (see chapter 29). Also, what the characters say is often profound and instructive, particularly when they discuss issues of political economy (see especially *North and South*).

There is an acknowledgement in much of Gaskell's work that education does not only belong to those who have been through a conventional course of training. The archetype of this is perhaps Mr Holman, the minister in *Cousin Phillis*, who is a farmer as well as a theologian, and is also interested in mechanics. It is also shown in Mr Hale's tutoring of Thornton the mill owner in *North and South*, and in the character of Job Leigh in *Mary Barton*. More playfully in *Wives and Daughters* she paves the way for Roger Hamley the naturalist to achieve great things while his brother, the classical poet, never realises his potential.

Most especially, Gaskell recognises the feelings of poor people. The death of a child, as portrayed in *Mary Barton*, is no less a tragedy because the Wilson family is poor and the occurrence common; fine feeling is not confined to the genteel. Gaskell must have seen this at first hand in her work as a minister's wife in Manchester. Of course, Gaskell was not alone in making such portrayals; they also occur in some of her contemporaries, most notably Dickens. However, the striking realism of the portrayals in Gaskell's works is notable, and is one of the most distinctive characteristics of her writing.

In contrast with the stark realism of the Manchester novels, there is the paradox of a Unitarian, who was expected to be essentially rational and unsuperstitious about religion, writing occasional ghost stories. Was this, perhaps, her own form of dissent? That she disliked the dry intellectualism of some strands of Unitarianism, in favour of a more spiritual approach to religion, has already been made clear. That she also disliked the smug complacency of those who believed the world could be divided into black and white, right and wrong, and that they invariably knew which was which, is shown by her merciless portrayal of Mr Bradshaw in *Ruth*. Was an occasional ghost story her way of being a little provocative towards the stern? In any case, they show that there is no such thing as a conventional Unitarian.

5 Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels and Message for Today

An extract from part of a sermon delivered by Rev. Jim Robinson at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, London

I will speak about the novels Elizabeth Gaskell wrote and then suggest three challenges she gives us today.

Mary Barton was her first major novel. It is set in Manchester. The story revolves around a poor working class family headed by John Barton. His wife dies, and he is left to raise his daughter Mary. Mary takes up work as a dressmaker. She is courted by hard working but poor Jem Wilson, and rich Henry Carson, son of a wealthy mill owner. Mary loves Jem, but thinks she should marry Henry to secure a good life for her father. Meanwhile, father John Barton is becoming active in a trade union attached to the factory where he works.

The plot becomes a murder mystery when the rich Henry is murdered. The poor suitor, Jem Wilson, is accused of the crime. However, in the end it is discovered that Mary's father, John, is the murderer, murdering to protect his daughter against sexual advances made by the wealthy Henry. One can imagine how explosive such a plot would have been in the mid 1800's: a poor trade unionist murdering the son of the wealthy mill owner. Through this plot Gaskell explores the deep injustices contained in class privilege, wealth, and poverty. She obviously sides with the poor.

She again sides with the oppressed in her novel *Ruth*. The book is about sexual morality – a nearly taboo subject for its time. The heroine, Ruth, is a woman who mothers a child out of wedlock, but does not suffer the fate of a 'fallen woman'. Instead, she is a character of high morals and hopes. She works out her own redemption through effort and decent values. Criticism fell upon Gaskell with the publication of this novel. Fathers burned the book lest it should fall into the hands of their daughters. Gaskell was shunned by some of her friends and social acquaintances. As she wrote to a friend: 'The only comparison I can find for myself is to Saint Sebastian, tied to a tree to be shot with arrows. But I have spoken out my mind as best I can, and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good.'

It must have been a relief for Elizabeth that her novel *Cranford* was received with great popularity and little controversy. *Cranford*, which was recently shown as a BBC film series, is a delightful portrayal of village life in 19th century England. Women dominate the book, with their strength, eccentricities, and social values. In the novel we read:

'...for keeping the trim gardens full of choice flowers without a weed to speck them...for deciding all questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments...for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs in the parish...for kindness to the poor...and real tender good offices to each other whenever they were in distress...the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient.' 'A man,' as one of them observed, 'is so in the way...'



Whether it is the narrator Mary Smith, the loving, sweet, and shy Miss Matty, her formidable sister Miss Deborah, the fiery Miss Pole, or the eccentric Miss Barker (who put her cow into a

flannel waistcoat), the women of Cranford (like the women of Gaskell's childhood) rule the town. The men, with their businesses and railroad, may think they rule the town, but they are mistaken.

Gaskell returns to more overt social issues and themes in her novel *North and South*. Elizabeth worked among the poor in Manchester, and had first-hand knowledge of the terrible effects on workers of industrialization. She was actively concerned with creating better working conditions. She also saw the need for creative reconciliation between the classes, for everyone's benefit. The best in the workers and the best in the mill owners must be coaxed out of them for a stable, healthy society to emerge.

These are the themes of her novel *North and South*. The novel describes the emerging industrial North, as seen through the eyes of a sensitive woman from the South, Margaret Hale. Margaret is raised by wealthy relatives in London and by her humble, hard working parents in a lovely English village in the South. Her father leaves the Anglican Ministry, out of conscience, and moves north to Milton (a fictional town modelled after Manchester), to become a tutor.

Margaret is a character of courage and empathy. She meets and mingles with the poor and the rich: Mr. Thornton, owner of the local mill; Nicholas Higgins, a poor worker at the mill; Mrs. Thornton, jealous and ambitious mother of the mill owner; Bessy, a poor woman who dies from inhuman living conditions; Margaret's parents, who make the difficult move from south to north; other family relations, who have the class privilege of wealth; other Milton poor who cannot rub two coins together. Through these characters Gaskell raises issues of social justice and the work of reconciliation in society. This quest for reconciliation is symbolized in the growing love between Margaret Hale and the mill owner John Thornton. Only when John can see his class privilege and feel empathy for his workers, does a marriage between Margaret and John become possible.

Her final works, the biography of Charlotte Bronte, another novel entitled *Sylvia's Lovers*, and her nearly finished work *Wives and Daughters*, display the skill of a mature and accomplished author. Indeed, a number of critics consider her novel *Wives and Daughters* to be her finest. One critic writes: 'In its wit and observation, *Wives and Daughters* is a worthy successor to the novels of Jane Austen. Gaskell draws more widely and delves deeper into the social scale. She portrays a changing society, in which achievement will soon count more than social position.'

Elizabeth Gaskell is a great English novelist whose message is still relevant today. She challenges us on a number of fronts.

Gaskell challenges us on the topic of **class privilege and poverty**. At the current time, around a quarter of children in the United Kingdom are raised in poverty. In the larger world, a third of humanity still lives on the knife-edge of malnutrition. Gaskell would have us look at the privilege we carry as middle class westerners, and how our social institutions favour the well-to-do at the expense of the hard-working poor of the world. Can we learn to share our resources more fairly and compassionately, for the sake of our human family and for the sake of the environment? We might learn that having fewer things, but more love will make us happier human beings. That is certainly what the mill owner, John Thornton, discovered in the novel *North and South*.

Gaskell challenges us on the topic of **women's rights**. We have certainly come a long ways since the time when Harriet Martineau (a contemporary of Gaskell) observed that women were like slaves, only treated with patronizing niceness. But there is still much work to be done. Women deserve more support in their choices around mothering and working. Women need full access to education. Studies demonstrate that educating women is one of the keys to raising a nation or people out of poverty. And women must have the right to control their own bodies and sexuality. Many of the women in Gaskell's novels are role models of what it means to be a strong and decent human being.

For Unitarians, Gaskell challenges us to **take our faith more seriously**. Modern Unitarians have become 'user friendly'. That means, if we like a Unitarian chapel we might join, but if it changes a bit (not to our liking) we will leave it quickly. We celebrate our freedom of thought and our passion for authenticity, but we take for granted the nature of community. Someone else will do the work of building and maintaining community – we want just the fun parts of it.

For Gaskell, her Unitarian faith was not a hobby. Spiritual community, in her childhood Knutsford and her adult Manchester, was very important to her. Her Unitarian values were central to her life. Her faith inspired her to confront social injustice and to work for genuine reconciliation. Her Unitarian values gave her characters like Margaret Hale the strength to face the storms of life and make decisions that led towards human dignity and a better society.

I don't know whether Elizabeth Gaskell ever attended a service at Rosslyn Hill Chapel. It is likely that she did, since her husband and the minister of the chapel were close colleagues, and the Gaskells visited London often. But whether she did or not, she is our Unitarian ancestor, and we can take pride in that fact.

Elizabeth Gaskell leaves us with these three challenges: to end poverty in the world, to champion the rights of women, and to be grateful for our spiritual faith and community. May each of us, in our own way, respond to these challenges. May her vision of human dignity for everyone become the reality in our world.

6 Elizabeth Gaskell in her own words

An extract from a letter to Eliza Fox, dated April 1850. The letter is No.69 (pp107-109) in the *Letters of Mrs Gaskell* edited by J A V Chapple and Arthur Pollard

(Note: This informal letter from Elizabeth to her close friend Eliza Fox gives some idea of her day-to-day concerns, and the inner conflict she experienced as she tried to reconcile the different aspects of her personality (the many selves or 'mes' – pronounce it 'meez' and it makes sense!)

My dearest Tottie,

I was going to have written a letter to myself, and sent it to you to fill up; only your most welcome letter this morning put a stop to that. I am so glad always to hear from you, and should be more glad to see you, dear little lady. And we've got a house, Yes! We *really* have. And if I had neither conscience nor prudence I should be delighted, for it certainly *is* a beauty. It is not very far from here, in Plymouth Grove...You *must* come and see us in it, dearest Tottie, and try and make me see 'the wrong the better cause,' and that it is right to spend so much on ourselves on so purely a selfish thing as a house is, while so many are wanting – that's the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes,' for I have a great number, and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian – (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, Meta and William most especially who are in full ecstasy. Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience which is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self) by saying it's William who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, and so it is – only that does not quite do. Well! I must try and make the house give as much pleasure to others as I can and make it as little a selfish thing as I can. My dear! It's (£)150 a year and I dare say we shall be ruined: and I've already asked after the ventilation of the new Borough Gaol, and bespoken Mr Wright to visit us – The said good Mr Wright drank tea here last night, and said '*By Jingo*' with great unction, when very much animated, much to William's amusement, not to say delight. (We have a greenhouse at the new house-to-be; which delights the girls; we shall remove in about 6 weeks.)

...William has just been pleased to observe that it is not often I make such a 'sensible' friendship as the one with you, which I rather resent; for I am sure all my friends *are* sensible...Yes, that discovery of one's exact work in the world is the puzzle: I never meant to say it was not. I long (weakly) for the old times when right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women. Only then I don't believe William would ever have *commanded* me. I can understand your nervous headache so well, having just worried myself into a similar state...

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7 For children of all ages

When her daughters were quite young, Elizabeth wrote a light-hearted list of advice: 'Precepts for the Guidance of a Daughter'. Here are some of the points, with some comments (in italics), on how these might be used in the children's part of a service.

1. Remember that Evelyn was not the first Norman King of England.
(Do you know who was? I wonder who Evelyn was? NB this could be a girl or boy)
2. Wash your hands.
3. When you have washed them, hold a book in them.
4. Diminish your calves *(Concern about body image and size is clearly nothing new; what would be the modern equivalent?)*
5. Pluck your arms *(Is this the Victorian equivalent of shaving legs? NB Victorian ladies' legs were not often visible – why?)*
6. Get up early, but not too early. *(On which day of the year are children likely to get up too early?)*
7. Talk German so fast that no one can ascertain whether you speak grammatically or not.
(Elizabeth learnt German, French, Italian and Latin. What languages do children learn today?)
8. Don't gobble; it turns maidens and turkey-cocks purple. *(What do you consider to be good table manners?)*
9. Remember John Still *(Is this telling us not to fidget? Perhaps John Still was a story of the time)*
10. Don't swear. *(This still applies!)*
11. Assume the power of reading, if you have it not.
12. Hold your book the right way up. NB you may know which is the right way by examining at what end of a page the numbers occur. Where the numbers are, that is the top, to be held away from you. *(There are all sorts of possibilities here. You can take along a selection of older books that all have page numbers at the top, and get people to check this. It also leads to a discussion about pretending/ cheating, and the importance of being able to read)*
13. Not to leave your room like a hay-field, of which the grass is gowns and brushes. *(Do you leave your room untidy? What do you leave on the floor? What does your Mum/Dad/whoever you live with say about this?)*

8 Hymns

In 1837 The Rev John Rely Beard published a new hymnbook, to which William Gaskell contributed over seventy new hymns. Elizabeth would doubtless have sung these, and would have discussed them with her husband. There is enough evidence to show that Elizabeth's Unitarianism was very similar to her husband's, so these hymns can be taken to express ideas close to Elizabeth's.

The following hymns by William Gaskell reflect Elizabeth's concerns:

Hymns for Living

222 Hush the Sounds of War (O God! The darkness roll away)
303 Through all the Coming Week (Not on this day, O God, alone)

Hymns of Faith and Freedom

191 Though lowly here our lot may be
423 O God! the darkness roll away
469 Not on this day, O God alone

Hymns of Worship (with supplement) has this single verse hymn by William Gaskell

590 To Thee, the Lord Almighty,
Our noblest praise we give,
Who all things hast created,
And blessest all that live:
Whose goodness, never failing
Through countless ages gone,
For ever and for ever
Shall still keep shining on.

Sing Your Faith

This hymnbook has only contemporary authors; but many of the hymns address the same issues that concerned Elizabeth Gaskell. Here is a sample five:

198 We'll build a land where we bind up the broken (reconciliation, justice)
191 We have a dream (justice, equality of opportunity)
178 Together now we join as one (serving humanity)
84 Justice for persons (justice, compassion)
220 Your life is good (poverty)

9 Closing words *(Rev. Jim Robinson)*

May the message of our Unitarian ancestor, Elizabeth Gaskell,
rise above the centuries and inspire us today:

to end poverty,
to champion the rights of women,
and to appreciate the gift of our Unitarian heritage.

Amen.

10 Elizabeth Gaskell – Life

Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was born on 29 September 1810 in Chelsea, London. Both her parents came from families with a long tradition of dissent. Her father, William, trained as a dissenting minister at Daventry, Northampton and Manchester and for a short time served the



Heathwaite – Elizabeth's childhood home

Unitarian congregation at Failsworth, near Manchester, before trying and failing at farming. He eventually settled in London, working as keeper of records at the treasury. He was said to be a progressive, radical Unitarian. Her mother, also Elizabeth, nee Holland, came from a large family of more traditional, 'respectable' middle class rational dissenters from Cheshire, linked by marriage to the Wedgwood, Turner and Darwin families. Elizabeth had one brother, John, twelve years older, but she saw little of him after her mother's death in 1811. On the death of his wife, William sent Elizabeth to live with her mother's sister, Aunt Hannah Lumb, in Knutsford. It was here that Elizabeth grew up, attending Brook Street Chapel, apart from a couple of years at boarding school in the Midlands.

When she was eighteen John disappeared, either lost at sea or in India; this loss affected both Elizabeth and her father severely, and she went to stay with William (who had remarried and had two more children) for some months, during which time he died, leaving her less money than had been envisaged. Once again the Holland family looked after her, broadening her education by arranging for her to stay with a variety of friends and relatives, including Henry Holland and the Swinton family

in London and the Vale of Evesham, the Rev William Turner and his family in Newcastle upon Tyne, the Holland family homes in North Wales, Liverpool and Birkenhead, and at least one visit to Edinburgh. Her education was broadened considerably, particularly in Newcastle, where the Literary and Philosophical society was open to women as well as men. It was on a visit to William Turner's daughter, Mary, who had married the Rev John Gooch

Robberds, minister of Cross Street Chapel in Manchester, that Elizabeth met the new co-minister: the Rev William Gaskell. Elizabeth was just twenty-one, and considered lively and sometimes 'giddy and thoughtless' according to her Aunt Lumb, while William, at twenty-seven, was quiet, scholarly and rather austere. Within six months they were engaged, and married very soon after at the parish church in Knutsford. (At this time all marriages had to be conducted in the parish church; the right for non-conformists to be married in their own place of worship was gained in 1836.) The Gaskell family was also a long-standing dissenting family, with connections to both the Cairo Street Chapel in Warrington and Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.

William and Elizabeth set up their first home in Manchester, and though they moved twice, stayed in the same small area one mile south of the city centre and Cross Street Chapel. As the minister's wife, Elizabeth met many of the middle class professional families in the fast growing city, and became involved in their concerns, such as the cholera outbreak of 1832, and cultural life. But the following year they suffered the stillbirth of a daughter, a sorrow that Elizabeth carried with her for the rest of her life. In 1834 she gave birth to a daughter, Marianne, followed three years later by another, Margaret Emily, known as Meta. A son was also born and died early; no record of this has been found. Although her life revolved round her role as a mother, Elizabeth did find odd moments in which to write. There were copious letters to her many women friends, though her lively style was inhibited by William's corrections to her grammar; also poems and



William Gaskell

probably prose writing, such as descriptions of places she visited and perhaps even short stories. She started a diary chronicling her experiences as a mother and the progress of Marianne. The first item to appear in print was *Sketches Among the Poor*, a poem written jointly with William on the experiences and wisdom of an elderly single woman. It was probably written in the summer of 1836 and appeared in a magazine the following January.

The birth and death of a second son, was followed by the birth of a third daughter, Florence Elizabeth, in 1842, and two years later the birth of a son, William; however, he died the following year from scarlet fever. During her grief over this loss, husband William suggested that she might find distraction in writing something more diverting, and encouraged her to write a novel. In spite of the demands of her domestic life - with a further daughter, Julia Bradford, born in 1846 - several short stories and *Mary Barton* were published in the next five years. The publication of her first novel, at first anonymously, but soon attributed to 'Mrs Gaskell' opened many doors for Elizabeth. She visited London, where she met many writers and celebrities, including Charles Dickens (who for a time attended the Unitarian Little Portland Street Chapel with the Rev Edward Tagart as minister). However, the novel also brought controversy and opposition in Manchester, where mill owning Unitarians felt criticised. The review in *The Manchester Guardian* considered that, as it was clearly being widely read, 'its errors have become dangerous' and that ignoring of the benevolent acts of the mill owners amounted to a libel. This criticism worried Elizabeth, but it did not stop her writing.

Over the next few years Elizabeth struggled to find time to write in between her domestic and social duties, but produced a stream of short stories and novels. Her novel *Ruth* provoked many protests about its impropriety, and was burned by two (male) members of Cross Street Chapel. However, there was also much support, and its publication did much to highlight the plight of the urban poor.

She began to travel more widely, to continental Europe, sometimes with William, always with several of her daughters. The family moved to a large house in Plymouth Grove, and entertained a stream of visitors. One person who was to become significant for her writing was Charlotte Bronte, whom she met in Manchester and visited at Haworth. After Charlotte's death in 1855 Patrick Bronte asked Elizabeth to write a biography of his daughter. This Elizabeth agreed to do, and worked hard on the balance between discovering the facts and maintaining propriety. However, on its publication Patrick

was particularly unhappy about some of the content, and revisions were made. Elizabeth's obituary in *The Manchester Guardian* considered that Mrs Gaskell would be remembered for this biography of Charlotte Bronte rather than for any of her works of fiction.



During the 'cotton famine' starting in 1861, many Manchester mills were closed due to the shortage of slave produced cotton, which was embargoed during the American civil war. Elizabeth and her daughters worked long hours providing relief and training to out of work cotton operatives. It is said that Elizabeth's subsequent ill health, and death in 1865 stemmed from the strain and over-work of this crisis. However, in the short term she seemed to regain some energy, and enjoyed visits to Italy and France. She started making plans for William's retirement, away from the unhealthy smogs of Manchester, and with the help of a loan from her publishers, secretly bought a house in Hampshire (The Lawn, in the village of Holybourne, near Alton). It was as she was preparing this house for occupation that she suddenly collapsed and died on 12 November 1865. She is buried at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford.

11 Elizabeth Gaskell and issues of class and gender

Elizabeth Gaskell was firmly middle class, and had no desire to change the social system in which she was born and raised. In many ways she was a conventional wife and mother, who gave priority to her children, especially when they were small. Hence her title of 'Mrs Gaskell' as author, rather than first name as in the case of the unmarried Charlotte Bronte or Jane Austen. Some of her letters to her close women friends describe the minutiae of her days with her daughters when there was little time for writing. In her early years of marriage, William used to check her personal letters to ensure that the grammar was correct; she found this somewhat inhibiting. The extract from a letter to her close friend Eliza Fox reveals both her informal style and some of her concerns about the roles she performed. (See Section 6)

Although she took advice about fulfilling her duties as a minister's wife from Mary Robberds, wife of the senior minister at Cross Street Chapel, she showed considerable independence, and was not at the beck and call of the congregation. William and Elizabeth often took holidays separately, though their relationship always seems to have been supportive and caring. It is remarkable that in the days before the married women's property act, when wives were not supposed to control money in their own right, Elizabeth managed to find the funds to buy a surprise retirement house for William, without his knowing. In common with other Unitarian women writers, such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Elizabeth somehow contrived to be seen as 'respectable' and thus acceptable to her potential readers, while actually pushing the boundaries of what women could do and write. One of her strategies was to claim ignorance and lack of knowledge, for example about theology and political economy, while actually she had a good practical grasp of such subjects, though with little formal education in them. This disarming tactic is not unknown in the 21st century!

12 Elizabeth Gaskell and social justice

Elizabeth was no revolutionary, yet she was concerned for individuals when they encountered hardships and misfortune. As the minister's wife, she taught in Sunday School, and occasionally invited her pupils to her home. She did comparatively little visiting of the poor and sick, people known to the domestic mission visitors; but she read their accounts, and used this information in her stories to highlight injustice and suffering. She sometimes went to great lengths to help individuals, for example when she persuaded Charles Dickens to arrange for a woman, a young prostitute, to emigrate to start a new life. Elizabeth believed that all actions have consequences, and that people must cope with these as best they can, rather than expecting an interventionist God to put things right. Yet, when there was great poverty during the cotton famine, when workers were laid off, she spent long hours organising and supervising sewing classes for young women, so that they could earn some money. She used her novels and short stories to draw attention to the injustices and hardships suffered by the workers in the cotton mills, not in order to change the system, but to make people more humane and sensitive.

13 The Gaskell House in Manchester

84, Plymouth Grove, where the Gaskell family lived from 1850, is owned by the Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, who are restoring it. During the winter of 2009-2010 it was closed while the



Drawing Room

foundations and exterior were repaired, but it is due to open again in the spring of 2010. The web site: elizabethgaskellhouse.org has details and contacts.

The full postal address of the house is 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester M13 9LW - but no correspondence should be sent there.

(See the letter quoted in section 6 for more about the house.)

14 Some Events in the Gaskell Bicentenary Year 2010

March 31	Opening of Gaskell Exhibition at the Portico Library, Manchester. (runs until 29 April)
May 14 - 17	Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford – flower and costume exhibition with Victorian high tea in the garden.
July 15	Opening of Gaskell Exhibition at the John Rylands University Library Deansgate, Manchester (runs until 28 November)
September	Exhibition on 'Elizabeth Gaskell's Cheshire' at Tatton Park, Knutsford.
September 25	Dedication of window in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, London.
September 29	Elizabeth Gaskell's birthday. Talk at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford followed by lunch at a local restaurant.
October 3	Commemorative service at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, with wreath laying, refreshments, and afternoon walk.

Contact Details:

Brook Street Chapel, Adams Hill, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 8DY
Beulah Cornes: tel 01565 632 673: email Beulahcornes@ntlworld.com

Portico Library, 57 Mosley Street Manchester, M2 3FF
0161 236 6785. www.theportico.org.uk

The John Rylands Library, 150 Deansgate, Manchester, M3 3EH. Visitor and Event Enquiries
Telephone: 0161 306 0555.
Email: jrul.special-collections@manchester.ac.uk

Tatton Park, Knutsford, Cheshire, WA16 6QN; Tatton Park Information Line: 01625 374435

For other events, see the official website of the Gaskell Society, containing information about Elizabeth Gaskell, her life and times, and the Gaskell Society of the UK. (www.gaskellsociety.co.uk)

15 Present day Unitarian Congregations with a connection to Elizabeth Gaskell

Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford (Elizabeth and William Gaskell are buried here)

Dob Lane Chapel, Failsworth, Manchester (Elizabeth's father was minister here)

Church of the Divine Unity, Newcastle upon Tyne

Cross Street Chapel, Manchester (There is a small collection of Gaskell works and pictures)

Cairo Street Chapel, Warrington (William Gaskell (son) is buried here)

Old Chapel, Flowergate, Whitby (Elizabeth visited Whitby and used it as the setting for *Sylvia's Lovers*)

16 Resources and further reading

The best biography of Elizabeth Gaskell, which gives a good account of nineteenth century Unitarianism, is: *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* by Jenny Uglow, Faber and Faber 1993, now available as a paperback.

Also recommended; *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* edited by Jill L. Matus, Cambridge University Press 2007. In addition to chapters on her writing, there are sections on gender and the family, social transformation, and Unitarian dissent.

For more on Elizabeth Gaskell's Unitarianism, see 'The Gaskells as Unitarians' by R. K. Webb in *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in honour of Philip Collins* edited by Joanne Shattock, St Martins Press 1988.

Much of Elizabeth Gaskell's writing is available on line.

A good source is The Gaskell Web: www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/gaskell

17 Thanks

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This Elizabeth Gaskell Worship Pack is available:

1 on line at www.unitarian.org.uk

2 as a hard copy – from:

Audrey Longhurst
The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches
Essex Hall
1-6 Essex Street
London
WC2R 3HY