



## GRAAT On-Line issue #9 November 2010

### Preface

The success of the BBC's 2007 series, *Cranford*, based mainly on Mrs Gaskell's novel –first published in 1853– illustrates, at one level, the apparently unending fascination with costume drama in Britain. But it also underlines the considerable attraction which Victorian society still exerts on contemporary British culture, as well as the broader, more popular appeal of the “Neo-Victorian”, as a key element in the British national “heritage” industry.

*Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854) complete a triptych of works which all convey a vivid image of mid-nineteenth-century life in England: the two novels published either side of the “provincial” *Cranford* doing so from a resolutely industrial perspective against the backdrop of the massive new manufacturing centre of Manchester. As one might expect, these three novels figure prominently among the texts discussed in the following pages.

But Mrs Gaskell's output was more multi-faceted, and her world view more ample, than any cursory or conventional acquaintance with her “industrial novels” might suggest. Gaskell made her mark also as a writer of short stories, and as a biographer: the editors of this issue of *Graat Online* are pleased that these aspects of Mrs Gaskell's work, too, continue to attract the sustained critical attention which they clearly deserve.

Gaskell's work, where the “gothic” sits side by side with the “modern”, is also an apt paradigm of the emerging Victorian paradox in respect of industrial development and a disappearing sense of community, of “progress” and the mounting anxieties and nostalgia to which it gave rise.

Above all, Mrs Gaskell remains, two centuries after her birth, an important figure in the development of the Victorian conscience, and not least an accomplished exponent of its militant middle-class humanitarian ethic. Furthermore, her friendships with the Brontë sisters, with Carlyle or Dickens, Ruskin or Harriet Beecher Stowe, combine to alert us to the respect in which she was held during her lifetime and the significance of her work in the broader context of contemporary British intellectual history.

As the following pages show, whether it be in relation to class, gender, social and cultural criticism, or the particular qualities of Mrs Gaskell's narrative, her work seems now to have freed itself from early-twentieth-century reductive readings which tended to see Mrs Gaskell as a decent, sensible author and to see her narratives as correspondingly decent and sensible, but not much more... She still has a great deal to say to us today. Indeed, taking this opportunity to look again at her work, we are reminded of the dangers of "presentism"- that capacity to convince ourselves that our own period has invented debates and dilemmas which, clearly, Mrs Gaskell had already identified as the key issues of her day.

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