



GRAAT On-Line issue #9 November 2010

**'Sever the Connexion': Nationalising Moments  
in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Lois the Witch*, *Mary Barton*, and *Cousin Phillis***

Veronica Hoyt  
University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Robert J.C. Young makes an important contribution to discussions about constructions of England as the centre of its Empire in which he argues that these were largely defined by the peripheries, the diaspora living away from the mother terrain, as they sought to stabilize their own identity grounded in a sense of social cohesion and underpinned with the supposition of racial superiority and the subsequent moral obligation to spread English civilization (32-3). In this context, London was at the centre, the capital of the Anglo-Saxon world, the hub of the comings and goings of Empire. Similarly, to illustrate this concept of nationality and the centre being defined by the diaspora, Benedict Anderson, in a chapter aptly titled 'Long Distance Nationalism,' gives the example of a young Massachusetts woman, Mary Rowlandson, who was abducted in 1675 for a short time by a group of local Algonquin and Narragansett warriors. She wrote of her experience:

I saw a place where English Cattle had been: that was a comfort to me, such as it was: quickly after that we came to an English Path, which so took with me, that I thought I could have freely lyen down and dyed. That day, a little after noon, we came to Squaukheag, where the Indians spread themselves over the deserted English Fields. (Qtd. in Anderson 60)

Anderson notes the irony of a young woman, who has spent her life in 'un-European Massachusetts' (61), seeing 'English Cattle,' an 'English Path,' and 'deserted English Fields.' He observes further: 'These are not pluckings from the Cotswolds or the

Downs – real places [...] but acts of imagination [...] They are, in a way, getting ready to be ‘English’ exactly because they are in Massachusetts, not in England [...]’ (61).

A nationalising moment such as this also occurs in Elisabeth Gaskell’s short story, *Lois the Witch*, published in 1859, and set in Salem, Massachusetts (in New England), at the time of the Salem witch trials in 1691-92, in which she records the instability of Salem’s Puritan society, and its fanatical hunting out and hanging of anyone suspected of witchcraft, culminating in the hanging of a defenceless and innocent English girl, Lois Barclay, who had travelled to New England to find sanctuary with her only remaining relatives after the deaths of her parents in England. From the outset of this story, a juxtaposition is set up between the newcomer, the *English* girl, Lois Barclay, and her New England relatives, particularly her aunt, Grace Hickson, who makes no secret of her antipathy towards England and her English niece, that ‘maiden from another land, who hath brought the errors of that land as a seed with her, even across the great ocean, and who is letting even now the little seeds shoot up into an evil tree, in which all unclean creatures may find shelter’ (LtW 330)<sup>1</sup>. This antipathy towards anything English changes, however, in a moment of extreme crisis, when the first ‘witch’ is arrested in Salem – significantly, an *Indian* woman (an example of Edward Said’s ‘oriental other’) – at which point Grace Hickson suddenly (re)aligns herself with her English forebears, referring to the ‘religious *English* household’ of each Puritan family (LtW 356, emphasis mine). Gaskell, then, foregrounds this powerful connection with England in a nationalizing moment of crisis, in which previous animosities become irrelevant and a connection to the centre is vital for identity and for survival in a harsh environment.

Despite Gaskell’s construction of these settlers’ sudden identification with their ‘mother country,’ she undermines their nationalising moment by raising questions for her largely English middle-class audience about the authenticity of these claims, by depicting this ‘English’ community in Salem as unstable and violent. A contrast between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ English societies is established already in the story’s first sentence which has Lois steadying herself on the rocking ship that is taking her ‘across from *Old* to *New* England’ (LtW 309, emphasis mine). Further, already in this

first sentence there is a hint that all is not well in 'new' England: Lois needs to steady herself on what ought to be stable land, whilst also observing that 'the aspect of the land was equally strange' (LtW 309). Later, this paragraph records that 'her heart sank a little' (LtW 309), adding to the foreshadowing that this move to 'New' England may not be a happy one for this English girl. Gaskell further juxtaposes these opening sentences of *Lois the Witch* with the landscape of 'old' England with its sweet-scented, peaceful, rural scenes such as 'the cottage covered with Austrian roses and yellow jessamine' (LtW 310) and 'the grassy Barford meadows' (LtW 310) in contrast to the dark green, foreboding forests that encircled the point of entry into 'New' England, Boston (LtW 309).

The instability of this new English society is developed further in this story by the narrator's juxtaposition of the English girl with 'the sweet young face' (LtW375) with her alien spiritual environment in which she is 'let down into the midst of the Puritan peculiarities [...] sufficient to make her feel very lonely and strange' (LtW315). That she is English is pointed out by the narrator no less than thirty times, who appears to be at pains to constantly remind the reader to not forget that this 'witch' is English (and Anglican, with a history that can be traced to the Church Fathers) and not American (and Puritan). The unfolding of the dark plot, complete with the increasing displays of madness by Grace Hickson's only son, Manasseh, supports the suggestion of instability of this new English society, climaxing in Lois being condemned as a witch.

This raises a pertinent question: why did Gaskell choose to portray an unstable 'English' diaspora? It is significant that, although by Gaskell's time there were many English communities around the world, the 'New' England set up in the seventeenth century by the Puritans was one of the first English colonies. It is possible, then, that Gaskell is setting up in the minds of her middle class, English audience that, already from the outset, the stable centre of English society was the 'Old' England, rather than the 'New' England of the diaspora, at least in its American format. While England may not be perfect, Gaskell has Lois say that 'this country [New England] is worse than ever England was' (LtW 351), suggesting that, despite their intentions, the diaspora did not necessarily construct a more enlightened English society, and

that the answers to the cultural challenges of nineteenth-century England would not necessarily be found away from England's shores. Gaskell, then, reaffirms the 'centre' in *Lois the Witch*, implying as she does so that, while the diaspora might identify with England, England does not necessarily identify with it but views it as potentially violent and unstable.

Gaskell similarly distances herself from England's imperial activities in a letter written in 1861 during the American Civil War to her American friend, Charles Eliot Norton, in which she engages in a conversation about the American situation, stating: 'I should have thought [...] that separating yourselves from the South was like getting rid of a diseased member [...]' (*Letters* 655). In doing so, she compares the severing of the American north from its southern states with British severing of its colonies, assuming that she, being 'average English,' provides a commonly-accepted perspective:

And yet you say in this letter 'I do not feel sure that under *any* circumstances the *right* of secession could or would have been allowed' &c[.] You will perhaps say that our great unwieldy British Empire coheres that the Roman did (sic) yes, but we do not come in frequent contact with our colonies, as you North and South do. People of {all} diametrically opposite opinions on many points may keep good friends if they are not brought into intimate daily communion. Doubtless a good quantity of grumbling goes on, both with just and unjust causes, at our antipodes, at our government of them; but we do not hear it 'hot and hot'. (*Besides I heartily wish our colonies would take to governing themselves, & sever the connexion with us in a comfortable friendly way.*) So that altogether I (average English) cannot understand how you (American) did not look forward to 'secession' [...] (*Letters* 655, emphasis mine).

Gaskell not only presents her view on the American Civil War, but reveals an aspect of Englishness that was popular opinion in England in the mid-nineteenth century. While the Australian colonies and New Zealand (England's 'antipodes') had self-government by the time that Gaskell wrote this letter, other colonies, such as Canada, were still under direct English control. Gaskell, then, tapped into a common perception of her period, that it was impossible to rule the settler colonies from the centre<sup>2</sup>. Gaskell's comment to Norton reveals that, while she viewed the Empire as an inescapable part of English life, in her opinion, she (and England) would be the happier without it, particularly if this severance could be effected in a 'comfortable

friendly way.'

There is another aspect, however, which I will explore in the remainder of this article, which concerns the publication dates of Gaskell's stories. In order to understand *Lois the Witch*, published in 1859, in which Gaskell reaffirms England as the 'centre' and implies that to be truly English one needed to live within the geographical boundaries of this centre, in England, it is helpful to look at an earlier story, *Mary Barton*, published in 1848, in which Gaskell shows she is far more sympathetic towards Britain's colonies by blurring the distinction between the landscapes of 'home' and 'periphery.' Perera observes that early nineteenth-century fictional works were primarily interested in place and that the location of the story operated to demarcate clear lines of what was 'non-British' or 'un-English' (35). She notes, too, the construction of a 'green and rural core, which serves as a touchstone of the truly 'English'' (35). *Mary Barton* begins with such a 'green and rural core' in its description of Green Heys Fields: 'There are some fields near Manchester, well known to the inhabitants as 'Green Heys Fields', through which runs a public footpath to a little village about two miles distant' (MB 5)<sup>3</sup>. In the mid-nineteenth century Green Heys fields were part of greater Manchester's rural landscape, situated south of the city beyond Chorlton-on-Medlock and consisting mainly of smaller farms<sup>4</sup>. Green Heys Fields was a scene with which the novel's middle class audience could identify; loathing Manchester's polluted factory air, the middle classes were nostalgic for England's green and rural core, evidenced, for example, in their residential migration away from the factories to the outskirts of Manchester. Gaskell feeds this nostalgia, writing of Green Heys Fields: '[...] there is a charm about them which [...] contrast [...] with the busy, bustling manufacturing town' (MB 5). Gaskell continues by describing the porch of the farmhouse which is part of this setting, and is 'covered by a rose-tree; [...] the little garden [...] crowded with a medley of old-fashioned herbs and flowers [...] roses, lavender, sage, balm (for tea), rosemary, pinks and wallflowers, onions and jessamine [...]' (MB 6). The description of this setting is reminiscent of the 'Old' England of *Lois the Witch* in which the parsonage is described as a 'cottage covered with Austrian roses and yellow jessamine' (LtW 310).

There is a contrast in *Mary Barton* that is similar to the contrast between 'Old' and 'New' England in *Lois the Witch*, in the nostalgic portrayal of a calm, former (rural) way of life and the interminable clatter of the present (urban, industrialised, working class) England. At the risk of reducing the complexities of these binaries, the point can be made that there is overlap between the differences posed between the 'old', stable, peaceful, rural, green England, and the 'new', unstable, England, be it in the American colonies or in working-class, industrial Manchester. Whilst Gaskell begins *Mary Barton* with the idyllic scenes described above - albeit with hints of social rupture in the discussion about the mysterious disappearance of Mrs Barton's sister, Esther - the rest of the novel is largely about the miseries of the working-classes. Gaskell hints in this, then, that, whilst Englishness is very much within the 'domestic space' of England, the instability of working-class existence creates a self/'Other' dichotomy within this space. The societal divisions within England itself thus render neat demarcations between England and its Empire to be at best problematic.

This overlap between the domestic (working class) space and the overseas Empire in *Mary Barton* is further reinforced in that this novel's account of working class life is sandwiched between two pastoral idylls. Not only does the first chapter begin with a green, rural scene, but the novel concludes with a similar scene, albeit this time in (colonial) Canada, where, unlike the dark and forbidding American forest in *Lois the Witch*, the landscape has been transformed into an English, rural scene. The setting of this final scene is described as follows: 'I see a long, low wooden house, with room enough and to spare. The old primeval trees are felled and gone for many a mile around; one alone remains to overshadow the gable-end of the cottage. There is a garden around the dwelling, and far beyond that stretches an orchard. The glory of an Indian summer is over all, making the heart leap at the sight of its gorgeous beauty' (MB 392). To some extent, the novel has come full circle, in which this latter description is not unlike the green, rural core of England. This is not, then, a new (refashioned) England, as was attempted by the Puritans in America in *Lois the Witch*, but an extension of the centre, the 'old' England, described by Perera as being in 'the same spatial relationship' (52). Various scholars, including

Diana Archibald, Angus Easson, and Stephen Gill, comment that Gaskell's original notes, which stated her plan to have Jem and Mary sail for America, may have indicated her intention to send them to the United States, but, as Archibald comments, 'it seems probable that she ultimately rejected the States as a destination, primarily because such a move would have taken Jem and Mary out of the British Empire, thus severing the bonds of loyalty to England itself' (36). Archibald cites a letter written to the editor of the *London Daily Telegraph* which recommended emigration to Canada for 'practical men who are now struggling at home [to] a country more like our own' (37). Thus, unlike the America described in *Lois the Witch*, in which the dark, untamed forest looms forebodingly, 'tangled into heavy darkness' (LtW 320), the English Canadian side of the North American continent is portrayed as domesticated, pre-industrial and full of optimism, warmth, beauty and light. This latter point concerning light is reinforced in the concluding section of this scene (and the novel), in which it is disclosed that the formerly blind Margaret Legh has been 'couched and can see as well as ever' and is about to move to Canada newly wedded (MB 393).

This emphasis on light provides an optimistic ending to *Mary Barton*, causing some scholars to be critical of this migration solution at the end of what is in many ways a dark novel, perceiving this to be more of a plot device than realistic<sup>5</sup>. As Perera points out, however, *Mary Barton* was written (and set) in the period of Chartist unrest<sup>6</sup> which coincided with a period of intense debate about migration (53). Thomas Carlyle, for example, influenced by Malthusian theories of overpopulation, wrote of filling 'a whole vacant Earth' (qtd. in Archibald 38). In this context, Carlyle wrote glowingly in *Chartism* (1840) of (working-class) emigration to Canada: 'Canadian forests stand unfelled [...] cry[ing] out to be settled by the Englishman' (qtd. in Archibald 39). Indeed, immigration to Canada solved not only problems at home but also in Canada. The Lord Durham Report of 1839, for example, observed ethnic issues in Canada between the English and French settlers. Assessing this within the racial discourse of his period, in Durham's view the French, having no history or culture within Canada, had failed to demonstrate the social and economic progress evident in the superior English race. The Report

subsequently recommended the mass migration of British settlers to Canada so that these would quickly outnumber the French component of the Canadian population. This subsequently occurred, particularly in the years leading up to the four Canadian provinces receiving responsible (self) government in 1848-49 when it was assumed that the ethnic issues between the English and the French had been resolved, in part because of the immigration project in the 1840s. This ending to *Mary Barton*, then, is not simply an easy way out of a conundrum of plot – what to do with Jem and Mary so that they live happily ever after – but is presenting a realistic solution to industrial issues of the mid-nineteenth century, in which England was extended to include settler colonies such as Canada, which in turn would welcome working class English settlers.

Like *Mary Barton*, Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* (published in 1863-64) also includes migration from England to Canada. Significantly, however, in this story Gaskell is far less sympathetic towards Canada, and places markers of separation between the centre and its periphery. Indeed, in *Cousin Phillis* the pastoral/industrial dichotomy is reversed, with the pastoral idyll being situated firmly within England's geographical boundaries, and industry existing in the context of building railways in Canada. This short story records the development of young, sexually innocent Phillis Holman, who lives a quiet life in a state of perpetual childhood with her protective parents, and who is introduced, through her cousin, Paul Manning, the story's narrator, to Edward Holdsworth, a railway engineer. The story records Holdsworth's wooing of Phillis, which is interrupted by the sudden summons by his employer to build a railway in Canada. Holdsworth leaves England without saying goodbye to Phillis or her family, but it is his (unspoken) intention to return to marry her. Phillis pines because of Holdsworth's absence, and only becomes aware of his love for her after Manning tells her, at which news she perceptibly blossoms, until she hears of Holdsworth's marriage in Canada to a French Canadian woman, Lucille Ventadour. Phillis has an emotional breakdown at this news, and only recovers because of the kind but blunt words of the family's old servant, Betty, after which the story quickly concludes with Phillis' plans to visit Manning's family, 'for a change of thought and scene' (CP 528)<sup>7</sup>, before returning 'to the peace of the old



days' (CP 528), of which she asserts, 'I can, and I will!' (CP 528).

Despite Phillis' confidence that she will revert back to the peace of former days, the English pastoral idyll in this short story is irrevocably broken, at least in part, by one of England's peripheries, Canada. In *Cousin Phillis* Gaskell presents a Canada quite unlike the one referred to above in the context of *Mary Barton*, 'a country [...] like our own [England]' (Archibald 37). A possible reason for this is that public attention in England on Canada had abated somewhat by the 1860s when Gaskell wrote *Cousin Phillis*. Whereas in 1840s, in the wake of the Durham Report and leading up to responsible government in the Canadian provinces by 1849, concerted attention was given to extending Englishness in Canada through mass migration, this drive for emigration had lessened by the time that *Cousin Phillis* was published in 1863-64, with the Quebec Conference (1864) laying in place what would become the Dominion of Canada in 1867, all four provinces peacefully severing, at least in part, from Britain in to a single country. In so doing, Canada moved on from being 'a country [...] like our own' to a country in its own right.

Changes in Canada's relationship with Britain, then, contributed to the differences in the ways that Canada is presented in Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, published in 1848 and set in 1837-1842, and one of her final stories *Cousin Phillis*, published fifteen years later in 1863-64. The shift between these two stories did not, however, take place only in the realm of English/Canadian social relations, but also reflect a shift in Gaskell's thinking about England in relation to its Empire at that time. That Gaskell constructed a green and rural core in England itself in *Cousin Phillis*, rather than in pre-industrial Canada as she had done in *Mary Barton*, positions England as the centre with Canada now being on the periphery. Canada is described in *Cousin Phillis* as being 'out there' (CP 500), 'an out-of-the-way place' (CP 505), and not as an extension of England as it had been in *Mary Barton*. Furthermore, the Englishman who moves to Canada, Holdsworth, is portrayed as being not quite English. He cuts his hair 'foreign fashion' (CP 47), this being attributed to his having lived in Italy for two years, a 'queer, outlandish place' (CP 464). After her first meeting with Holdsworth, Phillis remarks to Manning: 'I like an Englishman to look like an Englishman' (CP 479), the implication being that Holdsworth does not.

Additionally, but no less crucially, Holdsworth does not marry the English rose that Phillis is, but a foreign, French Canadian, Lucille Ventadour. Earlier, he had written appreciatively to Manning of the Ventadours' 'foreign element retained in their characters and manner of living' (CP 505). Thus, when the foreign-looking Edward Holdsworth marries the foreign Lucille Ventatour, Gaskell cuts him adrift. Additionally, 'since he can speak foreign tongues like anything,' it is implied that he will no doubt now speak his wife's foreign language rather than English (CP 516). Holdsworth does not fit Gaskell's sense of Englishness, and so she marries him off to (another) foreigner. Consequently, he does not extend England in Canada as Jem and Mary had done in *Mary Barton*, but his mixed marriage creates a hybrid, something new and un-English, in this settler colony.

On one level, it can be argued that since *Cousin Phillis* was published after Darwin's *Of the Origin of Species* (1859), this short story portrays an evolving, hybridizing Englishness, as Gaskell did, for example, in her depiction of Osborne Hamley's marriage in *Wives and Daughters* (1864-5) to a French woman. However, *Cousin Phillis* has an added dimension, that of un-Englishness occurring outside of England, in Canada. Further, in this context, Canada is not portrayed as a Utopian extension of England's borders, as in Gaskell's earlier novel, *Mary Barton*, but as foreign and 'out there'. Keeping in mind popular enthusiastic perceptions of Canada of this period, why might Gaskell distance England and its Empire by way of her references to Canada and her characterisation of Holdsworth, and what implications does this have on constructions of Englishness in this respect? In answering these questions, Gaskell's comment about the Empire in her letter to Charles Eliot Norton is significant. She writes that 'I heartily wish our colonies would take to governing themselves, & sever the connexion with us' (*Letters* 655), indicating her personal lack of enthusiasm for the Empire. Keeping in mind, Gaskell's optimistic portrayal of Canada in *Mary Barton*, it is pertinent to ask why this change of heart may have occurred. There are two main reasons, one political and one personal.

A crucial date - indeed, a nationalising moment not only in England's development concerning Empire but also in that of the Gaskells' lives personally is 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny (against the British East India Company), which

erupted as the result of years of pent-up frustration on the part of the Bengal army attached to the Company, and was precipitated by rumours that recently acquired Enfield muskets were greased with either pork or beef fat, this being religious and cultural anathema to Muslims and Hindus respectively. Written accounts of this conflict, which included stories of the sexual violation of British women, were widely circulated in England, and greeted with alarm by the English public. Uglow notes that Gaskell 'gulped down' (438) Harriet Matineau's *History of British India* (1857), one of the public sources of information of the (supposed) atrocities committed against British women and children in India. Once the British had regained control of the area, India was no longer recognised as a commercial outpost, but was reorganised under the British crown and became part of the British Empire. Young notes that 1857 marked the beginning of imperial rule where the varying elements of settler colonies and commercial outposts came under the central control from the imperial 'centre' (34). After 1857 there was tension in England between its expanding imperial enterprises and, due to the widespread publicity of the Indian Mutiny, an increased anxiety of the foreign elements of Empire (Rendall 118). Indeed, as noted by Antoinette Burton, the Indian Mutiny revealed a 'fragility of British imperial rule to a generation of Victorians for whom the power of the Raj had appeared untouchable' (215)<sup>8</sup>.

Gaskell, then, was affected by a darker side to the Empire. Such political concerns were exacerbated at the personal level since the Gaskells were linked to India through family and friends. That the Gaskells were not immune to the horrors of the Indian Mutiny is evidenced in the murder of their close friends, Colonel and Mrs Ewart, and their young daughter, in the Cawnpore massacre (*Letters* 468; Uglow 439). Additionally, they were linked with India via the Clive family, of which Sir Robert Clive, popularly known as 'Clive of India,' a key player in the founding of British India in the mid-eighteenth century, was distantly related to the Hollands, Gaskell's mother's family, as well as to Gaskell's husband, William (Clive's mother was a Gaskell). Gaskell refers in a letter to a friend to going to a lecture in Manchester in 1849 about Sir Robert Clive, in which she recounts some of the family lore surrounding Clive's youthful exploits (*Letters* 75-6). Notwithstanding these

family connections, however, Gaskell's knowledge of India was presumably in the realm of adventure tales of English exploits, fed by family lore and, additionally, by the mystery surrounding the unexplained death of her dearly-loved brother, John, a mariner, whose last letter to Gaskell in 1820 when she was ten was 'almost all about India [...] [a] long and highly coloured [epistle]' (Chapple 230). Gaskell herself wrote to her publisher (of *Cornhill Magazine*), George Smith, in 1857, that 'I never had a notion of India in any way, – I did not know there were three presidencies till about two months ago; and as for whether the natives are white (sic) green or blue I know nothing, so that we are now going to read and learn as much as we can' (*Letters* 462). The innocence in Gaskell's knowledge of India and hence of the Empire was ruptured when she, together with the English public, learned of the brutalities of the Indian Mutiny. The Empire was no longer merely exotic and the stuff of adventure stories. This was a factor in Gaskell becoming more insular in her notions of Englishness in relation to Empire, retreating into a safe English domestic space. Published after 1857, in which the green and rural core was well and truly back within English boundaries, *Cousin Phillis* was written in this context.

An additional personal connection to India in 1857 was the engagement in this same year of the Gaskells' second daughter, Meta, to Captain Charles Hill, an officer of the British Army, whose furlough was immediately recalled at the outbreak of tensions in India. This caused quite a flutter in the Gaskell household, and dilemmas such as whether to have an immediate wedding in England or a wedding the following year in Cairo, together with questions and details about visiting India, both by Meta and her parents. Additionally, the engagement itself was, as observed by Uglow, 'a shock to Elizabeth' and a source of bemusement to her friends (438). Altogether, as Gaskell wrote to George Smith, 'the engagement is a most anxious one' (*Letters* 463). What transpired, however, was not dissimilar to what Gaskell would include a number of years later in the plot of *Cousin Phillis*: once Meta's fiancé was away from England, and 'out there' in the Empire, Captain Hill proved to be as unreliable as Edward Holdsworth in *Cousin Phillis*, causing Meta to break off the engagement<sup>9</sup>.

There are further striking similarities between Meta Gaskell and Phillis

Holman. When Meta learned of Captain Hill's perfidies and consequently broke off the engagement, she went into a period of about two years of severe emotional decline, as Phillis was also to do in *Cousin Phillis*. Further, Meta never married but devoted her life to social work amongst the poor (Uglow 446), something that Gaskell initially planned for Phillis. In December 1863, Gaskell wrote to her publisher, George Smith, who was wanting to bring *Cousin Phillis* to a close, that she wanted to extend the plot by having it conclude 'years later' with (a still unmarried) Phillis who has buried herself in social work, nursing those with typhus fever, and 'making practical use of the knowledge learned from Holdsworth and, with the help of common labourers, levelling & draining the undrained village - a child (orphaned by fever) in her arms another plucking at her gown [...]' (*Further Letters* 259-60). It is significant that by 1863 when *Cousin Phillis* was published, Meta was almost twenty-seven and had by then had considerable experience in helping the poor during the Manchester cotton famine of 1861-1865 (Uglow 503). Further, much earlier, in 1854, Gaskell had encouraged Meta to train as a nurse when she turned 30 years of age (*Letters* 320). Whilst she never did do formal nursing training, Meta did nurse many of the working-class poor in Manchester, also of typhus, a disease that accompanied the overcrowding and poor sanitation of that period. Like the Phillis of the planned (but never executed) ending, Meta was much-loved in her community, evidenced in an issue of *The Daily Chronicle* that noted her death in 1913: 'Many Englishwomen of our time have earned wider fame, but few lived more remarkable or more fruitful lives than Miss M.E. Gaskell' (qtd. in [www.elizabethgaskellhouse.org/family](http://www.elizabethgaskellhouse.org/family)). Meta was the real-life embodiment of the Phillis that Gaskell wanted to create.

Notwithstanding that some of the over-lap between Meta and Phillis developed after the publishing of *Cousin Phillis*, the seeds of disaffection with the Empire were already sown by 1863, five years after the nationalising moments sparked by events surrounding the Indian Mutiny, which served to reinforce for Gaskell the instability and uncertainty of life in the Empire. These thoughts come together in *Cousin Phillis*, where England is depicted as the pastoral idyll and the Empire, in this case Canada, as the unpredictable realm out there, which, in turn, destabilizes the centre, England. Holdsworth, representing the Empire, is no longer

English, falling outside the boundaries of what constituted Englishness. Both in terms of public imagination and personal experience, the Empire had become unstable. England, on the other hand, at least by way of contrast, was not. While the diaspora may have defined itself in relation to the centre, England, particularly in moments of crisis, writers such as Gaskell demonstrate that this relationship was contested by the centre. Nationalising moments were experienced not only by the diaspora, but also by those living in the centre. The centre, too, was constructing its notions of Englishness, and, as Gaskell's writing demonstrates, these did not necessarily always include England's peripheries. By the 1860s, then, Gaskell constructed England as the stable centre and the Empire as unreliable at best, thus illustrating her wish expressed to Eliot Norton in 1861 that England and the Empire 'sever the connexion.'

#### WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. London: Verso: 1998.
- Archibald, Diana G. *Domesticity, Imperialism, and Emigration in the Victorian Novel*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.
- Baucom, Ian. *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Beer, Gillian. "Carlyle and Mary Barton: The Problems of Utterance." *1848: The Sociology of Literature*. Eds. Francis Barker et. al. Colchester: University of Essex, 1978.
- Bolt, Christine. *Victorian Attitudes to Race*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Burton, Antoinette. "New Narratives of Imperial Politics in the Nineteenth Century." *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. Ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Chapple, J.A.V. *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years*. Manchester: Manchester University

- Press, 1997.
- Easson, Angus. *Elizabeth Gaskell*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*. Eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966.
- *Further Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*. Eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Alan Shelston. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- *Mary Barton*. 1848. Ed. Stephen Gill. Harmondsworth: Penguin Group, 1970.
- *Wives and Daughters*. 1864-1866. London: Penguin Group, 1996.
- *Mary Barton*. 1848. London: Penguin Group, 2003.
- *Mary Barton*. 1848. Ed. Joanne Wilkes. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005.
- *Cranford & Selected Short Stories*. Ed. J.A.V. Chapple. London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006.
- Midgley, Clare. "Bringing the Empire Home: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790s- 1930s." *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. Ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Perera, Suvendrini. *Reaches of Empire: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Rendall, Jane. "The Condition of Women, Women's Writing and the Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain." *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. Ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Uglow, Jenny. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Young, Robert J.C. *The Idea of English Ethnicity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- <http://www.elizabethgaskellhouse.org/family.html> date cited 21/07/2010

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> All page references to *Lois the Witch* (LtW) are to the text of this short story found in *Cranford & Other Stories*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1998, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Young identifies that this thinking developed after the loss of the American colonies; he views 1776 as pivotal in the development of free trade and the federation of self-governing Anglo-Saxon communities (34).

<sup>3</sup> All page references to *Mary Barton* (MB) are to the Penguin Classics edition, ed. Macdonald Daly, London: Penguin Books, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Greenheys Lane, currently in Manchester's suburb of Hulme, is reminiscent of this (*Mary Barton*, Pickering and Chatto edition, n.9).

<sup>5</sup> Scholars critical of the 'migration solutions' of various mid-nineteenth century novels, including *Mary Barton*, include Gillian Beer and Raymond Williams. Beer writes about *Mary Barton*: "Escape, not transformation, is seen as the only true record of what currently is being performed in society [...] [Gaskell] doesn't pretend to have solved society, only her novel" (248).

<sup>6</sup> Chartism was a working-class labour movement (c1836-1850) which aimed to achieve social change through political intervention.

<sup>7</sup> All page references to *Cousin Phillis* (CP) are to the text of this story found in *Cranford & Other Stories*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1998, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Other historians who mark this shift in 1857 in the English public's views on the Empire include: Christine Bolt (1971), Sara Suleri (1992), and Claire Midgely (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Uglow notes that Walter Bagehot referred to 'both pecuniary laxity and systematic profligacy' in relation to Hill, and that another correspondent had mentioned 'amours and natural children'. The rumours that Meta had heard concerned Hills' gambling, not paying his debts, and untruthfulness concerning these allegations (Uglow 446).

© 2010 Veronica Hoyt & GRAAT