

# Elizabeth Gaskell

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell** (née Stevenson; 29 September 1810–12 November 1865), often referred to simply as **Mrs. Gaskell**, was an English novelist and short story writer during the Victorian

era. She is perhaps best known for her biography of Charlotte Brontë. Her novels offer a detailed portrait of the lives of many strata of society, including the very poor, and as such are of interest to social historians as well as lovers of



Elizabeth Gaskell, in the 1832 miniature by William John Thomson

literature. <sup>[1]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Early life
- 2 Married life and Plymouth Grove
- 3 Works
  - 3.1 Dialect usage
- 4 Publications
  - 4.1 Novels
  - 4.2 Collections
  - 4.3 Short stories (partial)
  - 4.4 Non-fiction
- 5 References
- 6 External links

## Early life

She was born **Elizabeth Stevenson** in 1810 at 93, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, which was then on the outskirts of London. Her mother, Eliza Holland, was from a prominent Midlands family that was well-connected with other Unitarian and prominent families like the Wedgwoods and the Darwins. She died in 1812 when Elizabeth was a baby. Elizabeth was one of eight children,

of whom only her and her brother John (born 1806) survived. John later went missing in 1827 on a voyage to India.

Her father, William Stevenson, a Unitarian minister and a writer, remarried after Elizabeth's mother died.

Much of Elizabeth's childhood was spent in Cheshire, where she lived with an aunt, Mrs Hannah Lumb, in Knutsford, a town she would later immortalise as *Cranford*. They lived in a large redbrick house, Heathwaite, on Heathside (now Gaskell Avenue), which faces the large open area of Knutsford Heath.

She also spent some time in Newcastle upon Tyne (with Rev. William Turner) and Edinburgh. Her stepmother was a sister of the Scottish miniature artist, William John Thomson, who painted a famous portrait of Elizabeth in 1832. In the same year, Elizabeth married William Gaskell, the minister at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel in Manchester, who had a literary career of his own. They honeymooned in North Wales, staying with Elizabeth's uncle,

Samuel Holland, who lived near Porthmadog.

## **Married life and Plymouth Grove**



Elizabeth Gaskell — from the  
1851 portrait by George  
Richmond

The Gaskells settled in Manchester, where the industrial surroundings would offer inspiration for her novels (in the industrial genre). They had several children: a stillborn daughter in 1833, followed by Marianne (1834),

Margaret Emily (1837), known as Meta,  
Florence Elizabeth (1842), William (1844-1845)

and Julia Bradford (1846). Her daughter Florence married a barrister, Charles Crompton, in 1862.

They rented a villa in Plymouth Grove in 1850, after the publication of Gaskell's first novel, and Gaskell lived in the house with her family until her death 15 years later.<sup>[2]</sup> All of Gaskell's books, bar one, were written at Plymouth Grove, while her husband held welfare committees and tutored the poor in his study. The circles in which the Gaskells moved included literary greats, religious dissenters and social reformers, including William and Mary Howitt. Visitors to Plymouth Grove included Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, Harriet Beecher Stowe and American writer Charles Eliot Norton, while conductor Charles Hallé lived close by, and taught the piano to one of Gaskell's four daughters. Close friend Charlotte Brontë is known to have stayed there three times, and on one occasion hid behind the drawing room curtains as she was too shy to meet Gaskell's visitors.<sup>[3]</sup>

Gaskell died in Holybourne, Hampshire in 1865 aged 55. The house on Plymouth Grove

remained in the Gaskell family until 1913.

## Works

Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, was published anonymously in 1848. The best known of her remaining novels are *Cranford* (1853), *North and South* (1854), and *Wives and Daughters* (1865). She became popular for her writing, especially her ghost story writing, aided by her friend Charles Dickens, who published her work in his magazine *Household Words*. Her ghost stories are quite distinct in style from her industrial fiction and belong to the Gothic fiction genre.

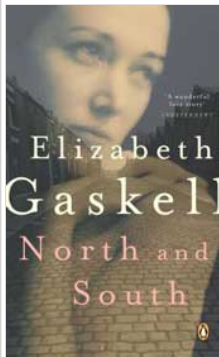
Even though her writing conforms to Victorian conventions (including signing her name "Mrs. Gaskell"), Gaskell usually frames her stories as critiques of contemporary attitudes, particularly those toward women, with complex narratives and dynamic female characters.<sup>[4]</sup>

In addition to her fiction, Gaskell also wrote the

first biography of Charlotte Brontë, which played a significant role in developing her fellow writer's reputation.

### **Dialect usage**

Gaskell's style is notable for putting local dialect words into the voice of middle-class characters and of the narrator; for example in *North and South*, Margaret Hale suggests *redding up* (tidying) the Bouchers' house and even offers jokingly to teach her mother words such as *knobstick* (strike-breaker).<sup>[5]</sup> Her husband collected Lancashire dialect, and Gaskell defended her use of dialect as expressing otherwise inexpressible



A cover of Gaskell's *North and South*

concepts in an 1854 letter to Walter Savage Landor:<sup>[5]</sup>

'...you will remember the country people's use of the word "unked". I can't find any other word to express the exact feeling of strange unusual desolate discomfort, and I sometimes "potter" and "mither" people by using it.'<sup>[6]</sup>

She used the dialect word "nesh" (soft)- which goes back to Old English - in chapter 1 of Mary Barton:

"Sit you down here: the grass is well nigh dry by this time; and you're neither of you nesh folk about taking cold"

and again in The Manchester Marriage [1858]:

"Now, I'm not above being nesh for other folks myself. I can stand a good blow, and never change colour; but, set me in the operating-room in the Infirmary, and I turn as sick as a girl."

"At Mrs Wilson's death, Norah came back to them, as nurse to the newly-born little



Edwin; into which post she was not installed without a pretty strong oration on the part of the proud and happy father; who declared that if he found out that Norah ever tried to screen the boy by a falsehood, or to make him nesh either in body or mind, she should go that very day." [7]

## **Publications**

### **Novels**

- *Mary Barton* (1848)
- *Cranford* (1851-3)
- *Ruth* (1853)
- *North and South* (1854-5)
- *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863)
- *Cousin Phillis* (1864)
- *Wives and Daughters: An Everyday Story* (1865)

### **Collections**

- *The Moorland Cottage* (1850)
- *The Old Nurse's Story* (1852)
- *Lizzie Leigh* (1855)

- *My Lady Ludlow* (1859)
- *Round the Sofa* (1859)
- *Lois the Witch* (1861)
- *A Dark Night's Work* (1863)

### **Short stories (partial)**

- *Christmas Storms and Sunshine* (1848)
- *The Squire's Story* (1853)
- *Half a Life-time Ago* (1855)
- *An Accursed Race* (1855)
- *The Manchester Marriage* (1858), a chapter of "A House to Let", co-written with Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Adelaide Anne Procter
- *The Half-brothers* (1859)
- *The Grey Woman* (1861)

### **Non-fiction**

- *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857)

## **References**

1. ^ [1] "Children in Early Victorian England: Infant Feeding in Literature and Society 1837-1857." *Tropical Pediatrics*

and Environmental Child Health August 1978

2. ^ Uglow J. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (Faber and Faber, 1993) (ISBN 0-571-20359-0)
3. ^ Nurden, Robert. 'An ending Dickens would have liked' *Independent* (26 March 2006)
4. ^ Excluding Reference to Gaskell's Ghost Stories, Abrams, M.H., et al. (Eds.) "Elizabeth Gaskell, 1810-1865." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, The Major Authors: The Romantic Period through the Twentieth Century*, 7th ed., Vol. B. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. ISBN 0-393-97304-2. DDC 820.8--dc21. LC PR1109.N6.
5. ^ <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> Ingham P. (1995) Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *North and South*
6. ^ Chapple JAV, Pollard A, eds. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. Mandolin (Manchester University Press), 1997
7. ^ Victorian Short Stories, Stories Of Successful Marriages, The Project Gutenberg

## External links

- The Gaskell Web
- Elizabeth Gaskell at Victorian Web
- Works by Elizabeth Gaskell at Project Gutenberg
- A history of 84 Plymouth Grove and pictures from now and then

Retrieved from

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Gaskell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Gaskell)"

Categories: English novelists | English biographers | English short story writers | Women novelists | People from Chelsea | Women of the Victorian era | 1810 births | 1865 deaths

---

- This page was last modified 08:42, 3 August 2007.
- All text is available under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License. (See **Copyrights** for details.)  
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a U.S. registered 501(c)(3) tax-deductible

nonprofit charity.