

Alligators infesting the stream: Elizabeth Gaskell and the USA¹

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Amongst Elizabeth Gaskell's many cultural enthusiasms was an interest in the life and literature of the United States, and in this article I shall focus both on her friendships with a number of prominent American contemporaries and on her very partial view of the United States itself. Then, as now, America both intrigued and puzzled English commentators: figures as diverse as Fanny Trollope, Dickens, Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde were to record their impressions of the United States through the century, often very critically. Gaskell's was a more sympathetic voice, and one which has so far been largely ignored in studies of the transatlantic relationship.²

In Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, she takes her heroine at a crucial point in the narrative to Liverpool, by train across Chat Moss. Mary has never made the journey before, and when she gets to Liverpool we are given a topographically accurate account of the city, and of her dash up the Mersey estuary where she has to seek out a vital witness in the court case against her lover who is on trial for murder. The witness in question is a merchant seaman, and about to sail for America. Later in the novel Mary must have repeated her train journey, since it concludes with her emigrating to Canada. Gaskell, for her part, often made that railway journey across Chat Moss but she never made the longer one across the Atlantic. 'We dare not ever hope to be sufficiently people at large with regard to time and money to go to America, easy and rapid as the passage has become', she wrote to John Pierpont, one of her earliest American correspondents, (*Further Letters*, p. 25) and her prophecy proved to be accurate. One of the themes of this paper will be the disparity between America as imagined by Gaskell, and Americans as she knew them. But she was intrigued by America - or more specifically the

United States (like her, I shall use the terms inter-changeably) - and she developed an extensive American acquaintance. It was this personal knowledge of Americans that fed her curiosity about their country.

My title quotation comes from a letter by Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton of February 1860. It expresses very precisely the difference for Gaskell between America as imagined, and Americans as understood. Describing the experiences of the English painter and feminist Barbara Leigh Smith, she writes:

She married two or three years ago a Dr Bodichon, of Algiers ... and they went for their honey-*year* to America, ... And in some wild luxuriant terrific part of Virginia? in a gorge full of rich rank tropical vegetation ... her husband keeping watch over her with loaded pistols because of the alligators infesting the stream. Well! that picture *did* look like my idea of America.³

The letter is typical of Gaskell, with its energy its enthusiasm, and its cheerfully amused tone. Norton, then in his early thirties, was a Harvard academic, a thinker and an appreciator of the arts later to become Professor of History of Art there. Gaskell knew him well enough to know that he would be unlikely to have handled a loaded pistol, while the chances of his ever having confronted an alligator were no greater than her own. But the joke is also at her own ignorance of a country that she had never visited: as she says to Norton in another letter of the same period:

I have no notion what America looks like, either in her cities or her country or, most of all mysterious, her forests. Sometime I dream I am in America, but it always looks like Rome, whh I *know* it is not. (*Letters*, p.597)

Gaskell chose as her pseudonym for her first stories the name of Cotton Mather Mills, and she published two of her earliest stories in *Sartain's Union Magazine*, a New York monthly.⁴ In several of her early fictions America figures as a place to which her characters, good or bad, can escape: thus the scapegrace Edward Brown in *The Moorland Cottage*, fleeing from the law, has ambitions to become become 'an American judge, with miles of cotton plantations.' Much

later, in 1859 at the time when she was corresponding with Norton, she published her one story with an exclusively American setting, *Lois the Witch*, a story of the Salem witch trials. A feature of the story is the threatening setting of the 'all mysterious' forest which surrounds Salem, concealing from the settlers the Indians along with other threatening forces of nature. Acquainted as she was with individual Americans, America itself remained an imagined location, speculatively conceived at best. Her letters to America are full of questions about what American experience is actually like, therefore - and admissions of her ignorance of the country itself.

The correspondence with Norton is the most substantial evidence of Gaskell's American connections, and it provides a record of a relationship on which both drew extensively. Jane Whitehill's edition of these letters, in that it reproduces Norton's letters as well, offers an intriguing insight into the relationship.⁵ The Norton letters have long been a staple of Gaskell scholarship, and the relationship with Norton is still capable of being misinterpreted, but they provide us with an entrée into Gaskell's affection for America. Norton was both a prominent member of the Boston cultural establishment and an intellectual Unitarian, who travelled extensively on the continent at a time - in the 1850s and 60s - when many moneyed Americans were beginning to do just this. This was when the sixteen-year old Henry James spent his first year in Europe, with his somewhat disorganised family.⁶ At the same period in time Gaskell was making frequent visits to Paris - it was there that she met William Wetmore Story, another American who was rapidly becoming Europeanised. Story set up as a sculptor in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome - thereby providing the inspiration for Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* - and it was in Rome, during the course of her three month visit to Italy in the Spring of 1857, that Gaskell moved into this artistic circle, and really got to know Norton. Not only did he introduce her to Rome and to its art treasures, he accompanied the Gaskell party back through Florence

and Venice to the French border. Henry James refers to her visit in his biography of Story as ‘a season the perfect felicity of which was to feed all her later time with fond memories, with renewed regrets and dreams.’ James supports his observation with a comment drawn from a letter to the Storys, which he must have seen referring to ‘those charming Roman days [in which] my life, at any rate, culminated ... My eyes fill with tears when I think of those days, and it is the same with all of us.’ (*Letters*, pp.476-77)⁷

The Norton correspondence identifies a number of interesting points. In the first place it still comes as a surprise to those who know Gaskell only by her Manchester fiction to find her in the company of such a different set of literary and artistic names. Gaskell wrote of Manchester that it was the place where the work ‘appointed’ for her and her husband lay but it is clear that she frequently longed to be away from the city. For her Manchester was identified with duty, but as she said, she also had a ‘taste for beauty and convenience’ and a need for ‘the refuge of the hidden world of Art’. Women, she said, ‘must give up living an artist’s life if home duties are to be paramount’, but in her case the emphasis increasingly came to focus on the ‘if’. (*Letters*, pps.139, 108) In Rome home duties were not paramount, and Norton could tell her all she needed to know about art. To Norton she wrote ‘I believe I *am* mediaeval and *un* Manchester and *un* American’ (*Letters*, p.492) but in that sense so too was Norton, art historian and translator of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, ‘*un* American.’ From this material, and from the new letters, we get a sense of a much more cosmopolitan figure than the Manchester author of *Mary Barton* might conventionally seem to be. Given the association with Norton there is something very appropriate about the fact that it was the young Henry James who wrote Gaskell’s obituary for the American periodical, *The Nation*, combining it with a review of the unfinished *Wives and Daughters*. The relationship between Gaskell and Norton was not exclusively unworldly, however, since they shared philanthropic and political

interests which come to the fore during the period of the cotton famine and the American Civil war. It would seem that in Norton Gaskell identified a figure who had been able in his own life to integrate the various aspects of her own personality which she could only see as divisive.

The friendship with Norton came towards the end of Gaskell's life. The letters reprinted in *Further Letters* provide evidence that Gaskell's American acquaintance was not confined to Norton. When Elizabeth Gaskell died in 1865, the Anglo-American journalist Edward Dicey wrote that 'She counted many Americans amongst her intimate friends, and her house at Manchester was visited by almost every American traveller who had letters from the New England literary community.'⁸ It is clear that the Gaskells had American contacts from her earliest days in Manchester, and the city was the source of Gaskell's American connections for several reasons. Not only did the cotton trade provide for extensive Anglo-American interaction but, because Liverpool was the entry port for the transatlantic crossing, you were more likely to find Americans in the North West than anywhere else in England. Many of these visiting Americans were Unitarians, and they naturally made their way to the home of William Gaskell, minister of Cross Street Chapel, which at a time of Manchester's increasing commercial prosperity was effectively the cathedral of northern Unitarianism. One of those visiting American Unitarians in 1847 was Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Gaskell was probably the author of a set of anonymous reports for *Howitt's Journal* of the three lectures 'On Men Representative of Great Ideas' that he gave at the Royal Institution. Emerson did not visit the Gaskells - as far as we know - but as Dicey says, 'her house at Manchester was visited by many visiting intellectuals' - it is interesting that by 1865 it is 'her house' since in the first instance it was William whom the American visitors came to see. This is clear in the letter to Pierpont, already cited. Here she is effectively writing on her husband's behalf, thanking Pierpont for a

volume of his poems he has sent, and enclosing a volume of William Gaskell's *Temperance Rhymes* in return. Pierpont was minister of Hollis Street Church in Boston and the gift was appropriate: Pierpont had fallen out with his own congregation over the issue of temperance, since he was an Abolitionist and many of them were brewers. He would seem to have visited the Gaskells during his visit to England in 1837 and made some impression. Mrs Gaskell says in her letter 'Though we are far separated from you, and may perhaps "see your face on earth no more", yet believe us, dear Sir, often to think of you, and feel for you with deep and respectful sympathy.' (*Further Letters*, p.24) It is perhaps fortunate - and probably was also for Pierpont - that Mrs Gaskell rather than her husband has taken over the correspondence. In *Cranford* the narrator, Margaret Smith, makes her own distinction between men's and women's letters when the narrator receives a letter from her father: 'My father's was just a man's letter; I mean it was very dull and gave no information beyond that he was well, that they had had a good deal of rain, that trade was stagnant and that there were many disagreeable rumours afloat.' (*CD*, p.119) In the course of her letter to Pierpont she fills him in on family details, and about a projected journey to the continent. It is at this point that she refers to the impossibility of her ever travelling to America. She continues: 'But *if* we ever should cross the great waters be assured we shall come to No 18 Essex Street and have a peep at one whom we so well recollect and whose conduct we so much honour.' (*Further Letters*, p.25) Distance can lend more than enchantment to the view - it lends also a sense of sadness and separation. Hence, incidentally, the re-working in Victorian painting of that traditional icon from Dutch painting of the young woman reading a letter: the letter invariably signifies not so much communication as absence. In this, as in other letters, it is because of the distance that separates her from her correspondent that we get so much detail about the Gaskells' own activities: they become like those circular letters that Americans themselves are so fond of at Christmas. But the reference

to the facility of the crossing in her letter to Pierpont is to the point. Gaskell is writing at the very moment when the first regular steam crossings of the Atlantic were under way. In the same year, 1841, Dickens made his first crossing to America, travelling from Liverpool, although in his case ease and rapidity would seem to have been comparative terms, since he left on January 2 and then blamed the weather for an uncomfortable trip in which poor Mrs Dickens nearly died. Dickens's hilariously critical account of American life in *Martin Chuzzlewit* came out of that visit, and in the novel Martin returns to find when he lands that Pecksniff is claiming credit for a great public building that he himself has designed. Given the situation and the date it must be a fictionalised version of Liverpool's St George's Hall. Increasingly though Atlantic crossings became the norm - from the English side an interesting case is Gaskell's friend John Ashton Nicholls, a young and idealistic Manchester business man, who travelled to the southern states in the late 1850s, and who shocked her by coming back and declaring himself a supporter of the southern states. When Nicholls died an early death in 1861 his mother published his letters from America as a memorial to him: they confirm the significance of American experience for the Manchester business community.⁹

As Elizabeth Gaskell became more famous, so the American connection grew. She also became increasingly interested in American literature: where Hawthorne was concerned she read and praised *The Scarlet Letter*, and she was intrigued by *The Marble Faun* which she knew under its American title of *Transformation*. (*The Marble Faun* is set in the Roman surroundings in which she had met Norton; it is also about a man compelled to commit murder, a theme Gaskell explored in *A Dark Night's Work* at about the same point in time.) We have no direct evidence but I suspect too that she read *The House of the Seven Gables* before she wrote *Cranford* - there seem to me very distinct similarities. *Lois the Witch* is certainly on Hawthorne territory. Given their geographical proximity - Hawthorne was American consul at Liverpool

in the 1850s and it is odd that we have no record of Gaskell having met Hawthorne himself. They had a mutual friend in the figure of the Liverpool Unitarian hymn-writer Henry Arthur Bright, who like John Ashton Nicholls, expressed reservation about the right of the Northern cause in the American Civil war. These Northern business men detested slavery, but as Free Trade liberals they were seduced by the Southern states' claims to states rights and independence. Hawthorne came to Manchester for the 1857 Art Treasures exhibition, to which Gaskell took several of her visitors but they failed to meet, and when he visited the Story house in Rome it was just too late for Gaskell's own Roman visit. As someone writing on very similar themes, but from a very different perspective, Hawthorne is thus both pivotal figure and significant absence. In the new letters there is a puzzling and rather curt letter to Bright, undated but probably of 1859, saying that she will not contribute to a testimonial to Hawthorne, presumably on his departure from England ('As I have not the least wish to join in a testimonial to Mr Hawthorne, [I] must therefore decline adding my name to the subscription list', *Further Letters* p.193). The tone is unusually curt - had offence been given, or taken? ¹⁰

In a number of her letters Gaskell refers to American publications: thus in a letter to another Bostonian American, Edward Everett Hale, she says 'I plunged into Madame Ossoli.' Madame Ossoli was the American feminist Margaret Fuller, who figures in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*. Gaskell was not normally sympathetic to the women's rights movement but on this occasion the work in question was not Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, but her account of her travels in Italy, then perhaps better known, and certainly safer ground, although it had made Italy an unsafe place for Fuller herself to be. In the same letter she reveals how wide her American acquaintance has become:

I can count the Americans I know on my fingers. Hales (to start with.) Mr & Mrs Bradford of Roxbury. Mr Theodore Parker. Mr Wight ... Mrs Chapman, Westons & Russell Sturgis, my dear Mrs Shaw, and Anna Shaw, Greens, Storys - a Mr Somebody ... whose name I never caught, a Mr Kennedy Southern State Slave-holder,

but I could not help but liking him. Mrs Twistleton, Miss Dwight. I like both these last extremely - and now you have before you every American I ever spoke to in my own life, except our Mr Channing - Oh and Mr & Mrs Lawrence...(Further Letters, p.166)

Twenty-three fingers apparently. Some of these she had met in Manchester, but rather more through her attendance at the salon of her Paris friend, Mme Mohl. They are all identified individually in *Further Letters* and what is important is that they include the names of a number of the Boston intelligentsia, that group that formed the subject of Van Wyck Brooks's study of mandarin Boston culture, *New England Indian Summer* (1940). The route taken by English travellers to the USA was dictated by the availability of travel in the country itself; in that they invariably stayed for some length of time they often travelled extensively internally. Nicholls, for example, like Dickens twenty years before him before him, took in both the east coast and the mid-west, notably St Louis, which he reached by river-boat. He also got to see both California and the deep south, both of which would have been difficult for Dickens. These traveller covered enormous distances, recognising perhaps that it might be their only chance. (In 1859 the first England cricket team to cross the Atlantic took in Quebec and Montreal, as well as the cities of the United States east coast.) But for Gaskell America, as defined by the Americans she knew, was essentially New England. Her list of acquaintance is certainly incomplete since there are many other American names in Gaskell's correspondence of this time. She had met or knew of members of the Lowell family, for example, and apparently Oliver Wendell Holmes, again Boston luminaries. It is through these people that she gets drawn into America itself and this is particularly the case when we come to the period of the Civil War. Gaskell knew a number of participants in the slavery struggle, including Harriet Beecher Stowe - 'short and American in her manner, but very true & simple & thoroughly unspoiled & unspoilable.' (*Letters*, p.237) She knew and corresponded with Abigail Adams, the wife of the American Ambassador in London at the time of the Civil War. More sadly - and

this was another Parisian connection - she knew Mrs Shaw, the mother of Robert Gould Shaw, a commander of the black regiment recruited in Boston, the 54th Massachusetts, to fight on the northern side. Shaw died at the head of his men at Charleston in 1863, and his Boston monument by Augustus Saint-Gaudens is one of the masterpieces of American commemorative sculpture. For Gaskell child death was the ultimate tragedy and she had experienced it herself. Her letters to Mrs Shaw reflect her own concerns as a mother - 'O! Dear friend, I know what it is to lose a child ... [but] ...I would rather be the mother of your dead son than the mother of any living man I know.' (*Letters*, p.710) She paid a more formal tribute in an article about Shaw which she wrote for *Macmillan's Magazine*.¹¹

The Civil War was a key moment in Gaskell's concern for America, not least since it impacted on the cotton industry, contributing substantially to the cotton famine of the early eighteen-sixties.. The letter to Hale in which she lists her American friendships is the first of a sequence to him at this time. Hale is an interesting figure in his own right. Another Unitarian minister, he also played a part in politics and he was the author of 'A Man Without a Country', something of a classic amongst American Civil War stories. He also wrote a book called *Ninety days Worth of Europe*, an account of his first visit to Europe, in which he seems to have met the Gaskells for the first time. 'Such an American-looking American', Gaskell calls him (*Letters*, p.663), he became what Gaskell was to call one of 'our dear Americans ..whose very step is music on the stair'. Like Norton, Hale effectively became an honorary member of the Gaskell family. In 1857 Gaskell sent him a copy of her newly published *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and in 1859 he spent Christmas with the Gaskells at Plymouth Grove. Again like Norton, he was some years younger than she was (Hale was born in 1822; Norton in 1827), and she used him as a familiar pen-friend and confidante, as with Norton writing to him about anxieties about her family, and about her own work. But the war overshadows everything. On

December 13 1861 she thanks Hale for a box of Christmas goodies, but this Christmas is threatened by the prospect of the war extending to involve England itself:

We are so grateful to you! ... Canvass back ducks! two barrels of apples, box of books, all come and come safely, and *gloated* upon in their separate ways ... Mr Gaskell ... carrying one off in his pocket to eat at odd hours ... Florence suddenly exclaimed 'Shall we send them all back if we go to war with America? You don't know what an incubus this threat of war with you is! I think of it almost the last thing at night, and the first in the morning' (*Further Letters*, 228-29)

(Canvass back ducks, incidentally, were an American delicacy: Nicholls describes eating them in his letters to his mother.)

The threat of the British being drawn into hostilities with the northern states arose because of English naval action against American shipping at the time of the blockade of the Southern ports. Furthermore Gaskell feared 'that the Emperor of the French is having *great* influence in your cabinet, wanting to foment the differences between Gt Britain and the US into a war, for *several* purposes of his own.' (*Further Letters*, p.229) Gaskell was quite clear about the right of the Northern side in the Civil War where the moral issue was concerned, although she too couldn't see the need for the war itself. Surely the southern states should be left to secede, as she writes to Norton in the course of a painstaking attempt to make sense of the situation for herself: 'We have a proverbial expression in Lancashire, "Good riddance of bad rubbish" that I think I should have applied to the Southern secessions.' (*Letters*, p.655) What she finds so threatening is that her friends might find themselves her enemies. But as she had done famously in the Preface to *Mary Barton* ('I know about nothing of Political Economy') she took refuge, if unconvincingly, in the proposition that the politics of it all were beyond her female comprehension: 'I wish I could understand American politics, which are *the* most complicated things I know' (*Further Letters*, p.222-3), she writes to Hale; and then to Norton, about a speech by the American Unitarian clergyman, William Henry Channing: '... it was so full of imagery and eagles, and stars & stripes that it was impossible, hungry as I was for

knowledge, to get any out of it.' (*Letters*, p.665)

In one of her last letters to Norton Gaskell expresses her shock at the news of Lincoln's assassination; 'Florence opened it [the newspaper], - & read out "Assassination of President Lincoln." My heart burnt within me with indignation & grief, - we could think of nothing else ... all night long we had only snatches of sleep, wakening up perpetually to a sense of a great shock & grief. *Every* one is feeling the same. I never knew so universal a feeling.' And then, 'Mr Mason says the assassins are not Southerners - of course this is only conjecture on his part.' (*Letters*, p.757) Those of us who remember what we were doing when President Kennedy was shot will be struck by the resonance of similarities in this reaction. But Gaskell herself died in 1865 - her last letter to America, again to Norton, lets him into the secret of the retirement house she was preparing for her husband, and is written just two months before her sudden death.

'America seems to me like the moon; I am sure it is somewhere, but quite untouchable in this mortal state', she wrote to Hale, and to Norton, in response to a gift of some American recipe books, '... many, many, thanks. We can't understand all the words used, - because, you see, *we* speak English.' (*Further Letters*, p.166; *Letters*, p.536) Understanding would only ever be partial. There was an aborted attempt, in 1861, to send her husband to the United States, but to her it remained a place of mystery. It was always in her mind, however, and her constructions of it played a part in her literary consciousness that has yet to be properly examined. What we can take from Gaskell's correspondence with her American friends is her warmth towards them, and her open-mindedness about the United States itself. As she wrote to Norton, 'a letter which is to cross the Atlantic ... ought to be full of great subjects, greatly treated. Instead of which I am first & foremost going to tell you where everybody is, and how I come to be all alone.' (*Letters*, p.638) Gaskell's letters to America often touched on 'great

subjects' but she was always happier with a more intimate mode of discourse. If one thinks of the more well-known figures in the history of nineteenth century Anglo-American relations the story tends to be one of Anglo-centric assumptions of superiority. Gaskell, as we know, never actually got there. Had she done so she might have been a more generous observer than many of those who did.

Notes

1. This is the first of two articles arising from work done by Professor Chapple and myself in the preparation of *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester UP 2000) Page references to this volume, identified as *Further Letters*, are given in the text. The second article, which will investigate the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's work in the United States, will be published in the next volume of *The Gaskell Society Journal*.
2. See, e.g. Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1995) where Gaskell merits a single passing reference, and that not to her American interests.
3. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed JAV Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966) p. 607. Further page references in the text are identified as *Letters*.
4. 'The Last Generation in England', forerunner of *Cranford*, (1849) and 'Martha Preston' (1850), later to appear in *Household Words*. Both stories were conceived as explanations to an American public of English provincial life.
5. *Letters of Mrs Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton, 1855-65*, ed Jane Whitehill (London: Oxford University Press, 1932; rpt Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim and New York, 1973). In this article I have quoted from the Chapple-Pollard text of the letters, not least because for all its good qualities, the Whitehill edition contains textual inaccuracies.
6. The James family came to Europe in 1855, settling in Paris as a base and staying until 1858.

Henry James's account of this experience is to be found in his first volume of autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913).

7. Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (1903, rpt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1957, 2 vols in 1, vol 1, 354-5)

8. Edward Dicey, unsigned review of *Wives and Daughters* in the *Nation*, 7 December 1865, reprinted in *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*, ed Angus Easson, London, Routledge, 1991, 518-19.

9. [Sarah Ashton Nicholls], *In Memoriam*. A selection of the letters of the late John Ashton Nicholls, F.R.A.S. &c. Edited by his mother. Printed for Private Circulation only. 1862. Nicholls was a Manchester free trader, an active philanthropist and a writer on economic issues. An account of his death in his thirty-sixth year is given by Gaskell, in a detailed letter to his travelling companion in the United States, John Rotherham. (*Further letters*, pp.203-05)

10. The literary relationship between Gaskell and Hawthorne has been extensively considered by Anne Henry Ehrenpreis, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal*, ed. C E Frazer Clarke, 1973, 89-119.

11. See Marianne McLeod Gilchrist, 'The Shaw family of Staten Island', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 9, 1995, pp1-12.

Cranford - and Sarah Orne Jewett

What we get from all this is an insight into the practicalities of publishing, and I think too an understanding of Gaskell's work in terms of the contexts of the Victorian and the American publishing industries. We need to ask ourselves why her work appealed as it did, on both sides of the Atlantic, and that leads us into questions about the reading of her work, in both senses of the terms - i.e its reading by those first readers, and the critical reading that we now give it. I want to conclude with a single example where our reading is perhaps illuminated by the reading of those first readers, and that is perhaps what is her most familiar text, i.e Cranford . I want to say something about the reception of that most English and provincial of all of her works in the United States, and to compare it with very similar works by one of its first readers, the American story-writer, Sarah Orne Jewett.

Cranford, let me say straight away, is a much mis-read English text. Remembered primarily as an exercise in genteel nostalgia, it is in fact a much tougher work than is ever allowed for. Without prejudice to its humour it was, when first published, a text very much of its time, and certainly not of a refined and decorous past. In its opening chapter the Captain is run down by a railway train when engrossed in Pickwick Papers, but it is Dickens who wins the day when the younger generation read A Christmas Carol in preference to Rasselas. Tennyson's poems are the current hot reading, perhaps in their edition of 1842. Cranford in fact is a gently but nonetheless precisely ironic study of the claims of a world of new literature and new communications on the elderly ladies of the village: their adjustment is a tribute to their capacity to adapt to the demands of the modern world. Above all, Cranford expresses precisely

the spirit of benevolent optimism that informed Dickens's Household Words project, and which had attracted him to her in the first place.

The publishing history of Cranford is an unusual one. Surprisingly the story from which it originated, 'The Last Generation in England', was first published in America, in Sartain's Union Magazine, in 1849 (by the agency of Mary Howitt), and not published in England in Gaskell's own lifetime. 'The Last Generation' contains reminiscences of life in an unnamed English village and it includes some of the incidents that Gaskell was to include in her early instalments of Cranford itself - the story of the cow dressed in a flannel waistcoat, and of the precious piece of lace that had to be emetically retrieved from the cat who had swallowed it. Cranford was published in New York by Harper's in 1853, the year of its first appearance in book form in England, and further impressions appeared in 1855 and 1864. But nothing could have prepared American readers for the flood of reprints of Cranford that appeared in their country after Gaskell's death and towards the end of the century. According to G De Witt Sanders's specialist (but incomplete) bibliography, there were twenty reprints of Cranford in the United States in the years between 1880 and 1900 alone, and that is not to mention dramatic adaptations, like Mary Barnard Horne's The Ladies of Cranford: Sketches of English Village Life Fifty Years Ago; in three acts, registered in Boston in 1899. In 1891, there were no less than eight separate reprints of Cranford, by seven different publishers.

In spite of its subsequent reputation Cranford was not originally one of Gaskell's more significant works, either in Britain or in America. Its meteoric rise in popularity at the turn of the century, on both sides of the Atlantic, reflects its reputation as the work it had by then become, the nostalgic reminiscence of an earlier and above all genteel provincial society,

whose customs and values were part of a distinctly un-urban England. The famous Macmillan edition of 1891, with its decorated binding, introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and its coy Hugh Thomson illustrations, which appeared simultaneous in England and in America, has a lot to answer for. But prior to that one of the earlier American readers of Cranford, of a generation just later than Gaskell herself, was the story-writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who was introduced to it by her mother. Jewett has a restricted output and never published a full-length novel, but both of her two main works, Deephaven, published in 1877 after its serialisation in The Atlantic Monthly, and the later and much finer Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) follow Cranford, in that they each consist of a chain of stories, narrated by an naive, but increasingly aware, female narrator, who tells of her experiences of living amongst remote provincial communities ruled over by elderly, and usually single or widowed women: ‘communities of the amazons’, exactly, to adopt Gaskell’s Cranford terminology. Gaskell’s first editor, AW Ward, noted in his Knutsford edition that if ‘Cranford can justly be regarded as having originated ... a new school of fiction, it is in America that this school has most notably flourished.’ (1904), and in fact this kind of fiction certainly had a vogue at the turn of the century in the US.

We are not simply arguing by analogy here: in Deephaven Jewett calls an early chapter ‘Deeplaven society’, just as Gaskell had called the first instalment of Cranford ‘Our Society at Cranford’, and in that chapter she herself makes direct comparisons between her own characters and those of Gaskell. In The Country of the Pointed Firs, she slips in the phrase ‘elegant ingenuity’ to describe the nature of local hospitality: it is a direct echo of Gaskell’s famous phrase ‘elegant economy’ in Cranford. But it is the more substantial similarities that matter: the process of the narrator not only recording her own responses to the increasingly admirable qualities of the apparently unremarkable old ladies but learning from them, the

apparently inconsequential links between the individual stories , which nevertheless operate within the context of very significant overall frameworks of time and place, and the emergence of genuine heroism on the part of the protagonists themselves: Miss Matty in Cranford, and in particular Mrs Almiry Todd in The Country of the Pointed Firs. Widow, herbalist, and receptacle and narrator of her community's oral history, Mrs Todd is one of the great creations of American short fiction, standing, just as Miss Matty does, on the borderline between sentimentalism and a much more powerful expression of human experience.

There is, however, a crucial difference. Like Gaskell - and this is the important point - Jewett was driven by her consciousness of cultural change. Looking back on Deephaven, she wrote that

The young writer of these Deephaven sketches was possessed by a dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one another, or learn to profit by their new relationship.

'Fear' is an emotion completely alien to the spirit of Cranford, where Gaskell takes it as axiomatic that townspeople and country people will ultimately understand each other: that is the implication of its ending, where if Miss Matty's economic difficulties are resolved by the deus ex machina of a returning long-lost brother, the city has much to learn from the village as the village from the city. But the villagers of Jewett's stories are in a much bleaker economic situation. The social optimism which was available to Gaskell was not so easily available to Jewett. The prosperity of the fishing communities of the New England coast, where she sets her stories, had gone irrecoverably, and the idea at least arguable in mid-Victorian Britain that the local community might be well-served by national economic progress was not so applicable in the New England instance. Van Wyck Brooks sees Jewett as the true descendant of Hawthorne: 'No one since Hawthorne', he says, 'had pictured this New England world with such freshness of feeling'. But there are much darker points of comparison. Earlier I mentioned Hawthorne's

The House of the Seven Gables. Published in England in 1852 while Gaskell was actually writing Cranford, it has a lot in common with Gaskell's work. Hawthorne's Salem can stand for Cranford as a country town by-passed by time; it is inhabited by old people who seem powerless against the forces of the new, and Hawthorne shares Gaskell's interest in the technological novelties of the time - in his case, the railroad, photography, popular journalism. What is so different is the attitude that Hawthorne takes to these new developments. New England history lies behind his story of the decline of the Pyncheon family: as Henry James says, 'The cold New England air breathes through his pages.' Brooks, in his analysis of the social sub-structure of new England literary culture wrote that 'The new civilization abounded in practical benefits, railroads and steamships and gas-light, telegraph-wires and friction machines, sewing-machines and reaping-machines and what not. Its disastrous results were apparent at once.' The result is that in Jewett's fiction, as in Hawthorne's, Gaskell's benevolent comedy is replaced by something much darker - a sense of isolation, of loss, and of the irretrievable passage of time. In Cranford, death comes early in the narrative; it is defeated by the traditional rituals of marriage and birth, celebrated by Mr Hoggins and by Miss Matty's servant. In Deephaven, and even more so in The Country of the Pointed Firs, Jewett's characters live increasingly in death's shadow. Furthermore her structures and her language reflect a symbolic dimension: in her seascapes we are in the world not of Victorian realism, but of Virginia Woolf, and the Eliot of The Dry Salvages. Thus, as the conclusion of The Country of the Pointed Firs:

The little town, with the tall masts of its disabled schooners in the inner bay, stood high above the flat sea for a few minutes then sank back into the uniformity of the coast, and became indistinguishable from the other towns that looked as if they were crumbled on the furzy-green stoniness of the shore ... Presently the wind began to blow, and we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape, and when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight. (The Country of the Pointed Firs, Ch

In the cold air of New England we have the origins of literary modernism.

Conclusion

I have drifted a long way from the alligators in the stream. Except that in 1897 there was one last American visitor to Plymouth Grove, and that was Sarah Orne Jewett, making her own pilgrimage. Gaskell, as she knew, was long since dead, and she was received by Meta Gaskell, and the other unmarried Gaskell daughter, Julia. What they talked of we don't know. But in fact what I have tried to do is examine a chapter in the history of Anglo-American literary relationships - albeit very incompletely, and to see where it is that the two cultures impinge on each other - and in what ways they are so remarkably different. Both societies were undergoing cultural transformations of a kind that their literatures record, and in particular in which the relation of the individual to larger social movements was urgently problematic. Gaskell, in her bien-pensant way, believed that she and her American friends could only learn from each other - hence all her repeated requests for information. But that, as she said in another context 'doesn't quite do.' 'America seems to me like the moon; I am sure it is somewhere, but quite untouchable in this mortal state', she wrote in one of her letters to Hale, and to Norton, in response to a gift of some American recipe books, 'Many many, thanks. We can't understand all the words used, - but then we speak English.' Understanding would only ever be partial. Gaskell never saw America - to her it remained a place of mystery. It was always in her mind, however, and her constructions of it played a part in her literary consciousness that has yet to be properly examined.

Introduction

Over the past two years I have been working, with John Chapple, on an edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's correspondence supplementary to the Pollard and Chapple edition of The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (1966). That edition established ECG as one of the great letter-writers of the Victorian period, and since it appeared some 300 letters by her have surfaced from libraries and private collections all over the world.

Gaskell, as I say, was a quite wonderful letter-writer - a better letter writer than a novelist perhaps, since the form came more naturally to her. She is witty, informative, always self-aware and commenting on her own performance, and since she had a very active life, and a very wide range of acquaintance, both domestic and public, the letters are a mine of information about middle-class mid-Victorian England. The new letters add considerably to what was in the original volume, and in important ways. Amongst them are letters to famous correspondents (Florence Nightingale, Rossetti, Jacob Grimm) as well as to friends and in particular there are letters that tell us far more than was in the 1966 edition about her activities as a professional novelist. There is a sequence to the French publisher Louis Hachette, for example, in which we see her becoming involved in arrangements for the translation of her work in France, and advising Hachette on what else might be suitable for translation. (She complains, on behalf of Charlotte Brontë about a mutilated version of Jane Eyre that has appeared, and she warns him off Wuthering Heights. Not as strongly as she does Wilkie Collins however - his new novel, Antonina, she describes as 'detestable'.) All this shows her to be much more actively involved in the fictional trade that we were previously aware of - it also confirms the cosmopolitan interests in her life.

Those interests extended across the Atlantic. We have always known that one of the key figures in Gaskell's later life was the American scholar Charles Eliot Norton. An edition of Gaskell's correspondence with Norton - with his side of the correspondence as well - was published as long ago as 1932, edited by Jane Whitehill. In the new letters there are further letters from Gaskell to Norton; furthermore there is a sequence to another correspondent, Edward Everett Hale, which show that Norton was not the only young American who figured prominently in her life. Within the letters themselves there is further evidence of her American acquaintance, and it seemd to me that the question of Gaskell's interest in America was something that was worth investigating.

This paper comes out of that then, but I have to confess that it is not so much a paper as a series of not very well connected reflections on its topic. Gaskell's interest in America is reflected in various ways. We have the simple biographical connections - her friendships and acquaintances, and that is where I shall start. We then have her publishing interests in America, recently demonstrated by a superb new bibliography of her nineteenth-century publishing history, by the American bibliographer Walter Smith. And then we have the literary dimension, reflected both in the presentation of America in her own works, and in the reception of her work in America. That perhaps is perhaps a separate issue altogether, but nevertheless is one that I can't put down. What I am offering then is a brief introduction to each of these topics - and as I say, I am very conscious that at the moment they do not hold together. In that sense this is very much a kite-flying paper. Perhaps, if there is any discussion, someone might be able to suggest how it might more usefully be put together.