

P R E L I M I N A R Y

MRS. GASKELL'S BIOGRAPHY

THERE have been few biographies that have secured a more widespread interest than the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Mrs. Gaskell. It has held a position of singular popularity for fifty years; and while biography after biography has come and gone, it still commands a place side by side with Boswell's *Johnson* and Lockhart's *Scott*, although in all essentials it is considerably inferior to these. There were obvious reasons for this success. Mrs. Gaskell was herself a popular novelist, who commanded a very wide audience, and *Cranford*, at least, has taken a place among the classics of our literature. She brought to bear upon the biography of Charlotte Brontë some of those literary gifts which had made the charm of her eight volumes of romance. And these gifts were employed upon a romance of real life, not less fascinating than any thing which imagination could have furnished. Charlotte Brontë's success as an author turned the eyes of the world upon her. Thackeray had sent her his *Vanity Fair* before he knew her name or sex. The precious volume lies before me—

With the grateful regards of Wm Thackeray.

July 18, 1858.

And Thackeray did not send many inscribed copies of his books even to successful authors. Speculation concerning the author of *Jane Eyre* was sufficiently rife during those

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seven sad years of literary renown to make a biography imperative when death came to Charlotte Brontë in 1855. All the world had heard something of the three marvellous sisters, daughters of a poor parson in Yorkshire, going one after another to their death with such melancholy swiftness, but leaving—two of them, at least—imperishable work behind them. The old blind father and the bereaved husband read the confused eulogy and criticism, sometimes with a sad pleasure at the praise, oftener with a sadder pain at the grotesque inaccuracy. Small wonder that it became impressed upon Mr. Brontë's mind that an authoritative biography was desirable. His son-in-law, Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls, who lived with him in the Haworth parsonage during the six weary years which succeeded Mrs. Nicholls's death, was not so readily won to the unveiling of his wife's inner life; and although we, who read Mrs. Gaskell's *Memoir*, have every reason to be thankful for Mr. Brontë's decision, peace of mind would undoubtedly have been more assured to Charlotte Brontë's surviving relatives had the most rigid silence been maintained. The book, when it appeared in 1857,¹ gave infinite pain to a number of people, including Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls; and Mrs. Gaskell's subsequent experiences had the effect of persuading her that all biographical literature was intolerable and undesirable. She would seem to have given instructions that no biography of herself should be written. Her daughters have respected that wish, and now that forty years have passed since her death we have no substantial record of one of the most fascinating women of her age. The loss to literature has been forcibly brought home to the present writer, who has in his possession a number of letters written by Mrs. Gaskell to numerous friends of Charlotte Brontë during

¹ Mrs. Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë must be read in the 'Haworth edition,' printed in 1900 by Smith, Elder and Co., in England, and by Harper Bros., in the United States. In this edition will be found sixty-five letters to her publisher, Mr. George Smith, and to his mother, that are not obtainable elsewhere.

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the progress of the biography. They serve, all of them, to impress one with the singular charm of the woman, her humanity and breadth of sympathy. They make us think better of Mrs. Gaskell, as Thackeray's letters to Mrs. Brookfield make us think better of the author of *Vanity Fair*.

Apart from these letters, a journey in the footsteps, as it were, of Mrs. Gaskell reveals to us the remarkable conscientiousness with which she set about her task. It would have been possible, with so much fame behind her, to have secured an equal success, and certainly an equal pecuniary reward, had she merely written a brief monograph with such material as was voluntarily placed in her hands. Mrs. Gaskell possessed a higher ideal of a biographer's duties. She spared no pains to find out the facts; she visited every spot associated with the name of Charlotte Brontë—Thornton, Haworth, Cowan Bridge, Birstall, Brussels—and she wrote countless letters to the friends of Charlotte Brontë's earlier days.

But why, it may be asked, was Mrs. Gaskell selected as biographer? The choice was made by Mr. Brontë, and it would have been difficult to have named any other practised writer with equal qualifications. When Mr. Brontë had once decided that there should be an authoritative biography—and he alone was active in the matter—there could be but little doubt upon whom the task would fall. Among all the friends whom fame had brought to Charlotte, Mrs. Gaskell stood prominent for her literary gifts and her large-hearted sympathy. She had made the acquaintance of Miss Brontë when the latter was on a visit to Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, in 1850; and a letter from Charlotte to her father, and others to Mr. W. S. Williams, which will be found in due chronological order, indicate the beginning of a friendship which was to leave so striking a record in literary history.

But the friendship, which commenced so late in Char-

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lotte Brontë's life, never reached the stage of downright intimacy. Of this there is abundant evidence in the biography; and Mrs. Gaskell was forced to rely upon the correspondence of older friends of Charlotte's. Mr. George Smith, the head of the firm of Smith and Elder, furnished some twenty letters. Mr. W. S. Williams, to whom is due the credit of 'discovering' the author of *Jane Eyre*, lent others; and another member of Messrs. Smith and Elder's staff, Mr. James Taylor, furnished half-a-dozen more; but the best help came from another quarter.

Of the two schoolfellows with whom Charlotte Brontë regularly corresponded from childhood till death, Mary Taylor and Ellen Nussey, the former had destroyed every letter; and thus it came about that by far the larger part of the correspondence in Mrs. Gaskell's biography was addressed to Miss Ellen Nussey, now as 'My dearest Nell,' now simply as 'E.' The unpublished correspondence in my hands, which refers to the biography, opens with a letter from Mrs. Gaskell to Miss Nussey, dated July 6th, 1855.¹ It relates how, in accordance with a request from Mr. Brontë, she had undertaken to write the work, and had been over to Haworth. There she had made the acquaintance of Mr. Nicholls for the first time. She told Mr. Brontë how much she felt the difficulty of the task she had undertaken. Nevertheless, she sincerely desired to make his daughter's character known to all who took deep interest in her writings. Both Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls agreed to help to the utmost, although Mrs. Gaskell was struck by the fact that it was Mr. Nicholls, and not Mr. Brontë, who was more intellectually alive to the attraction which such a book would have for the public. His feelings were opposed to any biography at all; but

¹ An earlier letter, dated June 16th, 1855, from Mr. Brontë to Mrs. Gaskell, begging her to undertake the biography of his daughter, is printed in the Haworth edition of the *Life*.

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he had yielded to Mr. Brontë's 'impetuous wish,' and he brought down all the materials he could find, in the shape of about a dozen letters. Mr. Nicholls, moreover, told Mrs. Gaskell that Miss Nussey was the person of all others to apply to; that she had been the friend of his wife ever since Charlotte was fifteen, and that he was writing to Miss Nussey to beg her to let Mrs Gaskell see some of the correspondence.

But here is Mr. Nicholls's actual letter, as well as earlier letters from and to Miss Nussey, which would seem to indicate that it was really a suggestion from that lady that produced the application to Mrs. Gaskell. She desired that some attempt should be made to furnish a biography of her friend—if only to set at rest, once and for all, the speculations of the gossiping community with whom Charlotte Brontë's personality was still shrouded in mystery.

TO REV. A. B. NICHOLLS

BROOKROYD, *June 6th*, 1855.

DEAR MR. NICHOLLS,—I have been much hurt and pained by the perusal of an article in *Sharpe* for this month, entitled 'A Few Words about *Jane Eyre*.' You will be certain to see the article, and I am sure both you and Mr. Brontë will feel acutely the misrepresentations and the malignant spirit which characterises it. Will you suffer the article to pass current without any refutations? The writer merits the contempt of silence, but there will be readers and believers. Shall such be left to imbibe a tissue of malignant falsehoods, or shall an attempt be made to do justice to one who so highly deserved justice, whose very name those who best knew her but speak with reverence and affection? Should not her aged father be defended from the reproach the writer coarsely attempts to bring upon him?

I wish Mrs. Gaskell, who is every way capable, would undertake a reply, and would give a sound castigation to the writer. Her personal acquaintance with Haworth, the Parsonage, and its inmates, fits her for the task, and if on other subjects she lacked

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information I would gladly supply her with facts sufficient to set aside much that is asserted, if you yourself are not provided with all the information that is needed on the subjects produced. Will you ask Mrs. Gaskell to undertake this just and honourable defence? I think she would do it gladly. She valued dear Charlotte, and such an act of friendship, performed with her ability and power, could only add to the laurels she has already won. I hope you and Mr. Brontë are well. My kind regards to both.—Believe me, yours sincerely,
 E. NUSSEY.

TO MISS ELLEN NUSSEY

HAWORTH, *June 11th*, 1855.

DEAR MISS NUSSEY,—We had not seen the article in *Sharpe*, and very possibly should not, if you had not directed our attention to it. We ordered a copy, and have now read the ‘Few Words about *Jane Eyre*.’ The writer has certainly made many mistakes, but apparently not from any unkind motive, as he professes to be an admirer of Charlotte’s works, pays a just tribute to her genius, and in common with thousands deploras her untimely death. His design seems rather to be to gratify the curiosity of the multitude in reference to one who had made such a sensation in the literary world. But even if the article had been of a less harmless character, we should not have felt inclined to take any notice of it, as by doing so we should have given it an importance which it would not otherwise have obtained. Charlotte herself would have acted thus; and her character stands too high to be injured by the statements in a magazine of small circulation and little influence—statements which the writer prefaces with the remark that he does not vouch for their accuracy. The many laudatory notices of Charlotte and her works which appeared since her death may well make us indifferent to the detractions of a few envious or malignant persons, as there ever will be such.

The remarks respecting Mr. Brontë excited in him only amusement—indeed, I have not seen him laugh as much for some months as he did while I was reading the article to him. We are both well in health, but lonely and desolate.

Mr. Brontë unites with me in kind regards.—Yours sincerely,
 A. B. NICHOLLS.

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TO MISS ELLEN NUSSEY

HAWORTH, *July 24th*, 1855.

DEAR MISS NUSSEY,—Some other erroneous notices of Charlotte having appeared, Mr. Brontë has deemed it advisable that some authentic statement should be put forth. He has therefore adopted your suggestion and applied to Mrs. Gaskell, who has undertaken to write a life of Charlotte. Mrs. Gaskell came over yesterday and spent a few hours with us. The greatest difficulty seems to be in obtaining materials to show the development of Charlotte's character. For this reason Mrs. Gaskell is anxious to see her letters, especially those of any early date. I think I understood you to say that you had some; if so, we should feel obliged by your letting us have any that you may think proper, not for publication, but merely to give the writer an insight into her mode of thought. Of course they will be returned after a little time.

I confess that the course most consonant with my own feelings would be to take no steps in the matter, but I do not think it right to offer any opposition to Mr. Brontë's wishes.

We have the same object in view, but should differ in our mode of proceeding. Mr. Brontë has not been very well. Excitement on Sunday (our Rush-bearing) and Mrs. Gaskell's visit yesterday have been rather much for him.—Believe me, sincerely yours,

A. B. NICHOLLS.

Mrs. Gaskell, however, wanted to make Miss Nussey's acquaintance, and asked if she might visit her; and added that she would also like to see Miss Wooler, Charlotte's schoolmistress, if that lady were still alive. To this letter Miss Nussey made the following reply:—

TO MRS. GASKELL, MANCHESTER

ILKLEY, *July 26th*, 1855.

MY DEAR MADAM,—Owing to my absence from home your letter has only just reached me. I had not heard of Mr. Brontë's request, but I am most heartily glad that he has made it. A letter from Mr. Nicholls was forwarded along with yours, which I opened first, and was thus prepared for your communication,

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the subject of which is of the deepest interest to me. I will do everything in my power to aid the righteous work you have undertaken, but I feel my powers very limited, and apprehend that you may experience some disappointment that I cannot contribute more largely the information which you desire. I possess a great many letters (for I have destroyed but a small portion of the correspondence), but I fear the early letters are not such as to unfold the character of the writer except in a few points. You perhaps may discover more than is apparent to me. You will read them with a purpose—I perused them only with interests of affection. I will immediately look over the correspondence, and I promise to let you see all that I can confide to your friendly custody. I regret that my absence from home should have made it impossible for me to have the pleasure of seeing you at Brookroyd at the time you propose. I am engaged to stay here till Monday week, and shall be happy to see you any day you name after that date, or, if more convenient to you to come Friday or Saturday in next week, I will gladly return in time to give you the meeting. I am staying with our school-mistress, Miss Wooler, in this place. I wish her very much to give me leave to ask you here, but she does not yield to my wishes; it would have been pleasanter to me to talk with you among these hills than sitting in my home and thinking of one who had so often been present there.—I am, my dear madam, yours sincerely,

ELLEN NUSSEY.

Mrs. Gaskell and Miss Nussey met, and the friendship which ensued was closed only by death; indeed one of the most beautiful letters in the collection in my hands is one signed ‘Meta Gaskell,’ and dated January 22, 1866. It tells in detail, with infinite tenderness and pathos, of her mother’s last moments.¹ That, however, was ten years later than the period with which we are concerned. In 1856 Mrs. Gaskell was energetically engaged upon a biography of her friend which should lack nothing of thoroughness, as she hoped. She claimed to have visited the scenes of all the incidents in Charlotte’s life, ‘the two little pieces

¹ ‘Mama’s last days,’ it runs, ‘had been full of loving thought and tender help for others. She was so sweet and dear and noble beyond words.’

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of private governess-ship excepted.’ She went one day with Mr. Smith to the Chapter Coffee-House, where the sisters first stayed in London. Another day she is in Yorkshire, where she makes the acquaintance of Miss Wooler, which permitted, as she said, ‘a more friendly manner of writing towards Charlotte Brontë’s old school-mistress.’ Again she is in Brussels, where Madame Héger refused to see her, although M. Héger was kind and communicative, ‘and very much indeed I both like and respect him.’ Her countless questions were exceedingly interesting. They covered many pages of note-paper. ‘Did Branwell Brontë know of the publication of *Jane Eyre*,’ she asks, ‘and how did he receive the news?’ Mrs. Gaskell was persuaded in her own mind that he had never known of its publication, and we shall presently see that she was right. Charlotte had distinctly informed her, she said, that Branwell was not in a fit condition at the time to be told. ‘Where did the girls get the books which they read so continually? Did Emily accompany Charlotte as a pupil when the latter went as a teacher to Roe Head? Why did not Branwell go to the Royal Academy in London to learn painting? Did Emily ever go out as a governess? What were Emily’s religious opinions? Did *she* ever make friends?’ Such were the questions which came quick and fast to Miss Nussey, and Miss Nussey fortunately kept her replies.

TO MRS. GASKELL, MANCHESTER

BROOKROYD, *October 22nd*, 1856.

MY DEAR MRS. GASKELL,—If you go to London pray try what may be done with regard to a portrait of dear Charlotte. It would greatly enhance the value and interest of the memoir, and be such a satisfaction to people to see something that would settle their ideas of the personal appearance of the dear departed one. It has been a surprise to every stranger, I think, that she was so gentle and lady-like to look upon.

Emily Brontë went to Roe Head as pupil when Charlotte

went as teacher; she stayed there but two months; she never settled, and was ill from nothing but home-sickness. Anne took her place and remained about two years. Emily was a teacher for one six months in a ladies' school in Halifax or the neighbourhood. I do not know whether it was conduct or want of finances that prevented Branwell from going to the Royal Academy. Probably there were impediments of both kinds.

I am afraid if you give me my name I shall feel a prominence in the book that I altogether shrink from. My very last wish would be to appear in the book more than is absolutely necessary. If it were possible, I would choose not to be known at all. It is my friend only that I care to see and recognise, though your framing and setting of the picture will very greatly enhance its value.—I am, my dear Mrs. Gaskell, yours very sincerely,

ELLEN NUSSEY.

The book was published in two volumes, under the title of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in the spring of 1857. At first all was well. Mr. Brontë's earliest acknowledgment of the book was one of approbation. Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth expressed the hope that Mr. Nicholls would 'rejoice that his wife would be known as a Christian heroine who could bear her cross with the firmness of a martyr saint.' Canon Kingsley wrote a charming letter to Mrs. Gaskell, published in his *Life*, and more than once reprinted since.

'Let me renew our long interrupted acquaintance,' he writes from St. Leonard's, under date May 14th, 1857, 'by complimenting you on poor Miss Brontë's *Life*. You have had a delicate and a great work to do, and you have done it admirably. Be sure that the book will do good. It will shame literary people into some stronger belief that a simple, virtuous, practical home life is consistent with high imaginative genius; and it will shame, too, the prudery of a not over-cleanly though carefully white-washed age, into believing that purity is now (as in all ages till now) quite compatible with the knowledge of evil. I confess that the book has made me ashamed of myself. *Jane Eyre* I hardly looked into, very seldom reading a