PUBLISHING WITH DICKENS: GASKELL AND *HOUSEHOLD WORDS*

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On 31 January 1850 Charles Dickens wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell announcing his intention of starting 'a new, cheap weekly journal of general literature'. This was to be the already advertised 'new weekly miscellany of general literature' which was to take the title *Household Words*. Dickens wanted Gaskell to be a major contributor to his journal because, as he told her, 'there is no living English writer whose aid I would in preference to the author of Mary Barton'. Her novel, he added, had 'most profoundly affected and impressed' him. The purpose of his journal was also related to what Gaskell had achieved in her first novel for it was aimed at 'raising up those that are down, and the general improvement of our social condition'. What Dickens wanted of his prospective contributor was 'reflection or observation in respect of the life around you', and that we can assume meant something of a continuation of the line which we have now come to call 'Condition of England fiction'.

Five days later Dickens described to Angela Burdett-Coutts the social stress he hoped that his new journal would carry, placing a particular emphasis on one of Miss Burdett-Coutts's causes, that of the 'fallen woman' and the 'rescue' of London prostitutes. It was, he thought, a subject that was difficult to approach, in pages that are intended for readers of all classes and all ages of life', but it was one which might 'be brought into the

consideration' of those readers 'gently'. Dickens interestingly seems here to be anticipating the subject of *Lizzie Leigh*, which was to appear in the first three issues of *Household Words*, and indeed to be thinking ahead to an important aspect of the plot of *David Copperfield*. On 5 February 1850 Dickens wrote again to Elizabeth Gaskell delightedly acknowledging her acceptance of his invitation to write for his journal. She had proposed a short tale to him but was concerned about her expansiveness or what she referred to as her 'tendency to detail'. Dickens was reassuring: 'Where detail is an indispensable part of the art and the reality of what is written (as it decidedly is in your case) can not be an objection or impediment to any kind of fiction.' She was paid £20 for her contribution (much to her surprise) and she (perhaps to ours) promptly handed the money over to her husband, William. He in turn passed some of it on to her refuge for girls.

What these initial approaches, negotiations and considerations suggest to us is that the editorial relationship between Dickens and Gaskell was cordial, but that had in it from the very beginning the seeds of friction. Both were experienced writers, but Dickens was used to serialization whereas Gaskell was not. She was also a very determined writer who did not take kindly to interference. *Lizzie Leigh* proved to be a long story and it had to be published in three parts over a three week period (30 March - 13 April 1850). It helped launch *Household Words* successfully and the first episode of the story took pride of place at the beginning of the issue, immediately after Dickens's own 'mission statement', his largely optimistic 'Preliminary Word'. It suited the general tone of the issue well, reflecting many of its socially charged articles and fitting well into the context of the journal as a whole, Gaskell had judged this tone adeptly. She was to write regularly for the magazine throughout 1850, though as the issues progressed their overall tone became darker as Dickens became more evidently depressed by the state of the nation around him. The issue for November 16 opens with the essay

'Views of the Country' which opens with the challenging sentence 'Will you be saved or ruined ?'.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that Gaskell's most memorable contribution to the early issues of *Household Words* should be the benignly comic stories which were to be collected as *Cranford* (published between 13 December 1851 and 21 May 1853). Dickens professed himself delighted with the first story, again having given it pride of place on the opening pages of the 13 December number, and having made the minimal alteration of a reference to his own *Pickwick Papers* in the account of Captain Brown's reading matter during his fatal wait at Cranford station to an alternative mention of *Hood's Own*. He hoped, he told her, that the substitution 'will not be any serious drawback to the paper, in any eyes but yours. I would do anything rather than cause you a minute's vexation arising out of what has given me so much pleasure.' It may have appeared a modest enough gesture on his part to remove a reference to his own work, but it may also suggest that Dickens was disturbed at the idea of his own novel being an incidental cause of a fatal accident ! Nevertheless, 'Our Society at Cranford' took up no less that nine and three quarter pages of a twenty three page issue . The second story, 'A Love-affair at Cranford' (3 January 1852), continued this domination of the pages of *Household Words* (eight and three quarter pages), though Dickens who professed himself to be 'touched in the tenderest and most delicate manner' provided the title. 'Memory at Cranford' did not appear until 13 March 1852, again forming the largest single element in the issue that contained it ,as did the fourth episode 'Visiting at Cranford' (3 April). There was, however, to a long delay before the next episode was published. On 1 December an anxious Dickens wrote to Gaskell by simply asking: 'Cranford ???'. The three question marks said it all. What he finally received was the heftiest piece so far and he was obliged to publish 'The Great Cranford Panic' in two separate issues of 8 January and 15 January

1853 (the first number also contained the famous section of Dickens's *A Child's History of England* describing his distaste for the odious Henry VIII). There followed another long delay. 'Stopped Payment at Cranford' appeared on 2 April; 'Friends in need at Cranford' on 7 May and finally 'A Happy Return at Cranford' on 21 May. These three episodes were accompanied by much the same material that readers had come to expect of Dickens's editorial policies. There was a great deal of social urgency, an element of social gloom and a noticeable absence of the early optimism that had marked the launch of the magazine. It is remarkable therefore that *Cranford* had proved so acceptable to editor and readers alike. Perhaps it was its very difference, its delicacy and its lightness of touch that made it so.

There were to be many other short contributions to *Household Words* before Gaskell began work on *North and South* for Dickens. She had proposed a subject which was firmed up by early February 1855, but the real trouble lay now in the fact that she was writing a full-scale novel rather than a series of episodes or self-contained short stories. Gaskell was simply not used to serialization and especially to the kind of weekly serialization that required concision. Dickens insisted that she was not to worry about dividing the story up, and offered to do much of the work himself, but this was to prove a recipe for disaster. The experienced editor in him was rapidly to emerge also as the interfering editor, and Gaskell came to resent the interference. *North and South* (his title) had begun as 'an admirable story ... full of character and power' and with 'a strongly suspended interest in it'. By mid-June 1854 he had been given enough material for the first six weeks of serialization, but the crux came early on in Dickens's response to the dialogue in which Mr Hale attempts to describe to Margaret something of the nature of his religious difficulties. Dickens explained himself bluntly far more bluntly and forthrightly than did Mr Hale: 'The dialogue is long -- and

on a difficult and dangerous subject -- and where, to bring the murder out at once, I think there is a necessity for fusing two numbers into one'. The problem did not go away. He fussed and she delayed, evidently in the hope that he would give way to her. The serialization of the novel was announced in *Household Words* on 19 August. Nevertheless, two days later Dickens expressed himself 'alarmed by the quantity of North and South' and though 'it is not objectionable for a beginning' this 'quantity' might become objectionable 'in the progress of a not compactly written and artfully devised story'. He was evidently drawing parallels with his own *Hard Times*. Gaskell was, however, not for turning and Dickens fretted more. He told his deputy, Wills, that is was 'perfectly plain' that 'if we put in more every week of North and South than we did of Hard Times, we shall ruin Household Words'. Adding that 'it must at all hazards be kept down'. On 24 August he pressed Gaskell for the return of the proofs containing (he hoped) the cuts he desired, but again she appears to have been unmoved by his pressure and she eventually won. The relationship between the two novelists had become strained briefly, but it was still firmly based on mutual respect and admiration. Although she had initially assumed that the serialization of *North and South* would be in twenty-two weekly parts, Dickens had wanted it to appear over a mere twenty numbers. He was forced to give way to her. Nevertheless, by December 1854 and the penultimate instalment of the novel. She was sufficiently chastened to write to Dickens with 'what you will think too large a batch' and requesting him to 'shorten as you think best'. He was chastened too and, by the end of the serialization, was happy to blame anybody (and especially his printers) rather than his prized contributor for the length of the novel. On 27 January 1855 he wrote to congratulate her on the conclusion of the story, not from editorial relief on his part, but because, as he said 'it is the end of a task to which you have conceived a dislike' and even more so 'because it is the vigorous and powerful accomplishment of our anxious labour. It seems to me that you have felt the ground

thoroughly firm under your feet, and have strided on with a force and purpose that MUST now give you pleasure'.

Gaskell's relationship with Dickens as a serial editor was thus at once cordial and fraught. Although it has long been obvious that *North and South* stands in some symbiotic relationship with *Hard Times*, we ought now also to recognize that it also stands in relationship to the editorial style of its initial vehicle, *Household Words*. *Cranford* worked against the grain of the journal; *North and South* with it. But whereas the former found a ready reception from a happy and a acquiescent editor, the latter was met with a more demanding set of requests and demands. That Gaskell won her ground on the issue of the integrity of her text is tribute to her authorial integrity too. In the end, and perhaps only in the end, Dickens realized the quality of the material he himself had commissioned of her. And both authors were ultimately justified.