



E. C. Gaskell

**Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life
By Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810-1865)**



Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life

"Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life" was Mrs. Gaskell's first full-length novel. It was published anonymously in that tumultuous year of political change, 1848 - only a few months after the Communist Manifesto co-authored by her fellow Manchester-resident, Friedrich Engels. Engels's experience as agent in his father's cotton-spinning factory motivated him to write "The Condition of the Working Class in England", a classic account of the sufferings of the poor under the factory-system.

Elizabeth Gaskell's own personal contact with the plight of the poor cotton workers of Lancashire also compelled her to a compassionate examination of their lives; but as a middle-class woman, married to a Unitarian minister, her approach to her subject took on a more emotionally complex significance; influenced by religious faith but also by more personal considerations.

In the brief preface to the novel, Mrs. Gaskell hints at her initial impulse. The loss of a beloved child in infancy led her to seek a therapeutic outlet, but one which left her uncertain of her capacity to contextualize her public, writerly response to the tragedies occurring in the surrounding society of Manchester's poorest classes: "I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade..." She was, however, determined to portray, in novelistic form, the intimate connection between the private experience of her characters and the social forces of her time. The success of the novel led her to proclaim her authorship and move on to further works of fiction, which have secured her in our times a mounting reputation as one of the leading novelists of the mid-Victorian period.

Read by Tony Foster. Total running time: 15:40:56. Book coordinator: Tony Foster. Meta coordinator: Bev J Stevens. Proof listener: Martin Geeson.

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