

Abstract

The contention of this thesis is that in order to do justice to Elizabeth Gaskell's early novels *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853) a thorough knowledge of the social and religious background is crucial. A detailed examination of the Manchester that Gaskell experienced, bringing out both its dismal and glorious sides, draws largely on contemporary material such as Parliamentary Reports and relatively unknown local publications. While an outline of the growth of Dissent in Lancashire and the alienation of the working classes from the churches attempts to explain the increasing rift between the rich and the poor, a study of Unitarianism, the Rev. William Gaskell's writings and Elizabeth Gaskell's social work, tries to furnish a fuller picture of their religious and social ideas than we have hitherto possessed. It is against this background that the two novels are analysed. New evidence shows that for the composition of *Mary Barton* Gaskell drew directly on Unitarian documents—the *Reports of the Ministry to the Poor, in Manchester*. The examination of *Ruth* is preceded by a survey of prostitution, the double moral standard and dressmaking, subjects intimately connected with this "fallen woman" novel. The last chapter aims at providing a literary context for the novels, demonstrating why they made a stronger impact on contemporary England than their predecessors. Based on the above background studies, the analyses of *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* set out to show that Elizabeth Gaskell's message to her readers was nothing less than a religious challenge to a nation that called itself Christian.