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978-1-108-05720-2 - Mrs Gaskell: Haunts, Homes, and Stories

Esther Alice Chadwick

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MRS. GASKELL

HAUNTS, HOMES AND STORIES

CHAPTER I

BIRTH, PARENTAGE, AND ANCESTRY

ELIZABETH CLEGHORN STEVENSON, a Londoner by Birth—James Cleghorn—The Stevensons of Norwegian Descent—Love of the Sea—Rev. Joseph Stevenson, S.J.—The Novelist's Father, William Stevenson—His Literary Tastes—Retires from the Ministry—Scientific Farming and Marriage—He Settles in Edinburgh—Contributes to Magazines—Editor of the *Scots Magazine*—Sir Henry Holland—William Stevenson appointed Keeper to the Treasury Records—The Hollands of Sandlebridge—Some of Mrs. Gaskell's Relatives.

"THOUGH a Londoner by birth, I was early motherless, and taken when only a year old to my dear *adopted native* town, Knutsford," wrote Mrs. Gaskell in 1838. She was always proud of being a native of the Metropolis, although she only lived there for a very short time after her birth in 1810, and for a period of two years before her father died in 1829.

Mrs. Gaskell was born in Chelsea, in a house in Lindsey Row, now known as 93 Cheyne Walk, on the banks of the Thames opposite Battersea Bridge. Here Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson—to give her full maiden name—first saw the light on Michaelmas Day, September 29th, 1810.

She was the eighth child of William Stevenson by his first marriage. Her mother was Elizabeth Holland, fourth daughter of Samuel Holland, farmer and land agent of Sandlebridge, Cheshire. At the time of his daughter's birth, William Stevenson was the keeper of the Records at the Treasury Office.

Mrs. Gaskell received her first name from her mother, who died a year after the birth of her famous daughter, and her second name was given on account of the close friendship existing between William Stevenson and James Cleghorn of Dunse, in Berwickshire. It was James Cleghorn who fostered Stevenson's love of agriculture, for he was a farmer who

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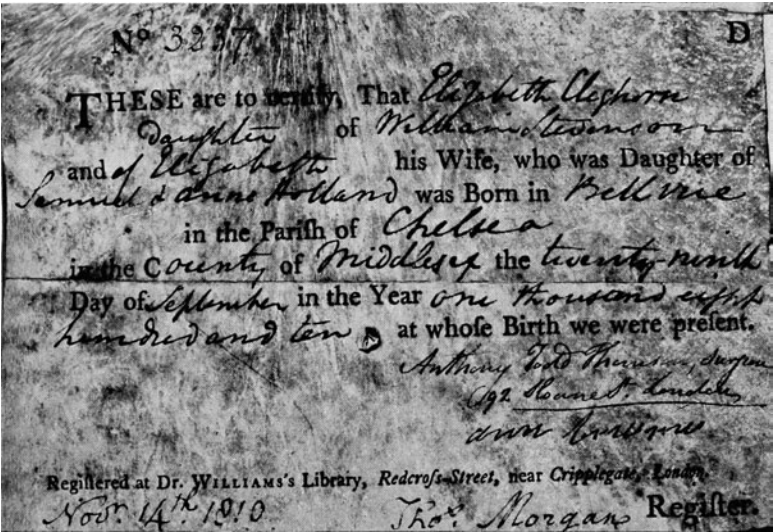
worked on scientific lines, and, like William Stevenson, wrote articles, based on his own practical experience, for the agricultural magazines.

James Cleghorn contributed to the *Scots Magazine*, of which William Stevenson was editor, and in 1811 he became editor of *The Farmer's Journal*. The article on agriculture, in the seventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, was written by him.

According to tradition, the Stevensons were of Norwegian descent, and in some of the family papers the name is spelt *Stevensen*. Mrs. Gaskell's father, in many ways a remarkable man, belonged to a distinguished Border family. He was born at Berwick-on-Tweed on November 26th, 1772. His father was a captain in the Royal Navy, and one of his brothers also became a sailor, whilst in later days his son John, born some twelve years before his daughter Elizabeth, showed the strong inclination for the sea which characterised the Stevenson family, and became a lieutenant in the Merchant Service. In 1827 he mysteriously disappeared from his ship when in port at Calcutta, and he is held in remembrance in Mrs. Gaskell's stories as Poor Peter in *Cranford* and Master Frederick in *North and South*, and he probably suggested the strange article on *Disappearances*, which she wrote in 1851 for *Household Words*.

A nephew of William Stevenson, Father Joseph Stevenson, S.J., was the distinguished historian and archivist. He was the son of Robert Stevenson, of Berwick-on-Tweed. After attending a school at Durham, he entered the Glasgow University and determined to enter the Presbyterian ministry, but turned aside to antiquarian and literary pursuits. Then, after holding appointments connected with the keeping of the Public Records, he joined the Church of England, and entered Durham University to prepare himself for the ministry. Some years later he was received into the Roman Catholic Church. In 1872 he obtained a pension for his historical researches. He died in 1895, and was buried at St. Thomas' Church, Fulham. As a writer, his historical research, like that of his uncle, William Stevenson, was characterised by the amount of industry which it revealed, and the authentic information which he collected was a valuable addition to English literature.

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ORIGINAL BIRTH CERTIFICATE OF ELIZABETH CLEGHORN STEVENSON

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WILLIAM STEVENSON

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William Stevenson's mother was Isabella Thomson, who was related to the well-known author of *The Seasons*. Thus Mrs. Gaskell could claim kindred on her father's side with writers and *littérateurs*, and, if heredity is to count for anything, her father was responsible for her love of historical research, which is revealed in many of her stories.

In his early days, William Stevenson was a pupil at the local Grammar School at Berwick-on-Tweed under Joseph Romney. He was not noted as a boy for his love of study, for in a letter to Captain Stevenson, whose ship was stationed near Cork, his mother writes :

"The children are all very well and give me no trouble, except William, who hardly ever attends school, and is constantly running about the walls."

But, as he grew older, William developed a love of learning, which he retained all through his subsequent life ; whilst at college he preferred books to sports, and his favourite recreation was walking. This he kept up in his Chelsea days, enjoying the walk from Lindsey Row to the Treasury Office and back each day.

Towards the end of his schooldays at Berwick-on-Tweed, he showed no particular bent, but his love of study prompted his father to give him a classical and theological training, to prepare him for the Nonconformist ministry. With this in view, he entered the Daventry Academy in 1787. This college was transferred to Northampton in 1789, and here William Stevenson stayed until he had completed his education. He was recognised at this time as an industrious student and a keen debater in classics and theology.

He was now qualified as a minister, but, with a view to increasing his knowledge, he went to Belgium, and before he attained his twentieth birthday obtained an appointment at Bruges as private tutor in an English family. Whilst at Bruges he became interested in the pioneer of printing in this country, and, later, he wrote a short life of Caxton.

The outbreak of war in 1792 caused his return to England, after holding his tutorship for only a few months. Very shortly afterwards he was appointed minister at Dob Lane Unitarian Chapel, Failsworth, near Manchester, and he also became classical tutor in the Manchester Academy—a well-known educational institution at that period. Thus, like

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many Unitarian ministers of those days, he held two appointments, preaching on Sundays and teaching during the week.

Manchester, however, did not retain his services long. Whilst there, he was greatly influenced by Thomas Barnes, a Doctor of Divinity of Edinburgh University, who had received his early education from Philip Holland, a noted schoolmaster of Bolton, and a relative of the Hollands of Sandlebridge. Dr. Barnes was the minister at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel, Manchester, where afterwards Mrs. Gaskell's husband was a minister for fifty-six years. It was Dr. Barnes who, with Dr. Percival and Mr. Henry, founded the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester in 1781. This was the first society of the kind in England.

William Stevenson afterwards developed conscientious scruples against being a hired minister, with the result that he resigned his preaching appointment. This doubtless suggested to Mrs. Gaskell the character of Mr. Hale, the clergyman in *North and South*, who resigned his living for conscientious reasons, and became tutor in smoky Milton, which has long been recognised as Manchester.

In 1797, Mr. Stevenson left Manchester and turned his attention to farming, for which he had a liking, going to East Lothian as an agricultural pupil. Very probably he was attracted to this district because at that time East Lothian was in the van of agricultural progress, and experiments were being made on scientific lines. His friend, James Cleghorn, was keenly interested in agricultural reform, and just about this time the first chair of agriculture in Great Britain was founded at Edinburgh University. When his education in agriculture was sufficiently advanced, Mr. Stevenson rented a small farm at Saughton Mills, near Edinburgh, from Mr. Cleghorn, and worked it by scientific methods.

It was on December 1st, 1797, that William Stevenson married Elizabeth Holland, at the old Parochial Chapel of Over Peover, near Knutsford, Cheshire. Probably young Stevenson was first attracted to the life of a farmer by his frequent visits to the well-kept farm at Sandlebridge, which has been immortalised in *Cranford* as Woodley, and in *Cousin Phillis* as Hope Farm, Heathbridge. The young couple

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SIR HENRY HOLLAND

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settled at Saughton Mills, where Mrs. Stevenson, as a farmer's daughter, was the more practical of the two.

In *My French Master*—one of Mrs. Gaskell's short stories—she tells of the amateur scientific farmer who lost more than he gained “over the very small scale of his operations,” and of the mother calculating: “If on twelve acres he managed to lose a hundred pounds a year, what would be our loss on a hundred and fifty?”

For four years Mr. Stevenson had to suffer reverses, some of which were beyond his control. There was a succession of bad harvests, and a fear of foreign invasion led to a panic and a run on the banks. This affected every branch of industry, and especially agriculture.

In 1802, Mr. Stevenson gave up his little farm and went to live in Edinburgh, where he and his wife established a boarding house for University students in Drummond Street. At the same time he acted as a “private coach” at the University. In order to supplement his income, he contributed to the *Edinburgh Review*, and in 1803 this versatile farmer-teacher became editor of the *Scots Magazine*.

Literature now claimed a good part of Mr. Stevenson's time and talents, and for the next few years his articles on agriculture and other subjects were much appreciated. “He laboured with unremitting diligence, contributing to the *Westminster, Retrospective, Oxford Review*, and the *Edinburgh Review*, and also to the *Foreign Review*.” As “private-coach,” journalist, and editor, his life was one of incessant toil, but Edinburgh did much to foster his love of research, besides bringing him in contact with the cultured life of the University.

Four years after William Stevenson settled in Edinburgh, his wife's nephew, Henry Holland (afterwards the famous Sir Henry Holland, physician to Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort), a son of Peter Holland, the genial surgeon of Knutsford, “who had his round of thirty miles and slept at Cranford,” came to Edinburgh as a medical student. He had previously studied at Glasgow University for two years, though not in medicine, and had been for a few months in a commercial house in Liverpool. Though only a youth of eighteen, he had already distinguished himself by drawing up a Survey of Cheshire for the Board of Agriculture, for

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which he was offered one hundred pounds if it proved satisfactory ; so well was his task accomplished, that the Board paid him two hundred pounds, "for it was full of sound and well-prepared material," wrote his father in 1806, to Josiah Wedgwood. It was owing to Lord Stanley of Alderley that young Holland got an introduction to the Board of Agriculture, and thus obtained a chance of distinguishing himself.

Towards the end of 1806, James Maitland, the eighth Earl of Lauderdale, was offered by Fox the position of Governor-General of India, and he, having a very high opinion of William Stevenson's abilities, offered him the post of private secretary.

Mr. Stevenson was only making a precarious living in Edinburgh ; he was known to be careless about money matters, and his boarding-house, like his farming, was not very remunerative. Writing and coaching did not add greatly to his income, hence his eagerness to accept Lord Lauderdale's offer.

Much to the disappointment of William Stevenson, the East India Company strenuously opposed Lord Lauderdale's appointment as Governor-General, and, in consequence, he withdrew from the position ; but as Mr. Stevenson had given up his Edinburgh work for the post of private secretary to Lord Lauderdale, and had come to London to help in the preparations for India, the Earl felt compelled to compensate him, and as there was a vacancy at the Treasury Office, he used his influence and secured for him the position of keeper of the Treasury Records.

Evidently Mr. Stevenson's work at Edinburgh was greatly appreciated, for, shortly after this, he was offered by the Czar of Russia a professorship of technology at Karkhov University. The offer is said to have been made in most flattering language, but Stevenson declined the appointment and settled in London, living first at Mayfair and afterwards at Lindsey Row, where his famous daughter was born.

Elizabeth Stevenson's maternal grandfather, Samuel Holland, was a very original character, and many of his quaint remarks are to be found in *Cousin Phillis*. Sir Henry Holland, in his *Recollections of my Past Life*, says : "My grandfather (Samuel Holland) was the most perfect practical optimist I have ever known. He could never be got to

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SAMUEL HOLLAND

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complain of the change or distemperature of the seasons." Grandmother Holland is described in a privately printed history of the family as "A woman of extraordinary energy and will, and rather the opposite of her husband, who, though firm, was far quieter and disposed to treat his servants with more leniency than his wife, who was exceedingly particular with them."

Elizabeth Stevenson's mother came from a truly religious home, and "Ebenezer Holman" fits her father's character as a good type of the best Dissenters of that day, who believed in the Bible as the one guide for everything, even to the deciding of the children's names.

Most of Samuel Holland's large family rejoiced in Biblical names, which included Samuel, Peter, and Thomas for his sons, and Mary, Hannah, Elizabeth, and Abigail for his daughters. Mrs. Gaskell's maternal grandmother was Ann Swinton (a name still kept in the Holland family), a descendant of John Swinton, of Nether Knutsford, who is mentioned in the history of Cheshire as one of the two charterers who owned Over Peover, near Knutsford, in 1666.

Sandlebridge Farm came into the possession of the Holland family through Mary Colthurst, who was the sole heiress to the property, which had been owned by her family since 1650, according to the history of Cheshire. Mary Colthurst married John Holland in 1718. The Cheshire branch was related to the Lancashire Hollands, one of whom, Jane, daughter of Edward Holland, married Thomas Cholmondeley, the son of Robert, Earl of Leinster, who died in 1667. Thus the maternal relatives of Elizabeth Stevenson have long held an honoured name in Lancashire and Cheshire.

Of the children reared in the Sandlebridge home, the best known was Peter Holland, whose reputation spread beyond the country town of Knutsford, and who left behind him letters, which show "a refinement and cultivation not common to country surgeons of his time."

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell has become the most widely known of the descendants of the Hollands.

The most distinguished living representative of the Holland family is the present Lord Knutsford, Henry Thurstan Holland, a great-grandson of Samuel Holland, whose father, Sir Henry Holland, was first cousin to Mrs. Gaskell.

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Through her mother's brother, Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was related to the Wedgwoods and the Darwins, as well as the Turners of Newcastle-on-Tyne and the Willets of Newcastle-under-Lyne.

Mrs. Gaskell's aunt, the first wife of Dr. Peter Holland, was a niece of Josiah Wedgwood, her mother being sister to the famous inventor of the pottery which bears his name. Another sister of Josiah Wedgwood was the mother of the well-known naturalist, Charles Darwin, who enjoyed having a good novel read to him as a recreation, and is said to have blessed all novelists.

All these families—the Hollands, Wedgwoods, and the Darwins—were Unitarians, and they were all keen educationists, taking an intelligent interest in the training of their children.

The history of the different families reveals the beautiful religious spirit that pervaded their respective homes.

Another family with whom the Hollands were connected was the Turners, who gave several noted ministers for four generations to the Unitarian ministry. Mr. Turner, of Newcastle-on-Tyne, married Mary, daughter of Thomas Holland, for his first wife, and Jane Willet, a niece of Josiah Wedgwood, for his second. The Willets were another well-known Unitarian family.