The Preston Strike in Literature: Dickens, Gaskell and Bamford

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Abstract

This article maps the fictional responses of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Samuel Bamford to the Preston dispute, arguing that they were based more on cultural sources than reportage. It includes the first scholarly analysis of Bamford's contribution, three linked dialogues published in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* in 1854. This article also examines the relationship of Victorian fiction and the reading public to unrest and northern working-class life, demonstrating how ideology trumped the facts. Dickens's priority was well crafted fiction. Gaskell attempted to base her fiction on reality, but only partly extricated herself from the assumptions of the period. Bamford, living in London at the time, was bound by his need to appeal to his middle-class audience, because of his precarious position and physical distance. He projected personal experience from an earlier period onto the Preston dispute, reinforcing the assumption that it was a strike rather than a lock-out. He knew no more of Preston than Dickens. It would take the cotton famine to shift prejudices against the northern working classes.

The great Preston strike and lock-out of 1853–1854 was the first English trade union dispute to win sustained national press coverage and widespread middle-class sympathy (if not exactly solidarity) with the workers. It also brought a small second wave of northern industrial fiction, following the first wave generated by the Chartist agitation of the 1830s and 1840s. Then, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* (1849) had presented the sufferings and the anger of the working classes to middle-class readers anxious to understand working-class unrest. In 1854–1855 it was Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (together with his journalistic sketch 'On Strike') and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South.* Before either of these, there appeared a fictional evocation of the strike, 'A Scene in North Lancashire', by the former handloom weaver and Lancashire reformer Samuel Bamford.

The years between the last phase of Chartist unrest and the Preston lock-out had seen a rapid relaxation in societal conflict, symbolised by the Great Exhibition of 1851. This saw industrial workers come to London in their hundreds of thousands without disturbing the public peace, often on cheap excursion trains organised by factory masters who were beginning to discover the benefits of a more paternal policy towards their own 'hands'. This interlude in the class struggle fostered a sense of generational change, in which the

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conflict of the 1830s and '40s was felt to be safely in the past. This may account for one notable difference between the earlier and the later writings. Those of the 1840s had been set safely in a harsher and more turbulent past: in Gaskell's case, a combination of the Lancashire political radicalism of 1816–1817 and the industrial conflict of the early 1830s; in Bronte's case the Yorkshire Luddite rising of 1811–1812; and in Bamford's case the radical years of 1816–1820, afterwards traced back to the 1790s. The writings of the 1850s by contrast were all written (or at least begun) while the Preston strike and lock-out were still in progress, and depicted it more or less explicitly, engaging more closely with contemporary journalism and politics. Bamford's work added the perspective of a Lancashire working man. All this provides for an interesting set of comparisons: between attitudes towards working-class unrest in the Chartist period and the 'age of equipoise'; between middle-class and working-class writers; and between fact and fiction.

This last distinction, alien though it may be to postmodernist scholars fixated on the internal dynamics of written texts, is crucial to understanding the literature. While all the texts treat the conflict as a strike, for most of its duration it was in fact a lock-out, imposed on workers and other employers alike by a minority of the town's 'cotton tyrants', at a time when cotton masters across the rest of the region had come to an agreement with their workers over the restoration of a pay cut. As Dutton and King explained in their classic study, the powerful Preston Masters' Association had since the 1820s organised to maintain low wages by vigorous and consistent union-busting tactics. When, in 1853, trade unions threatened strikes to claim the promised (or at least predicted) restoration of a ten per cent cut in pay imposed in the slump year of 1847, most of the region's cotton masters agreed to pay up, including those in neighbouring Blackburn and the majority in Preston. Four, however, held out, including Thomas Miller of Horrocks and Miller, Preston's largest cotton firm, who was also chairman of the Preston Masters' Association. The association resolved in September 1853 to lock out all cotton workers indefinitely until the demand for a general ten per cent rise was dropped. The lock-out was designed to neutralise the trade unionists' most effective tactic, that of striking against rogue employers whilst being supported by those working at other mills. The Bolton cotton master Henry Ashworth afterwards explained the masters' case:

> The principle with which they set out, [was] that the adjustment of wages is a matter which belongs exclusively to each employer and the persons in his employ; no-one else has anything to do with it …. The law of supply and demand is the only one which can be admitted to control wages …. This is a law in which, whatever the consequences may be, we have to acquiesce, just as much as we shall have to acquiesce in the law of gravitation.[1]

Ironically, the masters' association enforced this individualist line by binding themselves collectively not to pay the ten per cent on pain of a fine of £5,000 (around £1 million

[1] H. Ashworth, *The Preston Strike* (Manchester, 1854), 16, 95–8.

in present-day money).[2] The workers responded by raising subscriptions from the entire region to break this low-wage stronghold. By this bold strategy, Ashworth estimated that they managed to make good some 40 per cent of the wages lost during the dispute as a whole. Only when the masters opened their doors again five months later did the lock-out become a strike. As the Preston employers appealed in turn for financial support from employers elsewhere in the region, it was vital for their credibility to cast their actions as a principled defence against trade union aggression. As Ashworth prepared to write his history of the strike, the Manchester free-market liberal Richard Cobden offered him this advice.

> Show the leaders aimed at coercing the employers at Preston by bringing the whole of the labor of the country to bear against them. Then show at which date the capitalists of Lancashire came to the rescue of the employers of Preston. Show that it was in consequence of the aid of the labourers throughout the Kingdom having been invoked in support of the strike & of the very large sums brought to the aid of the turn-outs that the masters of Lancashire combined.[3]

Cobden's disingenuous line of argument ignored the origins of the strike as a lock-out which plunged a local economy into ruin for the sake of free-market principles. This prolonged industrial conflict came as something of a shock to outsiders who assumed that such things were safely in the past, and brought the strikers sympathetic national attention in the *Illustrated London News* of 12 November 1853. Its coverage of the 1842 Chartist strikes in Lancashire had included scenes of riot and military intervention, including the shooting of four Preston Chartists by troops. This time it depicted well-organised masses of workers gathering to hear articulate speeches, and then meeting in committee to collect donations and distribute strike pay with all the formalities of a meeting of shareholders or charitable trustees. Local councillors and clergymen attempted conciliation but were rebuffed by the cotton masters. In January 1854 the Royal Society of Arts convened a meeting at its imposing headquarters at St James's Square, Piccadilly, in an attempt to air the issues surrounding the strike on a national stage. The Preston masters refused to attend. Soon afterwards the Drury Lane theatre staged two benefit performances for the Preston workers.[4] It was at this time that Dickens, Gaskell and Bamford started to take an interest in the conflict.

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[2] H. Dutton and J.I. King, *'Ten Per Cent and No Surrender': The Preston Strike, 1853–1854* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 1; Dutton and King, 'The limits of paternalism: the cotton tyrants of north Lancashire, 1836–54', *Social History* 7:1 (1982); N. Kirk, *The Growth of Working Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (Urbana, 1985), 245–53, 302–3n.

[3] Lancashire Archives (hereafter LA), DDPr/138/87a, Ashworth scrapbook, letter from Cobden to Ashworth.

[4] *Daily News*, 1 February 1854; *Reynolds's 'Newspaper*, 22 and 29 January 1854; Dutton and King, 'The Society of Arts and the Preston strike, 1853–4', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 127 (1979), 506–8, 593–5, 656–8.

Dickens and *Hard Times*

Dickens is best known as a London novelist, but his interest in the Preston lock-out arose, at least in part, from his familiarity with Lancashire. Armed with letters of introduction from the Lancashire novelist Harrison Ainsworth, he first visited the county in 1838–1839, and picked up several characters for his second novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–1839) which was set partly in the industrial north. In the 1840s Dickens made several visits to his married sister Fanny in Manchester, who introduced him to the social circle of the Cobdenites – progressive liberals, profoundly committed to free trade, as hostile to trade unions as they were to the corn laws. The celebrated novelist was fêted at public dinners: 'the welcome they gave me was astounding', he wrote after one. A visit in the autumn of 1843 for a grand literary soirée to raise funds for the Manchester Athenaeum led to a surge of inspiration which produced *A Christmas Carol* that same year. The setting was London but the themes of money, morality, and miserliness surely owed most to Manchester – nowhere else had Christmas had fallen into such complete disuse. While London's Old Bailey sported the golden figure of justice, Manchester's giant new Bailey courthouse and prison displayed manacles and leg-irons over its gloomy entrance. The chains of Marley's ghost rattled first in Manchester.[5]

Dickens's views on trade unions were set out in his weekly magazine *Household Words* in January 1851 in a comment on a strike of railway workers in the north-west. These were, he thought, 'as honest men as the world can produce', but the union leaders were 'sometimes, not workmen at all, but designing persons who have, for their own base purposes, inmeshed the workmen in a system of tyranny and oppression'. As for the right to strike, he wrote: 'we must deny the moral right or justification … to exert the immense power they accidentally possess, to the public detriment and danger'.[6] Dickens's former paper, the reforming *Daily News,* sent a reporter to the mediation meeting for the Preston strikers at the Royal Society of Arts (of which he was a fellow) on 24 January 1854.[7] On Saturday 28 January Dickens headed north to Preston to find out more. The next day he wrote back to his friend and advisor John Forster:

> I am afraid I shall not be able to get much here. Except the crowds at the street-corners reading the placards pro and con; and the cold absence of smoke from the mill-chimneys; there is very little in the streets to make the town remarkable. I am told that the people 'sit at home and mope'. The delegates with the money from the neighbouring places come in to-day to report the amounts they bring; and tomorrow the people are paid. When I have seen both these ceremonies, I shall return. It is a nasty place (I thought it was a model town); and I am in the Bull Hotel … [an]

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[5] W.E.A. Axon, 'Dickens and Manchester' (unpublished typescript, Manchester Central Library); L.M. Angus-Butterworth, 'Dickens and Manchester' (unpublished typescript, Manchester Central Library).

[6] *Household Words*, 18 January 1851.

[7] *Daily News*, 1 February 1854.

> old, grubby, smoky, mean, intensely formal red brick house with a narrow gateway and a dingy yard.[8]

The account of his visit in *Household Words,* entitled 'On Strike', was more positive. As the contributions by Andrew Hobbs and Lewis Darwen elsewhere in this issue demonstrate, Dickens encountered plenty of evidence that the closure of mills in Preston was not, as he had suspected, caused by irresponsible agitators stoking resentment amongst misguided workers. The delegate meeting mentioned in his letter illustrated this. It was held at the Temperance Hall, a cock-pit converted some twenty years earlier into the meeting-place of Preston's respectable working-class teetotal movement. He described the 'quietness and order' of the meeting, the open and business-like collection of strike funds from around the region, and the steady chairmanship of the union leader George Cowell. He compared the proceedings favourably with those of the House of Commons (which he had himself covered as a youthful reporter). When delegates from Manchester sought permission to address the meeting on wider political issues, Cowell took a vote which went against them. Next, a delegate from 'Throstletown' stood up to rebut criticism from the strike committee. When a committee member called 'Gruffshaw' embarked on a long and angry reply, Cowell again quickly moved the meeting on: 'Gruffshaw stops in full boil', noted Dickens. Contemporary press reports broadly support Dickens's account but add context. Dickens's 'Gruffshaw' was Cowell's more militant colleague Mortimer Grimshaw, and 'Throstletown' was Warrington, which had received a visit from Grimshaw who had criticised their level of contributions. The external delegates who unsuccessfully sought a hearing were from the Manchester-based 'Labour Parliament', a Chartist organisation, and they failed despite Grimshaw's support.[9] Nonetheless, Dickens in his sketch chose to portray political disputes as social turbulence and to emphasise the attempts at agitation rather than their rejection.

The views Dickens offered in conclusion were exactly those he came with. 'This strike and lock-out is a deplorable calamity' he wrote. 'Anger is of no use, starving out is of no use … Political economy is a mere skeleton unless it has a little human covering … and a little human warmth in it.' He was not concerned with the rights and wrongs of the dispute. 'Masters right or men wright; masters wrong, or men wrong; both right or both wrong', the only solution, he insisted, was 'authorised mediation and explanation'.[10] Shortly after he returned to London, and at least a week before 'On Strike' went to press, came news that the Preston masters had rejected the attempt at mediation by the Royal Society of Arts and extended the lock-out another month.[11] Dickens disregarded all this and chose for his title not 'Locked out' but 'On strike'.

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[8] *Daily News*, 31 January 1854; *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vii, ed. G. Storey et al. (Oxford, 1993), 260–1.

[9] *Preston Chronicle* (hereafter *PC*), 2 and 4 February 1854.

[10] C. Dickens, 'On Strike', *Household Words* 8 (11 February 1854), 553–59.

[11] *PC*, 2 February 1854.

Two months later, on 1 April 1854, *Household Words* began serialising Dickens's novel *Hard Times,* a tale set in a fictional 'Coketown' against the background of a strike by cotton factory workers. The novel's core was not industry or the strike but what David Lodge calls a 'moral fable': the clash between the schoolmaster Gradgrind's grim utilitarian view of education as the transmission of useful facts and the human spirit as represented by children and the visiting showmen – the 'graminiverous quadruped' versus the equestrian circus.[12] Dickens's Coketown is a metaphor, not a real town, a brickbuilt backdrop to a Dickensian morality play. There is no attempt to portray the strike realistically. When a critic suggested that *Hard Times* was inspired by his visit to Preston, Dickens hastened to put him right. He had, he said, begun it well before then, and it was a mistake to localise a story intended for 'the working people all over England'.[13]

It is significant that Dickens chose to portray only the most militant of the strike leaders, Mortimer Grimshaw, in *Hard Times.* He is there in the person of the ranting orator Slackbridge, but there is no character corresponding to the temperate George Cowell, even though Dickens witnessed him prevailing over Grimshaw in 'On Strike'. Dickens, who collected the newspapers on his arrival at Preston, would almost certainly have seen that day's *Preston Chronicle,* which reported a speech by Cowell. In it he rejected the orthodox political economy of the employers, with its model of 'buy cheap and sell dear', and advocated instead the biblical golden rule of 'Do unto others as you would they should do unto you'.[14] Dickens picks up the phrase but puts it instead in the mouth of the innocent child Sissy Jupe. Neither Dickens nor (we may infer) his reading public were ready to hear trade unionists speak with the voice of moderation and Christian brotherhood.[15]

Gaskell and *North and South*

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* has been called 'the most sympathetic account of trade union action in early Victorian fiction', although the competition is not exactly strong. It followed *Hard Times* as the lead serial in Dickens's *Household Words.* Gaskell lived in Manchester and, unlike Dickens, had plentiful experience of northern working-class life. Her first novel, *Mary Barton,* was published in the Chartist year of 1848. It drew its material from the attempted march of the Manchester 'Blanketeers' on London in 1817 and the assassination by cotton workers of a millowner's son in 1831. It also mentioned several real individuals, notably Samuel Bamford, whose song 'God Help the

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[12] D. Lodge, 'How successful is *Hard Times*?', in F. Kaplan and S. Monod (eds), *Hard Times* (New York, 2001), 400–9. Lodge was considering the work of the influential Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis, who 50 years earlier had identified *Hard Times* as a tributary of what he called 'the great tradition' in English Literature: F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London, 1950), 18–20, 227–48.

[13] *Hard Times*, 281.

[14] *PC*, 28 January 1854.

[15] G. Carnall, 'Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, and the Preston Strike', *Victorian Studies* 8 (1964). See also (among much else) P. Brantlinger, 'The case against trade unions in early Victorian fiction', *Victorian Studies* 13:1 (1969); P.J. Keating, *The working classes in Victorian fiction* (London, 1971), ch. 9.

Poor' is read out at a significant moment in the drama. The theme of *Mary Barton* was the tragic alienation of the classes, and the potential for reconciliation through suffering and recognition of a common humanity.[16]

Mary Barton was generally well received (not least by Bamford himself), but was criticised by some reviewers for ignorance of economics and unfairness to employers. Among these was the industrialist W.R. Greg, partner in the model paternalist factory colony of Styal in north Cheshire, with whom Gaskell had social connections from her youth in nearby Knutsford. He accused her of misrepresenting factory owners. Gaskell, who knew and respected the social provision at Styal, took the criticisms to heart and made it her business to get to know other leading industrialists. Friends suggested that she consider writing something that would put employers in a better light.[17] When, in January 1854, Dickens approached her for a serial for *Household Words,* she sent him an outline of a work centred around the Preston strike, only to see Dickens' essay 'On Strike' appear shortly afterwards. Dickens reassured her that *Hard Times* would not be about the strike, and *North and South* duly appeared in *Household Words* in September 1854 and ran for four months. Her novel was overlong (Dickens found it 'wearisome') and the magazine's circulation dropped, but in the end he paid her a bonus.[18]

The central character of *North and South*, Margaret Hale, has migrated with her clergyman father from the rural south of England to the fictional 'Milton-Northern' (Preston), rather as Gaskell herself migrated from rural north Cheshire to industrial Manchester. Like Gaskell she inhabits middle-class social circles but visits the houses of the poor, finds her Christian values challenged by the materialism of the factory masters, and attempts to mediate. In the chapter 'Masters and Men', as industrial unrest threatens, the cotton master Thornton explains to Margaret that wage rates have to fall if the town's businesses are to survive, insisting: 'We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it.' The interests of employers and workers are at bottom identical, and as the workers are morally and intellectually immature 'despotism is the best government for them'. Margaret pleads ignorance about 'strikes, and rate of wages, and capital and labour', but argues that his autocratic attitude generates social conflict: 'I see two classes dependent upon each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own; I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down.' Thornton is adamant: 'I choose to be the unquestioned and irresponsible master of my hands, during the hours that they labour for me. But those hours past, our relationship ceases.'[19]

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[16] J. Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London, 1999), ch. 10; T. Wyke, 'The Culture of Self-Improvement: Real People in Mary Barton', *Gaskell Journal* 13 (1999); R. Poole, '"A Poor Man I know": Samuel Bamford and the Making of Mary Barton', *Gaskell Journal* 20 (2008).

[17] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 214–18, 343–5; [W.R. Greg], review of *Mary Barton*, *Edinburgh Review* April 1849, 402–35; 'Mary Barton: a Tale of Manchester Life', *Manchester Guardian* 28 February 1849.

[18] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 354–68.

[19] Gaskell, *North and South* (Penguin edition), ch. 15, 117–24.

The strike when it begins is just that – a strike, not a lock-out. Gaskell certainly knew about events in Preston. In a chapter called 'What is a strike?' she has one of the leading trade unionists, Higgins, blame 'five or six masters who have set themselves against paying wages'. She even has Thornton admit that the strike was deliberately provoked by one rogue master who had built up a surplus of stock and wanted to save on wages. Margaret urges the trade unionist Higgins to 'Ask some of your masters … The state of trade may be such as not to enable them to give you the same remuneration.' 'State o' trade!' replies Higgins, 'That's just a piece o' masters' humbug.' Previous strikes have failed but 'See if we don't dang the masters this time. … this time we'n laid our plans desperate deep.'[20] Later a reluctant striker who has watched his family starve rounds on Higgins, calling him 'a worser tyrant than e'er th' masters were … you've no more pity for a man than a wild hunger-maddened wolf.' Thornton for his part blames 'a rascally set of paid delegates' for the strike. When he provokes his workers beyond endurance by hiring Irish labour to replace them, his factory is attacked by 'an angry sea of men'.[21]

> Many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless,—cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey … and enraged beyond measure … infuriated men and reckless boys … Their reckless passion had carried them too far to stop.[22]

The scene owes nothing to Preston but bears many similarities to the description of a Luddite attack in the novel *Shirley* by Gaskell's friend Charlotte Bronte. Their leader is described as a 'mad Calvinist and Jacobin weaver … wholly a maniac'. Even for Gaskell the militants can only be the workers, not the employers.[23]

Living in Manchester, Gaskell's reference point is the Peterloo massacre of 1819. Thornton alludes to this.

> Those early cotton lords. There can be no doubt … of the tyranny they exercised over their work-people. You know the proverb, Mr Hale, 'Set a beggar on horseback, and he'll ride to the devil.' Well, some of these early manufacturers did ride to the devil in a magnificent style – crushing human bone and flesh under their horses' hooves without remorse.

All this however is in the past. 'Now the battle is pretty fairly waged between us,' explains Thornton. Margaret is not so sure and urges Thornton to outface the crowd in person:

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[20] *Ibid.*, 131–4, 143–5.
[21] *Ibid.*, ch. 19, 154, and ch. 20.
[22] *Ibid.*, ch. 22, 175–7.
[23] C. Bronte, *Shirley* (London, 1849), ch. 19; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 613–18; M. Roberts, 'E.P. Thompson, *Shirley*, and the Antinomian Tradition in West Riding Luddism and Popular Protest', *Labour History* 86:2 (2021); M. Roberts, 'Tory-Radical Feeling in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, and Early Victorian England', *Victorian Studies* 63:1 (2021).

'Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don't let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad.'[24] After the riot Higgins explains: 'Our only chance is binding men together in one common interest; and if some are cowards and some are fools, they mun come along and join the great march, whose only strength is in numbers.' But he concedes it was a mistake to force the hot-headed Boucher and his like to join them: 'We had public opinion on our side, till he and his sort began rioting and breaking laws. It were all o'er wi' the strike then.' 'You made him what he is' by coercion, explains Margaret, although she also attributes his impulsiveness to Irish blood.[25]

Thornton in turn gives ground when he concedes that 'This last strike … has been respectable' and agrees to meet Higgins face to face. Higgins deploys a homely dialect idiom to seek reconciliation: 'But for th' childer, Measter, do yo' think we can e'er get on together?'[26] This is not like Dickens' Slackbridge, but nor is it like the skilled, articulate, and undeferential Cowell. Thornton for his part comes to see his workers not as 'ignorant, wayward men' (143–5) but as the descendants of a spirited and independent northern Teutonic race, probably ready for self-government. He sets about providing social and welfare facilities at his mill – a nod to Greg's Styal.

North and South is much more than a book about a strike. It is animated by Gaskell's humane, Unitarian version of Christian belief. 'Your Union in itself would be beautiful, glorious – it would be Christianity itself,' says Margaret's clergyman father, 'if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that of merely one class as opposed to another.' The Preston lock-out and strike was indeed 'one class opposed to another', but in *North and South* the Preston Masters' Association and its lock-out are invisible behind the independent Thornton. It is the workers alone who act collectively, and it is this controlling vice which eventually turns them into a mob – hence the need for a riot scene, to show 'poor creatures who are driven mad'. Yet in the actual Preston conflict the cotton workers' collective strength and organisation were their greatest assets, and in Cowell and Grimshaw they had articulate leaders able to sustain the movement through eight grinding months until defeated by prosecution and economic recession. Even in this most sympathetic Victorian fictional account of trade unionism, the phenomenon of collective action against employer extremism was not to be acknowledged.

Bamford and 'A Scene in North Lancashire'

Before either Dickens or Gaskell, the first work of fiction dealing with the Preston lock-out to be published was by a Lancashire working man: Samuel Bamford. A former handloom weaver and radical turned writer, Bamford had become a minor literary celebrity in the 1840s with the publication of his memoirs *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1842) and

[24] *North and South* ch. 10, 84.
[25] *Ibid*., ch. 28, 228–9; ch. 37, 302; ch. 15, 122–3.
[26] *Ibid*., ch. 18, 143–5, and ch. 39, 325–7.

Early Days (1849). He was one of the main local organisers of the 1819 'Peterloo' reform rally in Manchester, leading the march of several thousand people from the weaving town of Middleton. He did much of the work of assembling evidence for the defence, and was one of those sentenced to a year's imprisonment along with Henry Hunt, though not before a triumphal procession which passed through Preston. Imprisonment, however, changed Bamford. He turned against the egotistical Hunt and warned against the perils of insurrection and conspiracy, to both of which he, along with his family, had fallen victim. Already a published poet, he became a local newspaper correspondent. He regarded the Chartist leader and orator Feargus O'Connor as another Henry Hunt, supported working-class education and improvement, and was distrustful of middle-class patronage – not exactly a class warrior, but certainly class-conscious.[27] He was proud to pronounce 'A plain honest "damn" of all perfidy, treachery, and betrayal whether in high or low, rich or poor.'[28]

When *Passages in the Life of a Radical* was first published in 1842, Samuel Bamford was acclaimed as both a talented writer and the authentic voice of the respectable working class. Reviewers applauded his powerful descriptions of suffering and injustice in the Peterloo years of 1815–1820. They approved of his renunciation of violence and demagoguery and his expression of homely, fireside values. Visitors to his country cottage north of Manchester included Jane Welsh Carlyle, Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Gaskell, and the German social explorers Victor Huber and Fanny Lewald. They were greeted in broad Lancashire dialect until they introduced themselves and earned the courtesy of standard English.[29] The social prophet Thomas Carlyle sent letters of encouragement and solicited several wealthy subscribers to his books. With the help of well-wishers among the liberal middle classes of Manchester he lobbied unsuccessfully for a state literary pension; he had to settle for a locally based testimonial fund which provided him with enough money to fund the publication of a second volume of autobiography, *Early Days* (1849). This was well received but could not pay for retirement. A well-connected liberal patron arranged a sinecure for him as a clerk for the Inland Revenue in Somerset House, so in 1851, at the age of 63, he left Lancashire with his wife Jemima for London. His plan was to write a further volume of memoirs but by 1853 all he had managed was a few fragments.[30] When the Preston lock-out began to make the news in London, he must have sensed an opportunity.

As he arrived in London, Bamford might have hoped to be published in Dickens's magazine. Their paths had crossed several times, albeit more memorably for him than

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[27] M. Hewitt, 'Radicalism and the Victorian Working Class: The Case of Samuel Bamford', *Historical Journal* 34:4 (1991); R. Poole, 'Samuel Bamford, the Radical', *Manchester Memoirs* 153 (2016), 116–25.
[28] Rochdale Archives and Local Studies, Bamford to anon., 18 April 1853 (also in *Manchester Guardian* 25 May and 1 June 1853).
[29] P. Morey, 'Meeting The Bamfords: The Accounts of Victor Aimé Huber and of Fanny Lewald', *Northern History* 57:1 (2020).
[30] R. Poole and M. Hewitt, *The Diaries of Samuel Bamford* (Stroud, 2000), Introduction; S. Bamford, *Some Account of the Late Amos Ogden of Middleton* (Middleton, 1853).

for Dickens. Dickens had admired and promoted Bamford's fellow working-class writer John Critchley Prince, and Bamford himself was personally introduced to Dickens at the Manchester Athenaeum in 1843. When Dickens later plundered Bamford's *Passages* for his own account of Peterloo in *All the Year Round* he described Bamford as 'always a truthful and careful observer … a man honest and true to the core'. Carlyle recommended 'the brave Bamford' to Dickens in late 1845 as a Lancashire correspondent for his new paper the *Daily News* but nothing seems to have come of it. Bamford next encountered Dickens at a fund-raising dinner in Manchester in 1847 for the London writer Leigh Hunt; Bamford, however, had to make do with a seat at the working men's table.[31] Soon after he moved to London in 1851 Carlyle referred him to Dickens's literary agent John Forster, describing him as 'a fine and a fine stalwart grey old Lancashire Weaver, and a piece of very good human stuff, and *worth* assisting if one could'. This got Bamford an introduction to a sub-editor of *Household Words,* who forwarded a piece of his work for consideration. Dickens's reply was curt: 'Bamford won't do.'[32]

Rejected by Dickens, Bamford turned to *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper,* launched in December 1853 as a wholesome and progressive weekly magazine, suitable 'for the family circle'. He later wrote:

> During the long protracted, 'Preston turn out', I wrote several articles for Cassells Weekly Newspaper, which I intended to be corrective of the pernicious writings which Mr Dickens was issuing at that time. Political party considerations – as I believe – stopped the continuance of my articles – and since then I have not followed writing as a means for subsistence.[33]

What these 'pernicious writings' were is hard to guess, for 'A Scene in North Lancashire' appeared in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* on 28 January 1854, the day Dickens travelled to Preston, and the second part on 11 February, the day that 'On Strike' appeared. Bamford's piece was briefly introduced by Cassell as coming from 'a respected correspondent' and containing 'much that may be profitably considered both by employers and the employed'.[34] It is in the form of a dialogue with stage directions.

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[31] R. Poole, 'Dickens and Peterloo', in *Manchester Region History Review* 23: *Return to Peterloo* (2012), 181–94; *The Pilgrim Dickens*, ii, 245–6; iii, 494, 569, 592; v, 149; Axon, 'Dickens and Manchester'.

[32] Letters of Thomas and Jane Carlyle, at https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/home, e.g. TC to JWC 9 and 14 September. 1847; W.H. Chaloner, Introduction to *The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford, I: Early Days* (London, 1967), 26–34; Victoria & Albert Museum, Forster MSS 48.E.18, 47 and 48, Carlyle to Forster, 7 March and 17 April 1851; Dickens to W.H. Wills, 27 July 1851, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vi, ed. G. Storey *et al.* (Oxford, 1988), p. 447.

[33] Bamford to James Kay-Shuttleworth. 9 Oct. 1860, *Diaries of Samuel Bamford*, 252. Kay-Shuttleworth's utilitarian views on education were the prime target of Dickens' satire in *Hard Times*. Later he and Bamford formed a warm relationship: R. Poole, 'James Kay-Shuttleworth and Samuel Bamford: politics, culture and identity in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 106 (2010), 46–72.

[34] *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, 28 January, 11 February and 25 March 1854.

Scene one is 'a meeting of turn-outs' in Rossendale, a country cotton district running between the Ribble Valley (Preston–Blackburn–Burnley) and the Manchester region to the south. It opens with speeches by four 'demagogues', 'from London, and Staffordshire, and Yorkshire, and Stockport, Heywood, and Manchester'. They talk down to their audience in standard English, advocating the Chartist plan for a labour parliament. A local man, introducing himself in dialect as 'Dick O'Brandle, a card-room hand fro' Clogshod Mill', gains a hearing. Switching to standard English, he denounces the language of class confrontation and questions the motives of the agitators, 'unless they were pretty certain of being well paid for their trouble'. He argues that every working man who saves money in a club or friendly society is a kind of petty capitalist, while not all big capitalists behave like tyrants. He warns that untrammelled democracy will create a cycle 'of tyranny founded on ignorance, of overthrow, and of tyranny again renewed'. His first example is the USA, 'where liberty, pure and virgin-white, is for the whites, and slavery, devil-black, is for the blacks'. His second democratic tyranny is France, ruled by a 'despot chosen by universal suffrage, who has destroyed universal suffrage': that is, Louis Napoleon, elected president in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution only to abrogate the republican constitution and conduct a plebiscite to proclaim himself emperor. The cycle of tyranny and democracy will repeat 'until a people trained in *duty*, and imbued with *virtue*, arise, and end the mournful mockery for ever'. Dick's solution to the situation in Preston is for the workers to bypass the strike committee and heed the views of their suffering families: 'Let us enquire into these things with the hearts of husbands and fathers, and then come here to-morrow morning and determine what shall be done.' He leaves the platform to cries of 'Hurra for Dick O'Brandle'.

Scene two, 'Interior of a Cottage' provides a sort of slow movement. Dick and his wife Kathern sit by a cold hearth, hearing the pleas of their hungry children. Dick takes one of the last objects in the house to pawn, saying, 'Not to seek food by every honest means is a sin.' Some female neighbours arrive and they all find comfort in reading a passage from the Bible about the famine in Gilead. There is no hint here that women were a large part of the factory workforce; they simply suffer at home. All seems lost when Dick returns empty-handed from the pawnbroker, but then there is a stage direction: '*Loud knocking at the door. Enter a stranger, followed by a man bearing a hamper of provisions, and another a sack of coal.*' It is Kathern's long-lost brother, whom she had believed dead, and as the scene ends '*the happy group enjoy a plenteous repast*'. One senses that Bamford has been given the hurry-up by an impatient editor. This scene may appear lame and melodramatic, but as a young married man Bamford had witnessed just such a scene on his travels, when a returning soldier believed dead turned up on the doorstep to be reunited with his former sweetheart.[35]

Readers of *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* had to wait a month for the final episode, 'Meeting near Spindlebury'. Its opening appears to have been trimmed by the editor, who supplies instead a brisk summary. The scene is the promised decision-making meeting

[35] *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, ii, ch. 22.

the next day. The itinerant agitators have moved on but the large crowd now includes a number of women. An old man pressed into the chair addresses his 'Friends an' Neybours' in dialect. He gets a laugh by comparing himself with the impatient speaker of the House of Commons in London, 'whilst I, the speaker at Spindlebury, shall be quite content iv I con nobbut be o' some use i' puttin' an end to this dispute between th' mesters an' th' men.' Another local, 'Robin o'Climbonk', urges a return to work, predicting that 'eawr childer win remember [the strike], when they telln' their childer, "Aye that wur whot led to th' great starvation time, when I was a child."' The women too speak at the meeting, having been encouraged to have their say by Dick'o'Brandle.

> Ar we to clem an' starve till life gwos eawt o' th' body becose a set o' medlin delegates tell us to doo so? Whot foo's ween bin. I wonder whether *their* wives an' childer are clemmin, like us an' eawrs? (Cheers. "That's reet, lass, speak eawt lass").

A stranger urges the men to stand firm: 'You have a right to get the best price you can for your labour, and if the masters won't give your price, you have a right to compel them.' Dick replies: 'I was once of your opinion, but I am not so now …. If compulsion be used, it ceases to be a fair, market bargain, and is more akin to robbery than to honest contract.' The vote goes unanimously in favour of returning to work and Dick leads the way to strike a bargain with the local employer, accompanied by cheers.

There is evidence here for those who would see Bamford as a reactionary, seeking middle-class recognition at the expense of solidarity with his former fellow-workers and asserting the values of hearth and home over those of class. Like Dickens and Gaskell he presents the dispute as an aggressive strike rather than a lock-out, and a distortion of the normal process of individual wage bargaining. By placing his drama in a country mill, he goes further than either in blaming manipulation by political agitators from outside the community. Historically, the smaller settlements outside the main cotton towns often had different economic environments and social priorities, and tended to be slightly lower-waged and resistant to uniform union policies.[36] It also however aligns with Bamford's long-standing political convictions, which date back to his experiences of the solidarity of country weaving districts such as his native Middleton behind the reform movement. His experience of espionage and entrapment made him acutely aware of the risks of trusting paid delegates, demagogues, and underground operations, and he opposed both the machine-breakers of the 1820s and Chartists of the 1830s and '40s. He had come to believe in the duty of men to put their families' needs first, in the need for reformers to see themselves as citizens rather than members of a subordinate class, and in the slow power of education to raise a society. In 1840, at the end of his first volume of autobiography he wrote: 'Canst thou not govern a household, and yet wouldest thou direct a nation? Come to thine own bosom and

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[36] J. Southern, 'Community, Class and Identity: an Analysis of the Harle Syke strike of 1915', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 170 (2021).

home, and there commence a reform.'[37] This was the finishing point of his Preston strike drama. The cautious wisdom of a streetwise radical of the 1810s had become a conservative set of responses by the 1850s; still, however, Bamford felt himself to be on the side of the people.

Digging back into Bamford's radical memoirs, we find him delivering the kind of speech which he put into the mouth of his characters in his scenes of the Preston strike. In the spring of 1818 he was one of a group of speakers at a series of open-air radical meetings in and around Lancashire. The spy John Livesey saw him chair a long meeting at Middleton on 27 April, and described him as 'a well dressed intelligent man'. He chaired competently and with dignity, then switched to dialect for the closing collection: 'Dick pull off they hat & thee Tom & 3 or 4 more I will count what you get on the table before your faces'.[38] Livesey's rapid phonetic transcripts convey dialect speech with unusual fluency. Bamford repeated his dual-register delivery at an outdoor meeting at the Pennine township of Quick in Saddleworth on 4 May, telling anecdotes in dialect and then urging 'that when there is a vote put as a question in future that the women will put up there, hands for if a Reformation is gave for the Husband it must be good for his wife & children'. The following month he chaired an outdoor meeting at Heywood near Rochdale, where he again urged women present to raise their hands and vote for the radical cause.[39] Both Quick and Heywood, like the fictional 'Spindlebury', were semi-rural settlements several miles from the main cotton towns. The warm reception accorded to Dick'o'Brandles was an idealised version of Bamford's own platform experience of 35 years earlier.[40]

We can gain further understanding of why Bamford wrote these pieces if we consider the position he had come to as a writer in the previous decade, and particularly his relationship with Elizabeth Gaskell. He had long seen himself as a kind of political mediator, able to convey popular feelings to the political classes with insight whilst giving candid advice to the working classes from a position of trust. His 1844 collection of essays, *Walks in South Lancashire,* had included a series entitled 'Walks among the Workers', originally published in the conservative *Manchester Chronicle and Salford Standard* in 1841–1842.[41] Bamford adopts the persona of a middle-class social observer,

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[37] *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, i, ch. 50.

[38] *Ibid.,* ch. 27; The National Archives, Home Office disturbances papers, HO 42/177 fol. 565, report of John Livesey, 27 April 1818.

[39] The National Archives, HO 42/177 fol. 541, report by Livesey of a meeting at Quick, Saddleworth, 4 May 1818; HO 42/178 fols 320–3, report by Livesey of a meeting at Heywood, 6 July 1818. For the female reform movement at this time, see Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford, 2019), 157–61, 237–46.

[40] Bamford, 'A Passage of My Later Years', *Walks in South Lancashire* (1844), 216–27; Poole, 'Samuel Bamford's Lost Years, part 1: the 1820s', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 104 (2008).

[41] Bamford, *Walks in South Lancashire*. The 'Walks among the Workers' were first published in the *Manchester Chronicle and Salford Standard* between 25 September 1841 and 5 February 1842; my thanks to Anne Secord for this information.

visiting mills and factories in the Oldham–Middleton–Rochdale area, commenting (on the whole approvingly) on working conditions, social provision, and morale among the hands. One essay in *Walks* recounts how, during the handloom weavers' uprising of 1826, Bamford walked a long distance to deter weavers in north Lancashire from coming to Middleton to attack power-looms. He claimed success, although the area was not without disturbances.[42] In 1839 he published a long poem, *La Lyonnaise,* addressed to 'The Hand-loom Weavers of Lancashire, and the Persons styled Chartists', about the fate of the striking silk handloom weavers of Lyon, cut down by the military in a failed uprising five years earlier. It was his warning to the next generation of reformers not to risk another Peterloo. Soon after this he began work on his memoir of the Peterloo years, *Passages in the Life of a Radical,* which recalled the painful lessons of his own youthful militancy but at the same time conveyed his pride in the power and integrity of the handloom weaving communities from which it sprang.[43]

Bamford's writings are distinguished by a liberal use of Lancashire dialect, not just in demotic speech but as a distinctive language of expression rooted in landscape and history; he used it in poetry and prose, as well as in real life. The literary and social rebuffs which had followed his initial success in the 1840s probably reinforced his sense of himself as an undervalued voice from within the working classes. Elizabeth Gaskell and her husband William however seemed to understand and respect both him and his dialect. William, minister of the unitarian Cross Street Chapel in Manchester, consulted Bamford on dialect for an 1838 lecture, and Bamford worked with William on a dialect glossary for the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. The glossary never appeared but William drew heavily on Bamford's work when he assisted his wife with the dialect in *Mary Barton,* and later in his *Two Lectures on Lancashire Dialect,* appended to the second edition.[44] Bamford found in *Mary Barton* not only his own dialect but elements of his own life experiences, drawn both from his writings and from personal conversations. His poem, 'God help the poor', is quoted in full, with a footnote describing Bamford as 'the fine-spirited author of "Passages in the Life of a Radical" – a man who illustrates his order, and shows what nobility may be in a cottage'. Bamford was touched, and wrote to Gaskell describing the novel as 'fearfully true' and 'mournfully beautiful' and its author as 'a genius'.[45] If Bamford needed any further affirmation to continue with his own career as the authentic, dialect voice of the working people of Lancashire, this was surely it.

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[42] Bamford, 'A Passage from my Later Years', *Walks in South Lancashire*, 216–27; Poole, 'Samuel Bamford's Lost Years', 105–8.

[43] 'La Lyonnaise', in *Poems* (1843), 133–5; Bamford, *Amos Ogden*. For the full text of the original pamphlet of 'La Lyonnaise', see *Middleton Albion*, 28 January 1889.

[44] Samuel Bamford, 'A Glossary of some Words and Phrases in use amongst the Rural Population of South Lancashire' (1843), John Rylands Library, English MS. 969. On this episode, see Poole, '"A poor man I know"', and Poole, 'Samuel Bamford, the Radical'.

[45] John Rylands Library, English MS 730/4, Bamford to Gaskell, 9 March 1849.

So it was that Bamford's fictional account of the Preston strike was written in metropolitan exile and aimed at a very different audience from his usual Lancashire public. The success of Gaskell's *Mary Barton,* and his own appearance in it as the voice of moderation, emboldened him to make the attempt. When the Preston lock-out and strike became national news Bamford seems to have felt that, as a displaced Lancastrian, culturally bilingual, and able to speak and write in the authentic voice of working-class Lancashire, he had a mediating role to play. His didactic dialogues were within the literary conventions of the time, and no more contrived than those of Dickens, but they were aimed at the wrong audience, and were curtailed by his editor soon after Dickens's writing on the same subject appeared in the rival *Household Words.* Writing at such a distance from his own experience, Bamford could ventriloquise but he did not translate.

Conclusion

This article has traced the complex web of relationships – personal, literary, and political – behind a significant tranche of nineteenth-century industrial fiction. Samuel Bamford, the only working-class writer involved, was memoirist and poet but no novelist, and his dialogue sketches were essentially an idealised version of his own role in previous unrest. It didn't come off but it is of real interest, both as part of the intertwined lives of all three authors and as a case study of how labour disputes were understood and portrayed in mid-Victorian England. The reformer Bamford was no more radical than Dickens and Gaskell when it came to the Preston strike. None of the three writers challenged the dominant free-market doctrine that wages were determined solely by the market rate. All three assumed that the aggressors were the trade unions, vulnerable to rabble-rousing and operating partly through coercion. The employers' lock-out is invisible; only Gaskell suggests that employers may have found it convenient to provoke a strike. None pays any attention to the widespread public sympathy for the locked-out workers, or to the attempts at mediation at local and national level which (as Dutton and King showed) were such a prominent feature of the dispute: it is always a straight war of masters against men. All three writers see the only hope for a just settlement as a mutual change of heart.

A few years later, the *Illustrated London News* carried a full-page engraving showing unemployed Lancashire cotton operatives, alongside an admiring account of their dignity in the face of suffering (Fig. 1). The occasion was not another strike but the onset of cotton famine in 1862, when more than a third of all cotton mills had stopped work completely and half the cotton workers in Preston were out of work and dependent upon relief. Those depicted were from Manchester but they could easily have been the Preston cotton workers of a few years earlier: a mixed male and female workforce with children, holding out in dignity. This was a great change from the *Illustrated London News* coverage of the Chartist strike of 1842 in Preston, with its illustration of four cotton workers shot dead whilst defying the troops. The same magazine's coverage of the Preston lock-out in

Figure 1: 'The Cotton Famine: Group of Mill Operatives at Manchester'

Source: Illustrated London News 22 November 1862, 564.

1853 showed a mixed picture, of determined confrontation and skilled organisation allied to patience and fortitude. It was, however, only when these qualities were manifested in a context separate from a trade union dispute that most writers and commentators were able to empathise with the struggles of the northern working class.