North and South: a siren call to tame industrial ambition?
October 2014
Angelica Michelis, Helen Nugent, Alan Shelston and Vanessa Pupavac introduced a discussion on what North and South says about society today, chaired by Pauline Hadaway

Costume dramas of nineteenth century Britain, self-consciously becoming more gritty than rosy, have recently captured the popular imagination way beyond the more prissy offerings of the 1970's. To mark the opening of the newly refurbished Elizabeth Gaskell House in October, this Salon discussion is going to have a look at what insights Gaskell’s novel North and South, first published in 1855, offers us in understanding the dynamics of Britain’s industrial revolution and what if anything it can tell us about society today. There is common reference made to a North / South divide, but compared to the times of Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, the Bronte sisters, and even Thomas Hardy is there still such a difference, and if so how does that present itself and what characteristics prevail? How should we be reading novels from different historical periods, and are we likely to misread them when transposing their messages for today?
In contrast to some earlier novels, with their own critique of the 'self-made man' from a capitalism dominated by individuals, Elizabeth Gaskell helps herald in a new genre of the social problem novel located in industrial Britain. North and South is notable, although not the first, in not dismissing industrialisation, with the heroine Margaret Hale acknowledging that her celebration of the countryside might be bit romantic and whilst cottage workers might be poorer, there was a real hope of overcoming the dangerous and insecure conditions for industrial workers.

Why is there a wider audience and interest in costume drama, and does the answer to that help explain why there is such renewed interest by contemporary novelists in writing historical fiction? Industrial Britain is being replaced by the production of culture, and no doubt there's a regional agenda being satisfied with the production of such drama, but is there also a common theme of wanting to find a common language across social divisions? In North and South, the concern to bridge the social divisions is expressed in the symbolism of the heroine's clergyman father and an industrial worker praying together, and in the factory owner introducing a shared canteen where the factory managers and workers meet and eat together. Is this a theme that resonates strongly with today's political elite trying to find ways to relate to a population beyond the towns in the south-east?

The centrality of a self-confident and self-made man through industry, albeit through exploiting the labour of others, cannot be ignored as it's the gruffness of the nouveau-riche (seen as a northern trait), that's tamed and refined by Margaret's social conscience. Is there a resentment towards southern based political power we warm to in this story? Is there also a desire for a story or script to help us reconcile ourselves to a lowering of our ambitions and achievements in the West throughout recent recessions and a desire to dampen such aspirations apparent in the East and developing world? Perhaps the focus on self-made individuals helps cover the failings of corporate capitalist entities, particularly helpful for middle-class professionals today?

Some background readings

North and South, by Elizabeth Gaskell, by Jessica Anderson, The Bluestocking Society 5 April 2010


David on slogging through the classics, by David Bowden, IdeasTap 4 June 2014
Discussion Partners

Northern Soul is a celebration of all things Northern, from theatre, music, authors and art to heritage, small businesses, food and leading figures. It was borne out of a desire to read some proper good writing about where we live. Northern Soul talks to the people who work, rest and play in the North of England and scour the region for interesting stories and events. Want to read a carefully crafted article about an oddball museum or go behind the scenes of a leading institution? Fancy a day out or the inside track on a new initiative? Look no further. Like looking at lovely pictures of Northern goodness? They have them.

The Northern Soul webzine is a collection of really good stuff to do, reflect on and ponder North of the Watford Gap. Although the contributors are based in Manchester – and love waxing lyrical about it – you could just as easily find them musing on the attractions of York, the appeal of Keswick or the darn right wonderfulness of Newcastle. If it’s Northern and it’s good then it’s here.
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