

Letter and envelope together again after 165 years

February 26 2013

(Phys.org)—A 165-year-old envelope addressed to one of the Victorian era's greatest writers has been reunited with its letter, unexpectedly discovered by an American academic.

The items, dated 8 November 1848 and penned by another influential Victorian figure, Thomas Carlyle, are now reunited at The University of Manchester's John Rylands Library.

Intended for Cranford author Elizabeth Gaskell, Carlyle's letter praises her first novel *Mary Barton*, published on 18 October that year.

Carlyle, a historian and radical social commentator, did not know who wrote the novel, which was a closely guarded secret, but suspected it was by a woman opening his letter 'Dear Madam'.

The letter, one of a substantial collection bequeathed by Gaskell's daughter Meta to The John Rylands Library in 1913, was almost certainly read by the novelist.

David Southern, Managing Editor of the Carlyle Letters Project at Duke University Press, North Carolina, spotted the envelope in a random search on the internet.

He said: "I make regular trawls for Carlyleana that show up in catalogs of manuscript dealers, major auction houses and even on [eBay](#)."

"We have had a special relationship with The John Rylands Library since the 1950s, when we acquired copies of a number of its manuscript letters and list 39 Carlyle letters from The John Rylands Library in our masterlist.

"So knowing of the Gaskell collection in Manchester, I immediately knew what it was when I spotted it and contacted Fran Baker at the Library to let them know."

Mary Barton, based on Gaskell's own observations, sympathetically portrayed the lives of the Manchester cotton workers, creating a sensation amid criticism from mill owners.

When it was published, Gaskell asked for copies to be sent to writers she admired, including Thomas Carlyle.

In a letter dated 5 December she complained of the 'impertinent and unjustifiable curiosity of people' about the authorship of her novel but that 'in the midst of all my deep and great annoyance, Mr Carlyle's letter has been most valuable; and has given me almost the only unmixed pleasure I have yet received from the publication of MB'.

Fran Baker, archivist at The John Rylands Library, said: "The letter this envelope originally held was sent before the author's identity became known, and directed to 186 The Strand; the address of Gaskell's publishers, Chapman and Hall.

"It was forwarded to Gaskell by Chapman and Hall, and was definitely in her hands by December 1848.

"The envelope bears no postage marks, suggesting it was handed in at the office, perhaps by a messenger sent on Carlyle's behalf."

She added: "At what point Carlyle's letter became separated from the envelope that originally contained it remains a mystery. We don't even know whether the envelope was forwarded to Gaskell with the [letter](#).

"If it was, one explanation for its subsequent disappearance might be that Gaskell was an avid autograph collector, and was always ready to pass on the letters and signatures of well-known figures to friends and acquaintances. She may therefore have forwarded the envelope, with Carlyle's precious signature, to a fellow collector.

"Its peregrinations during the past 150 years or so may never become known, but I'm delighted it has finally reached a permanent resting place, reunited with its original contents."

More information: Visit carlyleletters.dukejournals.org to see The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle.

Provided by University of Manchester

Citation: Letter and envelope together again after 165 years (2013, February 26) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-02-letter-envelope-years.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.