

## *Mary Barton's Chronology* \*

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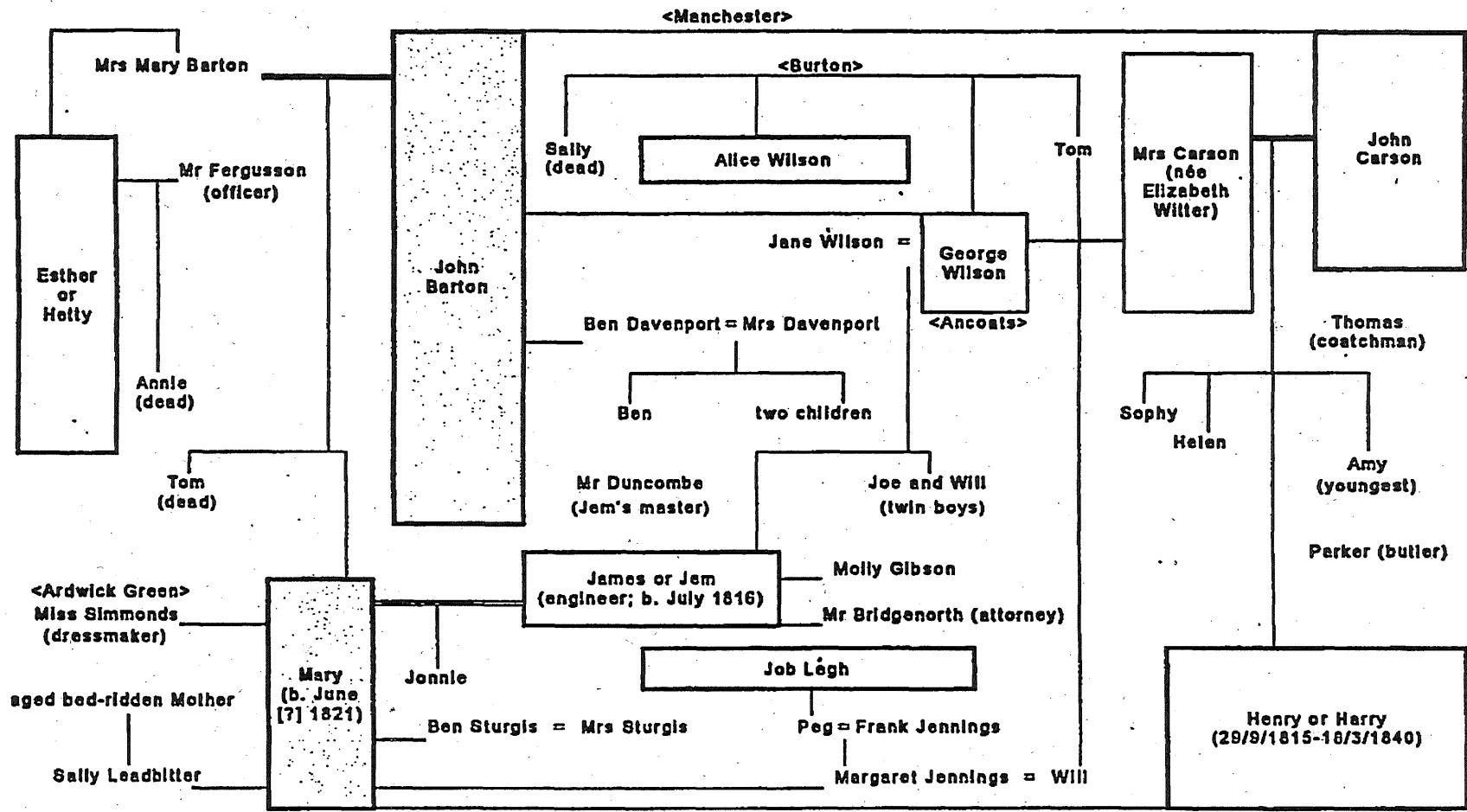
This article is an attempt to create as accurate a chronology of *Mary Barton* as possible.

The story opens with an excursion made by the Bartons and the Wilsons to Green Heys Fields (The subsequent explanation would be better understood if "Figure: Main Characters in *Mary Barton*" and "Table: Chronology of *Mary Barton*" were referred to whenever necessary). It takes place on "an early May evening" "ten or [a] dozen years ago."<sup>1</sup> Mrs Gaskell started on this novel soon after she lost her son on 10 August 1845 (Chadwick 156; Gérin 73; G. D. Sanders 17; Uglow 152); therefore, the year of the narrative's opening would be about 1834.<sup>2</sup>

The events of one day are traced until two fifths of the way through Chapter 3. Mary is nearly "thirteen" years old (10, 383) when her mother dies in childbirth at midnight on the same day (19). Hence, it can be surmised that she was born in the summer of 1821. The narrator tells us in Chapters 1 and 2 that Jem Wilson, a worker and her future husband, will be "eighteen" years old "in two months" (10, 17), which means his date of birth falls during July 1816.

"Three years" (26) have passed since Mrs Barton's death; Mary, "a girl of sixteen" (27), becomes apprenticed to Miss Simmonds, milliner and dressmaker. The story has moved on to 1837 by the end of Chapter 3. "Another year passed on," reports the narrator at the start of Chapter 4.

Figure: Main Characters in *Mary Barton*



Mary's first encounter with Margaret Jennings, a kind-hearted neighbour, and her grandfather Job Legh during "the early winter" (30) described in Chapters 4 and 5, therefore, is the event of 1838. The two young girls become close friends "ere the end of that winter" (45), when the story enters 1839. The fire at the Carsons' mill breaks out "towards the end of February" (48) of the same year. Chapter 6, portraying the vivid contrast between the poor labourers' kindness and the mill owner's indifference to the dying Ben Davenport, covers several days in "March" (64) 1839.

Mrs Davenport regains her strength in "a week or two" (83) after her husband's demise. The death of Wilson's twin boys (85-86) appears to take place in March or April because it happens soon after her recovery. This calculation accords with the chronological data in Chapter 8: Jem's Sunday afternoon visit to Mary is paid "about three weeks after" (93) his brothers' deaths, and in "early spring" (94) of "1839" (97).

Calendar facts and figures are scattered throughout the novel. The chronology slightly changes depending on which information we count on. One of the most reliable pieces of information with which we may determine the novel's time sequence, is found on pages 97 and 98, where the narrator relates how John Barton was appointed as one of the delegates to the Chartist petition of "spring ... 1839." Historically, this petition was submitted to Parliament in May (or, 14 June (Ward lvii)) 1839, and rejected on 12 July of the same year (Easson, Introduction x; Koga 120; Ward lvii). It can reasonably be supposed, therefore, that Chapters 8 and 9, which sketch Barton's departure for London and his miserable return, depict events that happened between May and July 1839.<sup>3</sup>

That Mary can secure two meals and tea a day at Miss Simmonds's (131) is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that the opening two-fifths (130-36) of Chapter 10 are dealing with events later in 1839. She was apprenticed to the dressmaker in 1837, three years after her mother's death (26), with the promise that she could dine and take tea there after "two

Table: Chronology of *Mary Barton*

Chapter	Time Inferred			Brief Summary of Each Scene	
	Year	Month	Day		
1	1834	5	one day	At Green Hey Fields, John Barton tells George Wilson about missing Esther and pitiless masters.	
2				A tea-party at the Bartons	
3				the death of Mrs Barton	
	1837			Mary is apprenticed to Mrs Simmonds.	
				Another year passes on.	
4	1838	winter	one day	Mary's first meeting with Margaret Jennings at old Alice's dwelling	
				Job Leigh appears.	
5	1839			Mary and Margaret become close friends.	
		2	one evening	Jem saves his father from the fire at Carsons' mill.	
			one evening	the plight of the starving Davenports	
6		3	next day	George Wilson calls on John Carson to have an infirmary order for Ben Davenport.	
				a few days later	Ben's funeral
7		3 or 4	one day	Mrs Davenport's recovery	
				next morning	the death of the Wilson twins; Jem's confession of love to Mary
				Mary prefers Harry Carson to Jem as her marriage partner.	
		4	one Sunday	Jem's fruitless visit to Mary	
8		spring		Barton is appointed a Manchester delegate to the Chartist petition.	
	5		one night	Neighbours come to Barton's house with their demands on the Parliament.	
			next morning	Barton's departure for London; Sally Leadbitter appears.	
	7		one evening	George Wilson's sudden death; Margaret tells Mary her debut as a singer.	
next evening		Barton tells Job, Margaret, and Mary his bitter experiences in London.			
			Barton becomes opium-addicted.		
10	1840	1	one afternoon	Mary's visit to Jane Wilson	
11		2	11	Barton turns a deaf ear to Esther's warning against Mary; Esther is imprisoned.	
				Barton's search for Esther	
				one evening	Soon after rejecting Jem's proposal, Mary discovers he is the man she truly loves.
				next day	Mary's avoidance of Harry
			evening	Harry's vicious intentions revealed	
				Harry and Jem's contrastive approaches to Mary	
12		3	4	Mary confides her love for Jem to Margaret.	
			5	Mary meets Will at Jane Wilson's house.	
13			9	Will entertains his new friends with his tales.	
14				Esther's release	
			10	Jem's interview with Esther	
				mutual distrust between masters and workers	
15			14	Mary notices Will's love for Margaret.	
			15	the scuffle between Harry and Jem	
16			16 Tue	Harry draws a caricature of worker delegates. An assassin is chosen.	

17	1840	3	18 Thu	Will's farewell visit to Mary	
18				Barton's assassination of Harry	
19				Harry's body is brought home	
20			19 Fri	Carson swears vengeance on the murderer.	
21				Mary calls at Jane Wilson's house to see decaying Alice.	
22				Mary hears Harry's death from Sally.	
23			20 Sat	a disguised policeman's interview with Jane	
24				Mary hears from Jane that her son was arrested on suspicion of murdering Harry.	
25				Mary dreams of her mother.	
26				Esther's visit to Mary	
27			21 Sun	The scrap of paper her aunt has brought reveals to Mary that the murderer is her father.	
28				Mary's efforts to prove Jem's alibi begin.	
29				Mary receives a subpoena.	
30				Mary finds that Jane also has received a subpoena; Alice becomes unconscious.	
31				Mary tells Jane her plan of rescuing Jem.	
32			22 Mon	Mary's anxiety about Jane's strength	
33				Jane's determination to go to the trial	
34				Mary discovers in Liverpool that Will has already left his lodging.	
35				Mary sits in a boat to catch the John Cropper.	
36				Mary's message is heard by Will.	
37				Ben Sturgis takes Mary home.	
38				Mr Bridgenorth, Jem's attorney, inclines to think him innocent.	
39				Job goes to Will's lodging to find Mary's action of the day.	
40			23 Tue	Job Legh deceives Jane to assure her of her son's safety.	
41				Mary spends the night at the Sturgises's home.	
42			24	Mary's sleepless night	
43				Jem wins the verdict of "Not Guilty."	
44				Mary becomes delirious.	
45			28 Sun	The Wilsons return home to see dying Alice.	
46				the death of Alice Wilson	
47			29	Alice's funeral	
48				John Barton reappears.	
49			one day	Jem nurses Mary at the Sturgises's house.	
50				Mary gradually recovers.	
51			4	5 [?]	Jem and Mary return home.
52				7	Barton's agony
53				8	Mary hears from Sally that Jem was dismissed from his foundry.
54					Jem discloses to Mary his plan of emigration.
55	Jane Wilson gives Mary a hearty welcome.				
56	9	Barton's confession of his guilt			
57		Carson reads the Bible.			
58	10	Barton dies in Carson's arms.			
59		Jem hides the truth from his mother for Mary's sake.			
60	one evening	Jem's talk with his former master			
61		Jane's condolatory visit to Mary.			
62	next day	Carson asks Job and Jem about the details of the murder.			
63		The emigration plan is arranged.			
64	late autumn	Mary and Jem talk about Esther.			
65		the death of Esther			
66	1842 or 43 [?]	late autumn	Mary and Jem live a happy life in Canada.		

years" (28).

Chastised by her father "one evening" for neglecting to see Jane Wilson, his late friend's wife, Mary calls on her the following afternoon (136). In order to pin down the time of this visit, the date of John Barton's meeting with his sister-in-law, Esther, on 11 February 1840, is of great help, because it occurs "[s]ome weeks after" (142) Mary's visit to Mrs Wilson. Therefore, it is most likely paid on a day in January 1840.

To clarify why the date of Barton's encounter with Esther can be dated as above, the date of his murdering Harry Carson, John Carson's son and Mary Barton's wealthy lover, provides a valuable clue. The narrator observes that the crime was committed "early on Thursday night" (273, 300), or 18 March (449); the year is no doubt 1840, insofar as the encounter is described immediately after the events of "summer" (132, 134, 136), 1839. She also makes it clear that it is on "Wednesday ... St Patrick's day [17 March]"<sup>4</sup> that John Barton calls on Jem to borrow the murder weapon (450).<sup>5</sup> The rendezvous between masters and workers, and the latter's drawing of lots to decide the assassin of Harry Carson, take place "on a Tuesday" (224): that is, 16 March 1840. Jem fights with Harry "some days" (247) before the fatal day, 18 March. If we presumed that the day of this scuffle is 15 March, Jem's meeting with Esther would fall on 10 March, because it happens on "the fifth" day (206) since the day on which he began to look for Harry — which was the day following his interview with her. Esther speaks with Jem on the very day when her one month's imprisonment (145, 184) is over. It can be deduced, therefore, that John Barton's encounter with Esther occurs on the night of 11 February 1840.

This inference accords with other chronological details. If we assume that the "evening" (164) when Mary acknowledges to Margaret her love for Jem — "some weeks" (167) after her January visit to Mrs Wilson — is that of 4 March 1840, the unexpected call of Will Wilson, the sailor, upon Alice, his aunt and foster-mother, is supposed to be made on 5 March; for, it is

"the next day" (169) that Mary welcomes her old playmate with Alice and Jane Wilson at Mrs Wilson's home. Mary comes to notice Will's love for Margaret by "ten days or so" (204) after his arrival in Manchester — that is, by around 14 March. He leaves the city on "Thursday" (224) evening, 18 March, the day of John Barton's shooting of Harry Carson (449); this dating is supported by Mary's words of regret to the departing Will: "But it's not a fortnight since you came" (225).

Esther walks to the scene of the murder at "dawn" (273) on a "Friday" (250, 273-74) to find a scrap of paper used as wadding for the gun on which Mary's name is inscribed in Jem's handwriting; she spends the day collecting details relevant to the homicide, and calls on Mary to give her the piece of paper "after midnight" (272), on Saturday, 20 March.

After Mary discovers that her father is the real murderer, the focus of the story shifts to her determined efforts to prove Jem's alibi. On Saturday "morning" (291), she calls on Job Legh to seek his advice; around "Saturday ... noon" (300), she recalls the name of Will's ship; on "Sunday morning" (317), she tells Jane Wilson her plan to rescue her son; and, all the necessary arrangements being worked out in two days, she takes a train to Liverpool "on Monday morning" (332), 22 March. Her breathtaking adventure in pursuit of Will, the only witness who can prove Jem's innocence, is undertaken that afternoon (342, 351, 354); her mission is to bring Will to Jem's trial which is to be conducted on "Tuesday" (311), 23 March. Hardly has his safety been assured than she falls into delirium resulting from her excessive physical and emotional strains, and is taken care of at the house of Ben Sturgis, a kind boatman, "that night" (395). Early on Wednesday morning (395, 397, 398), 24 March, Job Legh comes to his abode to tell Jem to go home with Mrs Wilson and Will to bid farewell to dying old Alice. They presumably arrive in Manchester that afternoon, only to see Alice meet a peaceful death "the day after their return" (399), on Thursday, 25 March. Her funeral is held on "Sunday afternoon" (400), 28 March, and shortly

after "eleven" (406) o'clock that night, Jem happens to glimpse John Barton enter his house. Jem goes back to Liverpool by the first train on 29 March (400) to find Mary still hovering between life and death at Sturgis's house.

The text gives no chronological details of the period of her convalescence except for two vague hints. The first is found on page 429 when John Barton tells John Carson that he has been suffering from an acute agony of repentance "this fortnight past" "since that night [18 March]." If we took his words literally, the date of his talk with the mill-owner would fall on 31 March. Furthermore, it is made explicit on page 421 that it takes place on the "fourth" day "from Mary's return home." If we bring these two details together, we can deduce that Mary comes back home from Liverpool on 28 March. This deduction conflicts with our previous argument which suggests she is still being nursed at Sturgis's home on that day. In consequence, we can only take John Barton's "fortnight" as a statement which provides an approximate, rather than a definite, measure of the period of Mary's recuperation — that is, as meaning a period of about a few weeks. The following two extracts from Chapter 34 serve as a second clue to determining the term of her convalescence: "There came a fine, bright, balmy day. And Mary tottered once more out into the open air" (412); "At last a day, fine enough for Mary to travel on, arrived" (413). They imply that her sickness is not so slight as to be cured in a few days but serious enough to require more than a few weeks of recovery. Because these two hints suggest "a few weeks" to be Mary's most likely period of convalescence, let us advance the hypothesis, for the sake of convenience, that her recovery takes two weeks — from 23 March, the day of her being seized with convulsions at the court, to 5 April, the day of her returning home. According to this hypothesis, Jem would spend one week from 29 March, the day of his return to Liverpool, before taking Mary home on 5 April. They take a train which departs around "two" (414) o'clock in the afternoon, and reach Manchester that same day. This time sequence looks appropriate, but



involves the controversial problem of whether John Barton's account of those "seven days" is acceptable or not.

As has been explained above, John Barton disappears from his home on the night of 18 March, and reappears on the moonlit evening (407) of 28 March. He lives alone for some "days" (417), receives his daughter on 5 April, and divulges his crime to John Carson at around "eight o'clock" (424) on the "fourth" (421) night after her arrival — 8 April. In other words, there is a time span of twenty-one days between his act of violence (18 March) and his initial confession (8 April) which he reckons as only fourteen days himself. It is debatable as to whether to regard his statement of that "one week" as the understandable error of a character who has suffered three weeks of an agonising conscience, or as an authorial anachronism. To argue this point would carry us so far away from our present purpose, that I shall not attempt to resolve this contradiction.

John Barton breathes his last in John Carson's arms in the early "morning" (438) of 9 April. On the following "morning" (442, 446, 449), John Carson's note to summon Job Legh and Jem arrives. His interview with the two labourers, on which Chapter 37 centres, is held on the afternoon of the same day, 10 April, when he asks about the details of the murder and John Barton's motive for the attack. The narrator relates on page 449 that this interrogation is carried out a "few weeks" after his son's death (18 March), or, according to our calculation, on the twenty-fourth day since the day of the killing. This almost exact correspondence between these two time sequences is one of the strongest pieces of evidence to prove the accuracy of our chronology. The same is true of the narrator's statement at the end of Chapter 36 in which she declares the events she has related took place "six or seven years ago" (447). As the main events of the story are set in 1840, the date of this narrative is generally supposed to be 1846 or 1847. This precisely coincides with the years when Mrs Gaskell was actually engaged in the novel's composition.

In all probability, Esther's burial (463) takes place during April 1840, because Jem's emigration, arranged not "many days after" (458) John Barton's funeral, has to be carried out "almost immediately" (458), and because she is laid to rest before Jem starts his voyage.

The novel closes with the idyllic scene of a cheerful home in Canada. The "imperfect" (464) pronunciation of Johnnie, Mary and Jem's baby boy, suggests that he is little more than two years old. Hence, the year is presumably 1842 or 1843.

Critics' opinions differ as to the years in which the novel is mainly set.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, our detailed chronology shows that the story begins in May 1834, chiefly describes the events of March and April 1840, and ends in 1842 or 1843.

#### Notes

\* This article is part of the paper read at the 10th Annual General Meeting of "The Gaskell Society of Japan," which was held at Jissen Women's University on 10 October 1998.

- 1) Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, ed. Angus Easson (Oxford: OUP, 1987) 2. Subsequent page references are to this edition, and hereafter given parenthetically in the text.
- 2) Easson states the story begins about 1835/37 (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 74); the opening year must have been inferred from counting backwards from 1847, when, according to the author's observation in her Preface, this tale was complete (xxxvi). An anonymous reviewer estimates it as 1836 (Easson, *Critical Heritage* 128); Craik 1838 (6); Hopkins (71) and Tillotson (205) 1839; Lucas (52) and Stone (146) in the late 1830s; Wheeler 1838-39 (45).
- 3) Craik refers to this 1839 petition as an important example of Mrs Gaskell's adroitness in incorporating history into fiction (18). Her view is supported by Brodetsky (18), Hopkins (75), Ward (lvii), and Wright (Introduction x).
- 4) The perpetual calendar shows that 17 March 1840 was actually a Tuesday.
- 5) The narrator writes on page 395 that it is "only two days before" the day of murder, or on 16 March, that John Barton borrows the gun from Jem; this

statement contradicts the date specified on page 450 – 17 March. I shall follow the latter date because it is one of the few concrete dates given, and because the chronology will then run more smoothly.

- 6) For example, 1836 and after (G. D. Sanders 20); 1837-42 (Wright, Introduction vii); 1838 or 1840 (Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 48, 74); 1839-41 (Charles Kingsley qtd. in Easson, *Critical Heritage* 153); 1839-42 (Ganz 49); around 1840 (Brodetsky 16); 1841-43 (early reviewers qtd. in Easson, *Critical Heritage* 74, 108); about 1842 (W. R. Greg qtd. in Easson, *Critical Heritage* 164, 172); 1842-43 (Ward lv); 1840s (Chadwick 208; Gill 21; Lane, Introduction v; Rubenius 22; Williams 99).

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