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BOOK REVIEW

By Leon Drucker

SELECTIONS FROM GEORGE ELIOT'S LETTERS

Ed. Gordon S. Haight Yale University Press 1985  £25.00

This is a most welcome and meticulous distillation of Dr. Haight's The George Eliot Letters in nine volumes, which in this age of the video cassette will be inaccessible even in many good reference libraries. My only reservation about the editing of this very readable book of some 650 letters in 560 pages is that the letters themselves are not numbered. I certainly commend the informative headnotes above each letter, though sometimes the longer the letter, the briefer the note, which proves that Dr. Haight is never one to obtrude between himself and his heroine.

The first sentence of the second letter in the book, written when George Eliot was aged 19, places her homely character. "My dear friend, I pursue the same plan with my letter as I used when a little child with my pudding, that of dispatching the part for which I had the least relish first".

Her first book, The Life of Jesus, was published in 1846. I find it interesting that, in preparing this for publication, she worried herself over an obscure matter of a date in the Jewish Passover - the 14th of Nissan; not too many Jews would know the answer today. But when she embarked on her last novel, Daniel Deronda, the roots were obviously deep and long.
In these pages George Eliot shows herself a woman of conviction rather than opinion. But her statements on women's rights were sometimes surprisingly equivocal. In a letter to Mrs. Nassau John Senior, dated October 1869, "There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn than on the 'Women Question'. It seems to me to overhang abysses, of which even prostitution is not the worst. Conclusions may seem easy so long as we keep large blinkers on and look in the direction of our own private path." At the same time, she comes out unhesitatingly in favour of equal adult education for men and women. More intimately in November 1873, in a note to Dr. Allbutt, she explains the physical act of writing: "I have for the last three years taken to writing on my knees, throwing myself backward in my chair, and having a high support to my feet. It is a great relief not to bend, and in this way at least I get advantage from the longsightedness which involves the early need of glasses".

In August 1872 she writes to her publisher, John Blackwood, "Mr. Lewes examines all the papers before I see them, and cuts out any criticisms which refer to me". And in a note to a letter dated February 1857, the editor records 'This is the first appearance of the nom-de-plume GEORGE ELIOT. She chose GEORGE because of George Henry Lewes and ELIOT because it was a good, mouth-filling, easily pronounced word'.

Although we may sense a proper Victorian reticence about her domestic affairs, never can her bibliographic record be more open. In September 1861 we learn that her advance from Blackwood's was £1,760 for the first 8,000 copies of Silas Marner. Another letter (May 1868) to
Blackwood shows what an unusual author she was: "You appear to offer me £300 unconditionally for 2000 copies printed (of her poem The Scholar Gypsy). This I do not wish. If any of the 2000 remain unsold I do not intend to be paid for copies left on your hands". (The emphasis is mine).

Finally, a letter to her friend Barbara Bodichon. I suppose a shilling then must easily be worth £3 or £4 now. But the letter demonstrates a certain impracticality, I feel. Couldn't G.E. have simply given grumbling Grace the shilling and written it off?

"The Priory, Regents Park
January 1869.

Dear Barbara,

.... Do you remember borrowing a shilling from Grace, to pay for your cab, when you brought me the hamper of pretty things for the summer? She told me of it the other day, and she is so accurate about money matters that I have no doubt that she is right. I forget such things myself and therefore feel sure that you, like me, will be glad to be reminded. Will you, when you come again, just give Amelia the shilling when she opens the door for you, and say what it is for.

Yours always

M.E.L."