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BOOK REVIEW: FREDERIC HARRISON: THE VOCATIONS OF A POSITIVIST

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By Martha S. Vogeler (Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1984)

This book, the result of more than half a lifetime's research, provides a much-needed insight into the nature of English Positivism and one of its leading disciples, Frederic Harrison. It opens excitingly with the twenty-three year old Harrison meeting the ageing but wonderfully fluent Auguste Comte, and being so mesmerised that the interview changed the course of his life and gave him his major 'vocation', the spreading of the Positivist gospel. It is a fascinating story, not so much for the positivism but because of the sheer variety of the man and his interests and indestructible energy. Martha Vogeler's great merit is that her narrative is fair; it has perspective, and never succumbs to the lure of idolatry.

Harrison was always comfortably off, went to Oxford, got a First, studied law, literature, wrote reviews, was interested in politics, contemporary history and philosophy, and never ceased to give himself to the positivist cause. He was a prime mover in support of the trades union movement in the 1860's, but had no wish to change the class system of this country; he encouraged the young George Gissing, and even made him tutor to his own children. He married a woman twenty years younger than himself, received her support in every way, and was a happy family man; he was opposed to
votes for women, and his wife dutifully undertook a poll in Kent which showed that both sexes were almost equally (and overwhelmingly) against women's suffrage. Keeping to the positivist ban on second marriages, he deplored George Eliot's to John Cross after her twenty-four years with Lewes. Yet he was full of inconsistencies, actually congratulating Hardy on his marriage to Florence Dugdale three years after the death of his first wife.

Such is Martha Vogeler's narrative spell that she keeps the reader interested in Harrison's many activities throughout. And because of her meticulous perspective, we watch a progress which is a curious mixture of humanitarian impulse, blindness and bias which is never less than real and committed. It is his relationship with George Eliot that concerns us here. Though he was a great admirer, he was never in awe. He certainly disapproved of her liaison with Lewes, and often asserted later that they 'had never lived together as man and wife'. This extraordinary belief is only made acceptable by Harrison's equally extraordinary naivety about sexual relations, a naivety surely apparent in his appraisal of Wilfred Scawen Blunt, whose amorous intrigues were apparently unknown to him.

Harrison first met George Eliot on New Year's Day 1860 and dared to disagree with her. But it is obvious that she respected him, and consulted him about the legal details of Felix Holt. The latter work impressed him greatly, he claimed to know 'families where it was being read aloud like poetry', and even read it himself '4 or 5 times'. He cherished the idea that she would one day write something embodying the 'grand features of Comte's world'. He was, however, bothered by what Martha Vogeler calls 'George Eliot's realism'. She says that 'he again
contributed to it in his own way by providing legal details for Daniel Deronda in the summer of 1866'. We would accept this, since he did, but Daniel Deronda was not even in George Eliot's mind at this time, its starting point being more correctly ascribed to 1872 as she was completing Middlemarch. But this is a minor point. Harrison criticised The Spanish Gypsy, saying that it was 'one of the most unhappy conceits that ever entered human brain'. He continued, however, to press for an 'idealisation of the Positivist vision of society' from her. Fortunately for posterity, she trusted her own judgement on her own subjects.

Though he disapproved of her marriage to Cross and was very glad that he had never seen her as 'Mrs. Cross', he endorsed the reticence and the method of John Cross in his George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals. Perhaps we should take this as our clue to the man. Like so many Victorians, George Eliot included, he was a radical - conservative or, if it is preferable, a conservative - radical. Individual or political or philosophical views are set, and firmly set, within the Victorian context, which accepts aspects of change but not change. Harrison was conditioned by the social, moral and political attitudes of his time, and that time extends into the third decade of the twentieth century. It involves a hatred of Germany which goes back to the period before the Franco-Prussian war, and it involves a condemnation of strikes and the improvement of working conditions despite his earlier sympathy with the emergence of Trade Unionism. Because of his own social position, he was never happy with the working class; he moved in a world which was financially cushioned, and deplored any threat to it, even fearing a 'violent explosion' on the labour front. He consulted friends
about how best to safeguard his investments (admittedly he had lost about £2,000 in an earlier speculation). Yet we cannot help but admire the man. His latter years were spent in writing on a variety of topics, and if his critical judgements were wayward, they were at least interesting and at best trenchant and provocative.

This is an important study for anyone interested in the Victorian period. The early part of the book is convincing, and throughout one can only admire the style in which the successive phases of Harrison's life and career are charted clearly and with verve. In the latter part one feels that Martha Vogeler is trying to get too much into the space, but it still remains impressive. She rightly says, I think, that one should not overestimate the closeness of Harrison's relationship with George Eliot. He was there as a friend to be consulted, and ironically, even after her death, he was again consulted, this time by Herbert Spencer as to whether she should be buried in Westminster Abbey. He advised against it on religious grounds, though he attended her burial in Highgate Cemetery which was preceded by a Unitarian service. We are told that Harrison 'rode in the fourth mourning carriage with...two men associated with Daniel Deronda, the novel that to him had revealed how great was the gap between her religious aspirations and his own: Frederic Burton, whose illustrations for the novel she cherished...' Did she? Were there any? There were no illustrations of Daniel Deronda in any edition published in her lifetime. Perhaps this is another error, but it cannot undermine the many many good things in a book which enriches our knowledge of Frederic Harrison and his times.