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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON
November 25th 1990
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY
by Ted Veasey, *local historian*

As a local historian I have been thinking to what extent did George Eliot portray Nuneaton - more especially in her most local book *Scenes of Clerical Life* - and how good a historian was she in this work.

Essential dates, first of all. George Eliot was born in 1819 and wrote *Scenes* in 1857-58. She sets the events of *Amos Barton* and *Janet's Repentance* some 25 years before the date of writing; that is roughly 1830 when she was a young girl of some eleven years of age. *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story* starts in 1820 but really deals with events of the late 1780s. It is perhaps noteworthy that this is the least local of the three short novels, possibly reflecting her unsureness of events which happened long before her own life. Though the main part of the story takes place at Cheverel Manor (Arbury Hall) and the Newdigates are minutely observed, the Hall is far removed from Shepperton where Gilfil takes his heart-broken and ailing young wife.

What picture then does George Eliot give of her own village and its neighbouring town in the other two novels?

First Shepperton: "A flat ugly district this; depressing enough to look at even on the brightest days. The roads are black with coal-dust, the brick houses dingy with smoke; and at that time - the time of the handloom weavers - every other cottage had a loom at its window where you might see a pale sickly-looking man or woman pressing a narrow chest against a board, and doing a sort of tread-mill work with legs and arms." Milby also was "a dingy-looking town, with a strong smell of tanning up one street and a great shaking of looms up another." And Paddiford Common - "a dismal district where you heard the rattle of the hand-loom and breathed the smoke of the coalpits."

These descriptions certainly give a somewhat unflattering view of the area; a backcloth before which her characters play out their lives. But how fully do the descriptions match reality?

Nuneaton in the period when George Eliot set the two stories was a rapidly growing town. Between 1700 and 1831 the population had more than tripled from about 3,500 to 12,870. Ribbon weaving, which George Eliot mentions above, had become by far

the largest single industry. In the 1851 Census one third of the whole population and a third of the working population respectively are weavers. Coal-mining and brick making were still small numerically, well under 10% of the workers, even though they were beginning to dominate the landscape physically as they continued to do well into modern times. The farming population, about which she wrote with such knowledge and understanding from her own early life and her father's profession, was still important. The streets of Milby and Shepperton may have been filled with the rattle of looms and the villages enshrouded in coal-dust and smoke but the country was rarely more than yards from the urban hovels. This was because, as the population grew, the built-over area of the town did not. New houses were infillings on old sites, especially along the long medieval gardens of Nuneaton which became covered with the infamous courts - ten to fifteen tiny houses where there had been originally but one or two.

I won't dwell on the appalling sanitary conditions of the town; sufficient to say that the annual death rate was about thirty per thousand - well above crisis levels even for the nineteenth century - and nearly three times as high as today. Though death plays a central part in the stories of Amos Barton, Mr. Gilfil and Janet Dempster, the reader is not really aware that for many, probably most, families death was a common occurrence (one in four children on average). Many parents died young and one parent families are not a new feature.

Far more important in 1830 and 1831 than the onset of evangelical religion in the area was the worst slump in the ribbon trade, caused by the relaxation of a ban on imported silk ribbons which undercut local products. Unemployment rocketed, more than half the looms were unemployed. Driven into poverty the weavers only avoided starvation thanks to the charitably organised soup kitchens which dispensed record quantities. There were riots in 1830 and 1831; not instigated by Lawyer Dempster but by the need for work and food. Poverty on this scale should have faced Amos Barton on his visits to Shepperton College rather than just Poll Fodge, Old Maxum, Silly Jim, Mrs. Brick and Mr. Fitchett.

George Eliot's Nuneaton, then, is one which leaves out most of the social and economic conditions and changes which are the concern of modern historians, but she herself acknowledged this. In a letter to Blackwood she says: "The real town was much more vicious than my Milby."

What George Eliot does with her Milby is to convey accurately and historically the feeling of life in small-town provincial Midland England. Hers is not a history of

events and social and economic trends, but a history of a community of local people. And her characters are not slavish copies of people she had known or knew about. Actual people were little more than pegs on which to hang the characters and events of her stories. Mr Tryan was the archetypal evangelical clergyman, not a copy of the Revd. Jones. George Eliot excelled at describing what made town life tick before the more formal days of Boards of Health and Town Councils. Her picture of Lawyer Dempster, Dr. Pilgrim, Mr. Tomlinson the rich miller, and their cronies and toadies in the Red Lion, dominating local affairs, scheming to their best advantage, orchestrating the opposition to the detested Edgar Tryan and his new-fangled evangelicalism: attitudes well expressed by the anonymous author of the Nuneaton Diary:

“Thus ended Mr. Jones (who) was of the Evangelical school in Religion and had caused more division and quarrels on a religious score in the Town among Church people and Dissenters than had taken place during the last half century”.

Equally vivid is the web of personal relationships and mutual dependence. Janet takes food to the consumptive Sally Martin. Janet herself in turn is sustained during her marriage crisis by Mrs. Pettifer. In the same way, the impecunious and improvident Amos Barton is helped by the Pattens and the Hacketts.

In the work which my research group is doing on the history of the town we are always conscious that our reconstruction of the past is based almost entirely on written evidence, mainly of a statistical nature: parish registers, census returns, probate inventories, rent rolls and land deeds. What we lack is a record of how people thought, what people said, what was the web of personal relationships which bound together and occasionally rent asunder the local community. This is what George Eliot did so imaginatively and so historically for her Nuneaton. Her reconstruction of the past - so different from ours - is no less valid. George Eliot's memory is indeed immortal. While her novels are read, and I am sure they will be, increasingly, for hers are real people in true situations, she will still live, and in her immortality she has made the town in which she spent her formative years equally immortal.