

1996

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Handley, Graham, "The Two Georges and The Gunner" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 272.
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THE TWO GEORGES AND THE GUNNER

by Graham Handley

Edward Bruce Hamley (1824-93) was a dedicated professional soldier, a military historian and theorist and a man of varied literary interests. He was a member of a distinguished Cornish family, and was educated at Bodmin Grammar School and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, being commissioned in the Royal Artillery in 1843, thereafter serving in Ireland and Canada (1844-8), and devoting himself to field sports, reading, and indulging his love of cats. His earliest papers appeared in *Fraser's* (1849-50), and in 1853 his superbly ironic novel *Lady Lee's Widowhood* made him a passingly famous writer. But the Crimean War clipped his literary wings. He went with Sir Richard Dacres to Turkey, thereafter acting as his adjutant in the Crimea: at the Alma his horse was hit by cannon shot, while at Inkerman it was killed under him, Hamley narrowly avoiding capture. Later he was to write an account (he had already sent letters to *Blackwood's Magazine* which were published) of the Sebastopol campaign (1855) and *The War in the Crimea* (1891). He was mentioned four times in dispatches, climbed the military ladder at regular intervals, met John Blackwood (who became a lifetime friend) and edited the first series of *Tales from Blackwood* (1858). To the latter he contributed two of his own stories, and in the following year his career took a new turn when he was appointed Professor of Military History at the new Staff College at Sandhurst. There he remained for six years, his lectures providing the basis for his major work, *The Operations of War* (1866). His love of animals is reflected in *Our Poor Relations*, originally published in *Blackwood's* in 1870. By 1877 he was a Major-General, served in Bulgaria in 1879, was made a KCMG in 1880, and in 1882 as a Lieutenant-General he was given command of a regiment in Egypt. To the presiding general he submitted a plan for an attack on Aboukir Bay, but another strategy was adopted of which Hamley was not informed. He found himself commanding two battalions at the battle of Tel-el-Kebir: convinced that his troops were responsible for the victory there, he was humiliated when they were not mentioned. He returned to England feeling that he had been wronged, and although he was made a KCB he held no further official appointment. He was retained on the active list largely through sympathetic public opinion until 1890, and promoted to full general in that year. Meanwhile he had become a Conservative MP for Birkenhead (1886). Earlier he had shown a strongly anti-Gladstone streak. In 1884 he had been disgusted by the slaughter of Egyptian troops at Sinkat, and blamed Gladstone squarely for the disaster. He accused him of being withdrawn, out of touch, egocentric and dictatorial: 'He is his own Pope If facts contradict him, he puts them calmly aside He is essentially shifty and evasive.' Hamley spent much time at his club (the Athenaeum) and was looked after in his final years by his niece. He died in 1893. He never married.

As a regular contributor to *Blackwood's* perhaps inevitably he came to the notice of George Henry Lewes and George Eliot, and subsequently appears to have been initially styled by them as 'The Gunner'. In January 1860 his brief burlesque 'The Last French Hero' appeared, and Lewes read it, admitting to John Blackwood that he had 'a shrewd

guess as to its military author' (*Letters*, III, 242-3). The full title of the piece, which is a delightful *jeu d'esprit*, is 'The Last French Hero: Being Some Chapters of a Very French Novel Not Yet Published – by Alexandre Sue-Sand Fils', an indication that he is parodying silly novels by French lady novelists, though the satire is certainly aimed at Dumas. Lewes would have appreciated the farcical plot, with its vivacious *exposé* of French fictional morality ('it is better to be faithfully fickle than falsely true') and its cartoon characters. Auguste Grenouille (frog) is even undeterred by the fact that he has unknowingly fallen in love with his grandmother, her beauty mysteriously preserved and apparently changeless – 'That my father should be your son is an untoward accident. That I should love you is an unalterable necessity.' This does change, though, when through his father's initiative he witnesses the transformation of a frail old woman into his beautiful Ninon at the hand of a painter. She hears Auguste's voice, laughs hysterically, her face cracking as she does so: 'I then knew why Ninon never laughed. Mirth does not suit enamel.' Hamley's squib is almost four years on from Lewes's farewell to his own fiction in the same magazine with 'Metamorphosis: A Tale' (May-July 1856), but the quality of the metamorphosis is certainly different, Lewes's French Revolutionary context having some moral seriousness of intention (and comic flippancy), Hamley's contexts providing in contrast all the fun of sparkling fantasy. By 25 May 1860 John Blackwood was telling George Eliot that Hamley could not accept the death of Maggie Tulliver 'and will be glad if you will introduce him to the original' (*Letters*, III, 298). Obviously Hamley suspected that *she* was that original. Anyway, he dined with the two Georges at Greenwich on 19 June 1861 (*Letters*, III, 427), and a month after that Lewes describes 'a pleasant visit' from Hamley to 'Mrs Lewes' (*Letters*, III, 441). We wait nearly five years for the next reference in the *Letters* (IV, 293), when John Blackwood tells George Eliot about Hamley's *The Operations of War Explained and Illustrated* (1866). She responds by saying that she intends to read it (it is on her 'revolving desk'), echoing Blackwood's 'high opinion' of the author. In April 1868 Hamley calls, and she records that he was 'looking handsomer than ever' (*Letters*, IV, 431). In June Hamley reviewed *The Spanish Gypsy in Blackwood's* (more of this below): he called at the Priory in January 1869, and in that month in 1871 he received a warm letter from George Eliot (*Letters*, V, 134) commending him for his stance over the German ruthlessness against French villages and property. The occasion was his letter to the *Times* (24 January 1871) and her immediate 'I write to say God bless you' is followed by 'your letter . . . contains the best expression of right principle – I was almost ready to say, the only good sensible words' on the conflict between the French and the Germans. She urges him to continue to express his humane views.

Stray references to Hamley occur after this, and almost a year after Lewes's death he visits her (December 1879), though their talk, to her regret, is interrupted. Doubtless there were other visits and meetings not recorded, but essentially Hamley is on the fringe of the George Eliot circle, though this should not diminish his interest for us. It seems unlikely on the face of it that she could be interested in *The Operations of War*, though her heartfelt letter about German atrocities cited above testifies to her emotional involvement in a major contemporary event. Other connections are significant. *Our Poor Relations* was published in 1870, appearing in a single volume in 1872. It is in the main current of

Hamley's sympathies, reflecting his love of animals and his horror at their abuse. At times he echoes the lyrical note which Lewes had struck in *Studies in Animal Life* (1862) and earlier in *Sea-Side Studies* (1858): 'A leaf holds a family, a clod a community, and there is material for the speculations of a lifetime in the tenants of the neighbouring meadow, and of the brook that waters it'. Hamley sees man as being 'surrounded by a wide circle of fear. The creatures around him have learnt, and taught their young, the lesson that he is as malignant as he is powerful'. He deplores 'the insatiate rapacity of man' in the ocean, attacks vivisection, which he feels is so often 'prolonged and horrible tortures', condemns the collecting of moths, and adds that one 'may feel disposed (parodying Madame Roland as she was led to the guillotine) to exclaim, "O Science, what deeds are done in the name!"' Here of course he departs from Lewes, but there is an insistent compassion and pathos in his depiction of man's inhumanity to creatures, whether domesticated or wild. He says an old horse, now past usefulness, 'asks for bran and gets a bullet; it is only his corn that he wants bruised when the knacker arrives with the pole-axe'. Lewes and George Eliot were animal lovers, witness Pug and her gratitude at receiving a copy of Dr John Brown's *Rab and His Friends*. And in his moving book Hamley particularly commends her portrait of Vixen in *Adam Bede* and of the ape Annibal in *The Spanish Gypsy*.

Shakespeare's Funeral and Other Papers was published in 1889. The funeral itself is a brilliant pastiche, with Drayton and Raleigh's son arriving on the day without knowing that Shakespeare is dead. But it is his critical independence in some of the other essays and reviews which command our attention. 'False Coin in Poetry' tries to establish what is real as distinct from what is trite and exaggerated. Dickens's later novels are censured because they depart from the vein of humour which made him. *Morte d'Arthur* is a masterpiece, but the idylls which followed are self-indulgent, while 'Turner's later extravagances, no less than his early achievements, are worshipped by crowds of devotees following their high priest, Ruskin.' He attacks excess in Wordsworth's 'Laodamia' (interesting in view of Lewes's cunning use of the poem in 'Metamorphoses') and triteness in 'Ruth', while Byron's 'Ode to Napoleon' is 'like a speech in a Surrey melodrama'. These remarks arise from his reading of Arnold's selection, and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* is also castigated for many of its choices, like Herrick's 'Whenas in silks...', Herrick being an 'amorous ecclesiastic' whose work was 'generally thin'. There is a long review of Cross's *George Eliot's Life* which consists of straight summary and an uncritical acceptance of Cross's method, and there is much in the appraisal which reflects Hamley's prejudices as well as his understanding. Noting that George Eliot was brought up on Scott and Bunyan, for example, he suggests that 'she could never have become what she did if for these had been substituted, let us say, the monstrous indigestibilities of Mr Macdonald, or Mr Wilkie Collins.' If that is indulgent, this is not:

In reading *Adam Bede*, it is impossible not to perceive her inestimable good fortune in having a social origin no higher than to be the daughter of a man who began life as a master carpenter, and ended it as a land-agent. Most persons born into a station favourable to the writing of novels, stand far from the inner life of the classes socially beneath them. But here we have

the quite new combination of the highest culture dealing with the life of the working classes from their own standpoint. Among the infinite advantages resulting from this, it was one quite unshared by any other writer to have had an aunt who was a Methodist preacher.

There is, I think, an undue stress on Lewes's dedication to her, where Hamley feels that her later life was like that of 'some princess in a fairy tale, guarded by spells against annoyance'. But the line, the sympathy, the recognition of George Eliot's greatness, is clear: it never once degenerates into worship or false praise. He believes that as her later works evolve she becomes more the theorist than the observer, hence the failure as poetry of *The Spanish Gypsy*, which is 'a metaphysical and ethnological problem in action'. Hamley enunciates, even inaugurates, what was to become a common critical view of these later works, namely the lapse from the picture to the diagram. But his voice is an independent voice: it is outside that of the professional reviewer. It is at once conservative and radical, the voice of the Victorian humanist reared in the Christian tradition: it is not unlike the voice of George Eliot herself. And in his only full-scale novel we find an authorial irony which in a way anticipates George Eliot's mode:

If Lady Lee had been that exceedingly disagreeable character, a perfect pattern of a woman, so often met with in the pages of romance – so seldom, fortunately, in real life, – I need hardly say these portions of her history would never have been chronicled So I would warn those readers who, with their tastes depraved by a long course of didactic fiction, expect to find her, perhaps a model for the Widows of England, that she has none of those pernicious excellences which would qualify her for the honour. (Chapter 13)

The snipe at Mrs Ellis, who had published such instructive moralities as *The Women of England*, *The Daughters of England*, *The Wives of England* and *The Mothers of England*, is sufficiently obvious but nonetheless effective. Hamley has, though, one endearing characteristic which he certainly did not share with George Eliot: he was able to laugh, like Thackeray, at his own fiction.

I have read most of what Hamley wrote, and have never been bored, never impatient, though I have often felt an edge of disagreement with what he said. He can be entertaining, realistic, ironic, pictorial, the humane current always flowing. His pristine and direct evaluation of *Voltaire* (1877), his careful, measured putting down of Carlyle in *Thomas Carlyle* (reissued in 1881 on the death of its subject, a kind of redressive obituary), the exemplary *War in the Crimea* (Kinglake without the dressing), together with the works mentioned in the course of this paper and others for which there is not space, are sufficient indication of his wide interests and his independence of judgment and spirit. I like to think that Lewes the scientist and Hamley the soldier discussed the living nature around them: I like to think that the contemporary awareness which George Eliot displays in her two final works of fiction, *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* owe some-

thing to the 'world-historic' position of her friend Edward Hamley. She uses the phrase in both these works. And was the Battle of Sadowa (3 July 1866), in which the Prussians gained a decisive victory over the Austrians and thus continued their nationalistic surge, 'world-changing' (*Daniel Deronda*, Chapter 50) through her hindsight plus Hamley's prescience? Not being a modern biographer, I shall never know. But I cannot think that the quality of Hamley's literary and cultural personality went unappreciated either by Lewes or by George Eliot, and I believe that something of that quality, an essence which each of us takes from the fineness of another, was subsumed into their own literary lives, the real biographies by which they live.

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