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Adams, Bill, "An Echo of The "Holy War"" (1999). *The George Eliot Review*. 341.
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AN ECHO OF THE 'HOLY WAR'

by *Bill Adams*

George Eliot's 'Holy War' began on 2 January 1842 and lasted for four and a half months. That day her father made a significant entry in his Journal: 'Went to Trinity Church in the forenoon. . . Mary Ann did not go'. In the protracted dispute with her father that followed this refusal to accompany him to church, her friends the Sibrees arranged for her to meet the Rev. Francis Watts, Professor of Theology at Spring Hill College, Birmingham, to try to help her resolve her difficulties. Their meeting probably took place in March 1842, and subsequently she wrote him six letters between April 1842 and February 1843. All of these letters are published from typewritten copies held in the National Library of Scotland. These copies were made sometime during the last hundred or so years, after which the originals disappeared from view into unknown private hands.

In 1998 the George Eliot Fellowship was approached for advice on behalf of a lady wishing to dispose of a letter thought to have been written by George Eliot from Solihull. Since there is no known connection between the novelist and Solihull we asked for a photocopy to enable the handwriting and other details to be checked. When the copy came it was clearly in George Eliot's hand, and headed not 'Solihull', but 'Foleshill'. Mary Ann began all her letters in this way when she was living at Bird Grove with her father from 1841 to 1849. There was no date on the letter, but an accompanying envelope was endorsed (in a different hand) 'M. A. Evans to Frs Watts (11th April 1842)'. The next check revealed that there was indeed a letter to him written that day and published in *The George Eliot Letters* from a manuscript at Yale University — but the text was entirely different! However, a further search of the published letters soon revealed the truth: the 'new' letter was the original of the one dated '[4 July 1842]'. Using funds from the generous legacy from the estate of the late Daphne Carrick, the Fellowship was able to negotiate the purchase of the letter itself for presentation on loan to Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery to ensure its proper preservation and display.

There is one small but significant difference between the published version and the original. In the penultimate paragraph, the phrase 'It gives me much pain to think' should read 'It gives me acute pain to think'. The difference might be said to reflect the 'acuteness' with which the great novelist always chooses words in her correspondence.

Note

1. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), I, 142.