George Eliot's English Travel: "Widely Sundered Elements"

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Although the Midlands people, places, and stories that turn up in *Scenes of Clerical Life* provide the first and most easily recognized Warwickshire models in George Eliot’s fiction, she also drew creatively on models she found during the many holidays and working trips she made throughout her life elsewhere within Britain. Readers’ recognitions of the originals of Amos Barton and Mr Tryan after the *Scenes* appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* led George Eliot to assure John Blackwood that she assembled her fiction not exclusively from her girlhood experiences but instead from ‘widely sundered elements’ (*GEL*, II, 459). But, while Midlands models appear often in the fiction, especially in the most distinctly Warwickshire-set works (*Scenes*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*), their frequency has obscured the truth of her defensive assertion to Blackwood. From the islands where George Henry Lewes pursued his research, to the spas and seashores they both visited for refreshment, to the Surrey towns where they summered within an hour’s distance from London, venues within England but outside Warwickshire contributed people and places to fiction from *Scenes of Clerical Life* through *Daniel Deronda* without ever having been associated with George Eliot or her writing. While Nuneaton/Chilvers Coton/Griff supplied more models than she cared to admit to her publisher, she also created her settings, plots, and characters out of far more ‘widely sundered’ English elements.

In addition to twenty or so European journeys, George Eliot made more than fifty long and short visits to English destinations. Nearly all of them contributed something to the fiction, whether to a current work-in-progress or to a novel which appeared some years after the journeys themselves. A holiday with her father in 1848, for example, provided a metaphor (the enclosed basin of Dorothea’s marriage) for *Middlemarch*, and a return to the same destination in 1853 suggested an important scene (the archery meet) in *Daniel Deronda*. A brief holiday in Surrey with her feminist friends that same summer yielded material for *Adam Bede* that may reduce the acuteness of Barbara Bodichon’s identification of its author. (If she recognized George Eliot’s treatments of incidents from their shared holiday her recognition did not depend entirely on her familiarity with her friend’s ‘wise, wide views’ [*GEL*, III, 56] as she wrote at the time.) The more famous Scilly/Jersey interlude in 1857 inspired settings, plots and characters that appear in ‘Janet’s Repentance’, *Adam Bede*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*.

George Eliot’s adaptations of such ‘widely sundered’ elements include modifications and emphases that sometimes help revise traditional interpretations of her characters. Each example mentioned above includes selections from the original models that emphasize various aspects of the characters involved. And in *Felix Holt*, for example, a Surrey estate owned by an important Victorian MP undergoes in George Eliot’s adaptation a significant change that heightens the humour of Mrs Holt’s character at the same time that it suggests her admirable responsibility as a parent both to Felix and to her foster child Job Tudge. In this and other examples, identifications of such models contribute to revisions of George Eliot characters at the same time as they provide examples confirming her assertion to Blackwood about ‘widely sundered elements’. Although the richness of these adaptations precludes a thorough
description of them all within this space, the *Felix Holt*/Deepdene example can serve to demonstrate some of the ways George Eliot put her travel within Britain to use in her novels.

After George Eliot and Lewes returned from their elopement to Germany, they settled in London and maintained homes there throughout their time together. But even when living in their most permanent home, the Priory, they seldom remained in London for longer than a few months at a time. For work, for play, and for health reasons, they took breaks in Surrey, Sussex, and the seaside towns along the southern coast of England. From the time of the 1856-57 *Seaside Studies* trips to Devon, Wales and the Scilly and Channel Islands, until they bought their own Surrey home near Godalming, they often travelled south of London.

One period during which George Eliot particularly relied on her intervals in the country, not for inspiration but for improved opportunities to write, occurred during the serialization of *Romola*. She handled the demanding publication schedule partly by seeking out rural peace and unpolluted air, and, although she tried a variety of destinations, the one she returned to most often was Dorking. As she was writing *Romola* she took a total of seven breaks in Dorking, and ended by going there once a month during the spring of 1863 while finishing the last four segments of the demanding serialization.³

The Leweses had made their first excursion to Dorking in 1861 when George Eliot was still working on *Silas Marner*. One February weekend they arrived on the train from London with Lewes’s nineteen-year-old son Charlie and diverted themselves with their usual strenuous walks, a drive around the countryside, and a visit to a local stately home. *Black’s Guide*, newly published in 1860 and a likely choice of guidebook for the Leweses (it was more current than Murray’s), describes these Dorking attractions and promises that ‘the tourist, in whatsoever direction he may wander, cannot fail to come upon all the rarest graces of nature – upon leafy woods, rolling streams, the swelling curves of chalky downs, and the ferny depths of dells which Titania might have made her haunt’ (195). In addition to the walks, Dorking offered tourists several stately homes and parks, including the Deepdene (now demolished), then in the possession of Henry Thomas Hope, owner of the famous diamond.

Hope, like his father before him, assumed responsibility for embellishing his estate, and he ended with a huge pile containing ‘40 bed rooms … nine reception rooms, halls and numerous offices’. As a Tory MP, he offered his home as headquarters to Benjamin Disraeli’s Young England group, and the future Prime Minister dedicated *Coningsby* to his host. Having acquired huge stretches of land, Hope then assured his popularity by opening it all to the public. On behalf of the visitor to Dorking, *Black’s Guide* is appreciative: ‘The tourist will not fail to examine [Deepdene’s] attractions, which, thanks to Mr Hope’s liberal courtesy, is no difficult task. Access to the house and gardens is readily permitted’ (206). The Leweses took advantage of Hope’s courtesy on their walks and visited the house on the Tuesday of their 1861 visit, just before they caught the afternoon train back to London.

*Felix Holt*, published three years after *Romola*, includes the usual number of Warwickshire originals. Most biographers agree that George Eliot modelled Mrs Transome on Maria Newdigate and Harold Transome on local Radical candidate Dempster Hemming, while the 1832 riots in Nuneaton help provide the action in the novel’s central chapters. But the adapta-
tion of the Deepdene as Transome Court suggests other Surrey sources for the Treby Magna settings which, together with the Deepdene, create a solid wedge of non-Warwickshire material in one of the most conspicuously Midlands novels.

Although the shabby Queen Anne exterior of Transome Court differs entirely from the Deepdene’s architecture, inside the Italianate structure a grandly pillared sculpture hall provides an impressive entrance to the house. The sculpture hall was both the aesthetic and architectural centre of the Deepdene. Hope’s expeditions to Italy enabled him to stock it with Greek and Roman originals as well as copies of copies. The hall displayed at least twenty busts: of Homer, Pindar, several unnamed Romans, Napoleon, Athena, Helen, and Paris. The curved arches on its ground floor showed off figures in marble, bronze, and plaster by Thorwaldsen, Flaxman, Canova, and Pisani. On the second tier a bronze faun danced between the pillars, contrasting in colour, size, and pose with the smaller sculptures and vases standing quietly on their pedestals to either side.

In *Felix Holt*, the sculpture hall scene occurs on a February day like the one of the Leweses’ first visit, when Dorking’s plentiful crocuses, like Transome Court’s in the novel, were in lavish bloom. Walking in the grounds, Esther and the Transomes suddenly encounter Mrs Holt who has come to plead for Felix. After the self-righteous mother delivers an appeal that reduces her auditors to uncontrollable laughter, Esther, embarrassed at having such a plebeian acquaintance, leads the visitor and her foster child into the sculpture hall. As the chapter goes on, and the characters enter or leave, they go up and down its stone stairway or pass through the glass door facing eastward toward the garden, both features of the Deepdene showcase room.

In this scene George Eliot designs the action in a spirit of ironically amusing juxtapositions. Little Harry and Job Tudge play hide and seek among the pedestals of statues which stand in stony dignity that contrasts with the children’s activity. The narrator mentions a prominent and recurring Deepdene subject in the description of Mrs Holt watching the children at play: she sits ‘on a stool, in singular relief against the pedestal of the Apollo’ (388-9). The Deepdene had three full-length Apollos (Catalogue 78), any of which might supply an ironic comparison with Mrs Holt: his energetic yet controlled young male beauty next to her aged female fatigue. George Eliot revives this technique of ironic juxtaposition in *Middlemarch* when she places Dorothea Brooke Casaubon near the Cleopatra/ Ariadne in the Vatican Museums.

Another statue against which George Eliot poses Mrs Holt creates a second and differently based comparison between the sculpture and the human. As the children play, one of little Harry’s squirrels scampers onto the head of a Deepdene subject: Silenus with the infant Bacchus in his arms. Mrs Holt creates comedy through her assumption that Silenus represents an ancestor of the Transomes and also through her bemusement that he should have had his marble portrait taken nude, which she regards as ‘eccentric where there were the means of buying the best’ (389-90). But George Eliot has made a change to her model that adds significance, for this juxtaposition requires moving Deepdene’s statue of Silenus from its place in the garden outside into the sculpture hall, an alteration that suggests more deliberate intentions regarding comparisons between the two figures. Placing Mrs Holt next to the foster father of Bacchus yields various forms of irony, especially since Mrs Holt has gained her living through
selling intoxicating drug mixtures. But whether the implications contrast or align the two foster parents, they emphasize Mrs Holt’s responsibility in looking after the abandoned Job Tudge. Through this juxtaposition the narrator balances Mrs Holt’s exasperating ignorances and self-righteousness with her kind heartedness, a balance that will ease Esther’s acceptance of her future mother-in-law.

Other Surrey similarities with Transome Court include Deepdene’s situation, its river, and the political occupations of its owners. When Harold first arrives home after fifteen years in Smyrna, he tours his house quickly but fondly, noting its shabbiness and reviving memories of his boyhood. From an upper storey, he catches a view of the River Lapp, which, like the often-fished River Mole, winds through the property: ‘Ah, there’s the old river I used to fish in. I often thought, when I was in Smyrna, that I would buy a park with a river through it as much like the Lapp as possible’ (19). Shifting the direction of his glance, he then notices some ‘fine oaks’ situated similarly to the ‘Glory’, a hill-crowning grove in which Dorking takes great pride. Politically, although Harold Transome takes the Radical rather than the Tory side, he does run for Parliament, and his neighbour and opponent, Philip Debarry, ‘a new-fashioned Tory’ (378), would fit among the members of the group that met at the Deepdene: Disraeli’s Young England.

Finally, the Surrey sources for Felix Holt could help answer one of the puzzles of the novel, specifically how Harold Transome could conceal an Asian concubine in an English market town without eliciting any attacks on the arrangement from his many political enemies. The architecture and situation of Dorking’s White Horse Inn, where George Eliot and her partner often stopped on their visits, helps provide an answer, for its sprawling property of outbuildings and the heavy traffic in and out, like the Ram’s in Felix Holt, could provide a nook adequate for the concealment of a docile concubine, at least for the period of the Parliamentary elections which run only from September through November.

Closer attention to the Leweses’ English travel also expands George Eliot biography by adding to the familiar story sequences of events most often compressed into brief summaries rather than detailed narration. Both Gordon Haight and Rosemary Ashton, for example, mention the sojourns at seaside or spas with little comment, often in subordinate clauses. But Evans’s visits to, for example, St Leonard’s, also contribute revelations, in this case the revelation that, travelling with her failing father in the late 1840s, she did perform the duties of the drudging nurse but was also being presented by him to the other visitors at their fashionable hotel as the marriageable, devoted daughter of a well-to-do man. A longer look at her English travel also enlarges the love story by suggesting that she and Lewes had the most decisive and romantic summer of their lives in 1853 in St Leonard’s, a choice of destination all the more remarkable because of the terrible depression she had experienced there five years previously with her father. Journeys to Surrey, Sussex, and, later, northward to Harrogate and Whitby yield similarly rich biographical material. Together with confirming her statement to Blackwood by locating a number of the ‘widely sundered elements’ in the English venues to which she travelled, such additions yield new interpretations of both the life and the art of George Eliot.
Notes

1. Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes George Eliot’s repetition of this phrase in her chapter on ‘The Outing of George Eliot’.

2. George Eliot’s foreign travel, on the other hand, especially her travel in Italy, has received much careful attention: in particular from Felicia Bonaparte, Deirdre David and Andrew Thompson.

3. Carol Martin observes that this serialization required more lead time than usual because of the pictures: even if Frederic Leighton recycled previous designs as Hugh Witemeyer suggests, he needed time to read George Eliot’s segments before he could complete an illustration.

4. Details of the visit, as I will argue elsewhere, help confirm Haight’s belief that Lewes joined Evans in St Leonard’s and that their intimacy there prompted her to move to more private lodgings when she returned to London.

5. Both the content and the excellent introductions in Harris and Johnston’s *The Journals of George Eliot* emphasize the importance of her travel to her fiction.

Works Cited


