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GEORGE ELIOT AND ARCHERY
by Arthur G. Credland

As a practising archer with a keen interest in the history of the sport it has struck me that the importance of archery to the development of Eliot’s final novel _Daniel Deronda_ (1876) has not been properly appreciated. It provides the context for Gwendolen Harleth’s fateful encounter with Grandcourt, first at the Brackenshaw archery meeting where she strikes three successive golds (central hits), and subsequently at the archery ball, where he singles her out as a dance partner. Later, it is in the course of the roving archery match at Cardell Chase that she discovers the existence of his mistress and illegitimate children. There is an obvious contrast between the archery contest – a healthy, outdoor, English pastime – which marks the culmination of Book One, and the morally dubious, unhealthily enclosed and foreign game of roulette with which the novel opens, although it is a contrast which George Eliot exploits to ironic effect, given the moral distinction between the two men whose attention Gwendolen attracts on the two occasions. That archery should provide the setting for the meeting of the aristocratic Grandcourt and the middle-class Gwendolen is itself historically appropriate to the period of the 1860s in which the novel is set. In the eighteenth century, archery had been an aristocratic sport but throughout the nineteenth century clubs were increasingly formed by the expanding bourgeoisie. Originally dominated by men, women first took part in a _public_ contest at the second Grand National Archery Meeting held at York in 1845, and by the end of the century the number of female archers far exceeded their male counterparts.

It was a commonplace of the period to regard the archery club and its social activities as something of a marriage market, much like the tennis club in the present century. Any author of the period might easily have chosen the archery contest as a feature of a plot along those lines, but George Eliot in several ways shows a special knowledge of the subject which also strongly suggests a real familiarity with the sport. The roving archery match at Cardell Chase is a case in point. This is a form of field archery in which the shooters walk over the countryside aiming toward natural marks, a tussock of grass, a tree, stone or whatever the archer nearest with his arrow selects as the next target, and so on. Roving has been pursued since Shakespeare’s time (and before) and was the type of archery familiar to the bowmen of London’s Finsbury Fields. It continued to be practised thereafter by archery adepts but was unfamiliar or unknown to those occasional archers who attended a country house meeting or even the regular club shooters, who invariably shot at the normal round targets of straw at fixed distances. Eliot’s particular understanding and ‘insider’ knowledge is emphasized by the following quotation: ‘This roving archery was prettier than the stationary game, but success in shooting at variable marks was less favoured by practice, and the hits were distributed amongst the volunteer archers otherwise than they would have been in target-shooting’ (Chapter 14). The match also provides a neat mechanism for enabling Gwendolen to meet Lydia Glasher informally in private and learn the secrets of Grandcourt’s life. Furthermore there is a reference to ‘clout-shooting’ in chapter ten which again speaks of inside knowledge but in this case the detail is irrelevant to the story and is not mentioned again. The uninitiated reader would be unclear what was meant without reference to a dictionary. This incidental aside by Lord Brackenshaw to Gascoigne is however a clue to the probable origin of Eliot’s special understanding of archery, since clout-shooting is the particular method favoured by the Woodmen of Arden. Founded in
A PARADOX.

CLARA (newly married). "Now, Bob, if I run through the Gold, I gain double, don't I?"

Punch, 2 November 1861
1785 by the fourth Earl of Aylesford the society thrives to this day and still meets at the ground near Meriden which is also graced by the elegant Forest Hall (built 1788) which accommodates the members and their equipment. In distant times archers would shoot at the ‘clout’, a cloth, pegged to the ground, but the Woodmen’s mark is a black-centred white target two feet seven inches in diameter placed at an angle of about forty-five degrees. The archer takes his stand, up to twelve score yards distance, loosing his arrow at a high elevation to drop it onto the target.

George Eliot’s father Robert Evans, originally worked for the Newdigates of Arbury Hall but began a life-long connection with the fifth Lord Aylesford in 1830 and had the use of a cottage on the Packington estate. In addition Mary Ann Evans’s sister, Christiana, married the surgeon Edward Clarke and went to live in Meriden in 1837. The Evans’s cottage, called Rookwood, was inside the north gate of the park, only about half a mile from the hall, and Robert Evans and his son Isaac made occasional use of it in their work for Lord Aylesford. In the altercation with Mary Ann over her refusal to attend church with him in 1842 – the so-called ‘Holy War’ – Robert threatened to go and live on his own at Packington and went as far as having some alterations made to the building, but when father and daughter finally made a truce, nothing further came of the planned move. However, Mary Ann would certainly have been aware of what took place on the Packington estate.

Roving was not a kind of shooting which featured among the activities of the Woodmen of Arden but the fourth Earl of Aylesford had constructed a formalized roving course in the grounds of the hall c.1790-1800. Comprising a series of butts, also with normal targets alongside, these would have been available for the amusement of family and friends. At the age of seventeen (in 1836) Mary Ann Evans would have become eligible to participate in the Woodmen of Arden Grand Week, which was held in the first week of August. Visitors and friends could attend at the Meriden ground and shoot on Friday and Saturday afternoons having watched the Woodmen competing for the Silver Arrow on the first of these days and the Silver Bugle on the day following. Unmarried girls and brides of one year drew lots with the names of the male archers and if the individual whose name they picked out won a prize she would become ‘his lassie’ and open the ball with him in the evening’.

The present Lord Aylesford has kindly checked the minute books for any mention of Mary Ann Evans but there is no record of her having drawn a winner’s name or won a prize herself. However, he makes the interesting proposal that one name in the minute books, that of a certain Granville Court Dewes, a Woodman from 1828 to 1842, might have suggested the name of Grandcourt. There is no mention of archery that I know of in George Eliot’s published letters or biographies, but if she had had any youthful contact with the sport, she would have been able to reacquaint herself with the bow after her move to Regents Park in 1863. Since 1834 the Royal Toxophilite Society, the oldest of the English Societies (founded in 1781 by Sir Ashton Lever while living at Leicester House, Leicester Square) had used the park for their meetings. They also built there an Archers Hall which is described by contemporaries as in the Swiss or Rustic Gothic style, opening onto a broad verandah. George Eliot mentions an Archery (sic) Hall at Lord Brackenshaw’s but gives only the briefest description of the structure, ‘with an arcade in front [which] showed like a white temple against the greenery on the
northern side'. This is rather closer to the severely classical Forest Hall of the Woodmen of Arden at Meriden than the Toxophilites' pavilion in Regent's Park. The former, built to the design of Joseph Bonomi in 1788, was extended in 1845 with the construction of a ballroom. An interesting link between the Toxophilites of Regent's Park and Meriden is the long association with them of the Hon. Daniel Finch, a son of the fourth Earl of Aylesford and a Woodman from 1812, who was Secretary and Treasurer from 1819 to 1866 and responsible for the layout of the Regent's Park ground.

Notes

1. Heneage Finch (1751-1812).
2. Heneage Finch (1786-1859), who also succeeded his father as Lord Warden of the Woodmen of Arden.
3. Personal Communication from Lord Aylesford.