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Review of Lives of Victorian Literary Figures I, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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Like Pickering and Chatto’s *Lives of the Great Romantics*, these volumes, each one devoted to a major Victorian writer, offer a collection of facsimile reproductions of 19th or early 20th century essays, reviews and extracts from memoirs and biographies with the emphasis, according to Ralph Pite’s ‘General Introduction’, on material hard to find outside copyright libraries. Each volume contains a thoughtful and illuminating introduction; pithy but highly informative headnotes to each item, outlining the personal relationship (if any) and general attitude of its author towards Eliot, Dickens or Tennyson and in the process attuning our ears to the sound of the grinding of various axes; and helpful annotation of the selected texts, especially in the Tennyson volume (69 pages of notes as opposed to 15 for Eliot and 13 for Dickens). An admirably detailed analytical index appears at the end of Vol. 3 and the books are handsomely produced, apart from some unfortunate instances of clumsy photocopying resulting in distortions of the text adjacent to the right-hand margin.

Introducing the Eliot volume, Gail Marshall notes that, unlike Dickens and the Brontës, her subject ‘has largely escaped the trappings of literary celebrity despite the best efforts of the George Eliot Fellowship’. She is still known by her masculine pen-name, ‘a recognition of her right to be self-creating and to be remembered for her literary skills rather than for her life’. Her immediate legacy and memory were, however, as Marshall shows, ‘potentially highly controversial’. Cross’s biography, that ‘curious publication’, appearing in 1885, an ‘annus mirabilis of sexual politics’, was designed to emphasise Eliot’s femininity (showing, commented Mrs Oliphant, ‘a creature all conjugal love and dependence to whom something to lean upon is a necessity’) and to counteract her apparent challenge to fundamental social morality in uniting with Lewes. Marshall includes Cross’s preface and his printing of Eliot’s ‘How I Came To Write Fiction’, intended to show Lewes as the inspirer and initiator of her fiction-writing, followed by a fascinating selection of reviews of the *Life*. We have Henry James’s ‘generous’ notice (his sister Alice, however, groaned over Cross’s book as a ‘monument of ponderous dreariness’), in which he stoutly maintained that Eliot’s great works would have got themselves written even with no Lewes in her life, as well as Mrs Oliphant’s much more critical assessment. Cross’s image of Eliot, writes Oliphant, ‘will probably fade away like an old photograph, leaving the world a much stronger and nobler image, the picture of the girl who was Maggie Tulliver, who was Dorothea ...’. For R. H. Hutton, Cross’s *Life* is ‘a sombre book’ presenting Eliot as a sort of sybil whose ‘heart never seems to have rebelled against her own dim creed – a creed for pallid ghosts rather than for living and struggling men’. Also included in the volume are Edith Simcox’s impassioned posthumous defence of Eliot and her ‘beautiful soul’, Eliza Lynn Linton’s slyly hostile ‘appreciation’ with its exaltation of *Romola* as Eliot’s greatest work, and Leslie Stephen’s anxious attempt to limit Eliot’s influence on potential Dorotheas by turning her into a ‘time-bound ikon’ who ‘with all her knowledge ... attended to the ordinary feminine duties’ and ‘was proud of her good housekeeping’. A fitting finale or postscript to this absorbing collection of Victorian assessments of Eliot is provided by Virginia
Woolf's fine centenary celebration of her in the TLS in 1919, 'an important recognition of the Victorian novelist by one of the leading progenitors of the new spirit of Bloomsbury'.

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