2003

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THE THIRTY-FIRST GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE
Delivered by Professor Joanne Shattock

JANE AUSTEN AND GEORGE ELIOT: AFTERLIVES AND LETTERS

‘A woman and her book are identical’ – or so the American writer Edgar Allen Poe reflected when reading an early collection of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Remembering the autobiographical nature of much of Barrett Browning’s early work, his comment is not surprising. But it has a more general relevance for nineteenth-century women writers. The charge that they could only write of what they knew, and that what they knew best was themselves, was made regularly by reviewers. The easy association of the life and the work, or more accurately, a refusal to separate them, was crucial to the reading of these writers by their contemporaries. In this lecture I am concerned with the reading of nineteenth-century women, how they were read in their lifetime, particularly how they read one another, and how we read them today. More specifically I am interested in the role that contemporary biography played in this process: how in a number of celebrated instances, a biography constructed the woman writer inherited by the next generation of writers and readers of both sexes.

It was the American feminist critic Ellen Moers who first made the point that nineteenth-century English women writers sought and created the sense of a literary community by reading one another’s books. ‘The personal give-and-take of the literary life was closed to them’, she wrote. ‘Without it they studied with a special closeness the works written by their own sex, and developed a sense of easy, almost rude familiarity with the women who wrote them’. Of course these were highly intelligent women reading the work of other highly intelligent women. They knew better than to look only for self-representation in these texts. They were astute critics of one another’s work and conveyed their views, sometimes in personal correspondence, sometimes in published reviews. But to these writers, reading one another’s books made them feel that they knew the authors. It was an alternative to a female literary society.

This reading culture was not confined to women writers as readers. It extended to all women readers. In her study of attitudes to women’s reading in the Victorian period Kate Flint notes the sense of community felt by women readers of fiction and the emergence of female heroines as role models. I want to suggest that both the search for role models, and the felt need for a personal knowledge of these women governed the reading of biographies as well as the works of women writers. To the wider reading public, both male and female, the biographies attracted the curious and the prurient as biographies have always done, but for this wider readership too there was a sense of wanting to know the woman behind the books.

Richard D. Altick in his Lives and Letters: a History of Literary Biography in England and America has noted the post-Romantic enthusiasm for literary biography, a process driven by an instinctive ‘quest for the creator behind the creation’. He suggests that the lives of writers, as distinct from other biographical subjects, acquire their appeal from the seeming remoteness of the literary life from ordinary experience, a sense derived from the Romantic poets that the writer was a person apart from society, and in some way ‘special’. In the case of nineteenth-century women writers, the search for the woman behind the books acquired a particular
fascination because relatively few people knew these women personally. Although professional writers they did not inhabit the public sphere. They were not members of the universities or of the clubs and societies which were the haunts of male writers; they did not give readings or lectures; their association with political and professional worlds was mainly through family connections; even opportunities for travel were circumscribed. Their increasing contribution to the world of journalism was conducted from home. Details of their lives were often the subject of gossip and speculation. And it was often to pre-empt further gossip and to control the way their lives were presented to the public that biographies were commissioned. This was Patrick Brontë’s reason for asking Elizabeth Gaskell to write the life of his daughter Charlotte. It was also one of William Godwin’s reasons for writing a memoir of his wife Mary Wollstonecraft. And it was the reason why friends and supporters of Letitia Landon conducted a campaign to rescue her reputation after her premature death, a campaign conducted by writing and rewriting her life, and her death, for more than twenty years.

Most women writers shunned biography and took steps to prevent any such posthumous publication, or their families did it for them. In this they were no different from their male colleagues. Cassandra Austen destroyed many of Jane Austen’s letters because she regarded them as too personal. Maria Edgeworth, writing in response to a request for a biographical preface to an edition of her works, commented, ‘As a woman, my life, wholly domestic, cannot afford anything interesting to the public’.4 Elizabeth Gaskell secured her daughters’ assurances that there would be no biography after her death. Margaret Oliphant extracted a deathbed promise from her literary executors that there would be no account of her life, a somewhat ironic injunction from the author of five biographies and numerous biographical sketches. Harriet Martineau recalled and destroyed her own letters. Yet Oliphant and Martineau were two of the few women writers in the nineteenth century who wrote autobiographies, possibly to pre-empt the biographies they so opposed. As we know, George Eliot resolutely refused to contribute personal information to various collective biographical projects of the period. She expressed her opposition to biography on several occasions, the last on the death of her partner G. H. Lewes when she announced that there was to be no biography. ‘The best history of a writer is contained in his writings: – Biographies generally are a disease of English literature’, she wrote to a friend.5 Yet as their published correspondence reveals, both Lewes and Eliot were avid readers of contemporary biography.

Victorian biography, it is fair to say, has received a bad press of late. The burgeoning of literary biography, as we are presently experiencing it, has brought with it a new self-consciousness, an interest in the development of the genre, although it trails behind the intense critical and theoretical focus on autobiography. In these assessments the so called ‘Victorian model’, by which is meant the two or three volume ‘Life and Letters’, is regarded as a primitive form, representative of the dark days, before Freud’s theories were common currency, and before Lytton Strachey’s iconoclastic reworking of the genre. In other words, it is a form which modern literary biography has left behind. I do not want to spend time defending the ‘Victorian model’, but I would caution against the assumption that there was a standard one, that they were always reverent, that there was ‘no sex, no scandal, no self-doubt on the part of either subject or writer’, as one modern practitioner has described them.6
Comparatively few women writers were memorialized by full scale biographies. Collective biographies of women writers, on the other hand, were published in profusion. Those devoted to women writers had the additional effect of contributing however unofficially to the creation of a canon, a hierarchy, if you like, of women writers. Works such as Anna Katherine Elwood’s *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England* (1843), Jane Williams’s *The Literary Women of England* (1861) and Julia Kavanagh’s *English Women of Letters* (1863) recycled biographical information and offered some critical assessment of mainly novelists and prose writers. Frederick Rowton’s *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (1848) and Eric S. Robertson’s *English Poetesses* (1883) did the same for women poets. The impact of a magazine culture and the emergence of the personal interview were reflected in Helen C. Black’s *Notable Women Authors of the Day* (1893), based on interviews conducted by the *Lady’s Pictorial*. At the end of the century fiction publishers Hurst and Blackett produced *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria’s Reign* (1897) in which living women novelists offered retrospective assessments of their elder and now deceased sisters.

The most ambitious biographical project of the period was undoubtedly John Morley’s *English Men of Letters*, its title indicative of its focus. There were no female biographical subjects in the first series, projected in 1877, and only a handful in the second, begun in 1902: Leslie Stephen’s *George Eliot* (1902), Austin Dobson’s *Fanny Burney* (1903), Emily Lawless’s *Maria Edgeworth* (1904) and Francis Warre Cornish’s *Jane Austen* (1913). In the wake of Morley’s venture, and no doubt influenced by it, J. H. Ingram inaugurated the *Eminent Women* series, published by W. H. Allen. The subjects ranged from English women writers of the period, through European figures such as George Sand, Madame de Staël, Madame Roland and the actress Rachel, to public figures like Elizabeth Fry and Susannah Wesley. Ingram was ambitious in the authors he sought to attract, and some of the biographer/subject pairings were intriguing: Charlotte Yonge on Hannah More (1888), the journalist and feminist Florence Fenwick Miller on Harriet Martineau (1884), the poet Mathilde Blind on George Eliot (1883), the first full length biography to be written of her, and another poet Mary Robinson, on Emily Brontë (1883).

The volumes were uneven in quality, partly because of the biographers’ seeming reluctance to undertake any new research for their books. Several of the biographers, however, made a point of searching for unpublished letters as an obligatory first step, confident that the possession of private letters would enable them to present an ‘authentic’ biography of their subjects, as Helen Zimmern insisted in the preface to her volume on Maria Edgeworth (1883). To a reading public with little personal knowledge of these subjects, the impact of published correspondence was electric. A letter was the equivalent of an overheard conversation, an intimate glimpse of the ‘real’ woman. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, reviewing the first full length biography of Jane Austen, which contained some of her letters, exulted: ‘For the first time we seem to hear the echo of the voice, and to see the picture of the unknown friend who has charmed us so long’. Nina Kennard, pleased that she could base her biography of Rachel on a cache of her letters, wrote confidently in the preface: ‘We fall back on her letters as the true key to this extraordinary woman’s character’.

Rosemary Bodenheimer, in *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans* has emphasized the expectations which readers of published letters brought to their reading – a scarcely disguised hope that the
writer of the correspondence would emerge as the equivalent of the personality revealed in her books. More significantly Bodenheimer has argued that letters can often be as much fictional constructs as the novels they are expected to amplify, and that the ‘small representation of myself’, as George Eliot once referred to a letter she was composing, was as self-fashioning as any of her fiction.11 But readers of the standard Victorian ‘life and letters’, seemingly unaware of these subtleties, sought from the letters the same reassurance that they sought from the biographies, that by reading them they were getting to know the woman behind the books. This same uncritical belief that letters offered an unmediated view of character, was to hold as true for the published letters of Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Brontë as it did in the case of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth. And it could be argued that John Walter Cross’s selection and presentation of George Eliot’s letters in his biography of Eliot, ‘the sad soliloquy in which Mr Cross condemned her to tell the story of her life’,12 as Virginia Woolf described Cross’s efforts, so coloured and distorted the portrait of Eliot that it determined her reputation for the next forty years.

In what follows I want to present two examples of biographies of women writers, each of which had an extraordinary impact when it was published, and each of which has had an influence on the way we read these women today. The first biography of Jane Austen was written by her nephew and published more than fifty years after her death in 1870 and John Walter Cross’s George Eliot’s Life published in 1885, five years after her death. Before I talk about these two biographies, I want to set them in the context of probably the most celebrated contemporary biography of a nineteenth-century woman writer, Elizabeth Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë, published in 1857.

References to Gaskell’s Life proliferate in the letters and diaries of women writers on both sides of the Atlantic. The Life is the most famous biography of a women writer in the nineteenth century, a biography written by a novelist of her friend, a greater novelist, a friend whom she had met only five times. Their friendship was based almost entirely on correspondence. The story of the lives of the Brontës is well known and the writing of Gaskell’s biography has been well documented.13 What is of importance to this discussion is the impact the Life had on contemporary readers, and how it affected the way in which Charlotte Brontë and also her sisters were read subsequently.

By the time of her death in 1855 the main facts about the Brontës were in the public domain. Charlotte’s biographical preface to the 1850 edition of Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey had revealed the identity of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Harriet Martineau wrote a sympathetic obituary in the Daily News, an obituary which traded on her personal knowledge, and hinted that the novels had their basis in the life of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters.14 This of course was what most readers had suspected. What they wanted to know from a biography was more precise: what kind of a woman could have produced those books, with their strange settings, their portraits of passionate, rebellious heroines, with an undisguised desire to be loved. What they read in Gaskell’s Life was a story, a tragedy, as moving, as disturbing as any of the novels. It became another text, the last work by Charlotte Brontë.

‘Tell me when you have read the life of Currer Bell,’ George Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell. ‘Some people think its revelations in bad taste – making money out of the dead, wounding feelings of the living. We thought it admirable, cried over it, and felt the better for it.’ Lewes
had written earlier to Elizabeth Gaskell: ‘The book ... makes us familiar inmates of an interior so strange, so original in its individual elements and so picturesque in its externals ... that fiction has nothing more wild, touching and heart-strengthening to place above it. The early part is a triumph for you; the rest a monument for your friend’. Anna Jameson commented on the ‘truth of that wonderful infinite life – in which there seems to have been so little of external fact or circumstance – and such a boundless sphere of feeling and intellect crammed into a silent existence’. Lady Caroline Fox wrote in her journal: ‘She is like her books, and her life explains much in them which needs explanation’. Most readers would have agreed.

Gaskell’s biography is concerned with the woman rather than her books. There is little in it about Charlotte Brontë’s writing or about its development. She missed, for example, the significance of the juvenilia. Her attitude to her subject is not uncomplicated. She both pitied and admired her. She acknowledged Charlotte’s superior talents and the differences between them as novelists but there is a sense too in which, despite her gifts of observation and sympathy, she did not fully understand her subject.

What Gaskell’s *Life* did was to increase the interest in the lives of all the Brontës and to legitimize speculation about the relationship between the life and the work. She had after all unwittingly encouraged this in her implication of the Reverend Carus Wilson as the original of Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*, one of the two lawsuits which threatened her after publication. Astute readers read Gaskell’s *Life* in conjunction with the novels, moving easily between the two, making assumptions about the real life originals of the various characters. Another result of the *Life* was a vast increase in the number of biographies of individual Brontës and of the family, along with books with titles like *Haworth Past and Present* (1879), *The Birthplace of Charlotte Brontë* (1884), *Brontëana* (1898). Its culmination was the foundation of the Brontë Society, and the establishment of Haworth as a place of literary pilgrimage. The number of new biographies from the 1870s prompted Margaret Oliphant to declare that the Brontës were ‘the first victims of that ruthless art of biography which is one of the features of our time’.

Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* had a profound impact on the way all three sisters were read in the decades following Charlotte’s death. Readers today are more sceptical of Gaskell’s achievement. Margot Peters has argued that Gaskell saw it as her duty to create ‘a noble Charlotte Brontë who was first of all a lady’, and as a result ignored the anger and sexuality she saw in the novels, and emphasized instead Brontë’s femininity and fragility. Lyndall Gordon has urged that we need to ‘open up the gaps in her life’, gaps left by Gaskell and other Victorian biographers. Deirdre D’Albertis sees Gaskell not as the self-effacing loyal friend who regarded her own talents as decidedly secondary, and who was proud as she puts it to ‘bask in the luminous rays of Brontë’s genius’, but as a fellow novelist entering into a disguised form of literary competition with Brontë, a competition which turned on their antithetical notions of duty and how, if at all, this could be balanced with the demands of art. Her argument is intricate, and I confess, persuasive. But despite the force of these new readings, Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* is still the biography with which every new biographer takes issue.

The *Life* secured for itself a near mythic status in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was against the furore generated by it and successive biographies of Charlotte and Emily Brontë that other
biographies of women writers were measured. One of the readers on whom Gaskell’s biography made an impression was the Reverend James Austen-Leigh, Vicar of Bray, and the nephew of Jane Austen. In the biography Gaskell quoted the now famous correspondence between Charlotte Brontë and G. H. Lewes, in which he had suggested that Charlotte might do well to read Pride and Prejudice, and she had responded giving her reservations about Austen’s methods:

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? ... I had not seen Pride and Prejudice until I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses.

What is remarkable is not her frequently quoted response to the novel – we are perhaps not surprised that Charlotte Brontë did not find Austen’s novels to her liking – but the fact that she had not until then read Pride and Prejudice. The history of Jane Austen’s reputation in the fifty years following her death in 1817 has yet to be written. Looking back from our position today, it is difficult to realize that for most of the nineteenth century she was a minority interest. Edith Simcox, writing in the Academy in 1870 observed that she ‘has always been ... the favourite author of literary men’, but even that cannot be taken for granted. When Dickens’s friend and biographer John Forster first read the dialogue between Mrs Nickleby and the dressmaker Miss Knag in Nicholas Nickleby, he told Dickens that he must have been reading Miss Bates in Emma, but to his surprise, he found that ‘[Dickens] had not at this time made the acquaintance of that fine writer’. Jane Austen had her champions, among them Sir Walter Scott, the philosopher and churchman Richard Whately, and G. H. Lewes. The historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, another admirer, once indicated that he intended to write a memoir as well as introductions to a new edition of her novels. Had he done so her reputation in the nineteenth century might have been quite different. As it was, when she died, very little was known about her. Her brother Henry wrote a short biographical notice which was prefixed to the posthumous edition of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion in 1817. There was a cheap edition of her work published in 1833 in Bentley’s Standard Novels, but after that there was nothing by way of a literary event to bring her before the mind of the public.

The event which began the process of turning Jane Austen into a more popular author was a memoir published in 1870 by her nephew, James Austen-Leigh, a man in his sixties who had never published anything before in his life, whose sole qualification for the task was that Jane Austen was his aunt, and that he had attended her funeral. Jane Austen, as is well known, had lived her entire life in the bosom of her family, and the family in turn regarded her reputation as a family matter. Moreover, various branches had differing views on what, if anything, the public should know about her. It was probably the death of her last surviving brother Francis in 1865 that removed the opposition to making more details of her life available.

Austen-Leigh’s memoir is the story of ‘dear aunt Jane’, as he calls her, the nicest of spinster aunts, who was never too busy to have an encouraging chat about a story one was writing, or
to play a game; who avoided literary society; dressed in middle-aged clothes before her time; hid her writing under the blotter if anyone came into the room. ‘We did not think of her as being clever, still less as being famous; but we valued her as one always kind, sympathizing and amusing’, he wrote. The picture prompted the novelist William Dean Howells to remark that ‘we might wish her now to have had a niece or a nephew or two less, if we might so have had a book or two more from her’. We learn how adept she was at spillikins, how skilful at cup and ball, how neatly folded her letters were, that she rarely spilled the wax.

Looking back from the high point of mid-Victorian prosperity in 1870 Jane Austen’s nephew was anxious that his aunt’s life might not appear as grand as he would have liked. He explained that gentry at that time often dined at four o’clock to save candles, that dinner tables were not as splendid as they were now, that ladies were even known to wash the breakfast china. He also exercised a certain amount of censorship. He did not mention Jane Austen’s mentally defective brother George, her brother Henry’s bankruptcy, or her two short-lived romantic attachments. He stressed too the remoteness of her life, from national events and from society. In her writing she was ‘always very careful not to meddle with matters of which she did not thoroughly understand. She never touched upon politics, law or medicine.’ She was not highly accomplished ‘according to the present standard’. Her talents did not introduce her to the notice of other writers, or connect her with the literary world. Her life ‘was passed in the performance of home duties and the cultivation of domestic affections, without any self-seeking or craving after applause’. That last sentence is in fact the family ‘line’ on Jane Austen, begun by Henry’s memoir, and carried on by Austen-Leigh. His Memoir is an affectionate tribute of an elderly nephew. The portrait of his aunt is of a lady-like amateur for whom writing was a polite accomplishment. As with Gaskell’s biography of Bronte, the emphasis is on the woman, not on the writing. There is no mention of what we now know of Austen the perfectionist, constantly revising her texts. There is no sense either of the sharp eye, the shrewdness, the sense of irony, the biting wit. ‘Aunt Jane’ is too nice, and too limited in her perspective on her world, in contrast to the Jane Austen we read today.

What the Memoir accomplished was the awakening of public interest in an author virtually forgotten. It generated a large number of reviews and appreciative essays, written by devoted enthusiasts who wanted to share their enthusiasm. It did not immediately create a new readership; that came later. The reviews of the various editions of the Memoir, which remained constantly in print until the end of the century, were written for readers who were familiar with the texts. On the other hand, the Memoir was well timed. It was published at the end of a decade of so-called sensation fiction, by Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Miss Braddon and Mrs Henry Wood. It came too at the point when enthusiasm for George Eliot had begun to wane. It made this Jane Austen ripe for rediscovery.

It was her unsensationalism, her wholesomeness, the seemingly non-intellectual quality of the novels, and their evocation of a more tranquil past age, which made them attractive. All of this was promoted by the focus of the Memoir. ‘Dear books!’, Anne Thackeray Ritchie wrote, ‘bright, sparkling with wit and animation, in which the homely heroines charm, the dull hours fly, and the very bores are enchanting’. This sentimentalized view of Austen, which was not,
to be fair to Ritchie, her only perspective—she saw clearly Austen’s strengths—was the view of an Austen who could provide an escape from the stresses of the present day. Domestic comedy in period costume was one which caught the public mood. So too did the small scale of her work, its miniaturism, summed up by the somewhat patronizing epithet of her next biographer, Goldwin Smith, as the work of that ‘wonderful little woman’. Another strand of enthusiasm for Austen at the end of the nineteenth century was that of connoisseurship, the view that an appreciation of her was a mark of the highest literary taste. Its subscribers swapped quotations and anecdotes, dropped the names of her characters into their normal conversation and so on. That approach to Austen has continued up to the present day.

Finally, in 1900 an article entitled ‘The Renascence of Jane Austen’ published in the Westminster Review by Janet Harper explained why all those men and women currently in their forties, in other words born after 1860, who have not read Jane Austen because she was not fashionable in their youth, were now clamouring to do so, and why there is a sudden demand for popular editions of the novels. It was her Englishness, her ‘thoroughly English, realistic and moral solidity’ which made her attractive, for the home market and as a cultural export: ‘Now the Saxon can introduce Miss Austen’s novels to our colonists in Australia, or to the Americans, or to any foreigners with a glow of patriotism, for he knows he is presenting something entirely English’.

It cannot be said that the women writers who read Austen-Leigh’s Memoir were more sensitive or more astute critics than the male reviewers. Mary Ward (Mrs Humphry Ward), Margaret Oliphant and Anne Thackeray Ritchie all wrote intelligently about her, all saw her greatness, and their criticism stands up well today. But so too did an important article by Richard Simpson. She had many biographers in the decades following the Memoir, including those by Goldwin Smith (1887) and by Sarah Maiden in the Eminent Women series (1889). Another member of the family, Lord Brabourne, published the first edition of her letters in 1884, and there was yet another biography by two more family members in 1913.

But the real growth in readers of Jane Austen came after 1900. Those new readers inherited Austen-Leigh’s Jane Austen, and the vestiges of ‘Aunt Jane’ are with us still. It helps to explain why modern critics of Austen persist in their interrogation of the historical and cultural assumptions behind her novels: Is she a feminist in the Wollstonecraft tradition? Why in an age which saw so much of war, revolution, and social upheaval does she not mention any of it? Did she acknowledge that Sir Thomas Bertram’s Antiguan estates were maintained on the proceeds of the slave trade? All of these questions, which we debate at length, are indirectly the result of a Victorian biography and the novelist it constructed.

When George Eliot died in 1880 Leslie Stephen wrote that the world had probably lost ‘the greatest woman who ever won literary fame, and one of the very few writers of our day to whom the name “great” could be conceded with any plausibility’. Ten years later she was being ridiculed by W. E. Henley in a series of epigrams as ‘an apotheosis of Pupil-Teachery’ and ‘George Sand plus Science and minus Sex’. Why had her reputation experienced so swift a decline? The process had probably begun before her death, in the years following the publication of Middlemarch in 1871-2. Samuel Butler’s friend and correspondent Miss Savage, writing to him in 1878 complaining that there were a great many difficult words in the
book of his she was currently reading, added ‘But I don’t mind them, for I have a dictionary which I bought two years ago, as I wished to read Daniel Deronda in the original’. Her witticism was probably more indicative of public opinion than she realized. The height of Eliot’s popularity as a novelist was reached with Adam Bede, not Middlemarch. The Times reviewer said of the latter that it ‘has not the liveliness, variety and picturesqueness of its great predecessor [Adam Bede]’. In place of these it had ‘a philosophical power’ and, for her Victorian readers, therein lay the problem.

Her reputation as an intellectual, among a smaller, self-selecting section of the public, on the other hand, had never been greater. The picture of Eliot as a sage, a woman of ‘masculine intellect’, as was frequently said of her, was one which women readers and women writers, found off-putting. There are many accounts of her famous Sunday afternoons at The Priory, her Regents’s Park home. The recollections of women writers who met her are strikingly similar in their ambivalence. They were ushered into her presence by the genial G. H. Lewes. They found themselves sitting beside her, often on a footstool, looking up at her, ‘she talking and I listening’ as one of them, Lucy Clifford, reported. They commented on her wonderful silk dresses, her large head, and her horse-like face, which became almost beautiful when animated, and her grave smile. Many, like Lucy Walford, endeavoured to link the woman with the books:

She had meant to be civil and kind. But how heavily drove the wheels of her chariot! How interminably dragged that interview! Could it be possible that this was the creator of ‘Mrs Poyser’, and ‘Hetty’? ‘Dinah,’ yes; and ‘Adam Bede,’ and ‘Maggie Tulliver,’ and any number more of serious, thoughtful people – I could picture the heavy brow bent in weighty cogitation over such, – but little frivolous, selfish Hetty?"

The image was inspiring but a little too awesome; it was also a role model almost impossible of emulation.

The writing of Eliot’s ‘official’ biography after her death was undertaken by her husband of eight months, John Walter Cross. It was not the first biography, as I mentioned earlier. Mathilde Blind published a brief one in the Eminent Women series in 1883, which attracted relatively little attention from reviewers. Eliot’s devoted disciple Edith Simcox had hoped to write the official Life herself, but had been pre-empted by Cross who took the decision to write it in order to prevent anyone else from publishing one. His three volume Life was over five years in the making. Among the many tributes in the press in the months following her death were two extensive obituaries, one in Blackwood’s (Feb 1881) and another in the Westminster (July 1881) which made public for the first time some of the details of Eliot’s writing life, and could themselves be said to have constituted early biographical sketches. The Blackwood’s article used the archive of her correspondence with John Blackwood to relate the now familiar details of their partnership and her connections with the firm. That in the Westminster recounted her connection with the Bras, the Hennells, and Dr Brabant; and her association with Chapman and the Westminster circle, including Herbert Spencer. The article made no reference to Marian Evans’s more personal involvement with any of these figures, but collectively the two obituaries told the story of the making of ‘George Eliot’.
But it was Cross’s three-volume *Life* published four years later, in 1885, which became the focus of posthumous reassessment and in effect determined her reputation for the next four decades. The significance of the title page would not have been lost on her friends and acquaintances: ‘George Eliot’s Life as related in her letters and journals, arranged and edited by her husband J. W. Cross’.

The reading public, as opposed to the smaller circle who had come into contact with her, knew at least two things about George Eliot: that she had lived with Lewes, who was not her husband, for nearly twenty-five years, and that she had been an ‘advanced thinker’, if not an atheist. They were agog for more details of this woman’s life. What they got, as Gladstone rightly said, was ‘a reticence in three volumes’. ‘If it is true that the most interesting of George Eliot’s characters is her own, it may be said also that the most interesting of her books is her Life’ the historian Lord Acton and a confidant of Cross, wrote at the beginning of his review.40 It was a good opening, but it wasn’t true. ‘We see the heroine, not reflected from other minds, but nearly as she saw herself, and cared to be known’, he continued. That was partly true. Margaret Oliphant claimed that George Eliot out of her own mouth had been ‘made to prove herself a dull woman’.41

As Cross organized it, the biography was a series of letters and extracts from journals, three volumes of five hundred pages each, with dates in marginal glosses and occasional short paragraphs of connecting narrative. Cross wrote well in the sketch he provided of Eliot’s childhood up to the time the letters began but the narrative was not continued. For a husband of only eight months he is nonetheless an insistent presence. There is much of ‘in fact my wife told me’, ‘one of the books we read together at Cheyne Walk’, and ‘as she was always fond of referring to, in our talks’ and so on.

The *Life* presents precisely what Austen-Leigh and Gaskell left out of their biographies, an account of a writing life. They had concentrated on the woman, not the writer. Cross did the reverse. Eliot’s reading and her views on her contemporaries are here; the important relationship with John Blackwood; the genesis of each novel and the aftermath of publication – all are documented in her letters. So too are her travels, which were extensive, and her headaches, which were frequent. But two of the great crises of her life are scarcely mentioned. Her religious deconversion gets swept aside in an account of her translations of Strauss and Feuerbach, and the estrangement from her brother Isaac, which occurred in 1854 when she took the decision to live with Lewes and continued until her marriage in 1880, is simply not referred to, presumably to spare Isaac’s feelings. The objects of two of her celebrated infatuations, John Chapman and Herbert Spencer are glossed in a note. It is just conceivable that Cross did not know of these relationships. His handling of Lewes is decorous, and at times even generous, but there is no recognition of their crucial partnership, or of Lewes’s role in the creation and sustaining of ‘George Eliot’. In his introduction Cross argued that by letting George Eliot tell her own story through her letters, it would better demonstrate her intellect and character. By virtue of his selections and ‘prunings’ as he termed them, he was constructing a version of George Eliot as carefully as if he had written the narrative himself.

Gordon Haight, the modern editor of the letters, has convincingly demonstrated Cross’s smaller sins of omission, showing the ways in which he stripped the correspondence of wit,
spontaneity, gaiety and humour and left a ponderous, ultra-serious Eliot. 'Even in an invitation
to dinner' as John Morley remarked, 'the words imply a grave sense of responsibility on both
sides'. 42‘She took herself with tremendous seriousness’, Margaret Oliphant observed, ‘and
was always on duty, never relaxing’. 43‘Before she wrote a tale at all’, said Frederic Harrison,
‘George Eliot in mental equipment, stood side by side with Mill, Spencer, Lewes and
Carlyle’. 44For the readers of her novels that was precisely the problem with the central
character of the biography. ‘Is this the woman who wrote Adam Bede’? 45Margaret Oliphant
asked in her review, echoing Lucy Walford’s reaction when meeting George Eliot. ‘They wear
me out – I know that. After a day at the Lewises [sic] I am worn to a thread’, the actress and
diarist Fanny Kemble once commented to a friend, reporting the non-stop intellectual
conversation at the Priory. 46Most readers of Cross’s life felt similarly worn out.

Women writers as readers of George Eliot’s Life saw something else – a masculine model of
the writing life, a model that their own circumstances made impossible. Lewes had kept
George Eliot in what Margaret Oliphant called a ‘mental greenhouse’ and had taken care of
her. Few if any women could hope for such working conditions. There was, after her death,
among women writers a kind of collective resentment of George Eliot, a resentment of her
success, her predominance. ‘No one will ever mention me in the same breath with George
Eliot’, 47Margaret Oliphant wrote in her autobiography, an autobiography which she was
prompted to write after reading Cross’s Life.

At least one other woman writer was prompted by George Eliot’s Life to write the story of her
own. Eliza Lynn Linton, whose career paralleled George Eliot’s, resented her success and
probably her personal happiness and what she saw as the betrayal of Eliot’s early radicalism
for the “‘made” and artificial pose which was her distinguishing characteristic in later years’. 48
‘She was so consciously “George Eliot” – so interpenetrated, head and heel, inside and out,
with the sense of her importance as the great novelist and profound thinker of her generation,
as to make her society a little overwhelming, leaving us baser creatures the impression of
having been rolled very flat indeed’. 49

Cross’s ‘lifeless silhouette’ as David Carroll has commented, intervened between the novels
and the reading-public and set the seal on her reputation for many years. 50Women writers no
longer looked to her as a role model. She was the butt of jokes like Henley’s. Other biographies
followed: Oscar Browning’s in the Great Writers series (1890) drew heavily on Cross but
included some personal anecdotes. Leslie Stephen’s 1902 volume in the English Men of
Letters series was an intellectual biography, and has rightly been described [by Ira Nadel] as
‘the first critical biography’ to be written of her. More biographies would follow in the early
decades of the twentieth century.

Yet the gradual reversal of her reputation began with a woman writer’s reading of Cross’s Life.
Virginia Woolf, in preparation for an article in the Times Literary Supplement to mark the
anniversary of George Eliot’s birth in 1919, began with the biography. ‘I am reading through
the whole of George Eliot, in order to sum her up once and for all, upon her anniversary’, she
wrote to a friend. ‘So far, I have only made way with her life, which is a book of the greatest
fascination, and I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her’. 51

17
Woolf’s essay began the slow process of revaluation, a process which took another thirty years, and was contributed to by Lord David Cecil, by Joan Bennett, and by F. R. Leavis, who paved the way for the modern critics of George Eliot. Like Jane Austen, the George Eliot we read today has come only comparatively recently into the Pantheon. And as with Austen, a Victorian biography constructed the writer which the twentieth century inherited, and the next generation of readers had to renegotiate.

It was Robert Browning, in his *Essay on Shelley* who remarked that ‘we covet ... biography’. He was speaking of a certain kind of Romantic poet for whom, as he said ‘readers of his poetry must be readers of his biography also’. But the comment has a particular resonance for the readers of nineteenth-century women writers who have always found it difficult to separate the life from the work. The energy of modern biographers who continue to produce new biographies of Charlotte Brontë, of Jane Austen, and of George Eliot suggests that modern readers continue to be reluctant to separate the life from the work, that we too, ‘covet biography’.

Notes


8. The series, or some volumes, were published in the United States as the *Famous Women* series, by Roberts Brothers, Boston.


10. Mrs Arthur Kennard, preface to *Rachel*, Eminent Women series (London: W. H. Allen, 1885). Helen Zimmern, in the preface to her biography of Maria Edgeworth in the same series, emphasized her access to an unpublished memoir by Edgeworth’s mother, and to a large number of her private letters through which she was able to present ‘what I hope is at least an authentic biography’. 18


38 Barbara Bodichon expressed the view that Cross neither could nor would write the biography, and that the task should fall to Simcox. See K. A. Mackenzie, *Edith Simcox and George Eliot* (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 121.