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## Review of Adam Bede

Mary Waldron

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**George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Mary Waldron (Broadview, 2005), pp. 642.**

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This Broadview edition of *Adam Bede* has a biographical and critical introduction, appropriately integrating G. H. Lewes into its discourse, and useful essays on some of the themes of the novel, – Religion, Love, Rank and Status. There are short summaries of selected critical commentaries from the contemporary to the current, including an appraisal of the feminist divide over George Eliot. The brief chronology is succeeded by a note on the text, here that of the First Edition with minor corrections/adjustments from the manuscript, footnoted throughout. The Appendices which follow it provide foreground and background to the novel, for example the author's own self-conscious account of how and when she came to write *Adam Bede*. Further material is found in the broadsheets on the execution of Mary Voce, extracts on the contemporary reception of the novel – an extension of pp. 39-40 of the introduction – and a telling analysis of the religious background. There are relevant derivations from Eliot's theories of fiction, drawn from comments in the years preceding *Adam Bede*, which show just how swiftly they were assimilated into her practice.

The whole encapsulates the shame-to-fame syndrome which marks the arrival of George Eliot. The timing was fortuitous, for Thackeray was in creative and physical decline, and Dickens had suffered the self-inflicted adverse publicity of separating from his wife in the previous year. *Adam Bede* confirms the rich promise of *Scenes of Clerical Life*: it is mature, studied, unsensational, tragic, leavened with humour and compassionate irony. It is sublimely tolerant, warm and wise, and its humanity, aesthetics and art demand considered evaluation, careful investigation and sympathetic identification with its name and nature. This Broadview edition is admirably focused, but there are a number of blemishes, passing irritants of varying concern. The title-page epigraph to the novel from *The Excursion* (VI, 651-8) which is so central to George Eliot's conception, and indeed to the Wordsworthian subtext which runs throughout the novel, is omitted. One of Jane Austen's most trenchant assertions, found at the beginning of the final chapter of *Mansfield Park*, is given as 'I quit such subjects', the key word 'odious' missing. This almost overshadows Waldron's insightful comment that Mr Irwine, meditating in Chapter 39 of *Adam Bede*, actually repeats to himself Austen's 'guilt and misery' phrase taken from the same sentence (20). Waldron refers to the 'five novels which followed *Adam Bede* between 1860 and 1876' (41) when there are six: perhaps she has forgotten *Daniel Deronda*, which also gets left out of the chronology of George Eliot's life and works, together with 'The Lifted Veil'. This chronology gives no entries for 1869 and 1870, important years with the life-changing death of Thornton Lewes, the composition of poetry, the beginnings of *Middlemarch*. Waldron inaccurately dates *War and Peace* 1864. Slangy phrasing occurs occasionally in Waldron's introduction: Cross 'was not up to the job' (41) of undertaking George Eliot's biography, while 'Such assessments as Barbara Hardy's were banished to the sidelines during the 1970s' (45). By whom? In the period of decline, 'post 1880', she quotes Lesley (sic) Stephen's 1881 article (but see below), George Saintsbury (who can't remember whether Charlotte Brontë was alive or dead in 1859), but does not note Virginia Woolf's redressive stance in the *TLS* of November 1919, with its great praise for Eliot's presentation of her Midland characters and its eulogy of *Middlemarch*. Her father, Leslie Stephen, had praised the 'inimitable force and pathos' in the description of Hetty's journey, observing too that George

Eliot had 'powers of mind and a richness of emotional nature rarely equalled' in his *George Eliot* (1902).

Footnotes to the text are ably undertaken for the most part. Waldron prefers some readings from the MS, though the restoration of 'consciousness' (357) seems at variance with the note in Carol Martin's Clarendon edition, the definitive text of the novel. Waldron points out Eliot's confusion over 'birches' and 'beeches' (191) which seems valid. There is a tendency, I think, to overgloss: Methody, sexton, ostler, country-seat, ricks, sorrel, bovine gaze, parish clerk, mill, victual and stile, all reflect Waldron's attention to detail, but the effect is somehow that of dumbing-down, as if general readers and students do not have dictionaries or even the most rudimentary period awareness. Critical comments in footnotes sometimes seem indulgent (see Chapter 12, 195 fn 3, for example, on Arthur's reaction after a meeting with Hetty), while some notes are redundant, as in Dinah's reference to the 'bottomless pit' where Waldron, having given the derivations from James I and Milton, says 'It is difficult to credit that Dinah was aware of either source' (90). If any note is needed it is surely to *Revelation* 9:1.

Waldron's best work is in the Appendices and in her general and particularized treatment of the religious content and context. In Appendix A she takes a long extract from Eliot's July 1856 review of 'The Natural History of German Life', and demonstrates through italicized passages, which have their equivalents in *Adam Bede*, how Eliot recycled Riehl into her own realism. Overall, Waldron's enthusiasm for the novel and her dedication to it outweigh occasional flaws and make this an interesting addition to the Eliot canon.

**Graham Handley**