

2007

Review of George Eliot

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Ashton, Rosemary, "Review of George Eliot" (2007). *The George Eliot Review*. 525.
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Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot* (Oxford University Press: 'Very Interesting People' series, 2007), pp. 57. ISBN 978 0 19 921351 1 (PB)

Oxford's publication of 'Bite-sized biographies of Britain's most fascinating historical figures' brings to mind Pascal's famous apology for the length of his letter: 'I have not had time to make it shorter'. Would Rosemary Ashton, who has written both long and short biographies, agree that it is more taxing to produce a 'bite-sized' account than a long one? Brevity demands clear aims, selection of salient points, stringent compression. These tests Rosemary Ashton passes with enviable ease, combining compression with elegance. She begins by summarizing her aims: 'In this study, originally written for the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, I hope to bring into focus the unusual qualities George Eliot possessed [...], among which are included George Eliot's rejection of orthodox religion, her acceptance of an unconventional 'marriage', the breadth of her learning, her command of languages, her exceptional knowledge of philosophy, history, science, English and European literature. Professor Ashton's aim is also to show the continuity of [George Eliot's] intellectual, imaginative, and narrative skills from her early letters and reviews to the novels themselves'. This interest in the development of George Eliot's creative powers is accompanied by a concern to establish links between her experiences of life and her writings.

Rosemary Ashton sets George Eliot firmly in 'fat Central England' with its elms and buttercups, but notes too Warwickshire's combined rural idyll and industrial poverty. Even as a child, Mary Anne observed the contrast between the lives of tenants and the lives of the gentry at Arbury Hall although 'as a clever and serious school-girl' she was briefly allowed to cross the boundary and 'browse in the family library'. Her wide reading of both spiritual and non-religious writing and her later contact with many liberal thinkers led not only to her crisis of faith but ultimately to that ability to see both sides of a question which permeates her novels, enabling her to catch in *Adam Bede*, for example, 'the unkindness as well as the neighbourliness of country life'. Other early signs of creative potential are clearly indicated. In October 1846 she wrote to Charles Bray giving him a fictional account of a visit from 'Professor Bücherwurm of Moderig University' ('Professor Bookworm of Musty University'). Rosemary Ashton believes the anecdote reveals at an early stage George Eliot's 'wit, wisdom, imagination, and an ability to turn her own experience to good account fictionally'. She makes brave jokes about her plain appearance and possible spinsterhood and 'exploits with playful ease the hard intellectual labour... of translating Strauss's work' when she imagines translating the work of a Professor whose commentary on the little book of *Tobit* runs into five volumes. Ashton also maintains that Eliot 'found her voice as a writer in her work for the *Westminster Review* from 1851 to 1856. In the essayist, increasingly confident, wide-ranging, witty and rhetorically complex, we can see many of the characteristics of the future novelist ...'. The value she sets on Art as 'an extension of our sympathies' sounds 'like a manifesto for the kind of fiction she was to write herself'. Her confident letters to Chapman show her rising above her customary diffidence although her love letters to Herbert Spencer certainly reveal vulnerability. Since it seems she was for a time attracted to both Spencer and Lewes, she must have understood emotional confusion as it appeared in the uncertainties of her most autobiographical heroine, Maggie Tulliver, drawn to three men at once – Philip, Stephen – and Tom. Moreover, she used her own experience when she placed her heroines in emotional

situations which provoked scandal. Yet Ashton, recalling the Dodson aunts, shows also how Eliot turned 'painful personal experience to comic, as well as tragic, account'.

Her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, with all its rich observation and humour, was written against a background of 'self-doubt and illness' as she and Lewes spent the summer of 1869 caring for Lewes's son, Thorne. After Thorne's death at twenty-five, she was even more sadly equipped 'to enter imaginatively into the consciousness of every kind of human being'. Discussing her portrayal of two unhappy marriages (the Lydgates' and the Casaubons') Henry James felt that there was 'nothing more powerfully real' and 'nothing certainly more *intelligent*' in all English fiction. The emphasis on '*intelligent*' reminds one of Professor Ashton's promise that in her focus on 'unusual qualities' she would include 'learnedness'. Learned George Eliot certainly was, but it is largely the learning from experience, the learning of the heart, that stimulate Ashton's imagination. Nevertheless, she does not underestimate the powerful intellect that undergirds all the novels, culminating in *Daniel Deronda* with its panorama of social classes, its range of opinions, its analysis of change. Why did she conclude her fiction with a vision of a Jewish homeland? 'By *Middlemarch* she had gone as far as it was possible to go in the imaginative study of English provincial life. Marian's wide intellectual curiosity, in evidence from her earliest years through her learning of foreign languages, translations of Spinoza, Strauss and Feuerbach, and critical appreciations of Goethe, George Sand, and other European authors ... led her to set the scene of *Daniel Deronda* partly outside England'. She told Blackwood that she wanted to 'widen the English vision a little'. Whether she does this through her vast learning or through the extension of our sympathies, she gives her readers the widest of horizons. It is a tribute to Professor Ashton that this little biography also gives us the same sense of enlargement inseparable from greatness.

Ruth M. Harris

***Everyone and Everything in George Eliot*, ed. George Newlin,
2 vols (M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006) has been purchased by the
George Eliot Fellowship.**