Review of George Eliot. Novelist, Lover, Wife

Brenda Maddox

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The distorted cover-image of George Eliot with a strange pen and a very small writing book, and the mind-reading at the beginning which tells us that one glance at the newborn Mary Ann, already possessed of a ‘large drooping nose, long chin, prominent jaw’, told her parents that ‘she would find it hard to fulfil a girl’s primary task – to find a husband, she would have to make her own way in life’, are not ingratiating, and there are signs that Brenda Maddox is not exactly inward with the novels, but she has done something no other scholar has done – not even George Eliot’s best biographers, Gordon Haight and Rosemary Ashton, and as far as I know, nobody else either.

She has authenticated the story of John Cross’s honeymoon leap into the Grand Canal from the Hotel Europa, sensibly looking beyond what might have been personal gossip – in Lord Acton’s papers and Walter Sichel’s memoirs – at two Venetian newspapers, Il Tempo and L’Adriatico. Between them they reported the attempted suicide, the rescue by the gondolier Corradini, the name J. W. Cross, and the presence of his ‘povera sposa’. One of them – the biographer’s source here is not made precisely clear – apparently cited the report of ‘incident 6908’ by the San Marco police station, whose sharp Inspector noted not only the age of the Englishman as forty but also that of ‘his wife, a woman over sixty’. She is reported as consulting a doctor (Ricchetti) about John’s worrying symptoms, when he leapt from the balcony in the next room ‘with such force that he sailed over the three or four gondolas stationed outside the hotel and landed in the middle of the canal’.

Gordon Haight once said to me – after his biography was published – that someone might still look for the doctor’s records, as he had not – and it has taken a biographer who worked as a journalist – for the Economist, the Telegraph and The Times – to make the scoop.

It seems ungracious therefore to complain that Maddox calls the George Eliot Fellowship ‘the George Eliot Society’, Amos Barton a vicar, Harold Transome ‘Harry’ and Mary Ann’s relationship with Charles Bray ‘an infatuation’, or that she says Tom Tulliver ‘tries to manoeuvre Maggie into a sensible marriage’ and apparently confuses the order of Daniel’s meeting with Mirah and Gwendolen. Her confident observation that George Eliot owed the ‘Wessex’ of Daniel Deronda to Thomas Hardy is more excusable, though it might have been modified by a look at David McIntosh’s article ‘George Eliot’s Debt to Hardy’ (The George Eliot Review, no. 33, 2002).

There are no signs that Maddox has read any literary criticism since Leavis; the quotations from the novels are unsurprising; Maggie and her author merge; the old legend of Mary Ann’s uncaring mother is retold once more, as if gospel truth. But this brief life is lively, compressed, fluent, sympathetic and well-written, if superficial compared with the author’s biographies of other amazing women – Nora Barnacle, George Yeats and Rosalind Franklin. It is in a series, Eminent Lives, which the publisher’s note ambitiously relates to the tradition of Plutarch, Vasari, Samuel Johnson and Lytton Strachey.