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THE GOLDEN GATES ARE PASSED
By Robert Muscutt

There have always been attempts not just to conceal knowledge of George Eliot's life but also to manipulate it into conformity with a preconceived profile. In the Preface to his edition of The George Eliot Letters in nine volumes, Gordon Haight revealed that those pages of her Journal from immediately after her father's death in 1849 until shortly before she went to Weimar with Lewes in 1854 were torn out and presumably destroyed, probably by Cross. Charles Lewes, George Eliot's main literary executor, also seems to have destroyed nine of his father's journals, the first volume extant beginning in 1856 is numbered X. Haight corrected Cross's idealized portrayal of 'a George Eliot who never really existed, a marmoreal image'. However, in the meantime questions have been and are being asked by biographers about many of the value judgments in Haight's enormously influential biography.

I would like to pose and try to answer such a question of my own: why did Robert Evans and Mary Ann Evans leave Griff House in 1841? Everywhere we read that Mr Evans decided to retire, passed his job and the family home on to Isaac and, after much dithering, moved to Foleshill to improve his blue-stocking daughter's prospects on the marriage market. This explanation of what was a very great disruption in the lives of both father and daughter deserves at least careful scrutiny. The question of why Mr Evans should suddenly decide to retire has not, as far as I know, been adequately answered or even seriously posed in the main biographies. The original bland version provided by Cross is still the generally if not universally accepted one:

New circumstances now created a change almost amounting to a revolution in Miss Evans's life. Mr Isaac Evans, who had been associated for some time with his father in the land agency business, married, and it was arranged that he should take over the establishment at Griff. This led to the removal in March 1841 of Mr Robert Evans and his daughter to a house on the Foleshill Road, in the immediate neighbourhood of Coventry.

The event, which did indeed lead to a kind of a revolution in Mary Ann's life, begs for a more demanding scrutiny. It is beyond the scope of this essay to review all the accounts of the departure of Mr Evans and his daughter from Griff House provided by the well-known biographies. An essentially accurate summary would be that, although a number of those biographical works contain detailed insights into the process of the move and the mental anguish involved, none of them considers the possibility that both Mary Ann and Robert Evans left Griff against their will in order to clear the way for Isaac to succeed his father prematurely as estate manager of the Arbury estate and consequently enjoy the tenure of the family home and social status that went with the job. Some biographies point out reluctance and indecision on the part of Robert Evans, but none of them argue, as I will do, that the decision was made over the heads of both daughter and father, probably by Isaac and the Newdigate family.

It is worth noting at the outset that there is no evidence that Mr Evans's health was a factor in the decision to leave Griff House. On 26 February 1840, Mary Ann wrote to her uncle Samuel Evans that 'dear father is quite well as usual' (Letters: I, 40), and on 10 June, two weeks after the first unambiguous reference to the impending move, she reports to Maria that she intends to make 'a little trip' to Derbyshire with her father (Letters: I, 52). She has been far
from well but she expresses no concern about her father’s health, and she had not done so in any of her letters between 28 February and 10 June. We can therefore safely dismiss the idea of Mr Evans’s health playing any part in the reasons for the removal.

Retirement in the modern sense of the word could provide no explanation as the normal course of events would have been for Mr Evans to remain at Griff House until his death, as his son Isaac actually did until he died at the age of 76. Mr Evans happened to be 67 in 1840, a closeness to the modern age of retirement which may have induced biographers from Haight onwards to accept more smoothly the false notion that relinquishing his position and home was in the normal course of events. On the contrary, his health and age had no influence on this unforeseen upheaval in the lives of father and daughter.

Before trying to address in detail the question of what brought about the move we should look at the events leading up to it. In 1835 ‘old’ Francis Parker Newdigate (b. 1751) died. Although hated by his tenant farmers and many other local residents,4 Parker Newdigate had a strong personal bond with Mr Evans, whom he brought with him from Derbyshire when he inherited the estate. The extraordinary plaque in Astley Church, which commemorates the death of both Parker Newdigate’s wife and the death of her servant, Robert Evans’s first wife, Harriet, in 1809, testifies to the unusual closeness of the two men, the master and servant. Parker Newdigate had a son but this son, ‘young’ Francis Parker Newdigate (1774-1862), was not the heir to the estate. Old Francis Parker’s inheritance had been restricted to one generation and now the estate reverted to the other line of the family, which in the meantime had produced a male heir. The Arbury Estate was inherited by Charles Newdigate Newdegate (1816-1883) and, as he was not of age when old Parker Newdigate died, he was represented for two years by his mother, the formidable Maria Boucherett. Maria Boucherett famously allowed the precocious young Mary Ann the run of the well-stocked Arbury Hall library but her relations with Mr Evans were so strained that in 1836 he offered, and subsequently withdrew, his resignation (Taylor, p. 24, and note p. 236). Significantly, he submitted his resignation to the son of his former employer, an indication in itself of the tensions between the estate manager and the real masters of his professional life. When he committed what in fact was a breach of procedure, he was certainly acting out of an admirable sense of loyalty to the family to whom he felt he owed so much, the Parker Newdigarettes. Conversely, the branch of the family then in possession of the Arbury estate, the family whom Robert Evans served, might justifiably have seen something disloyal, even insolent in his implicit refusal to accept their authority.

In George Eliot, A Life, Rosemary Ashton, using for the first time correspondence between Mr Evans and Francis Newdigate jnr, the son of his former employer, summarizes the conflicts between Mr Evans and the new owners of Arbury Hall:

Robert (Evans) was continually caught between the two branches of the family. Francis Newdigate would direct him to settle the rents of the Arbury tenants, and Mrs Newdigate would prevent him from doing so. In April 1835, Robert had had to tell Francis that Mrs Newdigate was preparing to sue him for destruction of part of the land. Robert Evans’s life was plagued by these disagreements. (Ashton, p. 23)

It is clear that, for Robert Evans, these circumstances meant split loyalties. On the one hand he felt a sense of responsibility to his former employer’s son, whom he unrealistically treated as his employer and who lived in Blackheath, London, 100 miles from Griff, and who had given him a free hand in running the estate in the interim period. On the other hand there was Maria
Boucherett, resident at Arbury Hall and frequently opposing, even overriding his management decisions. The newly installed branch of the Newdigate family, far more genteel than old Francis Newdigate, would want an estate manager whose loyalties they were not willing to share. These social differences between the two branches of the Newdigate family were reflected in the generational transition in the Evans family. Isaac had enjoyed a good education, in the process of which he rubbed shoulders on equal terms with the children of the local bourgeoisie, whereas his father’s relationship with the class above him had been one of subordination, that of a highly regarded servant. As early as 4 September 1839 there is clear evidence of Isaac’s integration into a social milieu to which neither his father nor any of his siblings ever truly belonged. Mary Ann wrote to Maria about the wedding of Thomas Bull, son of the wealthy and influential Nuneaton banker William Bull, partner of the even wealthier and more powerful William Craddock, at which ‘the very staid, fatherly and dignified Mr. Isaac Evans gave the bride away’ (Letters: I, 29). He also signed, together with the bridegroom’s sister, as a witness in Kenilworth Parish Register (Haight’s footnote, Letters: I, 29). Mary Ann did form a short-lived friendship with the new Mrs Thomas Bull but, typically, when invited to a party at the Bull’s home, it was a catastrophe. In Mary Ann’s own words:

when I had been there for some time the conviction that I was not in a situation to maintain the Protestant character of the true Christian, together with oppressive noise that formed the accompaniment to the dancing, the sole amusement, produced first headaches and then that most wretched and unpitied of all afflictions, hysteria, so that I regularly disgraced myself. (Letter to Maria Lewis, 13 March, 1840. Letters: I, 41).

On the safe assumption he was also present, it is irresistible to imagine Isaac’s reaction to his sister’s tantrum at the home of his fine friends. The incident happened only a few weeks before Mary Ann learned of the decision that she should leave Griff House permanently and go to live in Meriden. It is certainly at least conceivable that the highly embarrassing scene and the order to quit the family home were causally related. Furthermore, Isaac’s social aspirations would only be fulfilled if he had a suitable position and property, something to which he would normally only succeed when his father was no longer capable of carrying out his duties as estate manager, owing to either ill-health or death. In 1839, both would have seemed to Isaac to be in the distant future. The Newdixgates wanted a manager who was committed to their way of doing things and did not bring baggage from the former estate-owner with him. I suggest that Isaac was exactly the man they needed. In 1841, apart from sufficient knowledge and competence to take over his father’s job, he also had the preferred social graces, shared the landed gentry’s passion for hunting, and was almost exactly the same age as the young Viscount, all of which enabled them to work together for several decades. Rosemary Ashton points out that Isaac was in fact employed by Charles Newdigate Newdegate from 1836 (Ashton, p. 23), while Robert still felt answerable to Francis Parker Newdigate, who had taken over the responsibility for the estate some years before his father, Francis Parker Newdigate, died.

In 1837, when the young legal heir reached his twenty-first birthday, Isaac also came of age and saw his own star begin to rise; and he not only watched but, I would claim, even contributed to his father’s loss of favour and eventual replacement. In any case, within little more than two years, Isaac had taken over his father’s job, and, with his wife, occupied Griff House and its prosperous farm. Father and daughter had been sent to Coventry, at least in the
non-figurative sense. This occupation was achieved by means of a two-pronged attack; the more easily accomplished one being directed at Mary Ann, whereas the dislodgement of Mr Evans seems to have met with some stubborn opposition.

Perhaps the very first intimation of the future process of displacement was in 1839, when Isaac celebrated his twenty-third birthday with a rook shoot at Arbury Hall. Mary Ann wrote to Maria Lewis: ‘my writing to you is as a délassement after a day of disagreeable bustle in preparing for a party met to celebrate Isaac’s 23rd birthday’ (Letters: 1, 24). Charles Newdegate was not only Isaac’s employer but quite possibly also his friend: the fact that the shoot took place on the Arbury estate supports this closeness. Less than a year after the birthday celebrations at Arbury, rumours began to connect Isaac with Sarah, the daughter of a wealthy Birmingham family, the Rawlins.

The first definite reference Mary Ann makes to her own vulnerability as head of the Griff household is in her letter of 28 May 1840 to Maria Lewis:

I have much that I could tell you and should like to convey to your ear, but I forbear to put down on paper, prospects that may yet after all pass by as the scenery of a Diorama. I will only hint that there seems to be a probability of my becoming an unoccupied damsel, of my being severed from all the ties that have hitherto given my existence the semblance of usefulness beyond that of making up the requisite quantum of animal matter in the universe. (Letters: 1, 50)

Haight notes on the same page: ‘The engagement of her brother Isaac brought the prospect of a sister-in-law who would supersede GE as housekeeper at Griff’, which seems to me to be an inadequate reason for such a distressful upheaval in Mary Ann’s life. While the young Mary Ann does seem to have valued this position, we can justifiably ask if it was of more nominal than practical significance. Although Mrs Christiana Evans had been ill even while Mary Ann was still away at school, the household was evidently well-managed, probably by a trusted and experienced servant. It is most likely that this situation continued after Mrs Evans died, leaving her youngest daughter formally in charge. Mary Ann herself calls her housekeeping duties the ‘semblance of a usefulness’. The letters from 1836 until the departure do not give the impression that housekeeping was a significant burden on her time. Apart from her other voluntary commitments, which included learning Italian, the amount of reading she got through suggests she had plenty of leisure time. And, of course, later when father and daughter were established at Bird Grove in Foleshill, housekeeping duties appear to have had little or no place in her life. As part of her personal and intellectual development in Foleshill, it was as if she had discarded the need for a title that afforded her a recognized social identity. Ruby V. Redinger also points out that Mary Ann was by no means enamoured by the chores of housekeeping at Griff but then writes:

The alternatives that would be forced upon her by Isaac’s marriage were unattractive:

either to remain at Griff, but with her sister-in-law supplanting her as feminine head of it; or to leave the beloved homestead and make a new home for herself and her father. (Redinger, p. 108)

In fact at this time (May 1840) neither of those two possibilities was available: her departure had been irrevocably decided, but there had been no talk of Mr Evans leaving Griff. Both Ruby V. Redinger and Rosemary Bodenheimer devote considerable attention to Mary Ann’s letters
of this period of time and their implications for Mary Ann's state of mind but without considering the possibility that the removal of both Mary Ann and Robert Evans was engineered by Isaac for his own social advancement.

Further on in the same letter to Maria, Mary Ann writes about her dear sister Chrissey and her darlings and asks: 'Can you imagine me at Meriden? ... I desire to imitate my father's calm endurance and humble gratitude and be quite free from anxiety respecting my destination' (Letters: I, 51). Clearly she sees herself and her father in some way as being in the same boat, although at this point there is still no mention of Mr Evans moving. On 10 June she evidently believes that her move to Meriden is imminent and inevitable as she writes to Maria: 'I do beg, as proof of your affection, you will once more visit Griff while I am still its mistress' (Letters: I, 52). And on 23 June her message has a strangely coded ring to it, but the implicit assumption seems to be that Mr Evans would remain at Griff:

As long as I am here you know well that my dear father will be delighted to welcome you as my friend, in addition to his respect for you, and should I migrate to Meriden our meeting will be facilitated in every way. (Letters: I, 54)

But by 6 July 1840 the situation had changed, and she wrote to Maria: 'I believe it is decided that Father and I should leave Griff and take up our residence somewhere in the neighborhood of Coventry ... and this is at present a matter of some anxiety' (Letters: I, 56).

Again, the phrasing – 'it is decided' – suggests that Mr Evans was, like his daughter, merely on the receiving end of this decision and had not been involved in making it. In a later letter to Martha Jackson (4 March 1841) she chooses similar wording: 'It has been determined for two months or more that our future residence shall be the house on the Foleshill Road that was formerly inhabited by Dr Hook and next door to Mr. A. Pears' (Letters: VIII, 7). The use of the passive voice – 'it has been determined' – was probably chosen here to conceal resentment towards a particular person or persons but it has the opposite effect when read in the whole context of the move. The earlier words in the letter of 28 May 1840 – 'I desire to imitate my father's calm endurance and humble gratitude and be quite free from anxiety respecting my destination' (Letters: I, 51) – take on a new significance. They suggest that the subservient Mr Evans had resisted for as long as possible but had finally succumbed to the decision about his future to be made for him, probably by the Newdigates officially but then presumably with the contrivance of Isaac, the main beneficiary. In her letter to Martha Mary Ann dates the decision that both she and her father were to move to Foleshill as February, 1841, but she had already written of this decision some six or seven months earlier on 6 June 1840 to Maria. Perhaps the explanation is that in the new year of 1841, Robert Evans formally capitulated after months of resistance to his son's scheme, backed now by his employer's insistence that he leave. Even if he had had any real choice in the matter, the alternative to moving together with Mary Ann was an extremely unpleasant one for Mr Evans and would have involved him placing his own wish to remain at Griff as estate manager above his daughter's only chance of a tolerable if unknown new home. Much as she loved Chrissey and her children, life at Meriden would have been misery for Mary Ann. In fact, in retrospect, we can see that moving to Foleshill provided Mr Evans with a thoroughly acceptable way of life with which he came to be contented, and it proved to be an enormously positive change for his daughter and for posterity.

At the time, however, the months were agonizingly uncertain. On 20 July 1840 Mary
Ann wrote to Maria: ‘Isaac is in Paris! There has been a mist of suspense thrown around our prospects lately. My brother’s marriage is at present uncertain, so I know not what will be our situation’ (Letters: I, 60). And shortly afterwards the final resignation returns. On 17 September she writes to Maria: ‘All is status quo here. I think it will probably be so till spring, and then most probably I shall be transplanted, and that to Meriden’ (Letters: I, 67)

Events began to move along and in September 1840 she travelled to Egbaston to visit Isaac’s fiancée, Sarah Rawlins, and her family. During that visit, as Sarah later told George Eliot’s widower John Cross, she broke down in hysterical crying at a concert they were attending (Ashton, p. 32). In a letter dated 1 October 1840 to Maria, she describes this dutiful task in an ironic tone which hints at a much more open resentment of Isaac’s manipulation: ‘Last week I was absent from home from Wednesday to Saturday, in quest of the “coy maiden” Pleasure – at least nominally so, the real motive being rather to gratify another’s feelings’. In same letter of 1 October 1840 she also writes:

My prospects have been long fluctuating so as to make it unsafe for me to mention them; now I believe I may say that I am not to be dislodged from my present pedestal or resign my scepter. The secession has devolved on another and the flutterer is to leave the nest. (Letters: I, 68)

The word ‘flutterer’ suggests to me the image of a cuckoo fledgling, though the image is of limited relevance as a cuckoo fledgling does not evict its siblings or its parents from the home into which it is hatched. In any case, it certainly supports the idea that Isaac was causing the commotion and that there was only room in the nest for him and his new bride. Neither should we forget that Griff House was large enough to have accommodated Isaac and his wife without anyone moving out. There was, therefore, no exigent reason why Mr Evans and Mary Ann should move out to make room for Isaac and Sarah.

Faced now with the inevitable, she expresses herself without the protective facade of irony. In March 1841, in a letter to her old school friend Martha Jackson she wrote candidly of the impending move: ‘To me it is a deeply painful incident – it is like dying to one stage of existence’ (Letters: I, 86). Clearly, her relationship with her brother, if it had ever been warm, had cooled considerably in the months leading up to the wedding, which was the direct cause of or excuse for the dreaded relocation. When reading the letters which mention the wedding, usually in an aside or in a studiedly casual way, we need to bear in mind how we would expect Mary Ann to write about what would under normal circumstances be a major and joyful event for the whole family.

In her letter to Maria dated 4 June 1841 she writes with no enthusiasm about her role in the wedding ceremony: ‘The whole of last week was devoted to a bridesmaid’s duties’. (Letters: I, 94). A letter written on 18 June, shortly after the wedding, is equally lacking in anything but the formally required emotion:

By the bye, I have not yet told you that Isaac is married, that I officiated as a bridesmaid and that the pair are now in Scotland after visiting the lakes with most propitious weather. I already love my sister (Sarah) for her own sake as well as Isaac’s and I trust she will make him a valuable partner. (Letters: I, 97)

The choice of words ‘valuable partner’ here is significant. Anything even slightly colder would have been impolite to say the least. In the letters of those months we feel the repressed
resentment, the pain and also the determined effort to suppress her rebellious feelings.

Mary Ann and Robert Evans had moved into Bird Grove in mid-April 1841. Isaac married Sarah on 8 June, 1841. Mary Ann ‘officiated’ as bridesmaid at the wedding, the word chosen to express a distinct lack of enthusiasm and emotional involvement. A fact of even greater significance which has not received enough attention from biographers is that Robert Evans declined to attend his only son’s wedding. Quoting from Mr Evans’s Journal, Haight mentions almost incidentally that ‘he (Mr Evans) lent his carriage to take Chrissey and Edward Clarke while he rode to Packington to look over “different things”’ (Haight, p. 31). Other biographers do not even mention this staggering snub but surely we ought to ask why Mr Evans boycotted what was at that time the biggest day in his son’s life. His absence could not be explained or excused by health reasons as he went on horseback to Packington and back on the wedding day. Mr Evans was a man of few words but his behaviour is in this case eloquent enough. Too deferential and sincerely grateful towards the Newdigate family to blame them for his loss of position and home, his powerless resentment is aimed at his son, and his abstention from attendance of the wedding, about which Mary Ann was, as far as we know silent, was the only way he could express his bitterness. Far from being the result of a mutual, amiable agreement between father, son and the Newdigates, as all accounts since Cross would have us assume, I believe that Mr Evans’s departure from Griff was forced upon him very much against his will. His demonstrative absence from the wedding lends strong support to this view.

Mary Ann’s feelings towards her brother are apparent in the language she uses to convey the news of the couple’s travels. On 21 June she writes to Maria:

I am expecting the Bride and Bridegroom to return by the railway this evening. They have had a delightful excursion amongst the lakes and in Scotland. Did I tell you I have some rose-leaves from Wordsworth’s garden? (Letters: I, 98-99)

The first two sentences, devoid of any real emotion, have the ring of a formal court circular. The final sentence emphasizes the cutting indifference and lack of any show of affection which Mary Ann is trying to communicate while remaining polite. The phrasing, with the casual, distracting mention of the rose leaves, devalues both what is presumably a gift enclosed in a letter from the bride and bridegroom, and at the same time drains the news about the couple of anything but formal obligation. This tone continues in a letter to her uncle, Samuel Evans, on 2 October 1841. Mary Ann couldn’t be less enthusiastic about her brother and his wife: ‘My brother Isaac about whom you kindly enquire seems to have a very suitable partner as far as similarity of taste and domestic habits are concerned and I think we have reason to hope for his worldly prosperity’ (Letters: I, 112). The word ‘prosperity’ reminds us of ‘valuable partner’. The absence of any emotional involvement in this message, even when we take into account the style she habitually adopts when writing to her Uncle Samuel, again communicates the coldness and distance which characterizes Mary Ann’s relationship with her brother. It contrasts unmistakably with the effusive affection that invariably accompanies her news about Chrissey. That Mary Ann ever had an especially close relationship with Isaac is yet to be demonstrated without almost total reliance on fictional sources. But there is no doubt that in the months covered by this article, that relationship was extremely strained, and only determined self-restraint on the part of Mary Ann and her father avoided severance. The de facto eviction of father and daughter meant the end of any illusions Mary Ann may have harboured about her brother, even though both she and her father put a brave face on things and
avoided an open rift in the family.

Even more revealing than Mary Ann’s coldness is Robert Evans’s terse note in his journal for 26 June 1841, the Saturday following the couple’s return from their honeymoon:

‘Dined with I. P. Evans and his wife for the first time’. (Letters: I, 98, n. 4)

Again, Haight makes no comment on the entry and does not refer to it in the biography at all, but clearly Mr Evans is gritting his teeth for the sake of family unity and to refer to his only son and his daughter-in-law as ‘I. P. Evans and his wife’ is a rare show of acrimony and spite on his part. When Mary Ann had referred to her brother as ‘Mr. Isaac Evans’ on the occasion of Thomas Bull’s wedding, she chose her words deliberately in order to caricature his dignified manner on that day. Mr Evans was not as verbally skilful as his daughter but his choice of words here is, as was his absence from the wedding, expressive of his strong feeling of the alienation from his son and daughter-in-law at that time. It is worth mentioning again the lack of attention these two indications of Mr Evans’s feeling of unjust treatment have received in the biographers referred to in this article.

To me, as a non-academic reader of George Eliot’s works and biography, it seems that the question of perspective and selection of available biographical material is as pertinent as ever. This article is an attempt to re-assess a crucial period for the Evans family between 1836 and 1841, both by viewing existing and available evidence from a fresh perspective and also by giving it more attention than it has been allowed in the best-known biographies. I prefer to exclude fiction, most notably The Mill on the Floss, as a potential source of support for the argumentation of this article but it would be interesting to read how others use the interaction of biography and fiction to comment on the issues I have tried to raise.

Finally I would like to thank Professor Nancy Henry especially for providing the encouragement I needed to complete this article.

Notes


2 J. W. Cross, George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1885), vol. 1, p. 84.

life.

4 See *The Memorandum Book of Occurrences at Nuneaton*, John Astley’s Diary, entry for 5 February, 1835.