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RADICAL POLITICS IN THE 1860s: 
THE WRITING OF FELIX HOLT 

By David Paterson

While *Felix Holt the Radical* was being written there was a transformation in the atmosphere surrounding further parliamentary reform in Britain. In March 1865, when George Eliot began the novel, the Liberal Prime Minister Palmerston remained cautious about an extension of the franchise. Yet Felix Holt was finished on 31 May 1866 amidst great political excitement: a Reform Bill was being debated and the outcome uncertain. This change in emphasis in the political mood had its effect on Eliot’s writing, since the ‘reform campaign had not gained enough momentum’ to explain Eliot’s initial choice of subject. To say in early 1865 that Britain was ‘on the brink of parliamentary reform’ is to be wise after the event. It was not impending Reform legislation but philosophical discussion about who should possess the right – or privilege – to vote that initially inspired Eliot’s theme. Considerable attention was given to debating the nature of radicalism and democracy in the early 1860s.

Eliot’s increasing connections with Radical political circles and heightened awareness of international events impinged directly on her writing. A renewed friendship with Clementina (Mentia) Taylor was a significant development in Eliot’s political thinking. Mentia and her husband Peter Alfred Taylor (Pat) belonged to a different generation of Radicals from those campaigning around 1832 and their fictional equivalents, Felix Holt and Harold Transome. The Taylors showed greater interest in Radical causes abroad and supported women’s suffrage at home. At the time of the General Election in July 1865 Eliot wrote supportively to Mentia regarding her husband’s re-election as M.P. for Leicester: ‘Success to the canvassing! I should have liked to be present when you were cheered’. Felix’s high moral tone, his refusal to carry on a family business he regarded as dishonest as well as his reluctance to take a lost note back to landowner Philip Debarry directly, for fear of a largely undeserved reward, were reminiscent of Pat Taylor. He refused to help any local Leicester charities as this might be regarded as buying votes. What a contrast to the corrupt mood of 1832 when Leicester seats were known to be sold for £1 or £2. His moral earnestness can bear comparison with Felix’s.

The Taylors’ home, Aubrey House, Kensington, was a centre for international Radical activity supporting the anti-slavery campaign during the American Civil War after 1861. Several of Eliot’s Radical friends strongly supported the north. In 1864 Barbara Bodichon wrote *Accomplices*, advocating ‘an English boycott of goods containing southern-grown cotton’. Mentia Taylor was honorary secretary of the Ladies’ London Emancipation Society, founded in 1863 as a separate organization from the all-male Emancipation Society. On 25 March 1864 as the American army in the north looked forward to more successful campaigns, Eliot commented to Mentia that ‘I share your joy in the Federal (northern) success’, but added ‘with that check that attends all joy in a war not absolutely ended’. The north’s eventual victory led to slave emancipation and was seen by many as a triumph for democracy, raising the reform pulse at home. When the south surrendered on 9 April 1865, Eliot had been working for two weeks on *Felix Holt*.

The right to exercise the franchise was increasingly discussed in a variety of social
circles. Frederick Denison Maurice, an Eliot admirer who first met her in 1864, argued that the granting of the vote would ‘be a better discipline, morally and intellectually’ than book learning. Eliot responded to the heightened political awareness. In 1865 she read accounts of the distress of weavers in the Coventry district since the free trade Treaty with France five years earlier. She realized the depression was not temporary but, in contrast to the Lancashire cotton workers (who were likely to do better once the Civil War had ended), she noted in her Journal that there was ‘the absence of any strong hope as to the revival of trade there’. Both Rosemary Ashton’s and Kathryn Hughes’s biographies point out that Eliot’s political interest was also enhanced by George Henry Lewes accepting the editorship of the *Fortnightly Review*, a post he took on in March 1865, just a few days before *Felix Holt* was begun.

Another of the Taylor’s Radical causes influenced George Eliot: Italian Unification. In the wake of the publication of *Romola*, the visit to England of the Italian nationalist and democratic hero Garibaldi in 1864 made a great impression. Support for the Italians against combined Austrian, Papal and Neapolitan forces, all seen as illiberal, was widespread and not confined to Radical circles, bringing out admiring British crowds. On 8 April 1864 Eliot went to the Crystal Palace to see Garibaldi in the presence of aristocracy, government members and the middle classes. Working people had been allowed a small deputation at Crystal Palace and Garibaldi’s visit stirred them into action.

In recent years political discourse had been relatively subdued. Pub-based politics, though still strong with the Tories, had declined on the Liberal side, replaced by what historian James Vernon has described as ‘new sober self-improving radical politics’. Whereas Felix, back in 1832, had felt it necessary to go to a hostelry for political discussion, even if he only had one drink, increasing numbers of Radicals no longer frequented public houses at all. But with Garibaldi’s visit, the political atmosphere warmed up, sometimes literally: there was a revival of effigies, processions and torchlight marches and ‘Garibaldi was praised and honoured while his enemies were burnt’. The Government, alarmed by this atmosphere, cut short his visit, but the resultant protests put Radical reform back on the agenda. Working-class and middle-class co-operation over reform recalled the campaigns of the Political Unions from Eliot’s childhood around 1830-32.

Eliot was also fascinated by the more cerebral Italian nationalist, Giuseppe Mazzini, who wrote extensively on democracy and nation-building. Mazzini argued that ‘the spread of democracy and national self-determination would be a powerful force for peace in the long run although the transition might often be violent’. Eliot, while generally sympathetic to this view, had reservations about that ‘violent transition’. On 23 July 1865 she made this clear in reply to Mentia Taylor’s request for a donation to Mazzini’s fund. Radicals such as Fawcett and Mill had contributed, but Eliot wrote that ‘Mr. Lewes and I would have liked to subscribe to a tribute to Mazzini, [if] the application was defined and guaranteed by his own word. As it is, the application of the desired fund is only intimated in the vaguest manner [...] [and] the reflection is inevitable that the application may ultimately be the promotion of conspiracy’. Radical campaigning influence on Eliot, though apparent, had its limits. She believed society should evolve organically rather than violently. This would be reflected in *Felix Holt*.

Other radical thinkers also influenced Eliot at this time. She enjoyed positivist Frederic Harrison’s ‘well-written’ articles in the *Fortnightly Review*. Harrison was involved
in the protest by the London Working Men’s Garibaldi Committee against the ending of the Italian hero’s English visit in June 1864, a reminder of the large working-class reform meetings around 1831-32. Another international cause had been highlighted with Radical protests against the brutal Russian suppression of the Polish nationalist revolt in January 1863. But trade union advocacy of war against Russia alarmed middle class sensibilities and caused further argument as to whether working people were fit to exercise the franchise.

One major politician, Chancellor William Gladstone, increasingly felt they were. His speech on parliamentary reform in May 1864 referring to the moral entitlement of every man to come ‘within the pale of the constitution’, though later qualified, caused a stir. While not a democrat – and opposing women’s suffrage – Gladstone argued that many unenfranchised working men had recently earned the right to vote. He did not see the vote as a right but as something that needed to be gained by responsible behaviour and good education. In a widely-reported speech at Chester on 31 May 1865, just as Eliot finished her preparatory reading for Felix Holt, Gladstone argued that the education of the people had been ‘infinitely improved’ in the last 30 years, their greater prosperity was apparent and above all their moral worth was such that ‘a considerable and effective portion’ of their body should be enfranchised. The Lancashire Cotton operatives suffered hard times owing to the North American states’ blockade of their livelihood, raw cotton. But they had shown impressive disregard for their self-interest by continuing to support the abolition of slavery.

Gladstone’s belief in the increasing electoral fitness of the working-class sat uneasily next to Felix’s view that taking 100 working men, even though there were ‘thirty who had some soberness [. . .] the power would lie with the seventy drunken and stupid votes’. But Felix was referring to the previous generation when the young Gladstone’s views were much less liberal. Gladstone admitted that, as a young man, the fear of French Revolutionary terror had made his opinions more Conservative. Eliot, setting her story in 1832-3, remained true to period. Indeed in the novel’s epilogue she implies through irony that the North Warwickshire of her youth was still all too recognizable politically, and concludes by pointing out that ‘North Loamshire does not yet return a Radical candidate’. Rapid social, economic, religious and political change had evolved relatively slowly in some areas compared to others. Up to the second Reform Act of 1867 – and even beyond Eliot’s lifetime – two staunch Conservatives continued to represent North Warwickshire.

Where Eliot and Gladstone were agreed was in the desire that voting should be undertaken with the serious intent of examining the greater good rather than narrow self-interest. Felix Holt’s response to the Radical speaker in Chapter 30 expressed his doubts about the wisdom – in 1832 – of a further extension of the franchise:

while men have no better beliefs about public duty—while corruption is not felt to be a damning disgrace—while men are not ashamed in Parliament and out of it to make public questions which concern the welfare of millions a mere screen for their own petty private ends. (FH 410)

But by the 1860s the likes of Gladstone now argued that a substantial enfranchisement of the working class would not lead to an undesirable swamping of other classes. The more responsible and better educated working men that were increasingly apparent would not vote as a class en masse but use their individual judgement.

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So, fitness to vote was being increasingly discussed when Eliot started her new novel in March 1865. In May her reading moved away from tragedy and towards politics, including early nineteenth-century working-class Radical Samuel Bamford's *Autobiography*. In this work, Felix Holt-like sentiments were expressed concerning the undesirability of annual parliaments (a common Radical demand) whilst behaviour at election time led to 'good men bullied by ruffians, and spit upon by poltroons — demagogues cheered — scurrility applauded — fraud devised and practised — truth suppressed — falsehood blazoned'.

Eliot's study of these thoughts coincided with an anti-reform speech in the House of Commons on 3 May by the Liberal (but not Radical) Robert Lowe, in answer to a private members' motion for parliamentary reform. Lowe's vigorous opposition created political excitement; he attacked the right to vote on abstract grounds. Unlike Gladstone, he worried about working-class domination if the £6 household (rather than the current limit of £10) was given the vote.

> 'If you have a large infusion of voters from the working classes, they will speedily become the most numerous class in every constituency. They, therefore, have in their hands the power, if they only know how to use it, of becoming masters of the situation, all the other classes being, of necessity, powerless in their hands.'

Compare this with Felix Holt speaking on nomination day. Though he wants working men to have power, he argues that his fellow Radical

> 'expects voting to do more towards it than I do'[ . . . ] 'There's a power to do mischief [. . . ] to be cruel to the weak, to lie and quarrel and to talk poisonous nonsense. That's the sort of power that ignorant numbers have.' (399)

Twelve days after Lowe's speech, Eliot's review of William Lecky's *The Influence of Rationalism* appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* on 15 May. In it she referred to Montaigne's essay *Des Boiteux* and commented, 'He thinks it a sad business to persuade oneself that the test of truth lies in the multitude of believers — "en une presse où les fols surpassent de tant les sages en nombre" [translated as 'in a crowd in which fools so largely outnumber wise men'].

Eliot's reading list now included *The Economic Position of the British Labourer* by the blind young Radical Liberal, Henry Fawcett, and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and *Representative Government*. In the first, Mill remarked that the worth of a state in the long run was that of the individuals composing it. In the latter, Eliot read of Mill's emphasis on self-improvement and the importance of education: in attacking the idea of a 'good despot' as a desirable system of government, Mill argued you must not 'leave out of the idea of good government its principal element, the improvement of the people themselves'.

Mill's radical parliamentary candidature for the constituency of Westminster in July 1865 made Eliot muse on the whole question of who should stand for the Parliament in the early stages of writing *Felix Holt*. While electing Mill would be 'a fine precedent' if he was 'elected solely on the ground of his mental eminence', she wondered whether he was wise in making the attempt: 'Thinkers can do more outside than inside the House' she wrote to Mentia on 9 July. Though wrong in her prediction that Mill would not be elected, Eliot was giving careful thought to the nature and practical application of radicalism. She remained intrigued by Mill: 'Some of his works have been frequently my companions of late' she told Mentia. Felix's speech at the nomination arguing that liberty was of little value if 'men abuse and defile it'(401) has a 'side-glance' at Mill as Fred Thomson has pointed out. Thomson
also asserts that while Eliot was 'warier than Mill on the perils of democracy she shared his faith in the power of strong moral conviction and agreed with his strictness on the secret ballot'. Voting was a trust not a right and secrecy should be reserved for the most exceptional circumstances. It influenced Eliot's treatment of Rufus' Lyon's political attitude and Lyon's opposition to the secret ballot, despite being of Radical opinions on other questions.

So, when Eliot began preparing for Felix Holt, exactly who was fit for the franchise was much discussed but an immediate Reform Bill regarded as unlikely to succeed. In June she discussed her early thoughts with George Henry Lewes and wrote her celebrated introduction to Felix. What would happen next? After all, this could have been another example of what she confessed on 20th March when she stated that recently 'I have written nothing but beginnings'. With a forthcoming General Election announced in June, Eliot significantly read the Annual Register which gave an account of political events in 1832 including the passing of the Reform Act and the subsequent General Election in December. The General Election held in July 1865 produced an increased Liberal majority, with more MPs of a Radical bent. Nevertheless, reformers were waiting for the death or incapacitation of the eighty-year-old Palmerston.

So, it would be the increasing general discussion surrounding the ideas concerning reform, and debate over the right to vote, that inspired Eliot to develop this theme in the novel, rather than the likelihood of its imminent passing. However, circumstances changed more quickly than expected. On 14 October Eliot confided in her Journal, 'The last fortnight almost unproductive'. But then the relatively healthy if elderly Palmerston died suddenly on October 18th, a few days short of his eighty-first birthday and the pro-Reform Earl Russell replaced him and decided immediately to plan a Reform Bill. At this stage only 74 pages of her manuscript had been written but Eliot undertook relevant reading in November, much of it political: Neale's History of the Puritans as well as Fawcett and Mill. Writing now speeded up and chapter seven was completed by the end of that month. In this, Mrs Transome failed to inform Sir Maximus that Harold's candidacy was a Radical one and he later found out by chance.

Eliot's writing proceeded. On 4 December she reported, 'the other day read to the end of chapter nine of my novel to George, who was much pleased and found no fault'. This chapter described the tense conversation between Matthew Jermyn and Arabella Transome about Harold's election prospects and his relationship with Jermyn. In the country at large, the reforming atmosphere moved up several gears as two points became clear at the end of 1865: the Government would introduce a Reform Bill and it would be hard-fought and controversial. The pace of reform excitement quickened. Eliot wrote to François D'Albert Durade on 17 December 'I am occupied in a leisurely way with my own writing'.

At the end of 1865 this writing had slowed up as she became concerned about her 'construction', beginning some correspondence with Frederic Harrison on 1 January 1866 about the intricacies of the law of entail vital to the plot. This delayed progress, and by 9 February 1866 she had 'only advanced twenty pages'. By chance, her delay over technicalities coincided with a similar kind of delay in reform preparations as Ministers examined the small print of electoral reform and the precise nature of changes to voting qualifications in both county and borough. But then development in both spheres was rapid: as political controversy heated up so did George Eliot's writing of Felix. In March 1866, she wrote in Chapter 27 that Felix described himself as 'a Radical, yes, but I want to go to
some roots a good deal lower down than the franchise’ (368). And in Chapter 30 he asserted ‘It’s another sort of power that I want us working men to have and I can see plain enough that our all having votes will do little towards it at present’. (399) He developed his theme; the desirability of a sense of right and wrong, an avoidance of corruption, a true concern for the welfare of all rather than narrow self-interest, none of which he believed would be achieved whilst uneducated working men with a partiality for drink and quick cash were in the majority.

On 3 March Russell and Gladstone had introduced a moderate Reform Bill lowering the limits for voting in both Borough and County. The debate on how far working men should possess the franchise was now for real; there was virulent opposition by some Liberals to the modest Reform proposals, in particular another significant anti-reform speech from Robert Lowe on 13 March, more intemperate than his previous one.

If you want venality, if you want ignorance, if you want drunkenness, and facility for being intimidated; or if, on the other hand, you want impulsive, unreflecting, and violent people, where do you look for them in the constituencies? Do you go to the top or to the bottom?4

Lowe did not believe newly enfranchised voters would exercise a knowledgeable choice. By the end of March Eliot had reached Chapter 30, the nomination at Duffield in the North Loamshire election.35 Here, Felix was ‘looking on at the senseless exhibitions of this nomination-day’ with the ‘hustling and the pelting, the roaring and the hissing, the hard hits with small missiles and the soft hits with small jokes’ of the Sproxton men (392).

The question of the fitness to vote of the working class had been rudely thrust to the fore. As Eliot completed volume two in early April the political situation was tense. Gladstone – a senior Minister – addressed two meetings in Liverpool on Reform, on 5 and 6 April at a time the Bill was in danger of being lost. This was unconventional when a detailed measure was being debated in parliament. In a manner reminiscent of popular agitators in 1830-2, he attacked aristocratic opposition to a measure benefiting the people and in a warning bordering on threat declaimed: ‘it is not in our power to secure the passing of the measure: that rests with you’.36

When Eliot described herself on April 25 as slowing down again with the writing, ‘I have been ailing and uncertain [...] and got no further than p. 52’ [of Book 3],37 the Reform Bill was in the same position. On the same day, Rosemary Ashton tells us that Lewes had written to Blackwood, as Eliot was wrapped up in the later part of the writing and politicians were wrapped up in debate. He commented that, had she completed the work a little earlier, it would have been ‘just in the thick of the reform discussion [and] so many good quotable bits would be furnished to MPs’.38 Eliot’s writing again picked up. She completed the novel ‘on the last day of May, after days and nights of throbbing and palpitation’.39 After a holiday abroad she returned on 14 June just as the printing of the book concluded.

It was quite a time for Felix Holt to appear. No wonder Blackwood had rushed it out on 12 June just ten days after Eliot had corrected the final proofs. Its first readers could follow the real political crisis simultaneously. On 17 June 35 Liberals rebelled against their own Government’s Reform measure and it was defeated. A political crisis had developed. After the Leweses returned, Blackwood’s letter of 26 June mentioned that ‘I am off to see if I can get into the House [of Commons] to hear Gladstone’s explanation. Nobody knows what
is going to happen'. This concerned the resignation of the Liberal government after the failure of the Bill. Would the attitude of the new Conservative government prove positive to reform? There could hardly be a better time for the sale of the book, though numbers bought were not particularly high.

The real political drama continued. On 23 July 1866 the new government banned a large reform meeting scheduled to take place in Hyde Park at the last moment. But the weight of protestors caused a huge section of park railings to give way and the meeting was held in defiance of the prohibition order. The Home Secretary resigned and all this just at the moment when the first readers of Felix Holt studied the passage on the election riot in Treby Magna based on that in Nuneaton – and some other places – in December 1832. The political situation of 1832 seemed to have returned. The leading Conservative in the Commons in 1866, Benjamin Disraeli, had stood, Transome-like, as a Radical for Parliament in December 1832. By August 1867 he had pushed through a substantial Reform Bill: second-wave readers of Felix Holt were aware that the political world described by Eliot had changed forever. The skilled working-class man now had the vote and the female franchise, though rejected, had been raised by Mill and debated in the Commons.

Parliamentary reform was not expected in the short term when Eliot began her novel in 1865. However, this time of relative political stability had produced a questioning and thoughtful political atmosphere when there was intense debate on the question of the franchise: was the vote a right to be had or a privilege to be earned? Was it as Mill believed a trust that should be exercised openly rather than secretly? Was the female franchise a right unjustly withheld, as Mill also argued? Had skilled working class men earned their right to vote, as Gladstone attested? These discussions, academic when Eliot started her book, had become pressing practical issues by its completion fourteen months later. Eliot, through Felix, mused out loud on the question of fitness to vote painting a picture of a corrupt electoral system, which 1832 had amended but not mended, let alone cured. Eliot found a contemporary prophesy from The Times in 1832: ‘Now, the beauty of the Reform Bill is that, under its mature operation, the people must and will become free agents’. She remarked, ‘a prophecy which I hope is true, only the maturity of the operation has not arrived yet.’

The violence so apparent in the contests in 1832 quietened down somewhat in subsequent elections but had not disappeared in the 1860s when Eliot’s writing was in full flood and further Reform was being passed. Her dislike of violence and her delight in intellectual discussion and argument made her awareness of electoral fisticuffs particularly upsetting. To her, it was the intellectually impoverished and unlettered who resorted to violence; a rounded liberal education would lead to argument and counter-argument and the adoption of politically-based solutions to questions which might otherwise tear a nation apart. As she wrote to Barbara Bodichon in 1862 of the American Civil War: ‘an example on so tremendous a scale [as the war] ... [shows] the need for the education of mankind through the affections and sentiments as a basis for true development.’ Eliot, though corresponding with Radical thinkers and enjoyed discussing the issues they raised, was not always fully convinced by their conclusions.

While we have made great strides in both educational provision and democratic participation the last 150 years, are we not still as far away as ever from Felix’s desire that everyone should vote out of principled belief rather than narrow self-interest? We still need to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Felix Holt.
Notes


13 Vernon, p. 229.


16 Eliot to Maria Congreve, 16 October 1860, Cross, II, p. 200.

17 ‘Every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution’. Quoted in Richard Shannon, *Gladstone, Peel's Inheritor 1809-65* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 508.
18 Gladstone, Speech at Chester, 31 May 1865, Quoted in Alan Bullock and Maurice Shock (eds.), The Liberal Tradition from Fox to Keynes (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1956) [Liberal Tradition], pp. 143-4.


21 Hansard, 1803-2005, online version hansard.millbanksystems.com [Hansard], 3 May, 1866.


23 John Stuart Mill, Considerations on Representative Government (1861), pp.136-143 Quoted in Liberal Tradition p. 117.

24 Eliot to Taylor, 9 July 1865, Cross, II, p. 293.


27 7 June 1865, Cross, II, p. 292.

28 Journal, 14-15 October 1865, Haight, IV, p. 205


30 Journal, 4 Dec 1865, Cross, II, p. 299.

31 Eliot to François D’Albert Durade, 17 December 1865, Haight, IV, p. 211.


33 Thomson, Clarendon, p. xxv.

34 Hansard, 13 March 1866.


38 George Henry Lewes to Blackwood, 25 April 1866, quoted in Ashton, p. 281.


40 Blackwood to Eliot, 26 June 1866, Haight, IV, p. 281.

42 Eliot to Bodichon, 15 February 1862, Cross, II, pp. 242-3.