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Block, Geoffrey D.M., "George Eliot and The 1832 Election" (1986). *The George Eliot Review*. 42.
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GEORGE ELIOT AND THE 1832 ELECTION

by Geoffrey D. M. Block

This article is an examination of some political aspects of George Eliot's Felix Holt.

The very first line of the first chapter of the novel makes it clear that the action takes place in 1832. This was the year of the Reform Act - the year too of the first general election to be held under the provisions of that Act. When she began writing her book in 1865-66 George Eliot did some painstaking research into the happenings and into the electoral practices of the 1832 election. (See her oft-quoted Journal and the Quarry usefully abstracted in the Clarendon edition of Felix Holt.)

In doing so she was in fact refreshing her own recollections of the period. Not only had she, as a schoolgirl, witnessed the agitation of the 1832 election in a Midland town, but she must also have known her father carry out political work for his employers in his capacity as a land agent. Furthermore, before she left the Midlands she lived through four more general elections there - in 1835, 1837, 1841 and 1847 - plus a contested by-election at Coventry in 1833. Her personal experience and careful research give the novel real authenticity when she covers post-Reform Act electoral practice. But Felix Holt is not, of course, intended to be a descriptive political novel. As George Eliot herself says in Chapter 3, "...this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women..." (p. 45). Thus she tells us of electoral qualifications and registration practice (e. g. pp 112 and 227-28). There is a full description of Nomination Day (pp. 242-45) and Polling Day (pp. 253-59), with a riot to follow (pp. 264-72). But strangely enough, the Declaration of the Poll, that culminating stage of an election, is not described. We are

simply told that Harold Transome "had lost the election... and... paid eight or nine thousand (pounds)" (p. 277).

The election of the novel takes place in the town of "Treby Magna", a polling place, in the fictional constituency of "North Loamshire" and ends with a riot in which the eponymous hero is implicated. J. W. Cross, George Eliot's husband and first biographer, tells us that she saw such a riot as a schoolgirl in 1832 "at Nuneaton on the occasions of the election for North Warwickshire"; and practically every subsequent biographer has accepted this identification of Nuneaton as the venue of the Felix Holt riot. Only two or three historians with special local interest have suggested otherwise. Bertram A. Windle wrote in A School History of Warwickshire (1906):-

"... the election riot which is described in (Felix Holt) is reminiscent of an actual riot which took place in Coventry in 1832 and of which the novelist was an eye-witness."

M. Jourdain wrote in Memorials of Old Warwickshire (1908):-

"The Treby Magna of the novel is the 'city of the three tall spires' (i. e. Coventry)".

The suggestion that the riot in Felix Holt could have been somewhere other than Nuneaton is feasible because the riot at Nuneaton was not just an isolated occurrence. The Coventry and the Warwickshire newspapers report a surprising number of electoral riots in December 1832. In all of them broken limbs, smashed windows, public disorder, even deaths occurred; and troops often had to be called in to restore order. Riots were reported at Stamford ("a serious riot"); Warwick ("a desperate affray"); Wolverhampton ("the most brutal outrages"); Walsall ("disgraceful proceedings"); Sheffield ("five persons shot by the military"); Coventry ("ferocious and systematic violence"); Nuneaton ("peace disturbed by a set of miscreants"); and elsewhere.

Now it so happens that in the year 1832 Mary Anne

Evans moved from Mrs Wallington's school in Nuneaton to the Misses Franklin's school in Coventry. The most arduous searches have failed to establish the actual date when she moved. But in principle, she could have been in either town in 1832. The Coventry riot happened on 10 December, the riot at Nuneaton was on 21 December. Failing documentary evidence of where the schoolgirl Evans was in December 1832, let us examine the internal evidence in the text.

First topographical. The town of Treby Magna is termed "largely typical and imaginary" by F. B. Pinion. We have seen above how M. Joudain and B. A. Windle thought they recognised Coventry. But it can equally be urged that some features of Treby Magna suggest Nuneaton. The description of the church at Treby and its broad churchyard with the line of yew trees beside it fits Nuneaton better than the more spectacular spires of Coventry. The proximity of Sproxtion (which is usually identified as the Griff-Chilvers Coton area) is another pointer to the Nuneaton neighbourhood.

Next consider the chronology of the 1832 election in the Midlands. Nomination Day in Coventry was 8 December and Polling Day was Monday 10 December. Nomination Day in North Warwickshire was 18 December and the first day of polling was Friday 21 December (Coventry Herald, 28 December 1832). George Eliot gives us some guidance, for at page 277 she writes that "a week after that Treby riot" Harold Transome sat in his private room in Transome Court and that this was the third morning after Christmas, i. e. 28 December (p. 278). This is decidedly an argument for Nuneaton since the rioting there was precisely on 21 December 1832. At page 242 the Rev. Rufus Lyon urges Felix Holt to go to Duffield "on the 15th December to witness the nomination of the candidates for North Loamshire", which again is much closer to the Warwickshire North date than that of Coventry (see above). The chronological evidence points to Nuneaton.

Politically the status of Treby Magna is quite clear.

It is a county seat, not a borough. At page 105 George Eliot refers specifically to "a county election". At page 112 she tells us that Mr Chubb, the go-getter landlord of the "Sugar Loaf" at Sproxton, is a 40-shilling freeholder, which is a county voting qualification. References to farmers coming in from the country to vote at Treby Magna point in the same direction (see pp. 173, 253 and 256). So does the occasion when the Parliamentary candidate Harold Transome pines for "three more fifty-pound voters" (p. 95). This is a clear reference to the "Chandos Clause" of the Reform Act which enfranchised tenant farmers in counties who paid not less than £50 p. a. in rent.

Perhaps the most telling line is the first line of Chapter 3 (p. 40) which talks of "Treby Magna on which the Reform Bill had thrust the new honour of being a polling place". This appears to rule out Coventry borough which had always returned two Members since 1295. Warwickshire North, on the other hand, was a new constituency. During the 1832 election for this Division of the old County, Nuneaton was the only place where there were serious disorders: voting proceeded peaceably in the four other polling places (Coventry Mercury, 23 December 1832 and Coventry Herald, 28 December 1832). In the disorders at Nuneaton one Joseph Glover, aged 72, was knocked down and died of wounds (Coventry Herald, 14 January 1833). Similarly at Treby Magna poor Tommy Trounsem was trampled upon and killed in the polling day scuffles (p. 272). Surprisingly, though the Coventry rioting was brutal and bloody, there were no deaths there.

There were three candidates at Treby Magna. Unlike Coventry (which had four), Warwickshire North also had three candidates. There is a further resemblance in the candidatures. The third candidate at Warwickshire North, Demster Heming, had - like Harold Transome - made money in the East and returned to England to stand for Parliament. Like Transome he was a Radical and like Transome he was defeated.

A further resemblance to Warwickshire North is the continuing conservatism of North Loamshire politics. George Eliot notes that "... North Loamshire does not yet return a Radical candidate..." (p. 399). She was writing in May 1866 when, except in 1847, Warwickshire North had been solidly Conservative at every election since 1832.

So far the evidence from the text supports the suggestion that Treby Magna is Nuneaton and North Loamshire is Warwickshire North. But when it comes to the riot scenes, except perhaps for the death of Tommy Trousem (see above), George Eliot's description scarcely corresponds with the course of the Nuneaton riot.

In this riot the "Hemingite" mob sought to bar entry to the polls. The Magistrates read the Riot Act and summoned the Scots Greys, who entered the town, charged the people with drawn swords and endeavoured to form protective files to ensure access to the polls. But in George Eliot's Treby Magna riot there is no mention of soldiers in the centre of the town drawn up before the polling booth. Cavalrymen do get summoned in the novel and told to come into the town. But it is at Treby Manor outside the town that they encounter the mob, on whom they fire.

At Coventry, on the other hand, the rioting took a different form. There was no military intervention, but a savage battle for the control of the polling booth took place. Both sides used hired mobs. After some bloody encounters the Liberals drove the Conservatives away. For the rest of the day they dominated the scene and were fairly successful in stopping their opponents from voting. By evening Messrs Fyler and Thomas (Conservative) retired voluntarily from the contest. Ellice and Bulwer, the Liberal candidates, were therefore declared duly elected after only one day's voting.

Polling under the Reform Act would normally last two days. At Treby Magna it seems to have lasted one day. At Nuneaton, exceptionally, polling lasted

three days because an extension was granted till Monday 24 December (Coventry Herald, 28 December 1832 and 4 January 1833). Without a doubt the conditions of the Coventry riot, with an overawed constabulary and no troops present, are more in line with the Treby Magna narrative than is the Nuneaton riot where there was a strong military presence in town and three days of polling.

An outstanding feature of the Coventry riot was the importation of mobs of colliers and navvies into the city. All accounts talk of it, though contemporary accounts of Nuneaton make no mention of imported bravos there. Now this tallies exactly with the fictional Treby Magna election where hired "navvies and pitmen" cause trouble. George Eliot describes how Johnson, Harold Transome's organiser, recruits some of them at the "Sugar Loaf" in the Radical interest. They are brought into town in an inebriated and bellicose state, to the distress of Felix Holt and the Rev. Rufus Lyon.

The character of Rev. Rufus Lyon has long been recognised to be a portrait of Rev. Francis Franklin, Minister of Cow Lane Chapel, Coventry. He was the father of George Eliot's schoolteacher Rebecca Franklin who, like Esther Lyon in the novel, had spent a year in Paris. As the Rev. Franklin had no parallel in Nuneaton his appearance in the novel constitutes a strong claim for Coventry as the venue of the Treby Magna riot.

But perhaps the most cogent argument in favour of Coventry lies in the Party colours at Treby Magna. These have hitherto had little attention. George Eliot tells us that the colours were:

- i. Light blue for Radicals (pp. 154 and 255).
- ii. Yellow (p. 154) or Orange (p. 255) for the Tories.
- iii. Mazarine, that is Dark Blue, for the Liberals or Whigs (p. 255).

The colours at Warwickshire North in 1832 simply do not fit this pattern. They were Red and White for the Radical candidate and Green for one Conservative

candidate (Coventry Herald, 21 December 1832). Colours at Coventry were Mazarine for the Liberals and Yellow and Blue for the Conservatives. (Coventry papers and handbills variously call the Conservatives the "Yellows", the "Sky Blues" or "Skies", and the "Sky Blue and Yellow Party"). The Coventry colours - including the unusual term Mazarine - are not identical with, but are fully compatible with, George Eliot's pattern for Treby Magna.

Now one sees that the evidence we have assembled first points convincingly to the polling place of Nuneaton in the constituency of Warwickshire North; but the remaining evidence points equally cogently to the borough constituency of Coventry. Certainly George Eliot would have been familiar with the politics of Coventry. She lived there as a schoolgirl for three years and stayed there with her father and with friends after 1841. Even if she did not see it, she must have heard of the "dreadful scene of lawlessness and riot" (to quote T. W. Wheatley) at Coventry on 10 December 1832. It became a local legend and was still remembered as the "Bloody Tenth" fifty years later.

Novelists do sometimes pick and choose and amalgamate their material. One must conclude that the framework of George Eliot's election passages describes the 1832 election in her well-loved Nuneaton and North Warwickshire (and describes it with great observation). But when it came to relating the sharp practices and public disorder of that election it seems clear from the internal evidence of the text that she drew upon the more notorious disturbances of Coventry for some of her material.

Note: The page references are to the Clarendon Edition of Felix Holt.

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