

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1986

The Fifteenth George Eliot Memorial Lecture- 1986

Loius Marks

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Marks, Loius, "The Fifteenth George Eliot Memorial Lecture- 1986" (1986). *The George Eliot Review*. 65. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/65>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE FIFTEENTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL
LECTURE - 1986

delivered by LOUIS MARKS, Writer of the Screenplay
and Producer of the BBC Television film of 'Silas Marner'

SILAS MARNER: FILMING THE NOVEL

To make a film of such a well-loved classic book as Silas Marner could be called a calculated risk. To venture into the home territory of George Eliot and talk about it to an audience of experts in the subject seems frankly foolhardy. So, while expressing my gratitude to the George Eliot Fellowship for inviting me to address you, I cannot deny that my awareness of the great honour you do me is mixed with more than a dash of trepidation.

First let me say that I do not think I have anything profound to add to the perennial debate about film adaptations of great books. In my experience the more one intellectualises and tries to evolve any meaningful theory the more one runs into paradox. The best films clearly belong to a different art form from the best books. A bad book can often translate into a good film. A good book, because it is so perfect in the original, must of its nature resist being redone in another language. Indeed, the nearest I can get to any guideline relates to translation. The best translations owe at least as much to the expressiveness of the language being translated into rather than the language being translated from. So I believe it must be with film. What mattered to me was that Silas Marner should succeed in satisfying, moving and entralling its audience first and foremost as a film. But even as I say this I realise I am begging many questions, and the only answers that are of any real help are the practical ones.

So.... why Silas Marner? The answer to this lies behind the final credit on the finished film ... "For Hannah Weinstein". Hannah was the first producer for whom I worked when I entered films as a lowly script editor in the late 'fifties. She was a remarkable American lady over here at the time to produce the

popular Robin Hood television series starring Richard Green, which some of you may remember. (What few people knew at the time was that the series provided much needed work for several famous Hollywood scriptwriters who had been blacklisted and wrote episodes under pseudonyms in order to escape the Mc Carthy witch-hunt.) When she returned to the States we remained in touch and always talked about working together again on a suitable project. Sometime in 1983 she called me at the BBC to suggest putting together a number of classic titles for a series of films to be made on a coproduction basis.

Hannah was a woman of great vision, and what obsessed her was the idea of using television to introduce a new generation of Americans to the great works of world literature. She remembered her father, a poor Russian-Jewish immigrant, buying her as a child a shelf-full of standard editions of classic books which she devoured. Television, she believed, could be the modern equivalent. I said it sounded a fine idea and where do we start. She replied: "Silas Marner". Sadly, Hannah did not live to see the project realised but the enthusiasm she engendered not only started the ball rolling but helped it a long way down the road. Hence the dedication.

George Eliot herself writes somewhere that Silas Marner started in her mind with a visual image. It is there on the first page, that powerful description of the weaver outlined against the landscape, the figure of a man weighed down by the burden on his back. Echoes of John Bunyan. It is an image which immediately evokes a sense of loneliness, of an outcast, a solitary being cast out from the warmth of human contact. Crucially, it is an image which resonates in the mind and carries its vivid message without any need of words. And film-making is essentially about creating images.

The next powerful impression I derived was of George Eliot's extraordinary observation of the daily round of village life. Her descriptions have an almost documentary accuracy, meticulous even to the bizarre detail of the key from which Silas suspends his joint of meat over the fire for roasting. Intensely aware as

she is of the loveliness of 'merrie England' she gives Raveloe - to my mind - none of the cosy, over-ripe picture-postcard quality of Dickens. Eliot's eyes are wider-open and more penetrating and she uses her pen as a camera to capture the texture of reality.

As with visual detail so with language and dialogue. The astonishing tour de force of her scenes with the regulars in the Rainbow needs no praise of mine. It seems hard to believe that the writer did not have the benefit of a hidden tape-recorder to take down these conversations between Ben Winthrop, Mr. Snell, Mr. Macey, Jem Rodney and the rest. But, these apart, may I draw your attention to the utterly convincing way in which her people talk at key moments as the drama unfolds. There is one little scene in particular when Godfrey and Dr. Kimble visit Silas in his cottage on the night Eppie arrives. Silas tells them he won't give up the child. "She's a lone thing and I'm a lone thing" he says. Hardly a word is wasted as each character makes his point and Eliot with consummate skill uses a light joke in the mouth of Dr. Kimble to turn the moment away from any possible mawkishness. "What a fool you are, Godfrey, coming out on a night like this in your dancing shoes. What would Miss Nancy say?" It is all so human and believable. No wonder that these few speeches worked so convincingly when put into the mouths of our actors.

But I am jumping ahead. There were other considerations as I pondered the project. At two hundred odd pages the story was clearly about the right length to be told in a single-length film. The containment of the main action in one village appealed to the budgetary part of my producer mind. But the final judgement rested on a simple question which I put to myself on behalf of an as yet unsuspecting audience for this unmade film. Would I care enough about these people to want to stay in their company for the space of ninety minutes? This after all would be the main consideration.

The strength of involvement one feels for Silas' predicament and his love for Eppie must surely be among the most irresistible in all literature. It draws a tear to the eye more readily than any other story I know and yet, because of the realistic portrayal of the

characters and the world in which they live it is never merely sentimental.

Eppie is no Little Nell. The book has a moral force which is peculiar to George Eliot and which ultimately overwhelms any cavil or cynical detachment. Of course it brings with it elements of melodrama but that too is the stuff of which films are made. And there is nothing any Hollywood screenwriter could teach George Eliot about the sweep of the narrative or the construction of a powerful plot.

I speak now with hindsight. Even after my second re-reading I did not know the book then anywhere near as well as I do now having lived with it through all the vicissitudes of production over two years. All the problems then lay in the future. And the first of these arose when it came to writing the script. My initial enthusiasm convinced me that this should seek to follow the book as closely as possible. But this brought up several difficulties. The first of these relates to little Eppie herself. A central character in the drama, she does not actually appear on the scene until over half-way through the book. I felt the film audience should be introduced to her earlier, and be given time to get to know her before she enters Silas' life. In a similar way Molly is given almost no 'character' in the book and exists largely as a projection of Godfrey's guilts. Yet in the film she had to be played - and convincingly played - by a good actress if she was to live in the story. So we decided to add in a couple of scenes in Molly's lodgings.

As the script proceeded we found that some compression became essential. I cannot remember at what point Nancy Lammeter's sister Priscilla was written out, but she sadly had to go, together with the young Cass sons, the brothers of Godfrey and Dunstan. There simply wasn't going to be enough screen time to allow them into the film if the lives of the principal characters were to be conveyed. In films, unlike books, if you attempt to squeeze too much in there is no time for the story to 'breathe'. Magical moments like little Aaron's rendering of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" must be allowed to play themselves fully for the audience to sit

back and enjoy and in the end are worth more than the minutiae of the plotting.

The most heated discussions we had were over how to treat the Lantern Yard 'prologue' with Silas's condemnation for a crime he never committed and the loss of his best friend with the girl he was to marry. There was a time when it was suggested that all this information should be held back until much later in the film, so that Silas would be presented as something of a mystery figure (as indeed he was to the villagers of Raveloe) until his 'secret' is revealed. But the debate was settled - as indeed so many arguments were - by Eliot who knew her business better than we. Without that opening, Silas remains an unattractive character devoid of sympathy. The audience had to know what had driven him to Raveloe in order to be able to identify with his deep inner pain.

I have said 'we'. While the script was being developed I had chosen Giles Foster - one of the most talented of our younger generation of directors - to direct the film, and henceforth we worked very closely together, not only in writing the final version of the screenplay but on every aspect of the production from the casting onwards.

And from this point on luck also started to play a role, a role which seems to increase in importance on every production as you get nearer to the actual shooting.

In our case it operated most powerfully in helping us find our baby Eppie. Giles felt that it would be sensible to look for identical twins since the role would be demanding for a three-year-old toddler and if one twin fell sick or was even off-colour we would wheel in the sister. We advertised and saw several sets of twins but the two who stood out were Elizabeth and Emily Hoyle. The only trouble was they were only two, and far too young to take direction. They actually spent most of the audition rolling about on the floor. So, sadly, we had to turn them down.

At this point the whole production was hit by a BBC scenery strike. Everything ground to a halt, and as

the weeks went by and March turned to April and then May, we had to face the possibility of a major postponement as it would be impossible to shoot the film in summer. When we finally did get the go-ahead it was not till the following winter (1984/5) and by this time our twins were almost three. So we were able to cast them and you saw the result on the screen. In the event Elizabeth played almost all the scenes, with her 'understudy' only coming on at rare moments of disaster!

And our luck held in the crucial casting of Silas. Ben Kingsley had been cast at an early stage and we knew he would make the perfect weaver. He had even taken weaving lessons while the production was being set up. But would he be able to remain available to us after the strike? That was a nail-biting time for us all, but so great was Ben's feeling of involvement with the part that he offered to plan his whole year ahead around the new dates. And so it worked out. The little family in the cottage beside the Stone Pits was complete.

There is much else I could write about this extraordinary production, but a lecture, like a film script, must also practise economy. Luck certainly stayed with us for the weather, providing us with alternate heavy snow and sunshine almost on schedule. We were lucky too in finding, after much hunting, the perfect location for Raveloe in Upper Slaughter in the Cotswolds. And the Cotswold hunt turned out on the day in full period attire, to provide us with a wonderfully exuberant piece of action which almost made us think we were shooting a 'western'.

It would be good to think that the spirit of George Eliot worked on our behalf. The book certainly proved a constant source of inspiration and reference. At several key moments, dog-eared paperbacks would be produced from anorak pockets to be pored over in search of solution to a problem over a line of dialogue or a particular piece of business. She never failed us. I hope she does not feel that we in our turn failed her.

---o0o---