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BOOK REVIEW

by Kathleen Porter

The Clarendon Edition of Middlemarch

by George Eliot. Edited by David Carroll.
Clarendon Press, Oxford 1986

We welcome the Clarendon edition of George Eliot's Middlemarch, which is generally considered to be her greatest novel. It took her about three years to write, and it seems to have caused a good deal of trouble to all concerned.

David Carroll's splendid Introduction, although not intended to be biographical, offers the reader a glimpse of the working life of the Leweses. As the Editor tells us, George Eliot left no detailed account of the 'germ' of Middlemarch, but her letters to John Blackwood gave hints that an 'English novel' was in her mind as early as 1867. Then, after The Spanish Gypsy was published in 1868, she seems to have got stuck, in the manner of Mr. Casaubon, in historical research for another work of poetry. Eventually, the scholar began to give way to the creative writer and George Eliot made a New Year resolution in 1869 to write 'a Novel called Middlemarch'. However, the delaying difficulties multiplied. She felt languid, a holiday in Italy intervened, and Thornton Lewes returned home seriously ill and died six months later. During Thornton's illness, she wrote her poem, The Legend of Jubal, and work on the novel proceeded at intervals. By September 1869 she had written three chapters of Middlemarch, and at this stage it contained the Vincy and Featherstone parts, with a hero concerned with provincial hospitals.

The Leweses were grievously upset by Thornton's death in October 1869, and they remained depressed and in poor health for much of the following year. When their spirits began to lift George Eliot made references to a story she was writing, called 'Miss Brooke'. The pace of work quickened and some time between December

1870 and March 1871 the story 'Miss Brooke' had been joined to the chapters of Middlemarch and the novel as we know it was being created. With the help of Jerome Beaty's Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel, George Eliot's Journal, notebooks and the manuscript of the novel, David Carroll has set out a convincing account of the fusion of the two elements to make a larger panoramic novel.

A further difficulty arose as a result of having what George Eliot called "too much matter". There were too many narrative strands to fit easily into the conventional three volume format, and it seemed that as the novel fell naturally into parts, it would be best to publish it in parts. George Lewes conducted negotiations with Blackwood, and George Eliot adapted her work to suit the new format, always aware that the different strands of the narrative must be kept in the reader's mind over the intervals between each part. Also, the novel had to come together as a whole, and although George Eliot had her own ways of ensuring unity, through imagery and allusion, much work had to be done on the organisation of material.

The experiment in publishing was reasonably successful and further editions followed. David Carroll has chosen the Cheap edition of 1874 as the best text for the Clarendon edition, as it was thoroughly revised and corrected by George Eliot. He has explained and listed all the substantive emendations he has made, and all substantive variants from the chosen text, in the manuscript, the first edition and the Cabinet edition, are recorded. He has included some explanatory notes to help the general reader, which earns him my gratitude.

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