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GEORGE ELIOT AND FRIENDSHIP

The Toast to the Immortal Memory - Sunday, November 22nd. 1987

by *Ina Taylor*.

(Mrs. Taylor is the author of The Edwardian Lady: The Story of Edith Holden (1980) and Victorian Sisters (1987).

She is now working on a new biography of George Eliot.)

Before going on to my chosen subject I thought you might like to hear a little about this new biography of George Eliot. You could indeed be forgiven for saying, 'Not another biography of George Eliot'. A new study must come out most years, either in this country or in America and I would be the first to admit that the definitive biography by Gordon Haight will not be superseded for some time. So what more is there to say about the great lady?

Well, after reading Haight and others, I was struck by the fact that of George Eliot's sixty odd years we know a great deal about the last thirty, and precious little about the first thirty: those spent here in Nuneaton and Coventry, in fact. I checked Haight's coverage of that - 67 pages on the first half of her life compared to 500 on the rest. People often say the first 5 years of a person's life are the formative ones. I won't argue with that, but I can't help thinking then that the first 30 years must be of some consequence in shaping the personality. I hasten to assure you that I am not writing a deep searching psychological study of George Eliot at all. I want to know about the person. What was she like, what were her family really like? And the Brays, who are very much the lynch-pin in her story; we have never really got to know them.

So I set out to research George Eliot's life myself, to re-examine the evidence and to see if anything else had come to light since Haight's biography. I am still in the middle of it but some interesting snippets have already come to light and though I don't propose to give it all away at this stage, I will, I hope, whet your appetite. There is in existence an early photograph of George Eliot taken about the time she went to London. A new painting of her father has appeared, in which he looks the part of the prosperous business man, and one of her sister Chrissey. I was excited to come upon an unpublished section of manuscript, for the novel, 'The Mill on the Floss', in George Eliot's handwriting. Re-examining the evidence has also disposed of a few popular misconceptions. One, which caused a frantic phone call to Kathleen Adams, was the discovery that Robert Evans never came to this part of the world to be land-agent for the Arbury Estate. Not indeed until 1835, when George Eliot was at Miss Franklins' School did he get that job. And, even then, he had a row with the Newdigates and gave his notice in after a few weeks. Admittedly that quarrel was patched up and he went on to act as the agent for the Arbury Estate, but the real estate he was brought to Warwickshire to manage, was the far smaller Astley one. For the confusion over places we have to go back to Cross, and he can be forgiven for that. But why did subsequent scholars take everything for granted and never check? That is not the only point; there have been several others so far and I am confident that a fuller and slightly different picture of George Eliot will ultimately emerge, but it is going to be 1989 at least, before you or I will see the finished book.

To go back a little, I thought I would tell you how I encountered George Eliot. I would say it was an introduction by a mutual friend. That might seem strange -

possibly even eerie - considering both George Eliot and the friend have been dead for many years! The friend I speak of is Georgiana Burne-Jones, one of the four Macdonald sisters and it was during my research into the lives of this interesting quartet that I met George Eliot. Georgiana was always called Georgie, just to confuse the story, and she was a close friend of George Eliot's for the last thirteen years of the novelist's life. It was a friendship Georgie Burne-Jones valued highly and it helped her through a difficult phase of her life; George Eliot also placed great store on this friendship for different reasons - it is perhaps worth remembering that Mrs Burne-Jones was one of only five people George Eliot told of her marriage to John Cross.

Since friendship was something precious to George Eliot and is indeed to the George Eliot Fellowship today, I thought it might be appropriate if I told you a little more about the friendship between the novelist and the artist's wife, which I learnt a great deal about from Georgie Burne-Jones viewpoint during the research for my book 'Victorian Sisters'.

Georgie Burne-Jones was 28 when she was taken to one of the Sunday afternoons at the Priory with her husband, the promising artist Mr Edward Burne-Jones. George Eliot was 48, with 6 novels to her credit, the most recent being 'Felix Holt'. These salons at the Lewes's had rapidly become THE fashionable place for the London intelligentsia to be seen, which was paradoxical really, considering that only ten years earlier few had wanted to be associated with the shocking Miss Evans and the rake she was living with. But fame or infamy made no difference to Mrs Burne-Jones, she accepted people for themselves and had come on this occasion to meet the novelist because the artist Burton, a friend of theirs, had spoken so warmly of her. The smart social scene at the Priory on a Sunday afternoon held no attractions for Georgie Burne-Jones. She was a quiet person who preferred a private conversation to a party. It came as a surprise to her to discover that the great novelist was of the same persuasion.

In fact, in some ways, the two women had emerged from similar backgrounds. Both had observed strict religious practices in their youth, George Eliot as a fervent Evangelical and Georgie Burne-Jones as the daughter of a Methodist minister. Yet by their mid-twenties both had abandoned formal worship in favour of a more humanist approach to life. Georgie Burne-Jones had moved from the manse into the bohemian company of artists, George Eliot from provincial isolation into a cosmopolitan literary world. Despite abandoning the orthodox creed, both women set themselves the highest moral standards and showed tolerance towards those whose views differed from their own. In many ways the women possessed similar personalities, preferring to be quiet observers of life. Neither sought to hold centre stage, but equally neither was frightened to speak out against injustice or hypocrisy.

Georgie Burne-Jones had no idea what to expect when she was first taken up to meet the great novelist, but she was never one to fawn or be overawed by people. Away from the noisy bustle, she was introduced not to a formidable literary goddess, but to a woman. What struck her was the beauty of George Eliot's voice, sometimes full and strong and at others as tender as a dove's: her eyes, clear and grey, looking, she said, as if they had been washed by many waters; above all her gentleness. Despite the twenty year difference in their ages, there was immediate empathy between the two women. Each warmed to the other's sincerity.

Over the years it was a friendship which deepened as George Eliot found in Mrs Burne-Jones someone who was clever, warm-hearted and fiercely loyal. The two shared a common interest in music. Both were competent pianists and Mrs Burne-Jones was also an accomplished singer. There were evenings of music making and visits to concerts together, and when the Wagners came to London, George Eliot was only too pleased to introduce them to her friend. The two women discovered they had a common interest in languages, although Georgie Burne-Jones's knowledge was the more limited. The Methodist minister's family were continually on the move to different industrial towns, so schooling had never been practical. Along with her sisters she learned what she could from mother and supplemented that with reading. George Eliot, who described her own schooling as 'girlish miseducation', sympathised with her friend and wanted to share her own learning. Together they studied French and German texts and Mrs Burne-Jones worked on pieces of translation under the novelist's watchful eye.

Although Georgie Burne-Jones was grateful for the opportunity of extending her education with George Eliot, it was ultimately her guidance in another field which the younger woman valued most. Soon after their friendship began, there arose problems in the Burne-Jones marriage when the artist became infatuated with one of his models and ran away with her. He did return home again after a few days, but the affair continued for several years, causing Georgie great distress. In despair she turned to George Eliot for guidance. Is it not interesting to notice how many women found it easy to pour out their troubles to her? Even those as reticent as Georgie Burne-Jones. The advice they received was always kindly and eminently sensible. Understanding only too well the legal position of women and the difficulties of divorce, George Eliot concentrated on building up her friend's confidence. She suggested that instead of looking inward and wasting her life in futile self-examination and despair, she should cast her eyes outside herself. "Go on conquering and conquer a little kingdom for yourself there", she told her, "nobody ever envied narrowness of mind in misery". Georgie Burne-Jones gained inspiration from her words and she began to take an initiative with her own education, beginning lessons in Latin. She also developed her interest in politics, at first assisting William Morris with his socialist campaign and then, after Parliament passed a bill to establish parish councils, she set out on the campaign trail herself to fight and win a seat as one of the first parish councillors.

Contrary to appearances the friendship with George Eliot was not one-sided. The older woman, despite her international literary standing, possessed few close friends and was often very lonely. "What helps me most is to be told things about others", she once wrote to Mrs Burne-Jones, "and your letters are just the sort I like to have... Your words of affection are very dear to my remembrance. I like not only to be loved but also to be told that I am loved. I am not sure that you are of the same mind, but the realm of silence is large enough beyond the grave. This is the world of light and speech and you are very dear to me."

Friendship with the Burne-Joneses gave George Eliot a chance to participate a little in a family life which her unconventional liaison precluded. She adored children, as is evident in her novels, and so it was great joy to her to be able to spend a seaside

holiday with Georgie and the two Burne-Jones children, or to take them on outings to the country and the pantomime, much in the manner of a favourite aunt. So close did the friendship become that on one occasion George Henry Lewes proposed they all spend Christmas together. But George Eliot panicked and cancelled the arrangement, terrified lest she was imposing too much on her young friend's hospitality. A friendship as precious as theirs she did not want spoiled by thoughtlessness.

Their friendship over twelve years standing was severely shaken when Georgie Burne-Jones received the letter telling her of George Eliot's impending marriage to John Cross. After all their exchanges of confidences, it seemed she was not to be trusted with this most important one and she was deeply hurt.

Although it was past midnight when she got home and found the note, she said "I cannot sleep till it is answered. Dear friend, I love you - let that be all - I love you, and you are YOU to me 'in all changes' - from the first hour I knew you until now you have never turned but one face upon me, and I do not expect to lose you now". In the end she could not post that letter, but several weeks later when the news had had time to sink in, she did enclose it with another asking for forgiveness for her silence. Their friendship had always been based on complete honesty and that was how it was to continue. "Give me time", she asked "this was one 'change' I was quite unprepared for - but that is my own fault - I have no right to impute to my friends what they do not claim".

This friendship did continue until the end of George Eliot's life and was probably so enduring because it relied on sincerity.