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1988

## Book Review: George Eliot: The Jewish Connection

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Porter, Kathleen and Levitt, Ruth, "Book Review: George Eliot: The Jewish Connection" (1988). *The George Eliot Review*. 80.

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BOOK REVIEW

by Kathleen Porter

George Eliot: The Jewish Connection

by Ruth Levitt

Massada Ltd. Jerusalem. 1975. (obtainable at £8.00 including postage and packing from the George Eliot Fellowship)

George Eliot: The Jewish Connection, published in Israel in 1975, has recently come to our attention for review. Ruth Levitt, who lives in Israel, had read and admired Daniel Deronda, and was encouraged by George Eliot's sympathetic treatment of the Jewish characters in the novel, to attempt to show that Theodore Herzl, one of the founders of modern Zionism, was himself inspired by the fictional Daniel Deronda. As Mrs. Levitt tells us in her Preface, the attempt failed, and for this reason the effect of her book is diminished.

Undaunted, the author persevered with a modified theme, convinced that George Eliot's powers of generating feeling among her readers had a particular effect on the furthering of political Zionism. Mrs. Levitt recognises that Daniel Deronda is a complex novel, with the 'Jewish element' only part of the whole, but she concentrates her attention on those chapters dealing with Mordecai's vision of the return of the Jews to Zion and Daniel's assumption of his 'mission'.

There is no doubt that George Eliot felt sympathy with the Jewish people in their enforced 'separateness'. In 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' from Impressions of Theophrastus Such, she analysed the historical reasons for this 'separateness', and approved the Jewish people's sense of a corporate existence which she considered was the basis for the formation of a nation. With piercing irony, George Eliot denounced persecution and the results of conquest which degraded and corrupted a proud people. At the current state of man's development, she thought that national feeling, a sense of belonging somewhere as part of a group, was a source of goodness. If I understand her correctly, she thought that man might eventually be capable of something better, but not yet. She wrote, "A common humanity is not yet enough to feed the rich blood of various activity which makes a complete man." The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!, used by Mrs. Levitt to support her theme, contains generalities as well as particularities.

George Eliot: The Jewish Connection is a difficult book to classify and evaluate. It aims to show how George Eliot's writing, in particular her novel Daniel Deronda, fed the hearts and minds of those Jews who worked towards the creation of a Jewish national homeland. Some of Mrs. Levitt's conclusions are conjectural, and did she really mean to imply in her final chapter that in 1876 George Eliot 'predicted and called for' the modern state of Israel? Perhaps George Eliot's own words are worth quoting here. In July 1878 she wrote to an old and valued friend: ". . . . . My function is that of the aesthetic, not the doctrinal teacher - the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge. It is one thing to feel keenly for one's fellow beings; it is another to say, 'This step, and this alone, will be the best to take for the removal of particular

calamities." Mrs. Levitt's book contains long passages quoted from other authors, and it may have some interest as a kind of compendium of writings about the Jewish people and Jewish nationalism. Mrs. Levitt is an enthusiast for her cause, but she is not a skilled writer, and her book is disjointed and repetitive. There are a number of irritating errors, some of which can be ascribed to careless proof reading. A serious omission is a list of acknowledgments to the authors of the works from which Mrs. Levitt quotes.