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BOOK REVIEW

BY *Hilda Gunn*

The World's Classics Series: Scenes of Clerical Life by George Eliot.

Edited with an Introduction by Thomas A. Noble. Oxford University Press £3.95

This edition of George Eliot's first fiction reproduces the text of the much acclaimed Clarendon Edition which is also edited by Thomas S. Noble. It is an excellent edition for a student because, besides being so reasonably priced, it contains a most concise chronology of George Eliot and explanatory notes which have been researched with great thoroughness.

In the Introduction, Thomas A. Noble stresses that George Eliot, as one time editor of The Westminster Review, had been used to reviewing contemporary literature. She had, therefore, a very clear view of what she wished to accomplish as a novelist. She was convinced of the importance, as a subject for serious literature, of the lives of commonplace men and women, and of the novelist's moral obligation to give a true picture of those lives. In 'Amos Barton' she states her position with some force, saying: "My only merit must be in the faithfulness with which I represent to you the humble experience of an ordinary fellow mortal. I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles and win your tears for real sorrow."

Mr. Noble writes of George Eliot's attitude to religion, and traces her progress from a zealous evangelical at the age of nine to her ultimate rejection of conventional religious belief at the age of twenty-two. In its place, however, she put the religion of Humanity, and all her moral and intellectual decisions from her young womanhood onwards represent a "striving after something better and better". "I began to feel for other people's wants and sorrows a little more than I used to," she wrote to a friend in 1853.

This doctrine of sympathy is to be found in all the three stories which make up Scenes of Clerical Life. Both Mr. Gilfil's story and Amos Barton's are meant to widen the sympathies of the reader, and in 'Janets Repentance' this doctrine receives its fullest expression. Mr. Tyran is presented as an Evangelical clergyman, but it is through the doctrine of sympathy that Janet is saved.

We are indebted to Mr. Noble for his scholarly exposition of this religious background, for it enables us to have a fuller appreciation of the stories. The characters become living beings and so their feelings and motives become more readily understood.