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Review of Virago Classics: Brother Jacob

Kathleen Adams

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BOOK REVIEWS

by *Kathleen Adams*

Virago Classics: *Brother Jacob* by George Eliot

Price £3.50

With a new afterword by Beryl Gray

Brother Jacob, like The Lifted Veil, has always been in the shadow of George Eliot's longer and better known fiction, but Beryl Gray's afterword in this Virago edition brings it into the light. She offers interesting suggestions why the story was written after The Mill on the Floss and before Silas Marner, showing that the rhythms of George Eliot's creative life are revealing.

Our attention is drawn to those critics who have spoken disparagingly of the story, 'rather cheerless and austere' (U.C. Knoepfsmacher), 'cynical and coldly sarcastic' (G. S. Haight) and 'that tedious tale' (W. J. Harvey). Those of us who read it and enjoyed it must agree with Dr. Gray that it deserves better treatment than the twentieth century has so far accorded it. And those who have much enjoyed Gabriel Woolf's reading of that part of the story which he entitles 'The Corruption of the Grimworth Matrons', either at a recital or on the Fellowship's own 60 minute cassette, may wonder why these and other critics have found so little to appreciate in a story which George Eliot cared about and wanted to be published, even though she described it herself as 'a trifle'. Though her characters may be unpleasant, they are written about exuberantly and, as Dr. Gray reminds us, the story is skilfully organised.

Dr. Gray also reminds us that George Eliot gave the story to Smith, Elder as a gift (turning down 250 guineas offered for it) as some sort of financial recompense for the comparative failure of Romola in The Cornhill, surely disproving the avariciousness which some critics continue to impute.

It is good to have Brother Jacob again in print, particularly with Beryl Gray's afterword which contains some fascinating research. With this and the Virago The Lifted Veil (also with an afterword by Dr. Gray) all of George Eliot's fiction is now in print - and for this her admirers are particularly grateful.

Southwards to Geneva: 200 Years of English Travellers
by Mavis Coulson pub. by Alan Sutton, price £14.95

This is a most attractively produced book with about 100 black and white illustrations and 8 pages of colour. Mavis Coulson has lived in Geneva and I am sure the book will appeal more to residents and visitors than to those whose interest is less committed. Inevitably I turned to the pages on literary visitors. The first sentence on George Eliot, who visited Geneva after the death of her father, disconcerted me immediately for Mrs. Coulson has her birth wrong by two years! When an author gets wrong a simple fact which is so very easy to check, one wonders how many more of her facts have been checked. Her quotes are all from Cross's George Eliot's Life, as Related in her Letters and Journals, and one gets a feeling that it is hurried research as she seems to look nowhere else. For all that, it is an attractive volume and if one is as much in love with Geneva as the author (and doesn't find off-putting errors) it is a pleasant book to possess.