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## Review of George Eliot: An Intellectual Life

Valerie A. Dodd

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*BOOK REVIEW*  
*By Graham Handley*

**GEORGE ELIOT: AN INTELLECTUAL LIFE**

**by Valerie A. Dodd.**

The Macmillan Press. 1990 pp 381 £40.00

The tendency to produce esoteric books is one of the less pleasing registers of our critical and scholarly time. Valerie Dodd's book fills a gap at great length, and in doing so examines a number of intellectual lives, among them those of Mill and Carlyle. It also presents a mini-thesis on Saint-Simonianism. All this is heavy preamble to Marian Evans (63 pages to be exact) and Marian's own heavy (and often passing) preoccupations before she began to write fiction. Sources are voluminous and often cited, so that the narrative is weighed down with references which arrest its flow while one checks. The section on Coventry is well covered, with Marian's own acquaintance with the Higher Criticism placed 'as early as 1840' (p.88) The summaries of Hennell and Strauss have been done often before in shorter compass: the section on John Foster is particularly fresh and interesting. Comte and Hegel are given a measured treatment. Miss Dodd covers philosophy and the novel, and is impressive on the practice and influence of George Sand. From there on the pattern through to the preparations to write fiction is predictable. The ground has been covered before, starting, I suppose, with Mary Deakin in 1913, though the earlier sowings are sparse compared with this. Section headings indicate the main matter, so that when we read 'Rousseau' or 'Ruskin' we soon discover that we are reading a kind of anthology of the particular intellect. The 60 odd pages which contain the notes, the bibliography and the index testify to the industry which has gone into the making of this book. The intellect is everywhere apparent: the life is, perhaps inevitably, absent. The style is sometimes complex, sometimes muddled, rarely direct: I suppose if you write almost exclusively about the intellect this is bound to happen. Here is an extract:

'Dissent gave Carlyle intense awareness of a complex reality and ethical certainty; he saw the intuition of Idealism as likewise implying a unity of consciousness, which endowed the world with the wholeness of its vision, which was a counterpart of an integrated reality.' (p.19)

This is one of the simpler statements. The ground covered in this book is important to a full appraisal of the Marian Evans who became George Eliot: I am inclined to give thanks that George Eliot survived the intellectual ethos of Marian Evans to become one of the greatest of humanitarian writers. Barbara Bodichon praised her wisdom and above all the largeness of her heart: it would be wrong to say that it ruled her head but I think it lifted her above the influences and systems of her intellectual contemporaries.

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