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Adams, Kathleen and Bennett, Daphne, "Review of Emily Davies and The Liberation of Women" (1990). *The George Eliot Review*. 137.

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BOOK REVIEW
by Kathleen Adams

EMILY DAVIES AND THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN
by Daphne Bennett.

Published by Andre Deutsch, £15.95

Daphne Bennett has rewritten, in this book on Emily Davies, the history of the feminist movement. She seethes when she hears people talk about the movement as though it began with the suffragettes, for her heroine had been working for the emancipation of women for 50 years before the suffragettes were making themselves noticed in no uncertain manner.

Emily Davies was one of the great pioneers in the cause of women but little is, or has been, really known about her. She has often been confused with Emily Davison who threw herself under the feet of the King's horse, but Emily Davies was not one for such histrionics; her work was done quietly and yet with considerable force. She began as the daughter of a clergyman and, after his death, looked set to live the next few years as that stereotype of the unmarried Victorian lady who looked after her widowed mother. She had been sheltered from the evils of the world by her family, but she wanted to know how the rest of the world lived. She went into nearby Gateshead and learned what life was really like, particularly for the poor and more particularly for the females. Before she was in her teens she was quite familiar with the Gateshead slums, with the dirt, disease and the consequences of drunkenness. Amongst these poor deprived 'friends' the seeds of her future work were sown.

With no formal education behind her she began to work for that part of Victorian society which was oppressed, undervalued and uneducated. She saw how girls were sacrificed for their brothers; indeed, how subservient her own mother was to her father. She saw the desperate need for girls to be educated but even their own families were against this. Mothers really believed that 'book learning makes a girl unmanageable', that it took women away from their proper duties of looking after husband, home and family. She set up an investigation into girls' schools on her own and was horrified by what she saw - Dickens' Dotheboys Hall was not as great an exaggeration as we might feel, and yet Emily was looking into schools for the 'gentler sex'.

In Algiers she met Barbara Bodichon who was already fighting for the rights of women and in her conversations with Emily, Barbara clearly underestimated the strength of this apparently gentle woman. Emily opened her first college for young women in Hitchin and Mrs. Bennett describes Emily's efforts in this direction in such a way that one wonders why she never lost hope in what she was planning for women in that underprivileged age. The Manchester Guardian wrote that 'a girl's proper university is her own home in the bosom of her family'. The Times wrote in scornful terms of the idea of putting girls through a course of study equal in mental strain to that of men. But she battled on and ensured that university-sponsored examinations were open to girls as well as boys. She was the first woman to be invited to give evidence before a Royal Commission. In 1873 she founded Girton College, Cambridge, and proved that women could compete on equal terms with men, despite their physiological 'weakness' and despite dire warnings that she would be turning out dreadful mannish creatures whom men would despise and reject. Girls came - first to Hitchin and later to Girton, despite their mothers' fears that too much study would be deeply injurious to their health. Over a century later we can but applaud the determination of a woman like Emily Davies; we have seen the results of her efforts and can now only wonder at the attitudes which were so commonplace in Victorian England and against which Emily Davies had to fight and fight before the battle began to be won.

There is an appendix to the book, entitled Emily Davies and George Eliot, and it is here that I must take issue with Daphne Bennett. I have not checked any of her facts on Emily Davies because I assume her research to have been thorough, but it certainly slipped when George Eliot comes on the scene. To begin with she writes of her as Mrs. Lewis who invited Emily to have tea with her at The Priory, Richmond. The Priory was at North Bank, Regents Park, and the name assumed by Marian Evans was Lewes. It had been Lewes for 13 years when Emily met her but Mrs. Bennett describes Emily's tact at using the name! It is unlikely that anyone, anywhere, referred to her as Miss Evans after so lengthy a liaison. Emily's first impression of George Eliot included, Mrs. Bennett tells us, her 'jet black hair'. Was Emily really so unobservant as to mistake what is generally accepted as mid-brown for jet black, or did Emily herself get things as wrong as Mrs. Bennett? It is so irritating to find such errors in facts which are quite easy to check, and when one finds several on the few pages devoted to George Eliot's association with Miss Davies, one can't help wondering how many errors have crept into the main book. A good biographer must be honest but must also be free of mistaken details which should be correct. If one reads the correspondence between Emily Davies and

her friends Jane and Annie Crow, and the letters to Emily from George Eliot, there is a marked difference in tone from Mrs. Bennett's report of the same issues. Mrs. Bennett is condescending and disparaging; one wonders whether she allows her own dismissive attitude to George Eliot to be seen as Emily Davies's. The meetings between the two women are also mixed up and dates are distorted. Emily is reported as having persuaded George Eliot to talk about her own work at the third and last of their meetings in 1871. In fact, this conversation took place in 1869; their last meeting was in 1876. Indeed, in checking this mish-mash of dates, one realises how fascinating is the correspondence and the reports of the meetings between these two distinguished ladies and what a lot of light is thrown on George Eliot's own views on female emancipation, education, the Woman Question, morals and her own books. While I happily commend Emily Davies and the Liberation of Women for its fascinating story of the foundation and the foundress of Girton, I would suggest that the appendix be replaced by a good read in the 9 volumes of George Eliot's letters. There are not too many references to Emily Davies therein, but what there are make fascinating - and reliable - reading, particularly the letter from Emily to Annie Crow about the talk 'chiefly on morals'*. In a society like ours, when there is so much anxiety about moral standards, it makes very good reading.

* Volume 6, page 286.