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GOING, GOING, GONE BUT WHERE?

A slightly sad look at a house sale *by Kathleen Adams*

During the last decade Antique and Collectors' Fairs have flourished in Britain and are a very popular way for many of the population to spend a pleasant afternoon browsing amongst the items for sale. Forty years ago, when I began collecting - in a very modest way - antique shops were way out of my bracket and it was in junk shops that I picked up what I now regard as bargains. In those days few people seemed to be collecting pretty pieces of china or old pieces of brass and the prices were low. Junk shops, particularly in the poorer parts of towns, proliferated and, although they were clearly in the market with second-hand furniture for those setting up home not long after the second World War, there was always the odd shelf at the back of the shop with the pretty china and ornaments and brassware I craved, after so many years of austerity. All of these items were within reach of a pocket without too much money in it - unlike today, when frequently 'junk' is sold at something like 'antique' prices.

How any collector's mouth would water if shown a sale catalogue, a copy of which came into my possession some years ago. And how they would positively drool over the contents and prices, particularly if they were George Eliot devotees. For the catalogue contains:

CONTENTS OF THE RESIDENCE

comprising

DECORATIVE FURNITURE

the Library of about 1200 Vols of Books
being Portions of the Libraries of George
Eliot and G.H. Lewes

Silver and plated articles, Water-colour
drawings and miscellanies

By Direction of the Executors of the Will
of Gertrude, widow of Charles Lee Lewes,
being part of the Property of George Eliot,
bequeathed by her to Mr. Lewes, also a
Portion of the Library of his father,
George Henry Lewes.

The sale was held at Gertrude's home, 14, Sussex Gardens, Hyde Park, on Tuesday 15th May 1923. Whoever had bought my copy of the Sale Catalogue had been helpful enough to record the prices paid for many of the items at the auction and one's feelings on reading these are a mixture of envy for those who got so much for so little, and sadness that the possessions of George Eliot were so little valued at that time. For the prices, even by 1923 standards, now seem ridiculously and pathetically low. These prices I have changed into their decimal equivalent for ease of comparison with late 20th century values. George Eliot's own copy of Jubal was sold for £1.10, as was her copy of Young's Night Thoughts with pencilled notes in her own hand. Three of Barbara Bodichon's paintings (George Eliot's) went for £1.28 for the set, six by Octavia Hill for 90p. A pair of brass candlesticks (and all of the items mentioned from now on belonged to George Eliot) 55p; a copper bedwarmer 65p; a brass-mounted tea caddy was added to a leather papeterie case and a marble ewer and stand to make a lot which fetched 45p. An engraved glass claret jug together with a set of three engraved spirit decanters and six other pieces fetched 55p. 15p purchased a bamboo hanging egegere and a plaster corner bracket, but if you could stretch to £1.10 you could become the proud owner of a pair of French bronze vases and covers with female figure surmounts, together with another smaller one. A plaster female bust, another of a Roman lady and three others could be had for 30p.

If, however, you were waiting for the china to be held up for auction, how about George Eliot's Rockingham dessert service, 18 pieces, which went for £1.90? A pair of Nankin blue and white hexagonal-shaped jardinières and stands decorated in mountains and river scenes fetched £1.40. A pair of 5½" Minton flower vases supported by winged female figures went for 60p and part of a Minton blue and gilt tea and coffee service - 18 pieces - for 75p. A china tea service of 25 pieces went for £1.10. George Eliot's photograph of Savonarola, bought by her when in Florence researching Romola cost 30p.

When decorative furniture came under the hammer, George Eliot's oak portfolio stand containing her collection of drawings, photographs etc. from her own drawing room was sold for 35p. Lewes's oak armchair, seat, back and arms covered in leather raised 90p while a pair of carved ebonised chairs, on fluted tapered legs, seats and backs covered in leather, fetched £1.12½p. A 24" ebonised mahogany side table, with drawer and music canterbury beneath, together with her bound volumes of operas raised £1.10. Her open bookcase, in the same finish, went for £1.80p. Her Grand Pianoforte in a rose-wood case by Messrs Broadwood and Sons and her music stool (the piano, no

doubt, now in the care of Nuneaton Museum) raised £21; it is impossible to imagine what its value would be today, particularly with its George Eliot association, if it were to come onto the open market. Would only £21 have been its true market price in 1923, with or without its literary connection? A pair of carved and gilt footstools covered in velvet, went for 45p and a set of walnut 4-tier library steps for 70p. A 22" rose-wood music canterbury fetched 50p but her 6 ft mahogany wardrobe with a centre mirror panelled door went under the hammer for £9.45.

Reading this tantalising list of George Eliot's former possessions, one wonders who was at the sale; were they dealers, young people setting up home, nosey-parkers? Could one or two of them have been George Eliot admirers in a decade when she was not very highly esteemed by the general reading public? From the prices paid (and I must admit to having included those items with the lowest prices) it would appear that little value seemed to have been added because of the previous owner's distinction. Probably there were no museums represented to try and obtain George Eliot memorabilia for future collections or surely the bidding would have been reflected in the prices. The Catalogue claims, in thick black print, that 'this is the first occasion on which any Property of George Eliot or G.H. Lewes has been Offered for Public Sale'. One wonders if the auctioneers were unduly optimistic when they added (George Eliot's) at the side of the descriptive lots. If the person whose copy of the catalogue now belongs to the Fellowship may be believed, the literary crowds were not vying with each other to possess what had once been the property of their idol.

Those of us with the collecting bug always wonder in whose home their new and pretty or interesting acquisition was once on display. In this case, I would dearly love to know whose mantle-piece is now graced by lot no. 155 or whose clothes are stored in lot no. 216. We shall probably never know unless he or she is reading this article! I wonder!