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Beryl Gray

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## GEORGE ELIOT AND *THE LINNET'S LIFE*

*By Beryl Gray*

In the last year of her life, George Eliot gave John Walter Cross her copy of *The Linnet's Life*, which was published in 1822. At an earlier time she had inscribed on the recto of the frontispiece:

"This little book is the first present I ever remember having received from my father. Let any one who thinks of me with some tenderness after I am dead, take care of this book for my sake. It made me very happy when I held it in my little hands, and read it over and over again; and thought the pictures beautiful, especially the one where the linnet is feeding her young."

Several biographers - among them Oscar Browning (1890), Blanche Colton Williams (1936), Gordon S. Haight (1968), Ruby V. Redinger (1975) - in referring to this gift have followed Cross in stressing its obvious importance to George Eliot, but it is from the frustratingly incomplete details provided by Cross in his *Life* (1885) that we have had to construct our idea of the book's nature and contents. Naturally, the biographers have attempted to give their personal stamp to these details, and in two cases (Williams and Haight) have in the process succeeded in adding little inaccuracies. It seems quite clear that they have all relied on Cross's description, and not on their own perusal of an actual volume - and so a work that had meant so much to George Eliot, that must in some way have influenced her, has failed to gain substance.

About twenty years ago, however, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University added to their collection George Eliot's own copy, which Professor Haight then described as a "remarkable association" book; "a slender volume of twelve poems with a copperplate engraving for each."<sup>1</sup> But, except for the important fact that the book is a collection of poems, and the relevant fact that the illustrations are copperplate engravings, this description tells us little beyond what we knew before it was acquired by Yale. Its primary "association" had already been indicated by George Eliot herself in the inscription quoted by Cross (and reproduced here), who also gave us the date of publication; but matter, style, and quality - all the elements that might help us to understand why she cared for it - remain elusive.

Fortunately, there is - and has been for 120 years - a copy of The Linnet's Life in the British Library. The catalogue identifies the authors as Ann (Taylor) Gilbert (1782 - 1866) and Jane Taylor (1783 - 1824) though originally it had tentatively attributed the work to Isaac Taylor (1759 - 1829) of Ongar.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Gilbert and Jane Taylor were Isaac Taylor's daughters. Isaac Taylor was a well-known engraver, talented enough to be awarded (1791) the Society of Arts' gold palette. In 1810 he became the nonconformist pastor of Ongar, Essex. After his calling, he published several works for the edification of the young. Titles include: Self Cultivation (1818); Advice to the Teens (1818); Bunyan Explained to a Child (1824); The Book of Martyrs (1826). His wife, Ann, produced a series of popular little manuals of conduct, in which (according to the Dictionary of National Biography) "a Benjamin Franklin type of morality is developed". Her titles include: Advice to Mothers (1814); Maternal Solitude (1814); Practical Hints to Young Females (1815); Reciprocal Duties of Parents and Children (1818).

Ann (junior), Jane, their younger brothers Isaac - who was to become the author of Ancient Christianity, and the Doctrines of the Oxford Tracts for the Times (8 parts, 1839-40), and whose writings George Eliot was to describe as "eloquent, acute, and pious"<sup>3</sup> (she was also to call him "my jewel"<sup>4</sup>) - and Jefferys (whose literal translation of Aesop George Eliot was to use in 1840), were all taught by their father to become proficient and diligent engravers. Jefferys was technically very inventive, while Jane (future author of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star") proved at an early age to be an almost obsessive book-maker, delighting in title pages, prefaces, and so forth.

The work ethic prevailed powerfully in the Taylor household, and imaginative writing was not encouraged since it served no obvious useful purpose. Nevertheless, Ann found time to contribute regularly to a little annual called The Minor's Pocket Book; and then, for the same publishers (Darton and Harvey), the sisters collaborated in producing a series of children's books. These included Original Poems for Infant Minds (2 vols, 1804 and 1805) and Hymns for Infant Minds (1810), which went into nearly 100 editions in England and America.

The Linnet's Life was published when Ann was an established matron. That she was now a mother is reflected, I think, in the poems themselves, for, essentially, they are maternal, homiletic addresses to a boy and a girl. The main apparent purpose (like that of many of the sisters' earlier verses) is to



*Feeding her Young.*

*Reproduced by courtesy of The British Library*

exemplify and instil a sense of responsibility towards dependent creatures; but while kindness and empathy are expected of both children, other, incidentally-extolled virtues - such as obedience, docility, unobtrusiveness, modesty - seem (predictably) to be required specifically of the girl.

Throughout, the predominant voice belongs to the mother. Several poems take the form of a dialogue between her and her daughter Lucy (with the dutifully instructive adult naturally taking the last, moralizing word); one poem allots a couple of stanzas to the donor of the linnet; and another - ‘Perched on the finger’ - is narrated entirely by Lucy, to whom the gift is made. But even here, the mother’s prohibiting wisdom intrudes:

My Mama will often say,  
I know better child than you,  
When I want to break away,  
That’s not proper, dear, to do.

Despite the piety, however, it is easy to see why the book held such delight for Marian Evans when she was little, and continued throughout her life to be regarded affectionately by her: its very smallness (it measures 16.2 x 10 cm<sup>5</sup>) would recommend itself to most children, and the clearly-printed verses are never huddled or cramped, but are prettily centred in a leisurely layout that invites leisurely reading - pleasure engendering itself in the book’s whole design.

It is now perhaps difficult for us to imagine how, unadorned, the separate texts would have inspired even an improved Regency child. The many ‘poetic’ inversions (‘That very sinful is’; ‘You’ll gain a lesson good’; and so forth) tend to undermine the advantages of the simple metre or the forthright, usually masculine, rhyme-schemes. Although there is some variety of form from poem to poem, individually the finished compositions are decorous generic exercises of limited impact. Collectively, though, they have a distinct charm, for The Linnet’s Life is the biography of a pet. It is true that the four poems that immediately follow the first are concerned with linnets in the wild: a female sitting on her nest or feeding nestlings; a nest itself threatened by the principle narrator’s predatory son. But the sixth poem - ‘Fed through the bars of the cage by the mother [bird]’ - marks the transition from the subject’s freedom to its captivity, and in the seventh, the fledgling (who becomes, I’m sorry to say, Dick or Dicky) is given to Lucy. The rest of the series spans the bird’s fifteen years of life, during which he escapes, nearly expires but is

recaptured and revived; is caught by ‘‘Puss’’, nearly expires but is rescued and revived; and eventually loses first his sight and then his singing voice. For the remainder of his now useless (because mute) days he continues to be lovingly tended, and his funeral is conducted by Lucy’s own offspring - her ‘‘little linnets’’, who were

dearer still  
Than Dick had ever been;  
Were by her trained for him to feel  
And take an interest in.

Of course, it was above all the illustrations that endeared the linnet’s story to George Eliot. Nine of these depict quaint, well-circumstanced children, occasionally in the company of their Mama - a slender, attentive, rather medieval lady. The Arcadian and architectural settings are painstakingly and rewardingly detailed (the artist(s) were worthy of their father’s tutelage); but only the frontispiece - where the elegant male linnet perches at liberty on a twig, singing - compares in closeness of observation to George Eliot’s favourite.

The book is significant to those interested in George Eliot, though, not just because it was valued sentimentally by her, but because its concern with virtuous domesticity is precisely that which she was herself so unpiously to honour in The Mill on the Floss. She honoured it through Maggie Tulliver’s affectionate cousin, Lucy Deane. I don’t know whether George Eliot was thinking of The Linnet’s Life when she introduced the child Lucy into the novel, but by the time this Lucy is grown up her preoccupations associate her quite intimately with the poems. One of her chief pleasures, for example, is that of feeding her pets: she

‘knew the private tastes of all the animals about the house, delighting in the little rippling sounds of her canaries when their beaks were busy with fresh seed, and in the small nibbling pleasures of certain animals which, lest she should appear too trivial, I will here call ‘‘the more familiar rodents’’.’

Similar attention is paid to the bird’s ‘‘private tastes’’ in The Linnet’s Life, and to the need for his guardian to learn what these are. Like Lucy Deane’s canaries, the linnet belongs to the finch family, and he too is charmingly adroit with his seed. His busy cracking and nibbling - again reminiscent of the rewarding activity of the canaries - is a sign of his well-being. It comfortably assures his owner (who, like her ‘‘linnet-throated’’ namesake,

This little book is the first present I ever  
remember having received from my  
Father. Let any one who thinks of me  
with some tenderness after I am dead,  
take care of this book for my sake.

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It made me very happy when I held it  
in my little hands & read it over &  
over again, & thought the pictures beautiful,  
especially the one where the linnet is feeding  
her young.

Maria Evans Lewis

includes some of “the more familiar rodents” - i.e., rabbits - in her menagerie) that she is indeed his benefactress.

However, although a notion of contentment is common to both poems and novel, it is the novelist, not the poets, who transmits a true sense of life’s satisfactions. There is, of course, a moral connection between Lucy Deane’s indulgence of her fancy and her general charitableness, which manifests itself in all sorts of projects, and in her delight in cosseting her human loved ones; but it is in the pleasures themselves that George Eliot succeeds in involving us. The vicissitudes of the linnet’s life, on the other hand, seem - at least to the adult reader - secondary to the moral they every time point. But in the engraving that is reproduced here, where, in an aura of concentrated, maternal responsibility, the linnet is poised on the rim of her nest in its carefully-sited, protective habitat, the book’s special status in George Eliot’s rural imagination is entirely accounted for. Perhaps as a tribute to that imagination - and, too, to the Taylors of Ongar, who severally enriched it - someone, one day, will produce a facsimile edition of The Linnet’s Life.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. “The George Eliot and George Henry Lewes Collection”, The Yale University Library Gazette, 46 (1971), 21.
2. For those interested, the book was printed in London for G. and W.B. Whittaker, Ave Maria Lane; and B.J. Holsworth, St. Paul’s Churchyard. The printers were Cox and Baylis, Great Queen-Street, Lincoln’s-Inn Fields.
3. The George Eliot Letters ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1954 - 1978; I, 64
4. *Ibid.*, 98
5. I am grateful to Patricia Middleton, Public Services / Reference Librarian Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, for this information.