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## The George Eliot Fellowship Review 1990 No. 21

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Graham Handley

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# **The George Eliot Fellowship *REVIEW***

**No.21**



**1990**

*Edited By*  
**Kathleen Adams &  
Graham Handley**

**THE  
GEORGE ELIOT  
FELLOWSHIP  
REVIEW  
1990**

No. 21

*Edited by*

**KATHLEEN ADAMS AND  
GRAHAM HANDLEY**

*Published by*

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## CONTENTS

	Page
President's Message	3
Annual Report - 1989	4
Accounts - 1989	13
Treasurer's Report - 1989	14
Sixty Literary Years <i>by Kathleen Adams</i>	16
George Eliot's 'The Spanish Gypsy', a Neglected Work <i>by Jocelyn West-Burnham</i>	19
Book Review: An Annotated Critical Bibliography of George Eliot <i>by George Levine</i>	23
Review: 'A Letter from George', a BBC CWR serialised reading	24
Nuneaton Wreath-laying - 1989	26
The Kapellmeister <i>by Bill Adams</i>	
Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying - 1989	33
Debasing the Biographical Currency <i>by Graham Handley</i>	38
George Eliot and <u>The Linnet's Life</u> <i>by Beryl Gray</i>	43
Book Review: Octavia Hill. A Life <i>by Gillian Darley</i>	50
The Toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot <i>by Gabriel Woolf</i>	52
Book Review: Emily Davies and the Liberation of Women <i>by Daphne Bennett</i>	55
George Eliot Memorial Lecture - 1989: Novelists and Things: George Eliot in a Victorian Perspective <i>by Lord Briggs</i>	58
Book Reviews: George Eliot: A Reference Guide, 1972 - 1987 <i>by Karen L. Pangallo</i>	75
Middlemarch: A Student's Companion to the Novel <i>by Bert G. Hornback</i>	76
Going, Going, Gone ..... but Where? <i>by Kathleen Adams</i>	77
The Triumph of Spirit Over Law: Free Will Versus Determinism in <u>Adam Bede</u> <i>by William H. Klein</i>	80
Theatre Review: Adam Bede at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond	90
Obituary: Dorothy Eva Beamish	93
Review: Enter the Aunts - The 1990 Readings <i>by Gabriel Woolf</i>	94
Book Review: George Eliot: An Intellectual Life <i>by Valerie A. Dodd</i>	96

#### DESIGN ON FRONT COVER:

To mark the Diamond Jubilee of the George Eliot Fellowship the design by Jenny Quy on the front cover was submitted to Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council Parks Department and is to be executed in flowers in a public flower bed in Coton Road, Nuneaton during the summer of 1990.

\*\*\*\*\*

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Contributions are invited for the 1991 issue. They may be on any subject relating to George Eliot's work, life, family or friends. They should be up to 1500 words in length and it is preferred that footnotes are used only sparingly. Contributions must be typed (double spacing) and should reach the Editors not later than February 28th 1991.

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## SUPPLEMENT TO THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP REVIEW: 1990

Book Review by Rosemary Ashton

STATE OF THE ART: GEORGE ELIOT      A Guide through the Critical Maze  
by Graham Handley.                      Bristol Press, 1990      £4.95 paperback

Graham Handley and the Bristol Press have produced an attractive and useful book in the State of the Art series. There are clear, fair and sometimes fresh accounts of all the major books on George Eliot, from John Cross's devoted but delinquent biography in 1885 to the most recent feminist criticisms of Elaine Showalter and Jennifer Uglow. In addition Dr. Handley unearths forgotten studies, like Mathilde Blind's spirited biography, which predated Cross's by two years, and Mary Deakin's Early Life of George Eliot (1913). The latter is rightly rescued from neglect, to judge from the quotations from it given here; for example, the remark about George Eliot's essays: 'She (George Eliot) cannot let a falsity pass, whether in ethics or art.'

Students will find this an astute but broad-minded guide to George Eliot criticism. Dr. Handley clearly feels that those who have tried to interest readers in some aspect of George Eliot deserve to be treated with respect, with their best points emphasised, not their worst. This enlightened approach works well, particularly where Dr. Handley deals with devotees who wrote during the fallow period for George Eliot's reputation - ca. 1890 - 1940. This does not mean, however, that he is blind to critical faults. Leavis, praised for replacing George Eliot among the greatest English writers in The Great Tradition, is robustly characterised as 'independent, brilliantly insightful, bloody-minded, astringent', but above all influential on studies which followed.

Barbara Hardy is given the praise she deserves for reminding readers that the novel is an art-form - a fact too often forgotten by George Eliot's contemporaries and modern commentators alike. Gordon Haight's edition of the letters, surely the best scholarly edition of any important writer's letters ever compiled, gets generous praise, as does Haight's biography, though Dr. Handley calls for a new critical, rather than factual, biography.

An interesting chapter entitled 'Current Developments' singles out recent studies of George Eliot's relation to nineteenth-century science, in particular Gillian Beer's excellent Darwin's Plots, for helpful comment. David Carroll's remarkable introduction to George Eliot: The Critical Heritage is also mentioned, though unfortunately in the Critical Bibliography at the end rather than in the body of the text. Dr. Handley's judgement is always sound, and if he sometimes errs on the side of generosity towards his fellow critics, so much the better in a book intended to enthuse as well as explain. This book does both admirably.

Book Review by Graham Handley

GEORGE ELIOT      COLLECTED POEMS      Edited with an Introduction  
by Lucien Jenkins.   pp. 1-488.   SKOOB Books Publishing Ltd. 1990  
Price £18.95

Certainly there is a need for a Collected Edition of George Eliot's Poems, and I only wish more care and imagination had gone into the production of and the Introduction to this. The Introduction, which is mundane throughout, begins with an error in Marian Evans's birth-date, ponderously defines her 'conversion experience', and refers to The Revd. John Gwyther, original of Amos Barton, as a 'priest'. I suppose a Church of England clergyman can be described thus, though it seems an off-centre way of doing it. The style in this Introduction is sloppy where it should be specific, and errors in proof like 'Walker' for 'Walter' (in John Walter Cross) and Harold Transome's courtship as 'self-intested' are irritating. The derivations from Wordsworth in the 'Brother and Sister' sequence are obvious, and there is no critical apparatus for the poems themselves, apart from George Eliot's own notes to The Spanish Gypsy. One gets the impression of a wish to get everything into print without comment. The Epilogue to Felix Holt, which begins 'Our finest hope is finest memory' appears in 'A Minor Prophet' (dated 2-27 January 1865) with variants, but no connection is made. I remember reading on microfilm Cynthia Secor's excellent The Poems of George Eliot (Unpublished Dissertation, Cornell 1969). It did not include The Spanish Gypsy but it did have scholarly annotation and discriminating critical analysis. This Skoob edition lacks commentary of an incisive kind; it is a useful book to have, and I note that there is an ISBN for the paperback edition. This should bring it within the price range of readers who would like to read George Eliot's poetry for what it is - interesting minor verse written by a great novelist.

\*\*\*\*\*



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