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Doreen M.K. Agutter

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BOOK REVIEW
by Kathleen Porter

MERIDEN: ITS PEOPLE AND HOUSES PART 1

by Doreen M.K. Agutter

Alspath Publications, 1990. £4.95 paperback

This publication, said to be 'the first book ever written about Meriden', has come to our attention because of 'The George Eliot Connection' and because it was researched and written by a member of the George Eliot Fellowship. The historical research, dating back to the Middle Ages, is very thorough, and there are numerous photographs, plans and maps. The prose is somewhat breathless, as if copious notes have been written up with great rapidity, and this impairs its clarity. There are some errors in proof: the Clarkes, not the Evanses, must have been living at The Cottage

in 1850. The index has 'Royal Flying Corpse', and 'Morianne Evans' for George Eliot's proper name. It is misleading to use the French form, Marianne, as, according to Dr. Haight, she used this form only a few times while she was in Geneva after her father's death. Mary Ann Evans would be more appropriate for the index.

'The George Eliot Connection' refers to visits made by Mary Ann to her sister Chrissey Clarke's house in Meriden. John Pearson, said to be a cousin, lived at Patrick's Farm, near the road to Hampton-in-Arden and close to the bridge over the River Blythe. This area used to be subject to flooding when the little river burst its banks, and Mrs. Agutter conjectures that the inspiration for the flood in *The Mill on the Floss* might have its origin here. Leaning on Patrick's bridge in the attitude of the narrator in Chapter 1, watching the 'lively current', it is possible to imagine the child, Maggie, in her beaver bonnet, standing 'at the edge of the water' on the 'vivid grass'. There are no withies now, and no ducks, but George Eliot (and the narrator) may have remembered this bridge over the River Blythe. The recollection could have been transformed into the imaginary Ripple, tributary of the tidal Floss which flowed through the imaginary town of St. Oggs towards the sea. However, in seeking the derivation of Dorlcote Mill, we are in the realms of speculation. Unfortunately, Mrs. Agutter is hazy about George Eliot's dates. It is not correct to say that when Marian went to Meriden with Chrissey in 1854 'she was now gaining recognition as *Adam Bede* had just been published'. In 1854 she had not even begun to write fiction, and *Adam Bede* was not published until February 1859, and a month later, poor Chrissey was dead.

It should be emphasised that this book is about Meriden, not George Eliot. I hope it will generate some local interest; indeed, I have spent a happy hour or so with a modern Ordnance Survey map, tracing the course of old roads and marking the location of houses. It is probably a book to dip into, and for this reason it deserves a better index. Part 2 is promised, and will include details of Robert Evans' work in Meriden as the agent of the Earl of Aylesford in the early 1830s.