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Kathleen Porter
MIDDLEMARCH: A STUDY OF PROVINCIAL LIFE
by **GEORGE ELIOT.**
With an Introduction by E. S. Shaffer
Everyman's Library, 1991. £9.99

I read *Middlemarch* for the first time in the Everyman's Library edition of 1930, a trim book in two volumes with a note by Leslie Stephen by way of Introduction. The note was taken from the Essay on George Eliot in *Hours in a Library*, and is less than helpful to the reader. Stephen notices the high moral ideal George Eliot sets before us, but laments the absence of charm, or magic, which he found in her earlier works.

The new *Middlemarch* from Everyman's Library is an elegant book in one volume, convenient in size and moderately priced. There are no notes on the text, but there is a Select Biography and a useful Chronology. The Introduction is by E. S. Shaffer, Reader in English and Comparative Literature in the School of Modern Languages, University of East Anglia.

The new Introduction differs widely from that of Leslie Stephen, reflecting the changes in George Eliot criticism since Stephen's day. Dr Shaffer sets the tone in her opening paragraph, where she places George Eliot with the best nineteenth-century European writers of both sexes. There is no seeking after charm or magic; the study of provincial life, in fiction, was a serious and grand theme which spread across Europe in George Eliot's lifetime. Comparisons are made with Balzac's *Human Comedy* where the melodrama is more marked, and set against a background of extreme social unrest which did not accompany the political changes in England, except in outbursts here and there.

Dr Shaffer points out the relationship of George Eliot's characters to public events, from Mr. Brooke's standing as a candidate for Parliament to Rosamond Lydgate's loss of her goods and chattels through her husband's local political misfortunes. Private life, in *Middlemarch*, is inextricably mingled with wider public affairs.

Flaubert's Emma Bovary is suggested as the French Rosamond Vincy, with Charles Bovary corresponding to Lydgate, and George Eliot is strong on sexuality and its powers. Occupations, or secular vocations, are a major theme, with Lydgate and Casaubon hoping to be at the centre of international nineteenth century thought. Dr. Shaffer discusses resemblances between George Eliot's work and that of Turgenev, and points to the differences. Turgenev's contrasts are between life in the provinces and in the fashionable city, whereas Eliot's provincial town represents the nation, contrasted with a modern, secular European centre of intellectual development.

Dr. Shaffer examines Henry James's contention that George Eliot's novels lacked formal artistry, and argues that the formal structure of *Middlemarch* is 'masterly and original'. She expounds her theme with reference to the terms and imagery George Eliot used in the pattern of the narrative. The twentieth century writer Marcel Proust was an admirer of George Eliot, being helped in his own work by her use of the element of time.

In this dense and meaty Introduction, Dr. Shaffer places George Eliot firmly 'in the first rank of European novelists'. In this European year, perhaps there has never been a better time to read or re-read *Middlemarch*.