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## BBC Television's Film of Adam Bede

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Kathleen Adams

ADAM BEDE

Adapted by **Maggie Wadey**,

produced by **Peter Goodchild** and directed by **Giles Foster**

*BBC Television, New Year's Day, 1992*

This adaption was not for the academic, the scholar or the purist. As none of these, I admit that, with reservations, I enjoyed the film.

There were some very good things about it. The setting was very attractive (Stanway in the Cotswolds for much of the action because it is one of the least changed parts of England) and the photography superb, particularly in the Chase when the sunlight filtering through the trees made an extremely pretty picture. The fight between Arthur and Adam was well staged. Iain Glen as Adam portrayed the strength and integrity of the character convincingly; the comparison with James Wilby's attractive but weak Arthur well sustained. Jean Marsh would have been even better as Lisbeth Bede if the scriptwriter had left in the passage

in chapter 10 when Lisbeth gives only grudging praise to Dinah for her help in the cottage - surely a superb piece of writing which sets up her character so well; it was a mistake to omit it. I was given a copy of the script in the early days of filming and had tried to persuade the producer to include it as it seemed to me that George Eliot was here handing the character on a plate to the writer. The same happened in relation to Mrs Poyser 'having her say out' (chapter 22). Again I pointed out an exceptional piece of writing by the author who knew her character's strengths and weaknesses and created a Mrs. Poyser which Julia McKenzie failed to reach. Her Mrs. Poyser was attractive and funny and had many of Mrs. Poyser's sayings but she lacked the asperity which would have been needed had Maggie Wadey allowed her to 'have her say out'.

Susannah Harker's Dinah Morris, however, was completely convincing. Her gentleness and the serenity of her simple beauty shone through the portrayal. One could see how Hetty needed and responded to this truly good woman at the time of her desperate need. Sadly, the director changed the plot here and undid some of the depth and feeling during the confession scene in the cell by having Hetty confess to Adam instead of to Dinah. Certainly Adam came to call and forgave Hetty but the poignancy of Hetty at last confessing to Dinah was lost. Dinah's significant role in the cell is an important feature of the story and the change was unnecessary. I am told that the director felt that, in the book, the coming together of Adam and Dinah was long drawn out and, in a film of less than two hours, it had to be condensed. The confession to Adam in Dinah's presence was intended to be seen by the viewer as the bond which drew them together more quickly. I do not believe that this ploy worked and feel that, instead, the viewer was given the impression that only the push by Lisbeth as Dinah was leaving for Snowfield did the trick! Indeed, the cliché ending of the lovers in each other's arms was another error and an unnecessary deviation from the novel.

Patsy Kensit was convincing as Hetty; she could have made her too coquettish or too naive. Her portrayal was thoughtful and it worked - but I wondered if she was, perhaps, a little too glamorous? A chance was missed in the scene of the two bed-chambers (chapter 15); the images of Dinah's window and Hetty's mirror were used so significantly by George Eliot but overlooked in the film.

The seduction scene was clearly too good a chance to miss by film-makers! It was not nearly as explicit as many such on television today but lacked the subtlety which George Eliot had used so very effectively in the novel. The reader is left to wonder, thus heightening the suspense. The director exploited, as it seems they must these days, what was cleverly and delicately suggested in the 19th-century original.

The actors' dialects were acceptable, being a convincing mixture of North Warwickshire and South Derbyshire, and it was pleasing to find that, in her adaptation, Maggie Wadey had used a great deal of the original dialogue.

In a letter to John Blackwood at the end of 1858 George Eliot wrote that Lewes had suggested an advertisement at the beginning of *Adam Bede* stating that much of the effect of the story would be lost if the development of the plot were foreseen. Giles Foster and the writer decided to do just that - by putting Hetty's trial at beginning of the film and then going back to the circumstances which led up to it. Being so familiar with the story, I found it hard to imagine what effect this would have on the viewer coming to the story for the first time. As a device to grab the viewer's attention (and this is what it was intended to be) I am not sure that it worked. The trial scene was well set up and, during the scene, George Innes's testimony as John Stone was a most poignant performance. I was given the opportunity to see some of the filming of this scene at Stanway and was impressed by care and attention to detail.

The scene at the place of execution was badly overplayed. George Eliot wrote of the silent watching crowd and yet this crowd might well have been at a fair. I am aware that executions were once a sort of holiday but George Eliot had set her scene so eloquently and there was no excuse (apart from the fun use of rent-a-crowd) to so drastically change the atmosphere.

One television critic likened the film of *Adam Bede* to a Catherine Cookson novel. While disagreeing with him, I could see what he meant. There is no comparison between Catherine Cookson and George Eliot on the written page and it was sad that the psychological depth which sets George Eliot and *Adam Bede* so apart from Catherine Cookson could not have been reflected in the film. It is a long and complex book and one has to accept that a television film restricted to less than two hours cannot translate such a book satisfactorily to the screen. However, it must be said that the contact the Fellowship had with the producer and the dialect coach made one aware of the care they were showing and of their eagerness to do George Eliot's novel justice. If it did not entirely succeed one cannot lay too much blame on the script-writer, the producer or the director. Perhaps the difference in the two media - film and the printed word - is irreconcilable and always will be, up to a point. Having said this, however, one remembers the magic of the film *Silas Marner* a few years ago - and by the same director - but perhaps *Silas Marner* has its own particular magic.

It is interesting to conjecture what the film of *Adam Bede* would have been like if it had had George Eliot as its scriptwriter!