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Graham Handley

*Gordon S. Haight; George Eliot's Originals and Contemporaries:
Essays in Victorian Literary History and Biography,*
edited by Hugh Witemeyer (Macmillan, 1992)

It is good to meet old friends, to discover again who is the real heroine of *Middlemarch* and to realise that Ladislaw can be defended and that Dr Leavis was deaf to George Eliot's irony. Casaubon may not really have been impotent. All those theories about originals have been thoroughly tested, evaluated, replaced or re-stated by the investigative particularity of an eminent George Eliot scholar and, as some would have us believe, her definitive biographer (though I do not accept this last claim). Was Klesmer Liszt or, as appears more likely, a mercurial Rubinstein? Was Casaubon Mark Pattison? Does it matter? Is it really important that Charles Bray had a bastard daughter Nelly and that Cara contrived at the cover up? I suppose that if you are a biographical investigator you try to search out everything connected with your subject. This was Gordon Haight's great strength, and if the six George Eliot pieces reprinted here are already well-known to some readers, the essays on George Eliot's contemporaries provide further evidence of Haight's scholarship, his width and his inherent ability to tease out facts and to sift evidence. Meredith's contributions to the *Westminster Review* are seen in the light of Marian Evans's, which preceded them; Browning's proposals (or non-proposals) are weighed with a light irony. A searching beam is focused on Tennyson's *Merlin*, there is a vignette of Watts's *Clytie*, and a rolling account of Lewes's relations with Carlyle, including the latter's putting down of George Eliot. There is a direct appraisal of the Dickens-Lewes exchanges over Spontaneous Combustion, and as I read on I get the same feeling as I did in 1954 when I eagerly submerged myself in the first volumes of *The George Eliot Letters*: I know that I am in the presence of a widely-learned man. Then every footnote was a modest distillation of knowledge, here every essay is informed with it: then I learned much from his explicit range, here I delight in his scope and wit. Hugh Witemeyer's sensitive introduction says that in these essays 'information of lasting interest is conveyed in prose of enduring grace' and that Haight's 'thoughtful insights into the sensibility of the period and many drily humorous turns of phrase' constitute their excellence. He is right. The *Letters* and the biography are Haight's enduring achievement, but these essays are a sure index to the quality of the scholar and the writer.

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