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## Review of George Eliot (Marian Evans): a Literary Life

Kerry McSweeney

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## Ian Sutton

### *George Eliot (Marian Evans): a Literary Life* by Kerry McSweeney (Macmillan, 1991)

Many publishers run series of 'introductions' to English literature — handy roll-calls of the canon, beginning with Chaucer and ending with Virginia Woolf or thereabouts — and inevitably George Eliot has to be there. One is, of course, glad for the small army of academics for whom gainful employment is thus provided, but the question naturally arises whether so many books covering the same ground serve any useful purpose.

In Professor McSweeney's case the answer is yes. His book is rewarding because he is sufficiently master of his subject to make it his own. He forms his own judgements, chooses his own very telling quotations and balances his comments to make us look freshly at the novels and the novelist.

The first three chapters give us George Eliot up to *Adam Bede*. We get a clear picture of her Warwickshire background, her early religious experience, her intellectual development and her widening social circle. McSweeney emphasizes the central place of moral belief in the growth of her mind, deals sensitively with her emotional life, and even manages in a few pages to provide a nucleus of critical discussion. A highly interesting quotation from Nietzsche was quite new to me: 'They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. That is an English consistency; we do not wish to hold it against little moralist females à la Eliot. In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay there.' (Professor McSweeney seems to have read almost as much as George Eliot did. He is equally at home with Comte, Feuerbach, George Sand, Balzac and Walter Scott.)

When he comes to deal with the novels themselves, however, he is clearly to some degree defeated by the demands of space. In a total of only 145 pages he can hardly do more than make one or two points about each book (*The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, in relation to 'the Woman Question' — which is not the whole of *The Mill on the Floss*). On everything to do with ideas he is very good, not dodging such theoretical minefields as the claims of 19th-century fiction to represent reality; George Eliot's ambivalent status as a woman and as a woman writer; her belief in fiction as a moral force; and the advantages and disadvantages of 'intrusive narrational commentary'. What he fails to convey adequately, it seems to me, is the powerful hold that her books have on our *imagination*. He forgets to describe for us the processes by which

they are moving as well as profound. Where is Maggie's agony of choice, Dorothea's cruel disillusion, Gwendolen's marital misery? Perhaps Professor McSweeney thinks that things like these are sufficiently obvious without special guidance, and I suppose they are. But without them his account can sound disappointingly dry and academic.

That space is indeed the problem is proved by his earlier book of 1984 on *Middlemarch* (in Unwin's *Critical Library Series*), where he had 150 pages for one novel and showed himself a perceptive and sensitive interpreter. Even so, one wonders whether it was wise to give eight pages to the poems and not even mention *The Lifted Veil* and *Brother Jacob*.

This is nevertheless a book to be welcomed for its readable style, sound sense and density of information. It is a book firmly in the humanist tradition. It successfully achieves its purpose, which is, the publishers tell us, 'to demonstrate how an understanding of writers' careers can promote a more informed historical reading of their works'. Such an ambition, which would have been boringly conventional fifty years ago, is now almost dangerously revolutionary. The publishers are indeed aware of that. 'The role and status of the author as a creator of literary texts', they say, 'is a vexed issue in current critical theory, where a variety of social, linguistic and psychological approaches have challenged the old concentration on writers as specially gifted individuals'.

Do we not know it? And should we not be cheered to know that there are critics like Kerry McSweeney who can use sociology, linguistics and psychology with the best of them in the service of true understanding and sympathy?

Incidentally, in his 1984 book he called our author 'Eliot' throughout. In this one she is 'Marian'. No doubt the last ten years have made them better friends, but is such familiarity quite right? Perhaps the Fellowship should give us a ruling on this important matter.