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Review of George Eliot: Ihr Leben

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John Rignall***George Eliot: Ihr Leben* by Elsemarie Maletzke (Insel Verlag, 1993)**

In the epilogue to her life of George Eliot Elsemarie Maletzke pays tribute to the work of Gordon S. Haight and states that biographers who have come after him have found nothing really new to add beyond a more critical assessment of Eliot's person. The statement is true at least of this biography, which makes no claims to new findings and which follows Haight closely, often to the point of citing the same passages from letters or journals, while at the same time adopting an altogether less respectful and more critical attitude towards its subject. Where Haight reports without comment or evaluation, Maletzke is ready to pass judgement: for instance, George Eliot's unwillingness to tear herself away from Lewes and London to visit her sister Chrissey, who was dying from consumption, is brusquely criticized as 'neurotic hesitancy'. Similarly, a letter discouraging the loyal Sara Hennell from staying with the Leweses in Richmond, because they had little room and a visit would disturb their work, is castigated as 'rudeness in the best Evans vein', and followed by the pointed comment that Marian was inclined to assume that other people would quietly accept the kind of behaviour she herself could never tolerate.

The cooling of old friendships is not just seen as an occasion for censure, however, but also, more sympathetically, as the price of success - 'Der Erfolg ist ein liebloser Meister. Er macht sie der Welt noch fremder' (p.230). Success was a hard taskmaster, estranging her further from the world. An important factor in that estrangement was Lewes's well-intentioned and assiduous protection, which is here regarded with some scepticism. Far from endorsing Haight's view, with its origins in a celebrated observation of Charles Bray's, that George Eliot was not fitted to stand alone, Maletzke sees her behaviour after Lewes's death as evidence that she was well able to manage her own affairs. Despite her emotional desolation she proves to be her father's daughter, capable, resilient, even autocratic, opening her own bank account, reacting angrily to Swinburne's unfounded claim that she had derived the figure of Maggie Tulliver from a story by Mrs Gaskell, and dealing disdainfully with tradesmen who carried out incompetent repairs. This is a George Eliot more in tune than Haight's with a contemporary understanding of women's position and potential. Elsemarie Maletzke may sometimes be critical of her subject but her severest criticisms are reserved for prejudiced Victorian males, like Joseph Parkes and Benjamin Leigh Smith who are put firmly in their hypocritical place for reacting with outrage to Eliot's relationship with Lewes despite their own irregular behaviour. Judgements on the novels can be similarly severe - *Romola* is dismissed as 'a desperately bad book' and the Jewish part of *Daniel Deronda* declared a failure - but, whether hostile or favourable, critical pronouncements are, like these, unsurprising; and in this relatively short book there is not enough space to discuss the fiction in any depth. This is a popular biography rather than a scholarly work: there are no footnotes and the sources of quotations are not identified, the bibliography is patchy, and some unscholarly errors slip in: Matthew Arnold and Benjamin Jowett are assigned to Cambridge instead of Oxford, and the well-known passage from *Daniel Deronda* about how a life 'should be well rooted in some spot of a native land' is ascribed to *Middlemarch*. But despite such incidental inaccuracies this will serve as a lively introduction to George Eliot for German readers, who

should be intrigued enough by the complex character sketched out here to wish to explore the life and the works in greater detail.

Brief Notice

A facsimile reprint of the first part of George Eliot's translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* has recently been published in New York by Gloger Family Books, edited and introduced by Yoesh Gloger. The editor has kindly made a gift of a copy to the Fellowship. The volume reprints the second edition of 1892, preceded by the editor's introduction which outlines the lives and times of Strauss and Eliot, paying particular attention to their knowledge of, and relationship to, Jews and Judaism.