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## Review of The Letters of George Henry Lewes

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**Terence R. Wright**

The Letters of George Henry Lewes, edited by William Baker, English Literary Studies, Monograph Series Nos. 64 and 65 (University of Victoria, Canada, 1995) 2 vols, pp. 295 and 280.

This edition of Lewes's letters, collected from a range of libraries across the world and presented with clear introductions and notes, is a welcome resource to all readers of Lewes and Eliot. It is not a complete collection, deliberately setting out to supplement the Lewes items included in Gordon Haight's *George Eliot Letters* so that the two of them now provide a complete record of all Lewes's letters, or at least all the letters that Baker's widely cast net has been able to trace. Some of these (fifty-seven to be precise) are summarized rather than transcribed but the others (442 of them) are complete transcripts of letters not previously published in full (or accurate) form. Haight, who is convicted of important omissions and distortions, included no letters prior to 1853, when Lewes met Eliot. Baker's edition, on the contrary, covers all but the first seventeen years of Lewes's life.

Some of the early letters are embarrassingly pushy, with the ambitious young journalist thrusting his attentions on a variety of editors, demanding to know what has happened to his manuscripts, haggling for better rates of pay, alternately browbeating and flattering them. By the late 1840s, however, once he has turned thirty and made something of a name for himself, it is difficult not to admire the sheer range of his interests. He writes articles on Arabic philosophy, Greek history, English, French and German literature. He produces novels, acts in his own plays, lectures on philosophy and founds a new journal. Baker suggests that the 'maelstrom of activity' in which Lewes immersed himself in 1850 was partly an escape from his disintegrating marriage, on which these letters shed little light. But Lewes maintained his astonishingly broad range of interests for the rest of his life, adding marine biology and zoology to his list of hobbies.

Early acquaintances such as Mill found this very range of interests suspect, a mark of shallowness, but the mature Lewes at least was fully aware of the limitations of his *Sea-Side Studies*, a book 'for the amusement and instruction of amateur naturalists' which he urged Blackwood not to reprint: 'I am not disposed to write *deliberate* ephemeral. The 1870s see him carefully checking the details of the mathematical, geometrical or philosophical elements of *Problems of Life and Mind* with acknowledged experts in these fields. These letters help to disprove any lingering suspicions of Lewes as a charlatan, unconcerned with the truth or accuracy of his work.

Many readers will no doubt turn to these letters for any light they may shed on George Eliot. Lewes certainly provides detailed accounts of their various continental travels, though he is self-deprecatingly aware of the relative simplicity of their routine, established as early as 1854 in Berlin: rising early, working all morning, walking in the afternoon and reading aloud to each other in the evening. Lord Houghton, Lewes reports in 1871, finds it 'incomprehensible how we can live in such Simeon Stylites fashion, as we often do, all

alone – but the fact is we never *are* alone when alone'. At least Lewes asks his son Charles to send cognac and claret as well as books to the various refuges they took against possible disturbance. Their continuing ailments take up considerable space, as in George Eliot's own letters. There are frequent references to reviews both good and bad though disappointingly little about the works themselves. At one point he enters on an interesting discussion of the 'two distinct publics' of *Daniel Deronda*, 'one for the Gwendolen Grandcourt & one for the Jewish scenes'. The same letter disputes the charge that hers is 'the religion of Despair'. But this is a rare occasion when Lewes allows himself to dwell on the subject.

These two volumes, nevertheless, will appeal to a range of readers. Academics will find them (and their indices) invaluable in tracing the many strands of Lewes's intellectual interests while general readers will enjoy the portrait they provide of an extraordinarily rich and varied Victorian life. William Baker is to be congratulated on making these letters accessible to both kinds of reader.