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## Review of Holt the Radical

A.G. van den Broek

Linda Mugglestone

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**George Eliot, *Felix Holt the Radical*, edited by A. G. van den Broek  
(Everyman Paperbacks, 1997). £4.99. ISBN 0 460 87687 2**

**George Eliot, *Felix Holt: the Radical*, edited by Linda Mugglestone  
(Penguin Classics, 1995). £4.99. ISBN 0 14 043435 6**

With *Romola*, *Felix Holt, the Radical* has generally proved to be George Eliot's least appreciated novel. *Romola* used to be safely categorized as 'smelling of the lamp', while *Felix Holt* was awkwardly 'political'. Despite a continuing critical unease about both novels, we cannot easily employ such easy categories at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, the whole idea of what constitutes a 'political novel' has itself radically changed. Where unreconstructed Marxist and *Marxisant* critics used to see politics exclusively in terms of class struggle, and George Eliot as a muddled conservative whose intellectual grasp on political affairs would have been heightened if only she had taken the opportunity to read *Das Kapital*, we now recognize an acute and original political intelligence in both the novel and the novelist. *Felix Holt* has now emerged as a different kind of novel, one attuned to the essence of a *nineteenth-century* political debate in which the word 'radical' possessed very particular connotations. It now seems obvious that 1866 was not 1966, and that the 1830s were not the 1930s.

A new sympathy with the seriousness and refinement of the intellectual and political debates of the mid-nineteenth century is evident in both of the editions of *Felix Holt* under discussion. Both recognize the need to explore the dense political situation Eliot is describing (van den Broek in a succinct and helpful appendix on the 1832 Reform Bill; Mugglestone in her Introduction). Both include the 'Address to Working Men' by Felix Holt as an appendix to the text. Both also have the, virtually obligatory, further appendix on the legal background to the novel. Above all, both editors have acknowledged the need for full and detailed explanatory notes. Mugglestone's notes tend to be fuller, but van den Broek's often cover more ground and pick up on, sometimes simple, sometimes crucial things (such as the chapter epigraphs) that Mugglestone overlooks. The two editions complement both Eliot's novel and one another rather neatly.

Mugglestone has chosen a text based on that of the first edition (and she has consulted the MS in the British Library); van den Broek also uses the first edition, insisting, as did the Clarendon editor, that this is 'the only edition for which we know Eliot read the proofs'. Minor and telling differences between the two texts do, however, emerge. Take, for example, a minor crux in Eliot's 'Introduction'. On his p.7 van den Broek has a quotation from Jeremiah and Hosea reading 'Plough up the fallow ground...'; Mugglestone's p.7 has 'Break up the fallow ground...' (though, as her note on p.504 reveals, both the MS and the first edition have 'plough'). The Authorized version of the Bible has 'break' in both cases, as do all later editions of the novel (further evidence, if we needed it, of Eliot's detailed knowledge of the Old Testament and of her desire to be accurate in her quotations). Evidence too of the novelist *correcting* the text and departing from an established reading when she had the opportunity to revise. So where do we stand? Most readers wouldn't care, but for those that do care

Mugglestone has effectively added a new layer of editorial interpretation and ‘improvement’ which she points to in her ‘Emendations to the Text’ on pp.xxxvii-xxxviii of her edition. These emendations serve, she tells us, either to restore ‘superior manuscript readings’ or to ‘emend the text of the first edition in the direction of changes introduced in the second, third, or fourth editions’. An admirable aim, but I would have thought that these changes might just as well have been consigned to the endnotes.

Beyond editorial decisions it should be stressed that in accordance with the best traditions of Dent and Penguin both texts are attractively priced, printed and presented and that both are likely to prove highly reader- and student-friendly. The Everyman cover illustration is an (undated, but, by the look of it, 1870s) tinted woodblock of a night meeting during an agricultural strike; the Penguin, more disconcertingly, reproduces a painting by John Ritchie of an *eighteenth-century* hustings (there wouldn’t have been many tricorns, silk coats and bag-wigs around in Treby in 1832!).

My only complaints are little more than quibbles. Why, for example, does van den Broek insist in his introduction that the 1832 Reform Bill was ‘widely seen as “a sham”’? To justify his point he refers us in a note to Asa Briggs’s article ‘The Essentials of Chartism’, but, unlike Briggs, he appears to assume that the Chartists’ challenge to contemporary politics was ‘widely’ acceptable (a questionable point). When on p.xxii he, seemingly approvingly, quotes Eagleton and Pierce’s *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel from Walter Scott to David Storey* (1979) it seems to me that he has selected a particularly partisan reading of the evidence. Alternatively, certain of Mugglestone’s notes and references are irritatingly inaccurate. Throughout her edition she spells Frederic Harrison’s first name as ‘Frederick’. In note 7 to Chapter 2 she gives Pitt the Younger a knighthood to which he had no claim; in note 4 to Chapter 5 she tells us that William Paley was a fellow of a college in Cambridge called *Christ Church* (he was at Christ’s); and in note 10 to the same chapter she informs us that the Lord spoke to Samuel *through* Eli (rather a strange misreading of the text). Let it be said, though, that none of these minor misreadings can be said to seriously mar the quality of two fine and generally laudable contributions to the long overdue revival of interest in *Felix Holt*.

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