

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1997

Review of George Eliot

Josephine McDonagh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

McDonagh, Josephine, "Review of George Eliot" (1997). *The George Eliot Review*. 319.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/319>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Josephine McDonagh, *George Eliot. Writers and their Work* series.
Plymouth: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 1997.
pp. xiv + 114. ISBN 0 7463 0799 £7.99**

While the old 'Writers and their Work' pamphlets were very useful in their staid, often belles-lettristic, way, since the series was relaunched in 1994 under the General Editorship of Isobel Armstrong it has made its mark in a more forthright and compelling manner. These monographs are longer than their predecessors, at around 40,000 words, and while they are uniform in format, in a livery of nationalist red, white and blue, they respond distinctively to their brief: 'Drawing upon the most recent thinking in English studies, each book considers biographical material, examines modern criticism, includes a detailed bibliography, and offers a concise and original reappraisal of a writer's major work.' Some of the most notable of the new 'Writers and their Work' titles have been the first extended critical studies of contemporary authors like Angela Carter, Caryl Churchill and Ian McEwan. In this instance, the commission to address a canonical author has been met triumphantly by Josephine McDonagh.

McDonagh reads George Eliot for the 1990s, working with vigorous confidence in broad but sharply defined strokes. She knows George Eliot's writing, and the criticism (though it appears from the bibliography that her study was completed before the appearance of the two most significant books on our author since Gillian Beer's *George Eliot* of 1986, namely David Carroll's *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations*, 1992, and Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot Her Letters and Fiction*, 1994). It is a definite achievement to present a stimulating revisionary reading on so brief a compass, a reading that is moreover lucid and accessible to a range of readers with something to say to each of them. Its virtues are those of an essay rather than a treatise, and McDonagh puts forward an argument which should command assent as well as respect. Her discussion is suggestive rather than exhaustive, avoiding airy generalizations, engaging cogently with details of the texts.

'Prologue: Approaching Eliot' introduces us to George Eliot in the flesh, a figure in black velvet, one of two women among a group of men of standing in mid-Victorian intellectual circles. This emphasis on materiality, not only on the body of George Eliot's work, is confronting. The approach brings out Eliot's pre-eminence in a fresh and economical way, before the three main chapters unfold. The emulation of Eliot herself in invoking an analogy with a musical or dramatic work is warranted, for the three chapters pursue dominant themes with development, variation and counterpoint. McDonagh has worked out her argument so as to move through Eliot's career more or less chronologically, with the author's realism as the common thread. In the first chapter, the focus is on description ('the obsessive documentation of details of material life – which is the hallmark of her realism', 12), with a virtuoso section on doors which illuminatingly groups a number of examples, avoiding current clichés about liminality. Naturally, this section includes some pages on *Adam Bede*, which are followed by some on the clinical or scientific gaze in *Middlemarch*. Now the vision of *Middlemarch* has been checked out countless times, but McDonagh invokes Foucault in the penetrative gaze in a way that certainly sharpened my awareness of issues ultimately as significant as this novel's 'ambiguous relation to the impact of science and technology' (p. 38).

Chapter 2, 'Regeneration: The Uses of the Family', also traverses familiar ground, in ways that again propose some topical perspectives. Thus *Adam Bede* is done no violence at all in being described as 'a novel in which styles of mothering are of central importance' (44), nor *Felix Holt* by being identified as the text where Eliot 'interrogates ... ideas of inbreeds and amalgams most carefully' (64). Finally, 'The Shadow of the Coming Age: Modernity and the Limits of Realism' looks hard at *Daniel Deronda*, in combination with 'The Lifted Veil' and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, to round off the discussion of Eliot's career-long contention with the certainties of the realist form. McDonagh is concerned to make the case that the complexities of the late works are to be explained rather as reactions to a changing world than to such abstractions as 'artistic development' or 'intellectual maturity' (12). Obviously there are places in which it would be good to have the argument pause a little, to dilate and discriminate. I would have liked for instance more extended attention to the experimental works that follow *The Mill on the Floss* (especially *Romola*) in relation to the propositions about historical process put forward in treating *Daniel Deronda*. But this is ungrateful. I am delighted to respond to the directness of this exposition without negotiating tracts of theoretical positioning. It is a matter for considerable satisfaction to have a brisk recommendation for students who need some persuasion that their investment of time in reading long Victorian novels will be rewarded in ways that seem to them (postmodernists to a person) relevant. And it is even more satisfying to have my own views of George Eliot's achievement vitalized by a construction of the author that is unabashedly of its moment.

For all this exhilaration, I must record some carelessness of detail: for example, on p. 9, I think the painter Frederic Burton (not Lehmann) is meant; on p. 10 (and elsewhere), Bessie Rayner Parkes's name is misspelt; we meet a Sir James Chetham on p. 20, and critics James Beatty and Mary Ann Doody on pp. 107 and 108 (where Jerome Beatty and Margaret Anne Doody will doubtless recognize themselves); on p. 28 the narrator is 'travesting herself', and on p. 56 '*The Mill on the Floss* is seeped' rather than steeped in scientific allusions; there are occasional infelicities of expression, like that in the account of the Liggins controversy (not an easy matter to keep clear) which could be misleading in implying that the vexatious Joseph Liggins was a clergyman (p. 29).

Margaret Harris
University of Sydney