

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

---

1998

## The Stereotyped Edition's Title-Page Vignettes

Beryle Gray

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](#)

---

Gray, Beryle, "The Stereotyped Edition's Title-Page Vignettes" (1998). *The George Eliot Review*. 310.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/310>

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.

EMW:

## THE STEREOTYPED EDITION'S

### TITLE-PAGE VIGNETTES

by Beryl Gray

On 2 November 1866, George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood approving of his proposal to publish an illustrated edition of her books. The project, she saw, was

a wise one, as likely to assist in [the books'] circulation. In the abstract I object to illustrated literature, but abstract theories of publishing can no more be carried out than abstract theories of politics.<sup>1</sup>

Blackwood's idea developed into a plan 'to try the cheap illustrated edition of your Novels in sixpenny numbers of which Adam, The Mill, Scenes, Silas, and Felix would make 30, ultimately to form four volumes selling at 3/6 each'.<sup>2</sup>

In fact ultimately forming five volumes, the thirty sixpenny numbers were duly published, and were issued in green paper wrappers between 1867 and 1869. Bearing the general title THE NOVELS & TALES OF GEORGE ELIOT, the jauntily ornamental wrapper design is by the innovative John Leighton (1822-1912), a proficient artist and book cover designer who in 1869 was to become the founder-proprietor of the *Graphic*. His name is centred in the bottom of the decorative border. Also set within the border is the inscription 'ILLUSTRATIONS [that is, engravings] BY J. D. COOPER'. In each curved corner of the defined space is a roundel representing in turn (clockwise from top left) a carpenter's bench with tools; a mill wheel; a grave-yard displaying Milly Barton's headstone; and a loom: the designs for these were used for the gilt roundels or medallions on the front of the four relevant bound volumes. The title of the individual work is set almost centrally within its own rectangular frame, which is 'hung' by a tasselled cord.<sup>3</sup>

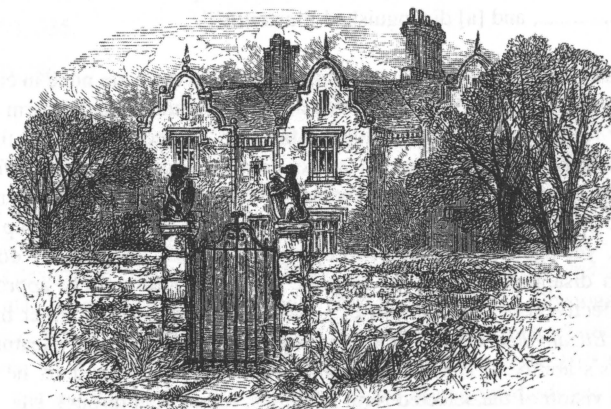
*Adam Bede* (numbers 1-7) was the first work in the series to be produced. The six full-page plates (engraved, as the wrapper indicates, by Cooper) were designed by William Small (1843-1929). As Blackwood clearly anticipated ('Some of the illustrations will, I doubt not, give you "a turn"'<sup>4</sup>), George Eliot could dredge up no enthusiasm for them, despite the pains taken by the engraver. She found them at best 'endurable to a mind well accustomed to resignation', while the 'unctuousness' of the depiction of Adam making love to Dinah enraged her to the extent of declaring that she 'would gladly pay something to get rid of it'<sup>5</sup>. Small was not used for the remaining numbers.

The vignette on the title page (reproduced opposite) of 'the really handsome'<sup>6</sup> bound volume of the novel was a different matter, however. George Eliot found it 'perfect – almost exactly as I saw the Hall Farm eight years ago in my mind's eye'<sup>7</sup>. This highest possible praise no doubt accounts for the fact that the same artist – whose signature, EMW, is just discernible in each case – was commissioned to design the vignettes (all engraved by Cooper) for the remain-

NOVELS  
OF  
GEORGE ELIOT

VOL. I.  
ADAM BEDE

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS*



THE HALL FARM

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS  
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

ing volumes in the series as it was so far planned. Each one – ‘Dorlcote Mill’, ‘Raveloe Village’, ‘Shepperton Church, As It Was’, and ‘Little Treby’ – is in sympathy with its associated text. George Eliot found them all ‘charming’<sup>8</sup>, making a point of distinguishing between them and the plates in general; yet while Cooper as the engraver is usually acknowledged by commentators on these illustrations. EMW’s contributions have received scant attention, while the artist himself appears to have remained either unidentified, or misidentified.<sup>9</sup>

EMW is the signature (reproduced in the title of this article) of Edmund Morison Wimperis (1835–1900). He trained as a wood-engraver under Myles Birket Foster, and for the earlier part of his career worked for the *Illustrated London News* and other periodicals as well as producing illustrations for books: of the thirty engravings included in Joseph Cundall’s fine edition of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry, *The Poets of the Elizabethan Age* (London, 1862), for example, seventeen are by Wimperis (there is also one by Birket Foster). His figure drawing was deemed ‘poor’<sup>10</sup>, however – though he seems to have enjoyed depicting sheep. In 1866, the year before the first vignettes for the Stereotyped edition of George Eliot’s works appeared, he began to contribute to the Institute of Painters in Watercolours, and for the latter part of his career confined himself to landscape painting, eventually becoming (1895) Vice-President of the New Watercolour Society: his best work, according to H. L. Mallalieu, ‘with its fine treatment of sky and shadow, was done directly out of doors’<sup>11</sup> in the English and Welsh countryside. Bénézit considers him to be an ‘eminent representative of the new school of English watercolourists, and [a] distinguished illustrator’<sup>12</sup>.

Given his difficulty with figures, it is interesting to note that there are none in either ‘The Hall Farm’ or ‘Shepperton Church, As It Was’; that the head, shoulders and an arm are all we can discern of a tiny figure leaning on the bridge in front of ‘Dorlcote Mill’; and that the characteristically retreating, through somewhat static, female form in the otherwise delicately-detailed ‘Raveloe Village’, is indeed rudimentary. Perhaps the most vaguely realized of the five, ‘Little Treby’ is the only scene which appears to have demanded a group of figures: an again retreating, yet apparently immobilized, herdsman with cattle and a dog – though a minuscule coach disappearing into the distance is a nice, and entirely appropriate, touch. However, the effectiveness of the vignettes – which seem stylistically freer than his earlier contributions to *Elizabethan Poets* – does not depend on these relatively featureless images, but on Wimperis’s ability to capture something of the spirit of the texts he is illustrating through his own vision of the selected rural localities, rather than through attempted portrayals of their fictional inhabitants. Although not strikingly original, they uninterferingly reflect George Eliot’s own vision – as her response to them (most expressly to ‘The Hall Farm’) indicates. Small’s designs for *Adam Bede* on the other hand, and those by other artists for the rest of the sixpenny numbers, are dominated by transfixed figures enacting scenes which must have interposed themselves between George Eliot’s (and the reader’s) mind’s eye, and her text; but – as Blackwood told her – illustrators had to be allowed to have their own way, ‘and they assert that figures are the only thing to tell’<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps those illustrators were right. Nevertheless, Wimperis’s little vignettes deserve to be noticed – both for the sake of their restrained charm, and in recognition of George Eliot’s own appreciation of them.

[I am indebted to Ian Sutton for helping me to identify Wimperis's signature. I am also grateful for enlightening conversations with both Paul Goldman, formerly of the British Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, and Edmund King of the British Library.]

#### Notes

1. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), IV, 313.
2. *Ibid*, 320.
3. The wrapper for the numbers is partly described on page xxvi of Gordon S. Haight's Clarendon edition (Oxford, 1980) of *The Mill on the Floss*. The wrapper specifically for that novel is described in detail on page xl of the Clarendon edition, and is reproduced facing page xl; the cloth binding of the Stereotyped edition is also described on page xl. However, Haight (who finds the frame round the novel's title on the wrapper 'ridiculous') mentions neither Leighton, nor the fact that the gilt medallion matches the relevant wrapper medallion.
4. *Letters*, IV, 352.
5. *Ibid*, VI, 335.
6. *Ibid*, IV, 366.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*, VI, 335.
9. Hugh Witemeyer attributes the *Adam Bede* vignette to Myles Birket Foster (*George Eliot and the Visual Arts* [New Haven and London, 1979], 228 n 19). Birket Foster did in fact design the vignette for the Cheap edition (1874) of *Middlemarch* (which George Eliot also found 'charming – not quite the Middle Mercian physiognomy in its grand distance, but perhaps not more than a fair average of characteristic English beauty' [*Letters*, VI, 45]). On page xxvi of the Clarendon edition of the *Mill*, Gordon S. Haight notes that the vignette on the title-page of the Stereotyped edition is signed E.M.W. (*sic*); on page xxix of his Clarendon edition of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Oxford, 1985), Thomas A. Noble states (understandably) that the 'rather charming' vignette on the title-page of the Stereotyped edition of the tales 'is unsigned'; and on page xl of his Clarendon edition of *Felix Holt, the Radical* (Oxford, 1980), Fred C. Thomson identifies only the engraver of the seven illustrations (which include the vignette) in the Stereotyped edition.
10. H. L. Mallalieu, *The Dictionary of British Watercolour Artists up to 1920*, 3 vols (Suffolk, Antique Collectors' Club, 1976-90), I (2nd ed. 1986), 368.
11. *Ibid*.

12. E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, 8 vols (Librairie Gründ, new ed. 1948), VIII, 761.
13. *Letters*, IV, 352.