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Kathleen Adams

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A FAMILY'S EYE VIEW OF GEORGE ELIOT

by Kathleen Adams

There have been very many views expressed over the years about George Eliot – her genius, her behaviour and, inevitably, her looks. But what were the views of her family back in Nuneaton? It is well known that her brother Isaac, then very much the Victorian patriarch, dismissed her from the Evans family when he knew about her liaison with G. H. Lewes. They could not subsequently be unaware of her fame and there may have been many criticisms of her expressed within the family circle.

Some family letters still exist and are in my possession, but there are not enough to tell us how often Mary Ann was the subject of discussion between her relations. One letter (or perhaps it was part of an article for a local newspaper) dated 25 February, written by Isaac Evans's unmarried daughter Eleanor possibly in 1881 – two months after George Eliot's death – describes a visit to Griff House by a Miss Kingsley. Miss Kingsley, Charles Kingsley's daughter, was accompanied by her cousin, Miss Vivian. Miss Kingsley, Eleanor writes,

was much pleased at being asked to come in and stay for luncheon.... They both knew GE by sight. Miss K was once in the house where GE had been to luncheon and she, GE, was waiting for her carriage. Miss K said her eyes were piercing and seem to see through her, every glance making itself felt. They were rather small eyes, but had a marvellous glow in them, and more expression than she had ever seen in any other person's.... Miss Kingsley had a copy of *Adam Bede* which 'Aunt George' had sent to Charles Kingsley. He thought very highly of her, and deplored her life so much, speaking of 'O May I Join' etc and being absorbed into something other than one self.

What Isaac Evans thought of this visit goes unrecorded in Eleanor's narrative, but he was able to assist John Cross when we was preparing the *Life* of his famous wife. Amongst Isaac's own copy of notes he sent to Cross' are the following observations:

'I can think of no-one who gave GE books as a little girl unless it was her Uncle Everard'.

'I went to Fee School for a short time but Mary Anne never did.'

'Sharp features does not truly describe her face'.

'The dearth of literature could not have been acutely felt *at that time*. Looking back to that time from the midst of her ample literary surroundings in middle life she might well have seemed to her to describe the state of her childish surroundings thus, but I know that then she was fonder of digging pits in the garden and such like than of books.... I cannot believe in the Joe Miller Jest book. If it had been in the house I should have been more likely to discover it than Mary Anne.'

Family views can be very different, particularly of the black sheep.

Isaac's half sister Fanny Houghton wrote to him in December 1866, asking 'Have you heard anything of Mary Anne? I cannot expect you to join in my admiration of her last work "Felix" is a Radical [sic].... the Book is marvellously clever, that you *must* confess. Apropos of M.A. I have gratified my curiosity as to the sort of looking person she has chosen for husband. Among a host of literary celebrities I saw the other day a photograph of G. H. Lewes. Accordingly I straightway purchased it but never in my life have I held a presentment of the human face with so very little of *human* beauty in it.... I am on the tiptoe of expectation to see the forthcoming novel by Mary Ann. It is too much to hope that no member of her own family will figure in it.'

In January 1881 Fanny wrote again, somewhat belatedly, to Isaac after being very shocked at the news of Mary Ann's death. 'We may be thankful' she wrote, 'that she had found a good husband and a *name*; it comforts me to know that she who for so many years was believed to be the wife of Lewes had not *Mary Ann Evans* inscribed on her coffin. That man spoiled her life and caused bitter mortification to all those nearly connected with her'.

Fanny's letters are long and verbose; Isaac's replies do not exist so we have none of his views about either his sister's unconventional lifestyle nor of her books. His own copy of *Middlemarch* was auctioned some time ago so we assume he had read that. Did he read *The Mill on the Floss*? If he did, was it possible that he might have seen himself and his sister in Tom and Maggie Tulliver? We shall never know.

In November 1890 Isaac's son-in-law, W. Griffiths, wrote after Isaac's death that same year an article or letter intended for a newspaper.² Although in his own copy of the piece he does not identify the paper it may well have been a response to an obituary of his father-in-law. Clearly the obituary waxes somewhat eloquent about the Brother and Sister Sonnets.

'The connection of these two names is very kindly meant,' he writes, but accuses the paper of sharing some of the glory of the poems with Isaac although, he says, '... in this way bringing additional honour to one who had already so much of his own acquiring.... I think, however, that such an appreciation of that eminent name with his own would not have been regarded by him with an unmixed feeling. At any rate I am sure he would have been much distressed if, from this unqualified association of the two names, it should ever come to be inferred that he has been led to regard the whole of his illustrious sister's course with satisfaction, or even without an abiding and very deep-seated sorrow. Out of this course arose indeed the one great sorrow of his life....'

Revd Griffiths ended his letter 'George Eliot may be admired, beloved, and pitied: Mr Evans may be admired, beloved and revered.'

Isaac had written to his sister at the time of her marriage to John Cross and the rift appeared to be healed after her first 'real' marriage had achieved, in Isaac's eyes, some respectability for the one-time scarlet woman who had been banned from the respectable Evans family. Yet it seems from Revd Griffiths's account that Isaac had never completely recovered from her fall from grace.

Finally, a view from even further back in the life of Mary Ann. In an obituary of Edward Simms,³ organist at St Michael's Church, Coventry (later to become the city's Cathedral), it is recalled that 'His most famous pupil was George Eliot. He has often expressed his admiration for her perseverance and insight, her method of rendering Thalberg's music, and especially her aptitude in theory. Whilst the novelist, on her part, has paid a peculiarly graceful compliment to her old music master in "Middlemarch", where Rosamond's music teacher is described as "one of those excellent musicians, here and there to be found in the provinces, worthy to compare with many a noted Kapellmeister in a country which affords more plentiful conditions of musical celebrity".'

So many lives touched hers and every person's view of her will differ from all the others. However, one might refer again to what Lewes said – 'To know her is to love her' and, finally, to the view of her husband John Cross after her death in 1880.

The place that may belong to her in the minds and in the hearts of future generations will be finally adjudged on the merits of her works. We who write and we who read today will never know that final verdict, but I think that those of us who loved her may trust to it with confidence.⁴

Notes

1. George Eliot Fellowship archive.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1885): the concluding sentences.