2010

George Eliot as Historian: The Case of Mr. Crewe and Hugh Hughes

David Paterson

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/586

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.
GEORGE ELIOT AS HISTORIAN:
THE CASE OF MR CREWE AND HUGH HUGHES

By David Paterson

‘My sketches [...] of Churchmen [...] are drawn from close observation of them in real life, and not at all from hearsay or the descriptions of novelists.’
George Eliot

‘Mr Tryan is not a portrait of any clergyman, living or dead’. George Eliot

Historians look for as many different sources of evidence as they can to describe and interpret the past. How far is fiction a valid source? Great fiction may reveal great truths but is this only in a general sense? George Eliot herself seems to suggest above that reliance on ‘descriptions of novelists’ may be a perilous route to an accurate portrait: but what about relying on descriptions of those in her own books? Despite one specific denial, some of her ‘portraits of clergymen’ contain valuable historical elements.

An examination of one part of *Scenes of Clerical Life* shows George Eliot’s analysis of one character in particular, ‘Old Mr Crewe the curate’, as having specific value for the historian. Crewe is a character in *Janet’s Repentance*, the third section of *Scenes*, her first major work of fiction published in 1857 but set nearly thirty years earlier. Crewe’s appearances are brief. He is merely described and not given any dialogue or significant action; but a great novelist like Eliot will take trouble in getting her minor characters right and she succeeds brilliantly here. Like so many figures in this book Crewe is based on a real person, the Reverend Hugh Hughes. George Eliot’s brief description of Crewe confirms our limited historical knowledge of Hughes. It also adds to what can be found out about him from other sources. Eliot brings Hughes alive, albeit unflatteringly; she is fascinatingly accurate in her assessment.

In *Janet’s Repentance* ‘Old Mr Crewe’ holds the same positions as Hugh Hughes did in actuality: he was described as curate of ‘Milby’ Church, in reality the Nuneaton Parish Church of St Nicolas, and also Master of the local Grammar School, the one in Nuneaton endowed in the time of King Edward VI. Scattered around the early parts of Eliot’s tale are numerous references to Crewe which reveal matters concerning his work and his character. If applied to his real-life equivalent, Hughes, one looks with awe at the accuracy of the novelist’s portrayal of this character. It is largely based on what the nine to eleven year old George Eliot both observed with her own eyes of Hughes, and heard from others, when she was a pupil at Nancy Wallington’s school in Church Street, Nuneaton, and Hughes was nearing the end of his life and career just up the end of that road. Their paths overlap around 1828-1830 when George Eliot would have attended the Church and seen Hughes in action. Her acute memories, critical without being malicious, are recalled to devastating effect in the book. Of course a novelist can choose to exaggerate or radically re-create for artistic effect and not be historically accurate; but this does not seem to happen with Eliot’s writing in this case.

Though Hughes was originally an outsider, he lived in Nuneaton for just over half a century, marrying Sarah Warden, a local girl, and making the town his own. Born in Llangollen, Denbighshire in 1755 he was appointed curate at St Nicolas’, Nuneaton, at the age of twenty-
four in 1779 where he performed the regular church duties for the absentee vicar. When Hughes arrived, the long-serving Thomas Liptrott was Master of the Grammar School. In 1799 on the departure of one of Liptrott’s successors, distinguished scholar John Spencer Cobbold, Hughes added the Mastership of the Grammar school to his portfolio, while retaining his curacy. He held both posts until his death in August 1830 at the age of seventy-five, having spent over fifty years as curate (as does Crewe in the book) and over thirty as Master at the Grammar School. What did he achieve, other than longevity? Here we can look to George Eliot. The characteristics of Crewe and Hughes seem as one.

How does Eliot see Crewe’s clerical abilities as a cure of souls? A clever use of negatives hints at her assessment: ‘No one is warranted in saying that old Mr Crewe’s flock could not have been worse without any clergyman at all.’

Does this suggest a clergyman who read all the necessary services but little more? Historical evidence would tend to confirm this. Parish records show that he officiated at almost all the baptisms, marriages and deaths in Nuneaton during his long tenure of office. Can Eliot’s portrait help us to discern other qualities?

*Janet’s Repentance* centres on a real life attempt at a religious revival in Nuneaton; in the late 1820s an Evangelical preacher at the Chapel of Ease in nearby Stockingford wished to give evening lectures in the parish church of St Nicolas where Hughes was curate. Had some felt Hughes’s preaching lifeless up to now? The fictional account in the book centres on those who supported Edgar Tryan, the young preacher, and their opponents who supported Crewe. Eliot ironically observes that, now he is threatened with criticism and challenge, Crewe’s virtues are suddenly re-discovered:

> It now first appeared how surprisingly high a value Milby in general set on the ministrations of Mr Crewe; how convinced it was that Mr Crewe was the model of a parish priest and his sermons among the soundest and most edifying that had ever remained unheard by a church-going population. (*Scenes*, 264)

And all this from ‘[t]he pulpit from which our venerable pastor has fed us with sound doctrine for half a century’ (*Scenes*, 282).

We have the pleasure of acquiring historical truth through elegance of style as well as heavy irony. Nuneaton was strongly divided between supporters and opponents of the Stockingford preacher John Edmund Jones – Mr Tryan in Janet’s Repentance – and his right to give the lectures. Eliot’s obvious sympathy for Tryan in the book is superficially surprising in view of her clear rejection of Evangelicalism as a young woman around 1841. However, despite the reference to the ‘sound doctrine’ of Crewe, words that she gives to his defenders, she finds Crewe’s friends less than truly theological in their opposition to Tryan. Eliot beautifully observes the often unthinking conservatism of those who sided with Crewe against any kind of change. As she pointed out to her publisher Blackwood: ‘The collision in the drama is [...] between irreligion and religion. Religion in this case happens to be represented by evangelicalism’ (*Letters*, II, 347-9).

This view is also implicit in the way the story is written. Eliot’s main target for irreligion is
lawyer Dempster who she describes in the letter as ‘far more disgusting’ in real life than she had portrayed him. But Crewe as a representative of the cloth hardly comes out well. By the same token Hughes’s own quirks of personality may have been under- rather than overplayed in Eliot’s description. As Gordon Haight points out in reference to Amos Barton, Eliot ‘did not exaggerate’ the ‘personal deficiencies’ of the real life John Gwyther (Haight, 212).

On the evidence available, Eliot’s portrait of Crewe – a man who gained supporters merely because he would not disturb the status quo – also relates to Hughes. Can Eliot’s other information about Crewe help us to build up a picture of Hughes?

For example, was Hughes a poor sermonizer who could not hold his congregation’s attention? The idea of getting another preacher to give Sunday evening lectures may be significant here but could merely be because the new man has a different theological perspective rather than because Hughes did not have the gift of the gab. Some thirty or more years after Hughes’s time Churchwardens complained about bad behaviour in the galleries at St Nicolas which was clearly a long-standing problem. This hardly counts as proof that Hughes had the same difficulty but the inconclusive evidence can be clarified by Eliot.

Old Mr Crewe the curate delivered inaudible sermons on a Sunday [...]. He had a way of raising his voice for three or four words, and lowering it again to a mumble so that we could scarcely make out a word he said. (Scenes, 253, 256)

Given the other hints we possess on the point it seems reasonable to assume that a poor voice applied to the real-life Hughes as well as the fictional Crewe. Crewe did not hold the attention of his congregation.

Divine service offered irresistible temptations to joking, through the medium of telegraphic communications from the galleries to the aisles and back again. (Scenes, 255-6)

Add to this the tongue in cheek comments above with regard to Crewe’s ‘sound’, and ‘edifying’ ‘unheard’ sermons and it seems clear Crewe is no orator.

Are Eliot’s comments about Crewe for comic effect and inapplicable to Hughes? Probably not: they are historically accurate when related to Hughes on other occasions. Eliot’s writing seems to swing the balance of the evidence into making the confident assertion that Hughes was indeed an indifferent orator.

Eliot goes further and portrays Crewe as so out of date as to be the object of some derision: ‘Old Mr Crewe [...] in a Brown Brutus wig [...] which [...] was never put on quite right’. (Scenes, 253, 256). George Eliot’s description of Crewe’s old-fashioned appearance around 1830 suggests a man with an eighteenth-century approach to religion and education. His unpowdered natural looking Brutus wig, common between about 1800 and 1810, was a transition from a more elaborate style to rejection of wigs altogether. By 1830 it was extremely old fashioned. It seems reasonable to conclude, with the aid of Eliot as an historical source, that Hugh Hughes wore a brown Brutus wig.
If we accept that Hughes had a poor voice how would he fare as a teacher? Concerning the other part of his dual career, Eliot also sees Crewe as less than successful as a schoolmaster:

On a weekday [he] imparted the education of a gentleman – that is to say, an arduous inacquaintance with Latin through the medium of the Eton Grammar – to three pupils in the Upper Grammar School. (*Scenes*, 253)

However, the fact that the boys learnt little was not because of Crewe’s lack of prowess in the classics or even his poor voice. George Eliot hints that he was a man of sound academic credentials and may have performed better in his earlier days: but he had lost the intellectual sharpness he may once have possessed:

It was clear he must be a learned man, for he had once had a large private School, and had even numbered a young Nobleman or two among his pupils. The fact that he read nothing at all now and that his mind seemed absorbed in the commonest matters was doubtless due to his having exhausted the resources of erudition earlier in life. (*Scenes*, 258)

Examining the historical record, Eliot’s erudite and ironic picture of Crewe as schoolmaster in the book is accurate in many respects as a portrait of Hughes in real life.

Few pupils attended the ‘Upper’ part of Nuneaton Grammar School in the late 1820s. Like many Endowed Schools of the time in modest market towns, there was a limited desire among the local male youth to receive a classical education dominated by Latin Grammar. They were not alone. The eighteenth Century had increasingly questioned the heavily grammatical and classical emphasis of secondary education. While a knowledge of Latin was still seen as important for the educated higher classes, it was no longer useful for most occupations, though the Church and the Law still required it.

One solution was to attract classical scholars from further afield. Eliot’s remark concerning Crewe’s ‘large private school’ could refer to when the real-life Hughes was appointed as Master in 1799; the Governors immediately proceeded to make extensive alterations to the School Master’s house so that boarders could be taken. However, even the younger Hughes lacked drive; he became content with fewer pupils and the boarding side of the school declined.

Eliot is also accurate in her references to the ‘upper school’. The Grammar school founded in the time of King Edward VI was now divided into upper and lower portions, a common though not universal practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries. There was an Undermaster taking the petties, that is the younger boys who needed to be acquainted with the rudiments of English Grammar before they could grapple with Latin. It is clear that when Hughes let things go even more as he got older, the vast majority of pupils were in the lower school. Benjamin Rayner was appointed Undermaster in 1802 three years after Hughes arrived, and taught far more boys than his superior. In addition, Rayner kept a local public house and one suspects only propriety kept his salary £5 below that of the Master, £45 as opposed to £50. Rayner undertook a good deal of the school’s administration as his name appears on some of the bills and receipts that have, in somewhat haphazard fashion, survived. Eliot’s fictional description of Crewe seems to re-enforce the evidence that Hughes as School Master was doing very little.
Eliot refers to the use of the *Eton Grammar* Latin text for Crewe’s Grammar school. This was the book used by Hughes in King Edward’s but there were few classical scholars to take advantage of it. At most forty to fifty students on the King Edward ‘Foundation’ received a free or nearly free education, plus ten to twenty who were boarders. Rayner as Undermaster took all the day boys studying elementary subjects – a very heavy load – and a good number of the boarders as well. George Eliot observed that Crewe taught just three boys in the Upper part of the Grammar School and this was true under Hughes in the last years of his life when he was well over seventy. At one stage Hughes taught only one boy. Eliot did not exaggerate.

While we lack the school registers available for later periods, there is occasional evidence that some boys in school from the age of nine or ten initially pursued Latin and Greek then moved elsewhere two or three years later to attend a grander establishment for their more advanced studies. This applied to Hughes’s own son, Thomas Smart Hughes, who attended King Edward’s briefly and after further study at Shrewsbury and Cambridge, went on to be a distinguished historian. So Eliot’s comment seems correct when applied to Nuneaton: ‘The genteel youths of Milby were chiefly come home for the midsummer holidays from distant schools’ (*Scenes*, 288).

Hughes was also willing to stay on his modest unaltered Master’s salary of £50 a year. Given this, and his apparent lack of desire for additional boarders, one might initially doubt the historical parallel of Eliot’s remarks about the fictional Crewe’s avarice and her comment on his ‘stingy housekeeping which was a frequent subject of jesting’.

> Old Mr Crewe, the curate was allowed to enjoy his avarice in comfort, without fear of sarcastic parish demagogues; and his flock liked him better for having scraped together a large fortune out of his school and curacy and the proceeds of the £3,000 he had with his little deaf wife. (*Scenes*, 258)

Historical investigation validates this assertion regarding Hughes.

Hughes’s wealth was literally ‘proved’ at the end of his life. His will indicated ownership of ‘family estates’ in Wales as well as an extensive property in Nuneaton such as in Bridge Street and Market Street, the adjacent villages of Arley and Ansley, the nearby Leicestershire village of Barwell and also Wolverhampton. He acted as mortgagor for others’ properties. Since 1799 he had lived rent and repair free in the Headmaster’s House where he enjoyed a large garden hard by the Churchyard. The latter was filling up and the Church (in the form of Curate Hughes) coveted part of the Master’s garden (Hughes the School Master). In Hughes’s lifetime the Master’s private comfort prevailed over the Curate’s public need. While Hughes remained merely curate of Nuneaton, he held other livings, the Hughes family one in Northamptonshire (the Rectory of Hardwick) and also the parish of Wolvey, a few miles from Nuneaton, acquired in 1815.

Because of his income from several sources, curacy, headmastership, boarders, town property, wife’s wealth, ecclesiastical livings, mortgagor, as well as his free accommodation and maintenance, Hughes was content with his Master’s annual salary remaining at £50, a figure he also received for his curacy. Hughes was clearly well off and careful with his money. However, historical evidence means we can go further and confirm Eliot’s comment regarding
avarice.

From the start in 1799 Hughes farmed out some of his boarders to the School Undermaster for the teaching of more elementary subjects, paying him a guinea for each pupil they took. However, when new Undermaster Benjamin Rayner arrived in 1802 and continued the teaching arrangement, Hughes failed to pay him his due, holding on to any fees parents paid. Rayner complained to the Governors but legally he was in a weak position; the School Charter of 1694 acknowledged a fixed and separate annual payment of £10 for an Usher or Undermaster and Rayner received a good deal more. Hughes defended his position. He was not prepared to lose any of his salary as ‘When he was appointed Latin Master’ he asserted, he ‘certainly was informed what he was to receive per annum’ and was not prepared to see it go to someone teaching something else. But he ‘does candidly acknowledge’ Mr Rayner has ‘done his duty as far as was in his power’. The avarice was fair-minded!

The Governors, anxious to avoid legal wrangles, sorted out the dispute by paying Rayner an additional £10, Hughes retaining all his income. While Rayner was doing valuable work on a smallish salary, the Governors clearly wished to retain the services of Hughes and he continued to possess the Master’s House. This was partly because, for all his laxness, he knew his Latin. More significantly perhaps, just teaching a few boys in this way would guarantee the continuation of the Grammar School status based on the original statutes of the school.

Further, Hughes’s use of the phrase ‘Latin Master’ makes clear his interpretation of the role: he is there to teach the classics to whoever requires it but not to run the school or teach the majority of boys. One would hardly classify him as a ‘Headmaster’ but for the fact he occupied the Master’s House and took the Master’s salary. It is all entirely consistent with Eliot’s cameo of Crewe.

In normal circumstances we might be suspicious of the retrospective account of a young child: is it historically precise? But this is an exceptionally acute and observant young girl, Mary Anne Evans. Nevertheless we still have to be cautious. The unflattering portrait of Hughes may have been based as much on the recollections of George Eliot’s teacher Maria Lewis as much as her own childhood memories. Maria’s Evangelicalism would have led her to side with Tryan in the great dispute of 1828-30 and be less sympathetic towards Hughes. Moreover, a younger Hugh Hughes of the 1780s might have given very different raw material for a budding novelist.

However, these cautions are normally applied to historical sources; that they may be subjective and can only deal with a snapshot in time. We do need to apply additional caution when approaching fiction but can dismiss the idea that Crewe is a composite picture of several clergyman as the description relates specifically to Hughes. However, a more plausible charge is that of literary romancing: for instance, did Hughes’s previous pupils include ‘a young nobleman or two’? (Scenes, 253)

While one member of the local gentry family, the Newdegates, had attended the school in 1700-01 Nuneaton did not have the social class to make this a frequent occurrence. However, a nobleman’s son might have attended when boarders were briefly coming in greater numbers around 1800. So, though Eliot’s writings are fictional and not an historical memoir, we ought to treat them when appropriate as valid historical sources.
Has any personal bias affected the unsympathetic portrait Eliot draws of Crewe’s religious and educational inadequacies? She knew all about the debates concerning Evangelicalism and its challenge to other forms of churchmanship. Her criticisms cannot be put down to her loss of religious faith when one sees the sympathetically drawn portraits of clergymen elsewhere in her output. With regard to education she has her own views and laments the lack of a girls’ school in Milby comparable to the boys: ‘It is really surprising that young ladies should not be thought competent to the same curriculum as young gentlemen’, but in Milby ‘there was no such academy’ (Scenes, 287-288).

Yet it would be unreasonable to suggest that this point has led her to a deliberate playing down of the achievement of the local boys. She is fully aware of the debate concerning the respective merits of a liberal or vocational education. Her ironic tirade against poor schoolmasters in Mill on the Floss, though general, may have had Hughes as a target when referring to ‘a headmaster, toothless, dim-eyed, and deaf, whose erudite indistinctness and inattention were engrossed by them at the rate of three-hundred pounds a-head – a ripe scholar, doubtless, when first appointed’. So a case can be made that the great novelist gives us additional historical insight into at least one figure in the history of the midland town that George Eliot may have moved away from but clearly never forgot. George Eliot has much raw material to offer the historian. Moreover, her sources are more elegantly written than most and from them we receive aesthetic pleasure as well as historical enlightenment.

Notes


2 Hughes was the son of Edward Hughes of Llangollen, the family seat being Tynymynydd nearby. The young Hughes did not attend Jesus College, Oxford, until he was 21 in 1776. However, he was already ordained deacon by 1778 while still a student at Oxford and yet to gain his BA.

3 Until 1803 this was George Champagne; after 1803 Richard Bruce Stopford was also an absentee and Hughes remained as curate.

4 Thomas Liptrott: Master of Nuneaton Grammar School for 55 years 1733-1788.


7 St Nicolas’ Nuneaton Parish Registers in Warwickshire County Record Office (WCRO).

8 At this time St Nicolas was a large parish increasing in population. In 1824 a Chapel of Ease was created in the mining area of Stockingford at the west end of the parish.
The notice still hanging up in St Nicolas Parish Church refers to ‘The misbehaviour of some persons [...] in the more remote parts of the galleries in this church and in the aisles beneath the galleries’ and warns of proceedings against the offenders if they continue their ‘unseemly and unbecoming conduct’. The notice is undated but refers to national legislation passed at the start of the 1860s.

Warwick County Record Office (WCRO), King Edward VI Nuneaton Receipts and Vouchers HI 45/193. Hughes was the first Master to accept paying boarders on more than an individual or occasional basis. This was becoming an increasingly common development in Grammar Schools. If boarders could be attracted, the school numbers remained high and the Master’s income increased.

These were the figures by 1809. WCRO H1 45/105.

‘To Mr Rayner 11/4/1805 Five copy books to enter boys names, 2/6d.’ See for instance WCRO HI 45/70 and H1 45/37 where Rayner, not Hughes, signs for over £3 worth of books and equipment.

The Eton Grammar of 1758 was a ‘slightly revised’ version of William Lily’s *A Shorte Introduction of Grammar* (numerous sixteenth-century editions) and so a very traditional Latin textbook. S. J. Curtis, *History of Education in Great Britain* (1963), p. 84.


Charity Commissioners Report for Nuneaton Grammar School 1834. This noted that there had been a ‘very great improvement since the appointment of the present Master’, i.e. since the death of Hughes four years previously. While Undermaster Rayner kept a public house, ‘no complaint of inefficiency or neglect of duty has been made’ against him. Indeed, ‘for many years the whole superintendence was left to him there only being one boy in the upper school’. He had carried the school for Hughes.

Thomas Smart Hughes died in 1847 at the age of sixty-one. If he had lived another ten years one wonders what he would have made of the depiction of his Father in *Scenes*.

The £50 annual salary appears to have remained unaltered throughout thirty years as Master. He received the same salary in 1815 as in the dispute of 1802. WCRO H1 45/195.

Will of Hugh Hughes. His ‘long annuities’ were to be left to his wife (who just predeceased him), Welsh Estates to one son, the Hardwick living to another and £1,000 to his daughter. Hughes had also acted as a mortgagee for five dwellings in Market Street (the mortgagor being George Petty) and inherited property through his Father-in-Law Joseph Warden, a Nuneaton mercer. WCRO Nuneaton Properties 715/6-7 (1818).

Charity Commissioners Report, 1834.

Hughes’s son Thomas Smart Hughes had been an outstanding scholar of Headmaster
Thomas Butler at Shrewsbury School just after 1800 and this may explain Hughes senior's appointment to the living of Wolvey in 1815: at that time Butler held the advowson. *Memorial tablet to Hughes in St Nicolas Parish Church.* [www.theclergydatabase.org.uk](http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk). Last accessed 1.3.2010.

21 WCRO King Edward VI School Nuneaton: *Papers relating to appointments and resignations* H42/14.

22 Ibid.


24 Such as Mr Farebrother in *Middlemarch* and Mr Irwine in *Adam Bede*. The Reverend Walter Stelling, Tom's tutor in *The Mill on the Floss*, is less sympathetically drawn, a vehicle for Eliot's opinion that education could sometimes be too narrowly classical.

25 Nuneaton had to wait until the twentieth century for girls' secondary education.

26 In *The Mill on the Floss*, Book I, Chapter 2, Mr Tulliver feels son Tom had acquired enough learning at his academy 'if I'd meant to make a miller or farmer of him', but though he 'wouldn't make a downright lawyer o' the lad' he would like to send him to a second school to enable him to 'talk fine and write with a flourish'.