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2010

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## ADAM BEDE AND EMIGRATION

By Josephine McDonagh

Although emigration to settler colonies was a widespread phenomenon in mid nineteenth-century Britain, it is a theme to which George Eliot appears to give very little attention. Of all the works, *Adam Bede* is the novel which seems especially home-bound. Characters who go abroad do so in penitence: Hetty is transported to Australia, where she dies; and Arthur goes to the East to make up for having committed 'the sort of wrong that can never be made up for' ('Epilogue'). In so far as it is discussed in the novel, migration is the chimera of the mistaken Mr Gedge, the landlord of the Royal Oak, who thought his neighbours such a 'poor lot' that he considers moving:

I think he had a dim idea that if he could migrate to a distant parish, he might find neighbours worthy of him, and indeed he did subsequently transfer himself to the Saracen's Head, which was doing a thriving business in the back street of a neighbouring market-town. But, oddly enough, he has found the people up that back street of precisely the same stamp as the inhabitants of Shepperton – 'a poor lot, sir, big and little, and them as comes for a go o' gin are not better than them as comes for a pint o' twopenny – a poor lot'. (ch.17)<sup>1</sup>

Migration, as Mr Gedge's reflections reveal, is the resort of fools or mistaken idealists, the product of his 'dim' imagination. Throughout, the novel appears to caution against all forms of internal movement. Even Dinah's peripatetic life as a Methodist preacher eventually ends as she settles down to a domestic life with Adam.

On the face of it, the novel sets up what Elizabeth Ermarth names as an 'ethic of mobility', in which moving is related to danger and conflict, and resolution with stasis and stability.<sup>2</sup> This same 'ethic' is followed through in Eliot's subsequent works. Only in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, at the end of which Daniel and his new wife Mirah embark on a journey to found a new Jewish homeland, does she take up the subject of emigration and colonial settlement in a direct way. Thus to think about *Adam Bede* in terms of emigration may seem wrong-headed or fruitless.

There are, however, factors why we should probe Eliot's apparent lack of interest in the mobility of people and emigration a little harder. In this short essay I would like to consider some of them. For a start, George Eliot herself led a relatively mobile life. By the late 1850s when she began work on *Adam Bede* she had already migrated from the Midlands to London, and had travelled extensively in Europe. She notes in the manuscript of *Adam Bede* that she composed it in no less than three different locations – the first and third volumes in Richmond, Surrey, and the second in Munich and Dresden.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Nancy Henry reminds us that in 1851 she encouraged her recently widowed sister Chrissey and her six children to emigrate to Australia, and even contemplated accompanying them – if not to settle herself, at least to write about and report on what she had seen. This was during the time in which she worked for John Chapman, the editor of the *Westminster Review*, who had previously been to Australia when helping the sister of his mistress to emigrate there.<sup>4</sup> In common with most people at the time, George Eliot lived in a context of heightened awareness of emigration, made so by the

experiences of emigrating friends and relatives.

Printed literature of the 1850s was full of accounts of emigration. In emigration pamphlets, parliamentary reports, and numerous articles in the periodical press, emigration was a subject which attracted vast amounts of attention. Eliot's own reading was full of positive accounts of emigration. In Book 9 of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth's long poem of 1814 – which supplied Eliot with the epigraph for *Adam Bede* – Wordsworth positively endorses state-assisted emigration:

For, as the element of air afford  
An easy passage to the industrious bees ...  
So the wide waters, open to the power,  
The will, the instincts, and the appointed needs  
Of Britain, do invite her to cast off  
Her swarms, and in succession send them forth;  
Bound to establish new communities  
On every shore whose aspect favours hope  
Or bold adventure; promising to skill  
And perseverance their deserved reward.<sup>5</sup>

Colonial emigration, for Wordsworth in 1815, was a response to problems of poverty at home, a desirable destination for the unemployed 'swarms' of bee-like British workers, and, in the terms of political proponents of emigration, a 'safety valve' for overcrowded Britain.<sup>6</sup> But it also presented Wordsworth and others with an opportunity to imagine a new society, in which the 'bold adventure' and 'perseverance' of Britons would contribute to the building of a new world. The same kind of views, expressed in a similar idiom of swarms and safety valves, is put forward by Robert Southey in a series of essays composed over the 1810s and 1820s and published in various journals, notably the Tory *Quarterly Review*. Southey speaks of Britain as a diseased body in need of cure – that is to say the removal of the poor to the wide expanses of the yet uncultivated expanses of the earth so as to protect the health of the body of English society.<sup>7</sup> As for Wordsworth, colonial settlement is both a refuge for what is conceived in Malthusian terms as a surplus population; and the site for the development of a new and better society.

It is likely that George Eliot had read these essays by Southey, which stayed in print across the century, issued as collected volumes. We do know for certain that she was familiar with other works by Southey, including his *Life of Wesley*, first published in 1820 and reprinted in 1849 and 1858, from which Eliot directly drew in preparing *Adam Bede*. In particular her account of Dinah's out-of-doors preaching was based on material from Southey's biography.<sup>8</sup> Moreover Southey's *Life of Wesley* also treats the theme of emigration in an account of the journey of Wesley and his brother to an English colony in Georgia, the last that the English established in North America. Southey writes that Wesley's American experiences taught him a great deal about both himself and the ways of men and society.<sup>9</sup> The idea of the colony as a pedagogic space, wherein people might learn about the operations of society, was widely held by writers and thinkers of the time.

Karen O'Brien has pointed out the strong contribution that Tory writers such as Southey and

Wordsworth had in the shaping of colonial emigration policy in this period.<sup>10</sup> Southey in particular contributed to various parliamentary committees on the subject of emigration. The chief proponent of pauper emigration in the post-war government was his friend, Robert Wilmot Horton, who implemented schemes for emigration between 1821 and 1828, when he served as under secretary of state for war and the colonies.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the post-war economic slump, Horton led a number of initiatives to assist poor British workers to settle in British colonies, in the Cape and, more successfully, in Canada. In this early phase of state assisted emigration under Horton's guidance, the colony was envisaged as a society made up of small land holders, a nostalgic conception of a pastoral community, of the type that no longer existed in Britain.<sup>12</sup> In these views, settler colonies had a recuperative function, healing the nation by clearing its surplus population, and at the same time, offering a possibility of building an ideal future society in which the people would enjoy close relationships to land that they owned.

Variants on this view of emigration persisted throughout the century, even though ideologies differed and policies changed. In 1839 Thomas Carlyle extolled the virtues of emigration to Canada in his essay on Chartism, asserting that the colonies would be a place for the renovation of Britain from its present malaise through the opportunities for British workers to craft a new society through the excellence of their free labour. This view is echoed by Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848). Carlyle had supported Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the author of a widely influential theory of 'systematic colonization' – which he first articulated in a series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle* between August and October in 1829, and reprinted in book form under the title, *Letter from Sydney* (1829).<sup>13</sup> Wakefield's views were quickly adopted by government and shaped British emigration policy for the next several years, particularly as regards emigration to Australia and New Zealand. Although Wakefield's vision of the colony was fundamentally urban rather than rural, he nevertheless shared with earlier writers the view that settlers needed actively to form an attachment to the environment in a new colony, and held that the principal way in which to do so was through work, rather than ownership of property. Wakefield focused on the need to concentrate population within the new colony. He argued that the tendency for settlers to spread across the new terrain, each one developing their own private property, was detrimental to the progress of the colony. In Wakefield's language, this tendency to spread made a colony forever 'new,' associating 'newness' with America, and seeing novelty as a barbarizing force.<sup>14</sup> Rather, Wakefield sought to build colonies in a more systematic way, developing a strong infrastructure of institutions and buildings, through the concentration of labour within conurbations. By creating a waged labour force, and by maintaining land prices so that they lay beyond the reach of labourers, Wakefield maximized labour within the colony, while also establishing clear class divisions between employers and employees. Emigration schemes invariably had a social programme attached to them that would enable the regulation of society, and that usually looked to replicate the structures of European society. A key feature of Wakefield's systematic colonization scheme was to conserve the structures of what he recognized as 'civilized' society within the new terrain of the colony.

### **Adam Bede and Emigration**

If we return to the text of *Adam Bede* in the light of emigration literature, the ways in which it represents relationships between people and the land take on a new significance. While the

novel appears to be celebrating an ideal of an autochthonous Briton, an agricultural labourer connected to the land through generations who worked on the soil, in fact the images of rootedness that it presents are always undercut by associations with mobility and transfer. At the Harvest Festival, in chapter 53, a typical scene of folkloric Englishness to which Eliot will return in later novels, notably *Silas Marner*, the narrator tells us that 'you and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men [agricultural workers] – hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thriftily making the best they could of the earth's fruits and receiving the smallest share as their own wages' (p. 562). The image of 'hard hands', mingling with the soil, conveys a powerful message about the ways in which people are embedded in a particular location and traditional way of life. However, this version of labour does not dominate the novel. Rather, the muscular body of Adam, first introduced in the opening chapter in his carpenter's work shop, is the iconic image of British labour in the novel, and it is this that is in the foreground throughout. Adam's 'broad chest [which] belonged to a large-boned muscular man nearly six feet high, with a back so flat and a head so well poised that when he drew himself up to take a more distant survey of his work, he had the air of a soldier standing at ease' (p. 50). The description emphasizes his mobility, rather than his entrenchment in the land: he can 'dr[a]w back', survey his work from a distance, and is compared with a soldier, suggesting perhaps his colonizing impulse. As many critics have noted, Eliot is also at pains to emphasize his mixed racial origins, the fact that he is 'a Saxon', with 'a mixture of Celtic blood'. The hero of the novel, therefore, is not the farmer whose 'hard hands' are forever 'mingled with the soil', but rather a highly mobile worker, whose forefathers have come from different origins, and whose relationship to his place is achieved through means other than 'mingling' with the soil. Moreover, we might remember too that 'soil' in *Adam Bede* is more often than not moveable itself, and usually remarked on when out of place. In chapter 5, for instance, the soil is spoiling the Rector's 'border-flowers,' which 'had been dashed down and stained with the wet soil' (p. 98); or in chapter 6, soil dirties Mrs Poyser's floor ('Our feet are quite dry;', says Mr Irvine, 'we shall not soil your beautiful floor' [p. 124]); or in chapter 10, it soils Lisbeth's floor on the day of the funeral ('The kitchen had had none of her attention that day; it was soiled with the tread of muddy shoes, and untidy with clothes and other objects out of place' [p.149]). In the second two examples the word 'soil' transforms from the wholesome noun, to the unwholesome verb (to soil, or to dirty).

The narrative also adopts a language of 'planting' or 'rooting' to describe characters' relationships to people and places. Yet rather than describing inherited relationships, the narrative takes on a more active mode, as characters actively plant or root themselves and their affections. Dinah, for instance, says that she has been 'planted' in Snowfield, and although Mrs Poyser warns that 'there is no more moving you than the rooted tree' (p. 518), by the end of the novel she has been effectively transplanted to Hayslope. And Adam we are told retains his deeply rooted love for Hetty, 'so deep that the roots of it would never be torn away', while also developing 'his love for Dinah [which] was the *outgrowth* of that fuller life which had come to him from his acquaintance with deep sorrow' (p. 574, my emphasis). As in the previous examples, the emphasis is on change and movement, rather than on stasis and immobility.

Indeed the terms 'planting' and 'rooting' are drawn directly from the vocabulary of emigration, where people regularly talk about 'planting' a colony. Other terms in *Adam Bede* are drawn from the same idiom, including the idea of a 'surplus' population, and that of the 'swarms'.

The Miss Irwines, for instance, are referred to as 'quite superfluous existences; inartistic figures crowding the canvas of life without adequate effect' (p. 110); while, more prominently, Hetty's probable murder of her illegitimate child is the typical response of an unmarried mother disposing of a 'surplus' child who would otherwise be chargeable to the parish.<sup>15</sup> The word 'swarm' appears on a number of occasions each time to describe the activities of the people. 'Villagers never swarm' (p. 63), we are told deliberately in chapter 2, as a way of differentiating between indigenous village folk, and the travelling Methodists from the towns (a point that Eliot took directly from Southey's *Life of Walsey*).<sup>16</sup> But in the ensuing description, the villagers do appear to 'swarm' around the Methodists, even adopting the behaviour of bees. The bee-like Timothy's Bess's Ben, 'a sturdy fellow of five in knee-breeches and red legs, who had a fusty mild-can round his neck' – hovers around the crowd 'looking up at their faces with his mouth wide open, and beating his stick against the milk can' (p. 65). When approached by one of the Methodists, he 'first kicked out vigorously' and then beat a hasty retreat. The rotund shape of his body, the drone of his drum, and his sting-like attack on the Methodist, all associate the boy with a bee and seem deliberately calculated to call to mind the language of swarms.

As many critics have argued, George Eliot, in *Adam Bede*, describes the transformation of a society at the turn of the century, envisaging at the end of the novel a society that is subtly modernized, in a way that emphasizes a dual commitment to continuity and change. The appropriation of the language of emigration might be understood as the adoption of perhaps the most readily available discourse for thinking about the transformation of society, and one that generally emphasized continuity and gradual change. Like novelists, theorists of emigration were actively engaged in imagining new societies, albeit under particular circumscribed conditions. That Eliot might have chosen to borrow terms from these discussions may merely indicate an overlapping commitment to thinking about ways to revitalize or renovate national life.

However, the language of emigration also brings with it certain assumptions about people and their relationships to places which, I would argue, Eliot also shares. This is an important point because it requires us to revise received ideas about Eliot's representation of English places and landscapes as unchanging, and her novels as nostalgic celebrations of traditional or customary native society. On the contrary, seen through the prism of emigration, Eliot's works seem to present a world in which people are always mobile, and in which they actively make relationships to new environments. The sense that people belong to certain landscapes is thus actively produced rather than inherited. In Eliot's works, this active effort is absorbed into customary culture.

One consequence of this is that the narrative voice in *Adam Bede* constantly occupies a position of reserve, distanced from the environments that it describes. Take for example the famous description of Loamshire and Stonyshire at the beginning of the novel. Seen through the eyes of a 'stranger on horseback', an elderly man who appears at the beginning of the novel to observe Dinah's preaching, the landscape is presented as a new terrain rather than a known one. As the description proceeds, components of the landscape take on the qualities of marks on a map. It seems significant that *Adam Bede* was written during the period in which the 'County Series' of the Ordinance Survey was produced, as all areas of Great Britain were carefully mapped. The cottages are a 'broken line', and features such as 'the gently swelling meadow,

and wooded valley, and dark masses of distant hill' are presented as defined patches; there is an 'advanced line of hanging woods,' which is 'divided by bright patches of pasture or furrowed crops'; and so on. Rendered as dots and lines and patches of colour, this map-like depiction of the landscape exaggerates the difference between the landscape and its representation. Readers are placed in the position of map readers, actively translating the signs of the map into features of the environment, as though they were, perhaps, new inhabitants of a strange landscape, measuring the contours of an unfamiliar terrain against its graphic representation. The reader is invariably put in the position of a stranger, plotting his or her position against Eliot's cartographic guide.

The process of reading as map-reading is one that requires us to put together unlike objects: for example, the dots on the map representing the row of cottages. As a consequence the depiction of the scene makes it a kind of a simile, in that it requires us to compare like and unlike, to see the similarity between designated pairs of unlike things. There are many similes in the novel, not least in this depiction of the landscape. Here the two counties are described as though they were 'a pretty blooming sister [who] may sometimes be seen linked in the arm of a rugged, tall, swarthy brother'. The simile here is a rich one that radiates out into the novel in a variety of ways. It may point us to Hetty and Adam, perhaps, not sister and brother, although the suggestion that they might be militates against their romantic coupling, and preempts the more brotherly relationship that Adam will finally adopt towards Hetty. The simile, which of course contains its own contrast, suggests that the radically different topographies of the two counties can nonetheless be accommodated in the national map, seen as a set of family relations. It enacts its own procedures, simultaneously contrasting and accommodating differences.

In some ways the simile at the beginning – the brother and the sister who are alike yet not alike, and alike yet not alike the two counties for which they stand – draws attention to the practices of reading that the novel will require us to enact throughout. The novel constantly asks us to compare and contrast: we have to compare characters – Hetty and Dinah (see, for example, chapter 15, 'The Two Bedchambers'), Adam and Arthur, Adam and Seth, Lisbeth and Dinah – as well as the choices that they make. We are also required to compare and contrast across the time of the novel, considering social continuity and change as processes in which things seem to be – like the simile – alike in some ways, and unlike in others. Arthur at the end is 'altered and yet not altered'; Adam too, and Dinah. And as the Epilogue returns us to an early scene in the novel – but with a new configuration of characters – we see that the society at the end of the novel is also an 'altered and yet not altered' version of the initial society. It is this social vision that, I suggest, George Eliot borrows from the language of emigration – and it is this that is the most powerfully suggests that the novel should be understood as a product of a culture of emigration.

#### Notes

- 1 *Adam Bede* ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 229. All subsequent references will be to this edition by page number.
- 2 Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983, rev. 1998), pp. 55-64. See also my 'Space, Mobility and the Novel: "The spirit of place is a great reality"',

- in Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 50-67.
- 3 'History of "Adam Bede"', in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-1978), II, 502-505.
- 4 Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 15-17.
- 5 Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ix, 369-70, 375-82. Cited in Karen O'Brien, 'Colonial Emigration, Public Policy and Tory Romanticism, 1783-1830' in *Lineages of Empire: The Historical Roots of British Imperialist Thought*, ed. Duncan Kelly, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 167, pp. 61-79.
- 6 A renewed enthusiasm for government assisted emigration began following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, as a response to economic slump and a population swelled by returning veterans, although it isn't until later in the period that Horton takes over, and not until the late 1820s that the schemes become more well known and widely discussed. On emigration policy in 1815, see H. J. M. Johnstone, *British Emigration Policy, 1815-1840: Shovelling Out Paupers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), esp. pp. 48-53. See also Donald Winch, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies* (London: Bell and Sons, 1965). On Wordsworth's response to emigration, see O'Brien, 'Colonial Emigration, Public Policy and Tory Romanticism, 1783-1830', p. 155.
- 7 Robert Southey, 'On the State of the Poor, the Principle of Mr Malthus's essay on Population, and the Manufacturing System (1812)' in *Essays, Moral and Political* (London: John Murray, 1832), 2 vols, I, pp. 71-155, esp. pp. 154-155. Southey returned to the topic many times, notably in 'On Emigration' (1828), II, pp. 206-275.
- 8 See *A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879, and Uncollected Writings*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1984), pp. 25-27; Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley; and Rise and Progress of Methodism*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman, 1846), I, pp. 415-418.
- 9 Southey, *Life of Wesley*, I, chapter 3.
- 10 O'Brien, 'Colonial Emigration, Public Policy and Tory Romanticism, 1783-1830', pp. 166-175.
- 11 See Eric Richards, 'Horton, Sir Robert John Wilmot-, third baronet (1784-1841)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, Sept. 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13827>, accessed 12 July 2010]).
- 12 O'Brien, 'Colonial Emigration', p. 169.
- 13 Wakefield based the work entirely on printed sources supplied to him by a friend while he was serving a term in Newgate prison for having abducted an heiress with

an intent to marry her. Wakefield underwent a religious conversion while in prison, and became one of the most influential proponents of colonial emigration in mid century. On Wakefield, see David J. Moss, 'Wakefield, Edward Gibbon (1796-1862)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, Sept. 2004, online edn, May 2007 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28415>], accessed 12 July 2010).

- 14 In response to the question, 'what do we mean by a new people', Wakefield settles on the following answer: 'We mean ... a people like what the Canadians will be, and the United States' Americans are – a people who, though they continually increase in number, make no progress in the art of living; who in respect to wealth, knowledge and skill, taste, and whatever belongs to civilisation, have degenerated from their ancestors; who are precluded from acquiring wealth except by the labour of slaves; whose education, though universal, stops before the age of puberty, and thus becomes, if not an evil at least a dangerous thing, instead of the greatest good; who, ever on the move, are unable to bring things to perfection. ... We mean, in two words, a people who become rotten before they are ripe!' *Letter from Sydney*, pp. 146-148.
- 15 On Hetty's child murder in the context of anti Poor Law discussions, see my *Child Murder and British Culture 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 4; Rosemary Gould, 'The History of an Unnatural Act: Infanticide and *Adam Bede*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 25 (1997), 263-277, and Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representation of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 157-167.
- 16 On George Eliot's reading for *Adam Bede*, see *A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879, and Uncollected Writings*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1984), pp. 23-36.