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**Robert Muscutt, *Heathen and Outcast: Scenes in the Life of George Eliot*
(Broadlands Books, 2011), pp. 198. ISBN 978 0 9568708 0 3**

This fictionalized version of George Eliot's life between 1841 and 1854 takes as its starting point Edith Simcox's account of visiting the Midlands after the novelist's death and collecting material for a biography which, in the end, was never written. Thus the first section of four chapters is titled 'From Conversations with Maria Lewis' and is written in the latter's voice, while the second section of two chapters follows the same pattern and is narrated by Charles Bray. The Simcox framework of posthumous interviews falters in the final section of eight chapters since here the narration is taken over by the novelist herself telling 'her story in her own words' from when she leaves England for the Continent with the Brays after her father's death. These different narratives draw on the standard sources – the letters and journals, Bray's and Simcox's autobiographies, Haight, Ashton, Bodenheimer, Hughes etc – and dramatize and elaborate on the characters and events that are well-known to students of the novelist. The author is sometimes cavalier with the familiar material, as when, for instance, William Hale White's famous description of the young Marian Evans correcting proofs in the dark back room at 142 Strand, with her legs over the arms of an easy chair, turns up in a letter to the novelist written by G. H. Lewes in the early days of their courtship. Some other authorial decisions are puzzling, such as referring to Sara Hennell as Sophie throughout. This could all be ascribed to the licence afforded to the novelist as opposed to the historian or biographer, and it is a licence that the author fully exploits in combining biography with fiction in the expressed hope that his combination will prove 'dramatically entertaining and historically convincing'. What is quite convincing is the image that emerges of Isaac Evans as a bully and a bigot whose treatment of both his sisters is obnoxious and overbearing. He recruits Maria Lewis to spy on Mary Ann and report back to him, and, in his concern to get his sister safely married, engineers, by bribery or blackmail, the proposal she receives from the young picture-restorer. If this stretches credulity, the overall picture of him as the dominant and sinister power in the life of the Evans family does not. Other fictional excursions beyond the known facts are Maria Lewis aspiring to secure the elderly Robert Evans as a husband; Charles Bray having an affair with Chrissey; and Chrissey later finding sexual consolation after the death of her husband in the arms of her attractive maid Sally. It is doubtful whether these do more than add a rather gratuitous spice to the background of the novelist's life. What are more successful are the drama of the sad decline and early death of Chrissey's husband, Dr Edward Clarke; the comic portrait of the hypochondriac Herbert Spencer; and the hesitant, often awkward development of the relationship between Marian and Lewes. Readers who find this combination of fiction and biography entertaining and convincing, at least in part, will be encouraged to see that the volume closes with the inscription 'End of Book One'.

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