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McCormack, Kathleen, "Review of George Eliot in *Society: Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory*" (2013). *The George Eliot Review*. 638.

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**Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot in Society: Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory* (The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2013), pp. xiii +178.
ISBN 13 978 0 8142 1211 0.**

This is a welcome and wholly worthwhile extension of the author's *George Eliot's English Travels: Composite Characters and Coded Communication* (2005), a densely written and stimulating examination of places and people in Eliot's life which have some resonance, in varying degrees of coding, from the seemingly casual to the subtly integrated, in her published work. McCormack there defined three categories of place identification. These range from 'absolute certainties' through 'pretty good cases' to 'alluring, probable, but irretrievably speculative suppositions', categories certainly applicable to her present study, in which her dedication and saturation in George Eliot, the works, the life, and a wide range of biographical and critical commentary, is again evident. It is a direct invitation to see and feel places and people, decode traits, pick up on similarities, mine differences, above all, be aware. McCormack's method is one of intimate identification with the life and the writing life.

The main thrust demonstrates how Eliot's social agenda, with the Sunday salons from 1869 onwards at the Priory as the focus, feeds into her fiction – and initially her poetry – together with comparable assimilations from her travelling life in Europe with Lewes from 1854 onwards up to the fraught honeymoon with Cross in 1880. Throughout, the Haight contention that Eliot was largely reclusive, a view commonly supported, is subjected to intense scrutiny and is vigorously disputed. The Sunday gatherings, carefully assembled, would suggest that Eliot enjoyed being the centre of a salon of her own making, her essay on Madame de Sable providing precursory evidence. The importance of Lewes as initiator, manager, socializing facilitator with an eye alert as always to publishing and critical opportunities, is integral. McCormack uses his unpublished journals and diaries, supplementing them with a detailed attention to known biographical sources which she carefully sifts for reliability or bias.

The Sunday guests listed by Lewes are often given brief biographies explanatory of context; acquaintances on holiday provide names or characteristics which are found in the fiction or situations which are mirrored in it. The Priory as setting is entered and detailed (even down to the catering), the lists and programmes underlining Lewes's role and commitment to Eliot's interest. Her self-consciousness as a poet means some poets were invited, with Browning initially prominent among guests who would possibly review her work. Despite the pressures in the summer (1869) of the illness and death of Thornton Lewes, the Sunday gatherings continued. In December 1870 she read parts of 'Miss Brooke' to her guests, thus setting *Middlemarch* firmly on its way. Lists right through to Lewes's death show just how mixed was the company, with McCormack noting the regular friends but bringing in new perspectives with the interaction and comments from foreign visitors (the Russian couple the Kovaleskys, for instance), or revealing the musical contributions of chosen guests, with fascinating detail on Pauline Viardot, George du Maurier and Bice Trollope. Fascinating too is McCormack's commentary on gay and lesbian guests, including the aftermath of some in the security – and respectability – of heterosexual marriage, a state which Eliot didn't hesitate to advocate to particular male friends. McCormack quietly notes that characters in her fiction expressed 'no interest in same-sex love and live emotionally circumscribed lives'. The domestic (so to speak) visitors are complemented by those met in travel, often at spas, some

providing ‘additional fuel for George Eliot’s creative imagination’. Lady Castletown and Cecilia Wingfield are prominent here, with Eliot using coded ‘details of the Castletown family’. Interestingly, McCormack also demonstrates that the well-known gambling sequence in the first chapter of *Daniel Deronda* shows Eliot ‘working within an established guide-book set piece’. The transforming imagination, the intellectual expansion, is obvious.

I have very few reservations. Slick headings like ‘Cockles and Molluscs’ and ‘Scilly Fiction’ in her previous book, have an equivalence here in ‘Music Music Music’ and ‘Did Johnny Jump?’ She has been inadequately served by her editors, who have allowed repetition and occasional woolly phrasing to pass unchecked, like ‘George Eliot’s participation in Society – with the big S – resulted partly from carefully contrived Sunday salons in London and led to fiction and poetry peopled by other members of Society, as she and Lewes pursued their social activities both abroad and at home in London, at the Priory.’(p. 36) These are small blemishes. For the most part she is direct, often revelatory and, best of all, warm; the whole investigation is enhanced by a vibrant identification with her subject – I should say ‘subjects’, since Lewes, except near the end, is rarely out of earshot. This study will be invaluable for the George Eliot student, the student of nineteenth-century literature and history as well as the general reader, since it deals with facts and advances tenable suppositions. With regard to the latter there will inevitably be some disagreement and doubt, but I believe they were all worth saying. This is an intellectual journey, an imaginative but disciplined re-creation. And it is a pleasure to record the presence of an abiding love, so often absent from academic studies.

Graham Handley