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NOTES

Oscar Browning's *Life of George Eliot*

By Tapan Kumar Mukherjee

I would like to draw the attention of interested readers and George Eliot scholars to one of the earliest biographies of George Eliot, that written by Oscar Browning. It is a book which, apart from many interesting anecdotes of her life, might still be valuable to them for the exhaustive annotated bibliography, compiled by John Parker Anderson of the British Museum, appended to the end of the volume. The extent and range of the bibliographical details collected there are the result of very thorough, painstaking research which may provide further new insights and give clues to unexplored areas in the life and works of the novelist. I also think the book still repays critical rereading.

As is well known, George Eliot's personal life was complex – she was an independent woman who challenged social conventions. Her friend, Eton master and historian Oscar Browning (1837–1923), although junior to her by several years, was moved to write this affectionate biography of her life, and it was published in 1890, offering 'no claims to originality or acute scholarship ... but written out of a friendship of fifteen years, and a deep and unswerving devotion to her mind and character'. Browning takes a chronological approach, focusing mainly on the beginnings of Eliot's writing career and critical analysis of her novels, while these are interspersed with intimate personal recollections of their encounters. He also writes with candour about Eliot's relationship and cohabitation with the married writer G. H. Lewes (1817–78).

It is interesting to note some distinctive features of Oscar Browning's *Life of George Eliot*. Published by Walter Scott, London, in 1890 in the Great Writers critical biographies series, the book consists of five chapters, a chronological list of her complete literary works and an index appended at the end. The book describes in detail the progressive developments of both her personal life and her intellectual life under the guidance and influence of her friend, philosopher and mentor George Henry Lewes, arranged in sequential order. As I have already indicated, apart from the wealth of biographical details, its most valuable asset is an exhaustive annotated bibliography compiled by Anderson, which may still provide invaluable source materials for further new research. The bibliography consists of nearly 15 pages, printed in double columns, and is divided into five broad sections : (1) Works: containing a list of the collected editions of the novels, poems and other nonfiction writings, as well as individual critical editions of novels, essays and other writings published by British and American publishers. (2) Miscellaneous: containing a list of her writings, essays and reviews, arranged in chronological order, published in contemporary magazines and journals such as the *Westminster Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Fraser's Magazine*, *Blackwood's Magazine* etc. (3) Selections from her writings such as 'wise, witty and tender sayings' from her verse and prose works. (4) Appendix: containing, under Biography and Criticism, biographical and critical works, or chapters in books, published in Britain and the United States, and also studies in French and German: and, under Magazine Articles, a list of articles and reviews of her work in British, American, French and German periodicals, arranged by subject. (5) Chronological list of the complete works of George Eliot.

The permanent value of Browning's biography lies in his critical assessment of her

novels and the contribution they make to the development of the great tradition of the English novel. Her literary genius is compared by the author with that of Goethe and it anticipates her claim to a European reputation, a claim which is now being made by contemporary critics and scholars. Written in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Oscar Browning's study not only served as a precursor to, but also set in many respects a standard for, the more comprehensive and authoritative biographies of the novelist that were subsequently produced in the twentieth century. For the benefit of those who might be interested to pursue the matter further, I would like to inform readers that the full text of the biography, including the bibliography, is available in the website on Oscar Browning's *Life of George Eliot* in the American Libraries Internet Archive.