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Buried Treasure

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Most commentors agree that George Eliot furnished her early stories from memories of actual places, events and people encountered in her childhood and youth in Warwickshire. In making this (perhaps involuntary) choice so soon after her liaison with G. H. Lewes began she was probably already aware that the estrangement from her family, and consequent exile away from her roots in the Midlands, was inevitable. So, perhaps with a strong nostalgic sense of isolation, she began writing about Nuneaton, thinly disguised as ‘Milby’ which those familiar with the place were quickly able to recognize. Later on, the source of her scenes and characters was more deeply hidden in, as she wrote to John Blackwood, ‘a combination of subtle, shadowy suggestions’. Nevertheless, the treasured memories of her homeland continued to well up into her stories like a perpetual spring of inspiration which can best be traced by readers who have shared her background and have become familiar with the things she also knew.

It is generally accepted that Middlemarch is a reflection of Coventry in the nineteenth century, each town being concerned with matters such as the development of hospitals and railways. Yet one cannot get much closer to actuality than George Eliot’s ‘Halsell Common’ recalling Hearsall (pronounced Her-sal) Common, still, to this day, a playground for children in Coventry.

Even in this novel thoughts of Arbury (where the young Mary Ann was a frequent visitor) come back to her. In the very first chapter, writing about Mr Brooke’s ancestry, she says ‘there was even an ancestor discernible as a Puritan gentleman who served under Cromwell, but afterwards conformed, and managed to come out of all political troubles as the proprietor of a respectable family estate.’ Now why should she take trouble with such an apparently inconsequential detail? The answer is that in the drawing room at Arbury Hall there is a large portrait of Sir Richard Newdigate, Bt (1602-1678), a judge in Cromwell’s time. The famous story about him which has come down through the ages is that he refused to try three Royalist officers brought before him on a charge of treason — ruling that treason is to take up arms against the king — and if there is no king, there can be no treason! He was dismissed but later reinstated; and on the return of Charles II to the throne in 1660 the officers whose lives he had saved petitioned the monarch on his behalf and eventually the baronetcy was conferred upon him and Arbury prospered.

Illumination of this kind can also be shed upon the setting of Felix Holt. A Midlander taking the ride so wonderfully described in the Introduction across what is obviously Warwickshire — ‘that central plain, watered at one extremity by the Avon, at the other by the Trent’ — will sit alongside the gossiping coachman with increasing recognition. The coach leaves Treby (where events seem to mirror the combined nineteenth-century experiences of Nuneaton, Coventry and Leamington) and the coachman rambles on about ‘what noblemen had half ruined themselves by gambling; who made handsome returns of
rent; and who was at daggers drawn with his eldest son’. There are plenty of examples in English history of aristocrats ruined by gambling – but what of the curious final remark? Once more Arbury has provided the background. In 1700 Sir Richard Newdigate, the second baronet, had a son Dick, the heir to the estate, who became alarmed at the incompetence of his father’s management and tried to gain control. The father died in 1708 and his will records that ‘my eldest son . . . continues to be my most inveterate and Implacable enemy.’ The coachman might also relate whether the fathers of actual baronets ‘had had much to do with canal companies’. Those familiar with the story of Arbury – the Cheverel Manor of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ – will recall again the private canal system developed in the eighteenth century by Sir Roger Newdigate for transportation of Arbury coal to Midland markets.

Continuing the journey, the coachman

drove between the hedges for a mile or so, crossed the queer long bridge over the river Lapp, and then put his horses to a swift gallop up the hill by the low-nestled village of Little Treby, till they were on the fine level road, skirted on one side by grand larches, oaks and wych elms, which sometimes opened so far as to let the traveller see that there was a park behind them.

There are only one or two hills of significance in the neighbourhood of Coventry and one of these is at Stoneleigh where the river Sowe runs parallel to the road as the village is approached. Leaving the ancient thatched cottages on the right hand the road turns sharp left across the river by a long narrow sandstone bridge, then turns right to follow the water again to the foot of a steep hill. As one mounts the hill a view of the village opens out across the river. Already the picture of Motslow Hill and Stoneleigh is unmistakable; but there is much more.

How many times in the year . . . had the coachman answered the same questions .... That? Oh, that was Transome Court, a place there had been a fine sight of lawsuits about.

Stoneleigh Abbey stands, just as George Eliot says of Transome Court, in a park of magnificent trees whose quality her father must have known about and which have long been famous. The estate belonged to the Leigh family who acquired the Abbey at the Reformation. In 1786 the title lapsed when Edward Leigh was declared lunatic and died unmarried. His sister Mary inherited and when she died in 1806 the title and property passed to the Gloucester branch of the family – the Reverend Thomas Leigh of Adlestrop.3

Law suits and scandal certainly followed, in circumstances that could hardly have been missed by George Eliot who was living in Coventry at the time. Despite a court decision in 1827 ending nine years of legal wrangling confirming the status quo, dispute continued, and in 1844 a claimant to the estates gathered a gang of supporters and forced an entry into
the Abbey. There followed a battle between estate workers and the intruders and finally the police and soldiers had to be called in. There is a vivid description of the event by a member of the family.\(^4\) Even worse scandal followed. Charles Bray’s ‘Coventry Herald’ for 12 May 1848, which Miss Evans would surely have read, carries a story headed ‘Extraordinary Investigation – Alleged Murder at Stoneleigh Abbey Thirty Years Ago’. Evidence was heard against Lord Chandos Leigh that he and other members of the family had murdered two workmen who had been employed to remove a monument from Stoneleigh Church, the inscription on which had some (unspecified) bearing on the estate succession. Eventually the magistrate decided that there was no case to answer. ‘A sight of lawsuits’ indeed!\(^5\)

In the summer of 1995 a previously unknown item appeared in Sotheby’s sale catalogue. It is a biographical calendar – a book covering the years 1840-1871, each year having twelve squares for entries. It is inscribed in George Eliot’s hand: ‘This book was made and given to me by my friend Sara S. Hennell. She entered as many dates as she knew of in association with my life, I think as far as 1853’. In the space for October 1852 Sara Hennell has written. ‘30 – H.S. came – into Stoneleigh Park’. H.S. was, of course, Herbert Spencer\(^6\) for whom, and to whom George Eliot had professed her love in the famous letter written three months earlier.\(^7\) Maybe it was under the autumn leaves of Stoneleigh Park that they were able to re-establish their relationship into a friendship that lasted a lifetime, and the memory was sweet.

Notes


2. *Middlemarch*, Chapter 47.

3. There are two unconnected literary associations here. Adlestrop is the railway station of Edward Thomas’s famous poem; and when the Reverend Leigh came to Stoneleigh to take up his inheritance, he brought with him some guests – Mrs Austen and her daughters Jane and Cassandra.


6. *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 66: note 5 indicates that Spencer was at Rosehill on 30 October / 1 November.