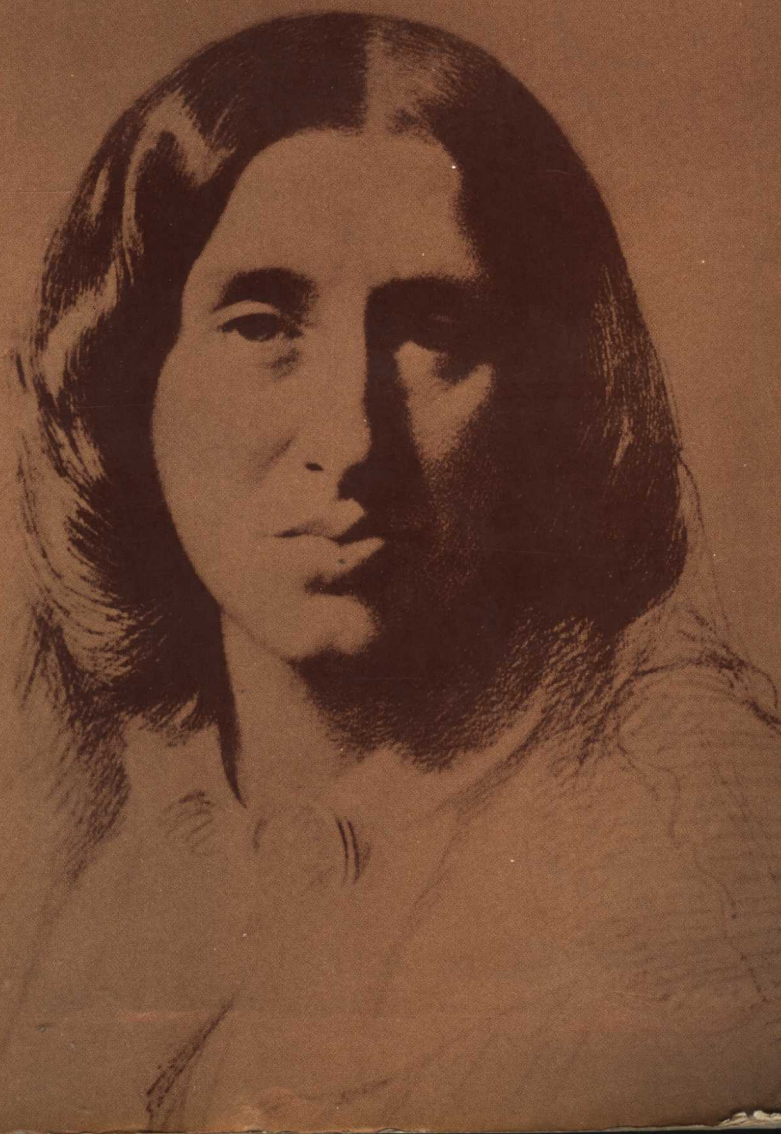


GORDON S. HAIGHT
GEORGE ELIOT
A Biography



GEORGE ELIOT

A BIOGRAPHY



GORDON S. HAIGHT

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TO ELINOR SOUTHWOOD LEWES OUVRY

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IN 1933 I came upon a group of George Eliot's letters in the Yale University Library. It was apparent that much of interest had been omitted from the portions included by John Walter Cross in *George Eliot's Life* (1885), and I decided to spend the summer reading them and gathering material for a new biography. I quickly saw that it would be more than a holiday task. Many other manuscripts were soon added to the collection, which is still growing after thirty-five years. Among them were two diaries of John Chapman, at whose house in the Strand George Eliot lived while editing the *Westminster Review*. They threw so revealing a light on this little-known period of her life that I published them separately in *George Eliot and John Chapman* (1940), of which a second edition is soon to appear. In 1941 Mrs. E. Carrington Ouvry, a grand-daughter of George Henry Lewes, consigned to the Yale Library her great collection of his papers, including the journals and diaries, which with those of George Eliot form the essential framework of this biography. In 1947 when a Guggenheim Fellowship enabled me to spend part of the year in Great Britain, I made the acquaintance of Mrs. Ouvry, whose friendship has been one of the pleasantest of many that the study of George Eliot has brought. As owner of the copyright she generously gave me permission to publish for the first time any letters or other writings of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes.

The members of the Evans family, George Eliot's great-nephews and nieces, also kindly made their manuscripts available. In Edinburgh George Eliot's publisher William Blackwood & Sons allowed me to examine her correspondence (now in the National Library of Scotland) as well as the business records at 45 George Street. Many librarians and collectors of manuscripts all over the world have helped with my work. I might properly repeat here the long lists of acknowledgements in Volumes I and VII of *The George Eliot Letters*, published in 1954-5 by the Yale University Press, to which I am grateful for permission to reprint both my text and notes. The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation

renewed my appointment in 1953 and again in 1960, when Yale University granted me a Senior Faculty Fellowship.

I offer my warmest thanks to the Yale University Library and its staff, in particular to Mr. H. W. Liebert, Librarian of the Beinecke Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, and Miss Marjorie G. Wynne, Research Librarian, who have nobly fostered the collection of George Eliot and Lewes manuscripts begun by Yale's first Keeper of Rare Books, Chauncey Brewster Tinker. For permission to quote from additional manuscripts I am especially obliged to Dr. John D. Gordan of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection at the New York Public Library; Mr. Rodney G. Dennis III, Curator of Manuscripts at the Houghton Library, Harvard University; Mr. William Park and Mr. James S. Ritchie of the Department of Manuscripts, National Library of Scotland; Mr. John H. P. Pafford, Goldsmiths' Librarian of the University of London; Mr. S. H. Barlow, Librarian of the Nuneaton Public Library; Mr. Ernest Simpson, Librarian of the Coventry City Libraries; and Mr. Robert Mackworth Young, Librarian of the Royal Library, Windsor Castle. To the authorities of the following I would record my thanks for permission to quote from manuscripts in their possession: Balliol College; Bodleian; British Museum; Brotherton Library, Leeds; Cambridge University Library; Edinburgh Public Library; Fales Collection, New York University; Folger Shakespeare Library; General Register Office, Somerset House; Girton College; J. Pierpont Morgan Library; Hughenden Manor; Parrish Collection, Princeton University Library; Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation, Inc.; Public Record Office, London; John Rylands Library, Manchester; L. W. Smith Collection, Morristown, New Jersey; Dr. Williams's Library.

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ABBREVIATIONS



- [] Matter supplied by the author.
- < > Overscored but recoverable.
- Bray-Hennell Extracts Passages concerning George Eliot copied by Sara Hennell from letters between Mrs. Bray and members of the Hennell family (Yale).
- CLL Charles Lee Lewes.
- Cross *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*. Arranged and Edited by Her Husband, J. W. Cross (3 vols., Edinburgh and London), W. Blackwood & Sons. 1885.
- Cross, New ed. — (1 vol., Edinburgh and London) [1887]. This ed. has been much revised by the addition of new matter and the deletion of many pages.
- DNB *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- GE George Eliot. Mary Anne (as she was christened) also spelt her name Mary Ann and Marian. Polly and Pollian were usual nicknames. In the notes she is referred to as GE.
- GE Journal MS. journal [1849]–61. The first forty-six pages were removed, probably by Cross; the extant portion begins 20 July 1854 (Yale).
MS. journal, Germany 1858 and Italy 1860 (Yale).
MS. journal, 1861–77 (Yale).
MS. journal, Italy 1864 and France 1865 (Yale).
MS. journal, Spain 1867 (not traced).
- GE Diary MS. diary for 1879 (Berg Collection, NYPL).
MS. diary for 1880 (Yale).
- GHL George Henry Lewes (pronounced Lewis).
- GHL Journal MS. journals numbered
X 24 July 1856–31 Mar. 1859,
XI 1 Apr. 1859–1 Jan. 1866, and
XII 1 June 1866–6 May 1870 (Yale).
- GHL Diary MS. diaries for 1869–76 (Yale).
MS. diary for 1877 (Mrs. E. Carrington Ouvry).
MS. diary for 1878 (Mrs. Robert Nuttall).
- JB John Blackwood

- Letters** *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (7 vols., New Haven), Yale University Press, 1954-55; (London), Oxford University Press, 1954-56.
- Maga** *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.
- NLS** National Library of Scotland.
- NYPL** New York Public Library.
- 'Occurrences at Nuneaton'** MS. journal by an unidentified writer of 'Occurrences at Nuneaton' 1810-45 (Nuneaton Public Library).
- Robert Evans Journal** MS. journals for 1823, 1826, 1835-7, 1839-42 (Mr. Charles F. H. Evans); for 1831-2 (Mrs. Michael Womersley).
- Simcox Autobiography** 'Autobiography of a Shirt Maker', MS. journal kept by Edith Simcox, 1876-1900 (Bodleian: Eng. misc. d. 494).
- TLS** *Times Literary Supplement*.
- WB** William Blackwood
- WR** *Westminster Review*.

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CHAPTER I

A LITTLE SISTER



ARBURY HALL, the seat since 1586 of the Newdigate-Newdegate family in Warwickshire, stands squarely in the middle of the great park, reflected in two pools—the ancient fishponds of the twelfth-century monastery. Under old oaks and beech trees the drive stretches for nearly a mile from the round twin towers of North Lodge before turning through the gate at the imposing brick stables, built in the 1670s by Sir Richard Newdigate, partly from designs of his friend Sir Christopher Wren, who may have advised in the rebuilding of the chapel at the north-east corner of the house. Beginning in 1750 (three years before Horace Walpole embarked on Strawberry Hill), Sir Roger Newdigate, fifth baronet, the founder of the Newdigate Prize at Oxford, rebuilt the huge hollow square of the Tudor house, vaulted the cloister in the inner court, added oriel windows, turrets, pinnacles, and castellated battlements in Gothic style, and the exquisite fan-vaulted plaster ceilings exactly as they remain to this day. When he died childless in 1806, a year after the work was finished, the Arbury estates passed for life use to his cousin Francis Parker of Kirk Hallam, Derbyshire, who assumed the name and arms of Newdigate. He brought with him to Arbury his agent Robert Evans, a man of thirty-three, who with his wife and two children was installed at South Farm on Arbury Lane, midway between the South Lodge and Astley Castle, where Francis Parker Newdigate's eldest son was living.

Though he had little schooling, Robert Evans by his own efforts had made himself a thoroughly competent and versatile man of business. Bred to his father's trade of carpenter, he found good use for his experience in overseeing the buildings on the 7,000 acres of the Arbury lands. He could estimate within a few feet the amount of timber a given tree would provide. He surveyed and built roads in many parts of Chilvers Coton parish. He was a shrewd judge of land values. Beneath Arbury lay the richest coal

deposits in Warwickshire, and part of his responsibility involved its mining and transportation on the Griff arm of the Coventry Canal. His practical knowledge and strict honesty won him the respect of every one so that he was in great demand as a valuer and arbitrator, sometimes being chosen independently by both sides in a dispute. His own farm on the estate he managed easily. His physical strength was legendary. Once when two labourers were waiting for a third to help them move a heavy rick-ladder, he lifted it and carried it to the next rick unaided.

Robert Evans's wife Harriet Poynton, whom he married in 1801 at Ellastone, Staffordshire, died in 1809 soon after the birth of a third child, which did not long survive her. She is described on a tablet in Astley Church as 'for many years the faithful friend and servant of the family of Arbury'. In 1813 Robert Evans married again. His second wife Christiana Pearson was the youngest daughter of Isaac Pearson, a well-established yeoman and a church warden, living at Old Castle Farm, Astley. She had a brother, also named Isaac, a prosperous farmer at Fillongley, and three sisters, who are immortalized as the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss*: Mary (Aunt Glegg), second wife of John Evarard of Attleborough; Ann (Aunt Deane), wife of George Garner of Sole End, Astley; and Elizabeth (Aunt Pullet), wife of Richard Johnson of Marston Jabbett. There is little doubt that Robert Evans was made aware that he had raised himself socially by this match. The Pearsons practised that 'variation of Protestantism unknown to Bossuet', which George Eliot described so brilliantly in the Dodsons: they revered

whatever was customary and respectable: it was necessary to be baptised, else one could not be buried in the churchyard, and to take the sacrament before death as a security against more dimly understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will.¹

Many of the brief references to the family in Robert Evans's Journal mention funerals at which they all assembled. After Mr. Evarard was buried, for example, the lawyer came and read the will, 'and it seemed to give satisfaction'. But when Isaac Pearson died there was some displeasure with his will 'as he left all the stock to his Wife'.

While the Pearson aunts are easily recognized in the Dodsons, there was nothing of Mr. Tulliver in Robert Evans: he never failed

¹ *Mill on the Floss*, Bk. IV, ch. 1.

at anything, never found the world too much for him. Nor did Mrs. Evans resemble the scatter-brained Mrs. Tulliver. From all one can learn about her she was an intelligent, thoughtful woman, efficient in her household and dairy, well known in the neighbourhood for her keen sense of humour and that epigrammatic turn of phrase made famous by Mrs. Poyser, whose tongue was 'like a new-set razor'.

Besides her stepchildren, Robert (born 1802) and Frances Lucy (born 1805), Mrs. Evans soon had babies of her own to look after: Christiana, or Chrissey, as she was always called (born 1814), Isaac Pearson (born 1816), and Mary Anne, the subject of this book, who was born at South Farm, Arbury, 22 November 1819. The choice of names reflects the dominance of the Pearson side of the family; Chrissey was named for her mother, Isaac for his grandfather and uncle, while Mary Anne¹ shared the names of two Pearson aunts. Twin sons, born 16 March 1821 and named William and Thomas after Mr. Evans's brothers, lived only ten days.

When Mary Anne was four or five months old the family moved to a delightful, roomy, red-brick farm-house facing the Coventry Road at Griff where Arbury Lane joins it. It was set well back on a pleasant lawn with two tall Norway firs flanking the gate and the broad sweeping branches of a sombre old yew almost touching some of the upper windows. Beyond the house lay the farmyard with low rambling stables and out-buildings. In the garden flowers and fruit trees jostled each other in profusion. A gate opened into green fields, where not far from the road lay the Round Pool, recalled like so many other features of the Griff neighbourhood in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede*. Early memories of the country were stamped indelibly on Mary Anne's mind. 'A human life', she said in *Daniel Deronda*,² 'should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, . . . a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection.' Throughout thirty years in London her yearning for blue sky, orchards full of old trees and rough grass, hedgerow paths among endless fields, haunted her always. Wherever she travelled she would notice the slope of the land, the quality of the soil, the harvest. 'I am always made happier by seeing well-cultivated land', she wrote; in fact, she seldom saw

¹ The Chilvers Coton Parish Register records her baptism as *Mary Anne*, and her earliest letter is so signed. In 1837 she began to write *Mary Ann*, in 1850 it became *Marian*, and in 1880 she reverted to *Mary Ann*. I use the spelling favoured at the time. Robert Evans's youngest sister was also named Ann. ² Ch. 3.

beauty in any terrain that was unsuitable for farming. Romantic views of mountain or sea attracted her less than the meadows with long grass in the luxuriance of June, and, everywhere, the 'tethered cows, looking at you with meek faces—mild eyed, sleek, fawn-coloured creatures, with delicate downy udders'.¹ Her comments on the weather usually considered its possible effect on the crops. When the rain poured down, her first thought was not of muddy London pavements, but of the wet hay and laid corn in the fields of Warwickshire. Of the scene so lovingly described in *Middlemarch* with little details that give each field a particular physiognomy, she wrote: 'These are the things that make the gamut of joy in landscape to midland-bred souls—the things they toddled among, or perhaps learned by heart, standing between their father's knees, while he drove leisurely.'² Almost every day Robert Evans went about the country looking after Mr. Newdigate's business, collecting rents, inspecting buildings, giving orders for repairs, valuing crops or cattle, arranging for the cutting and sale of timber. Often little Mary Anne was taken with him, to be left prattling with the servants in the kitchen at Astley Castle or Packington Hall or in the housekeeper's room at Arbury till her father was ready to go. She was only six years old when he took her and Mrs. Evans on a week's drive through Derbyshire and Staffordshire to visit his relations, returning through Lichfield, where they slept at the Swan.

The younger Robert Evans, still in his teens, soon returned to Kirk Hallam to act as subagent under his father, taking his sister Frances (or Fanny) with him as housekeeper and, later, governess to Mr. Parker's children. The Parker-Newdigate affairs were important in both places, and the Evans family ties were not weakened by distance. In 1864 after Robert's death Mary Anne wrote that 'in all the years I have lived I remember nothing that is much earlier than the knowledge that I had a brother Robert, and I have always thought of him, throughout the years we have been separated, as one whose heart had on every opportunity shown its ready kindness towards me'.³ Her own sister Chrissey was sent off early to boarding school at Miss Lathom's in Attleborough, two or three miles from Griff, but close to her Aunt Evarard, whose favourite she was.

Isaac and Mary Anne spent part of each day at a dame's school kept by a Mrs. Moore just across the road from Griff House. They

¹ *Letters*, II. 368.

² Ch. 12.

³ *Letters*, IV. 134.

became inseparable playmates. There is good reason for reading autobiography in the childhood of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, who were born in the same years as they. Perhaps the earliest reminiscence is of the spring flowers 'that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass',¹ and there are others in the childish daydream of a passage deleted from the manuscript of *The Mill on the Floss*, telling how Maggie,

down by the holly made her little world just what she would like it to be: . . . Tom never went to school, and liked no one to play with him but Maggie; they went out together somewhere every day, and carried either hot buttered cakes with them because it was baking day, or apple puffs well sugared; Tom was never angry with her for forgetting things, and liked her to tell him tales; there were no bulls to run at her, or fierce dogs chained up and leaping out unexpectedly; her mother never wanted her hair to curl or to have her wear frills that pricked her, and the patch-work was mislaid somewhere, where it could never be found again. . . . Above all, Tom loved her—oh, so much,—more, even than she loved him, so that he would always want to have her with him and be afraid of vexing her; and he as well as every one else, thought her very clever.²

This yearning for admiration appears again in Maggie's attempt to impress the gypsies, by one of whom little Mary Anne had been startled in what is still called Gypsy Lane near Griff. And she recalled that once, when only four years old, 'in order to impress the servant with a proper notion of her acquirements and generally distinguished position', she had played on the piano, of which she did not know a note.³

The dominating passion of her childhood was love for her brother Isaac. The 'Brother and Sister' sonnets recall how she followed him about everywhere, 'puppy-like', on little expeditions to the Round Pool or the rookery oaks (they become elms only for the rhyme) beyond the garden, or along the brown canal, where the barges floated past from the Griff colliery. Here she was once entrusted with the fishpole while he went off to hunt bait and was praised for getting a fish she did not know she had caught. No doll or childish toy could hold her interest if Isaac was near. He is the first example of what Cross called her 'absolute need of some one person who should be all in all to her, and to whom she should be all in all'.⁴

¹ *Mill on the Floss*, Bk. I, ch. 5.

² *Mill on the Floss*, ed. G. S. Haight (Boston, 1961), p. 44.

³ Cross, I. 14.

⁴ Cross, I. 15.

School parted them, ending these blissful days. Since the twins died Mrs. Evans had not been well. In 1824, when Isaac was eight years old, he was sent off to a school at Foleshill, near Coventry, while Mary Anne joined her sister Chrissey at Miss Lathom's. Five seems to us a tender age to be turned out to boarding school, even three miles from home. Mary Anne never forgot her suffering from cold in the circle of bigger girls around the too-narrow fireplace and her fears at night, which were something like the 'susceptibility to terror' later to haunt Gwendolen Harleth. Mr. Evans would come by frequently to see his 'little wench', and he brought the girls home for week-ends and holidays or when they were ill. He rather than her mother held Mary Anne's affection. Of her feeling for her mother one can gather little. Inferences drawn from the mothers in her novels are dangerous. In the solicitous ones—Milly Barton, Mrs. Poyser, Mrs. Moss, Dolly Winthrop, and Mrs. Davilow—the maternal is probably idealized for functional contrast. Of the others Mrs. Tulliver is most convincing when criticizing Maggie's dirty pinafore and untidy hair; we rarely see her soothing or consoling, and at the end of the novel, when Maggie needs her desperately, she has dwindled to a cipher; in Mrs. Tulliver most often we seem to see the eyes of the Pearsons, looking with silent reproach at George Eliot's misunderstood heroine.

Whatever traumatic effect the early separation from her mother may have had on Mary Anne, the separation from Isaac hurt her most keenly. Her delight at seeing him again when he came home from Foleshill for the holidays, is clearly reflected in *The Mill on the Floss*:

Mrs. Tulliver stood with her arms open; Maggie jumped first on one leg and then on the other; while Tom descended from the gig, and said, with a masculine reticence as to the tender emotions, 'Hallo! Yap—what! are you there?'

Nevertheless he submitted to be kissed willingly enough, though Maggie hung on his neck in rather a strangling fashion, while his blue-grey eyes wandered towards the croft and the lambs and the river, where he promised himself that he would begin to fish the first thing to-morrow morning.¹

Isaac was already growing away from his little sister. When he was given a pony of his own, riding absorbed him completely, and he found no time to play with the disconsolate Mary Anne.

¹ Bk. 1, ch. 5.