

GEORGE MEREDITH

BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1926

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## PREFACE

IF the main purpose of this book had been biographical and not critical, I should not have had the audacity to attempt it, as there are still many persons alive who knew Meredith more or less intimately, whereas I have never set eyes upon him and was only a school-boy when he died. But as the chief business of this volume, like the others in the series, is criticism, and criticism, so far as it is possible, aloof from the turmoil of contemporary opinion, I believe my disability as a biographer to be in my favour as a critic. It is difficult for a person who has come into contact with a strong and individual personality such as Meredith even to begin a critical estimate with any degree of impartiality: the man has turned the scale, one way or the other, for the writer. And few writers have suffered more from a lack of detachment in their critics than George Meredith. But whatever my own weaknesses as a critic may be, I have at least here the advantage of impartiality; it requires no effort to be detached; and if it is the opinion of posterity that is required in such a study as this, so far as Meredith is concerned I am free to count my own as one of

posterity's voices, though it should be only one of the weakest and most foolish.

The biographical records of Meredith are still rather scanty, but I must acknowledge my debt, for the biographical chapters in this volume, to the Introduction to *The Letters of George Meredith* by his son, Mr. William Maxse Meredith, the biography by Mr. S. M. Ellis, and Mr. J. A. Hammerton's *George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism*. In the critical chapters, particularly those on his attitude and his poetry, I have been considerably helped by Mr. Trevelyan's *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith* and by Mr. Basil de Sélincourt's study of the poetry included in Mrs. Sturge Henderson's *George Meredith, Novelist, Poet, Reformer*. In addition, I must thank Mr. William Maxse Meredith for correcting certain biographical details and adding others, though it is only fair to him to say that he strongly dissents from many of my opinions. Finally, I must thank Messrs. Constable for permission to make use of the numerous quotations that will be found in the volume.

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## CHAPTER I

### HIS FAMILY AND EARLY LIFE

It was not until after George Meredith's death that the facts of his parentage, birth and early life were made known to the public. Before that the contemporary books of reference and writers of critical studies told us little more than that he was born "in Hampshire", which suggests either that the reading public was unusually incurious or that the writer himself wished to conceal the facts of his origin and early life. His friend Mr. Edward Clodd has told how he helped Meredith to fill in a census form, and how the latter, after suggesting a vague "Hampshire" as an answer to the birthplace query, finally compromised on "near Petersfield", whereas he was actually born at Portsmouth. Even at the end of his life, when he was England's veteran man of letters and a great European figure, Meredith never seems to have departed from this extraordinary reticence. It was not without its consequences. The same friend has remarked: "Myths rarely accrete round men of note until they die, but Meredith's reticence about his parentage and birthplace gave rise to a host of legends during his lifetime, none of which he was at pains to dispel". The persons who

believed some of these fantastic legends were probably influenced by what they had found in Meredith's fiction, and their method of approach to the mystery was by no means foolish. Their mistake was to examine the wrong book, for instead of fastening upon *Harry Richmond*, they should have fastened upon an earlier novel, *Evan Harrington*, in which the truth was not merely revealed but shouted at the top of the writer's voice. There he hardly makes any attempt to cover his tracks, less indeed than the ordinary novelist who is making use of persons and incidents from real life. The "Great Mel" is Melchizedek Meredith, the novelist's grandfather, and his three daughters, Louisa, Harriet, and Caroline, are Meredith's aunts, Louisa, Harriet, and Catherine. The "Lymport" of the novel is, of course, Portsmouth, where the Merediths had their naval outfitter's shop, at No. 73 High Street. At the very outset we are faced with this curious contradiction, for here is a man who appears anxious to conceal the facts of his origin, even at the end of a long and distinguished literary career, and yet practically begins that career by turning the whole matter, both the facts of his origin and his own and his family's feelings on the subject, into a comic novel, a novel that makes light of even the customary reticences of fiction.

What is the explanation? Are we to believe, as some of his acquaintances would have us believe, that to the end of his days this great philosophic poet and novelist, this subtle moralist, was simply ashamed of his connection with a naval outfitter's shop? Mr. S. M. Ellis scouts this theory, and Mr. Ellis deserves to be listened to with respect, because he is a member

of the same family (the son of Meredith's cousin, and the great-grandson of the "Great Mel" himself), and further because it was he, in his biography of Meredith, who first discussed the matter. Mr. Ellis suggests that Meredith's use of family history in *Evan Harrington* refutes the theory that he was literally ashamed of the tailor's shop, and asks us to believe that the cause of Meredith's reticence was "an abnormally acute sensitiveness of mind which strove to put aside and forget the memories of old unhappy things". He points out, with some truth, that Meredith's early experiences were extremely unhappy and that, regarding them only with bitterness and pain, he had a natural desire to let them remain obscured. This might explain why he rarely spoke of his early life and his family, but it is not a very satisfactory explanation why he deliberately chose to make a mystery of the matter. A man does not falsify his returns on the census paper, as Meredith did, because he has had an unhappy boyhood. The fact is that it was probably neither plain snobbery, on the one hand, nor extreme sensitiveness, on the other, that prevented Meredith from telling the truth even in his later life. It was a combination of the two, a fear of appearing ridiculous, of producing a comic anti-climax. In later years he was probably ashamed, not of the tailor's shop, but of his shame of the tailor's shop. At one time, let us say during the ten years previous to his writing *Evan Harrington*, when he was a dashing young poet who had come from nowhere but went everywhere, a splendid, handsome young creature at large, when he had quarrelled and lost touch with his family and had no intention of allowing its shears and tape-measure

to hang around his neck, it is more than likely that he was ashamed of his origin, deliberately strove to conceal it, and even hinted, in the manner of the Countess de Saldar, at magnificent mysteries in his birth and parentage. *Evan Harrington*, in which the comedy is made plain, is probably the final seal set upon that period. But the comedy he had begun in his life had to be played out. The moment for letting the tailor out of the bag was continually postponed until the very thought of it was impossible. It meant that the mystery of his origin, now lit with romantic legends, would vanish while, amid laughter, there were seen behind him the tailor's shop and the tavern—a notable anti-climax. Further, it meant that he would be compelled to publish his former shame, and by this time he was probably heartily ashamed of that shame. It might be difficult for the handsome young poet to confess the tailor, but it would be still more difficult for the social philosopher and satirist to confess the snob that once lived in him. Years and fame, bringing him under the searchlight, only augmented the danger of confession, for they increased the mystery and therefore heightened the anti-climax. There was nothing for it but to be secretive to the very last. There was in Meredith the writer an intellectual honesty that delighted in pouncing upon and exposing a policy such as this, and it was this quality of his mind that dictated *Evan Harrington*, which is an exposure beyond the wit and malice of his most merciless critics; but there was, too, in Meredith the man a desire to be different from the ordinary not in one but in every particular, a love of mystery and a dark oracular manner, that would make him take

kindly, in spite of the derision of his more honest and philosophic self, to this necessary policy of reticence. The latter may or may not be typical of the man, but certainly the lengthy and complete exposure of himself is typical of the writer, as we shall see, and over and above his unusual gifts, it is this self-knowledge that makes him the great creator of Comedy he is. This curious contradiction that we have encountered at the very outset brings us close to the secret of Meredith.

The Merediths were undoubtedly of Welsh origin (and, as usual, preserved a tradition of aristocratic forebears), but they had been settled in Hampshire for several generations before the poet appeared upon the scene, and such Welsh blood as they possessed must by that time have been well mixed with honest Saxon. His grandfather, Melchizedek, was born at Portsea (now merged into Portsmouth) in 1763, and, on attaining his majority, married a woman some ten years older than himself, the daughter of a lawyer in the neighbourhood, and then set up his shop, as a tailor and naval outfitter, at No. 73 High Street, Portsmouth. His business grew to be one of the best, if not the best, of its kind in the town, and is mentioned by Marryat in *Peter Simple*: "We called at Meredith's, the tailor, and he promised that, by next morning, we should be fitted complete"; and in a letter by Admiral Hardy to his brother: "I can give you a bed. I am at Meradith's (*sic*), the tailor, 73 High Street, opposite the Parade Coffee House." His portrait has been painted for us as the "Great Mel". He was a tall, handsome figure of a man, who had a large social acquaintance, kept horses and hunted, and was an officer in the local Yeomanry.

Whether all the "Great Mel's" expansive gestures, such as that of never sending in a bill, were his, we shall never know, but it is more than likely that George Meredith relied more upon memory than invention, and gave us his grandfather as family and local gossip remembered him. Melchizedek had seven children, two sons and five daughters. Charles, the elder son, died very young. Two of the daughters married local men, but the remaining three went farther afield. Louisa, the most brilliant, married a naval purser named Read, who finally became Consul-General in the Azores and a friend of Pedro, Emperor of Brazil and King of Portugal, who created him a Knight of the Order of the Tower and Sword. Their daughter married Antonio da Costa Cabral, afterwards Marquis de Thomar. This Mrs. Read is, of course, the Louisa, Countess de Saldar, of *Evan Harrington*. Her sister Harriet married John Hellyet, of Surrey, a brewer, and was transformed into the Mrs. Andrew Cogglesby of the novel. The remaining sister, Catherine, became the wife of Samuel Burdon Ellis, a lieutenant in the Royal Marines who afterwards rose to be a General, and who seems to have been libelled rather than portrayed in *Evan Harrington* as Major Strike. His eldest son, George Ellis, was the original of Crossjay Patterne in *The Egoist*. There still remains one of Melchizedek's seven children to be disposed of, namely, the younger son, Augustus Urmston Meredith, born in 1797. He was only seventeen when his dashing father, by this time financially embarrassed, quitted this life at the early age of fifty-one, leaving his widow, a good woman of affairs, and his young son, who had

no love of tailoring and was being trained as a doctor, to carry on the business. A few years later Augustus married Jane Eliza Macnamara, the daughter of Michael Macnamara, a local innkeeper, and said to have been a very handsome and refined woman. She was not, as Meredith afterwards said she was, "pure Irish", as her mother was certainly English; and it is more than likely that, in spite of all Meredith's talk of the Celtic strain in him, the Irish blood in his mother had been as well mixed with English as had the Welsh blood in his father. To Augustus Meredith and his wife there was born, on the 12th February 1828, a son, their only child, George Meredith.

Some slight records of Meredith's childhood and boyhood remain to us. We know that he was considered proud and stand-offish by the other boys in the neighbourhood, the sons of High Street tradesmen, and that at one time he was known to them as "Gentleman Georgy". Meredith was to rise to undreamed-of heights, to become at length the most distinguished living writer in England, but it is doubtful if he did not always remain "Gentleman Georgy". Certain weaknesses that always stayed with Meredith, the man if not the writer, are suggested by that significant nickname. It is the "Gentleman Georgy" in Meredith that has prejudiced so many readers. But the circumstances of his childhood were not altogether favourable to him, and possibly account for some of his less admirable traits of character. He was an only child, and a very handsome, precocious child. His mother died when he was only five, and he and his father were never in sympathy. The

Merediths were in a curious position, somewhere between fish and fowl, for they considered themselves the social superiors of the other tradespeople of the High Street, and yet were not quite "gentry", so that they floated, uneasily, in a social mid-air. Never knowing exactly where they stood, they would naturally be far more sensitive and touchy than persons with a more closely defined status in local society. An only child of such people would be brought up in a not altogether healthy, somewhat tropical atmosphere, for he would be compelled to spend most of his time either alone or in the company of his elders, who would encourage him to regard himself as some one different from the ordinary, a creature apart. A great deal of the later Meredith can be explained, without making use of a fantastic theory of psychology, in terms of this early upbringing of his. There are, however, compensations, for a child so situated is under the necessity of developing his own resources and so contrives to live richly in his imagination, which is precisely what Meredith did, according to his own account of his childhood. Nearly all extremely creative men of genius, men who, later in life, have had the capacity of living intensely with the creatures of their imagination, seem to have been deprived of a normally happy and healthy childhood, which would not have driven them, as they were driven, to compensate themselves for the lack of companionship and outward incident by an early life of dreams and fantasies.

In 1833, at the early age of thirty-one, Mrs. Meredith died, so that George was now left to the companionship of his father and an adult cousin. Augustus Meredith appears to have been a pleasant,



cultured man, fond of walking, reading, chess, and society, though without the force of character of his father, the "Great Mel", or his son, who probably inherited more from his paternal grandfather than from his father. George, at the age of nine, was sent to a local high school, St. Paul's School, Southsea, but a few years later his father married his housekeeper, and, discovering that he could not succeed with the Portsmouth shop, sold the business and moved to London. By 1846 he was established in a tailoring business at 26 St. James's Street. Meanwhile, George had been left behind and sent to school, but in 1842 the trustee of his mother's small estate, of which he was the heir, determined to send him to the Moravian School at Neuwied, and it was in the August of that year that the fourteen-year-old boy entered the school and began his real education. This school deserves a word to itself. Neuwied, a little town in the most romantic part of the Rhine country, was one of those little German principalities that became centres of social progress and culture. Its Moravian school was founded during the reign of a liberal-minded eighteenth-century prince who believed in religious tolerance and allowed every religious sect the fullest liberty of thought and worship, and so excellent was the course of education offered by the Moravian Brethren in Neuwied, so inspiring their influence, that their school soon became famous and attracted pupils from all parts of Western Europe. In addition to Meredith, several Englishmen of note were educated there, and, indeed, the decade previous to Meredith's stay there was known as "the English Period". Professor Henry Morley, himself an old