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A GEORGE ELIOT COMPANION

 F.B. Pinion 



A GEORGE ELIOT COMPANION

Literary Achievement and Modern Significance

F. B. PINION



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Reference Abbreviations

Fiction

(small roman numerals indicate chapters; ep. = epigraph)

AB	<i>Adam Bede</i>	R	<i>Romola</i>
DD	<i>Daniel Deronda</i>	SCL1	'Amos Barton'
FH	<i>Felix Holt</i>	SCL2	'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story'
M	<i>Middlemarch</i>	SCL3	'Janet's Repentance'
MF	<i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	SM	<i>Silas Marner</i>

TS	<i>Impressions of Theophrastus Such</i>
WR	<i>The Westminster Review</i>

Letters

Most of the extracts are taken from *George Eliot's Life* by J. W. Cross, and, as dates provide the only form of ready access to the letters in that work, they have been preferred for reference. With hardly an exception, all extracts will be found in Gordon S. Haight's *The George Eliot Letters*, the text of which has been followed by kind permission of Yale University Press and the editor.

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Chronology

- 1773 Birth of Robert Evans
1789 *Outbreak of the French Revolution*
1793 *England at war with France*
1801 Robert Evans' first marriage. *Negotiations for peace with France*
1802 *Peace of Amiens*
1803 *War with France resumed*
1806 Robert Evans takes over the management of the Arbury estate
1813 His second marriage
1815 *End of the war with Napoleon*
1819 Mary Anne Evans born at South Farm, Arbury (22 November), a few months before her family moves to the farm at Griff
1824 After attending the dame school across the road from Griff House, she joins her sister Christiana as a boarding-school pupil at Attleborough
1828 Sent to a boarding school at Nuneaton where the evangelical Maria Lewis is the principal teacher
1829 *Catholic Emancipation Act*
1832 *First Reform Bill. Election riot at Nuneaton.* Mary Evans transferred to the Franklin sisters' school at Coventry
1836 After the death of her mother (3 February) she shares the management of affairs at home with her sister; reads Walter Scott to her father in the evenings
1837 In charge at home after the marriage of Christiana in May
1839 Visited by her Methodist aunt Mrs Samuel Evans
1840 Travels with her father to her aunt's at Wirksworth, and to other relatives in Staffordshire (June). *The penny post instituted*

- 1841 They move to Foleshill, near Coventry, leaving her brother Isaac in charge at Griff
- 1842 Buys Charles Hennell's *An Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity*, and asserts her religious independence (January)
- 1843 Stays at Devizes with Dr and Mrs Brabant (November–December)
- 1844 Agrees to continue the translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* which Miss Brabant had begun (published in 1846)
- 1845 Rejects a marriage proposal. Visits Scotland (October)
- 1849 Begins her translation of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Death of her father. European holiday with the Brays. Remains at Geneva from July to March 1850
- 1850 Reviews Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect* at the request of its publisher John Chapman
- 1851 Lives in the Chapman ménage (January–March). *The Great Exhibition opened at the Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, 1 May*. Returns in September to undertake the editing of *The Westminster Review*, which Chapman (the nominal editor) purchases
- 1852 The first number under its new editorship appears in January. Friendship with Herbert Spencer
- 1853 Growing friendship with George Henry Lewes. Translation of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* begun (published in 1854). Lewes's *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (September) and Harriet Martineau's *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (November) published
- 1854 *The re-erected Crystal Palace, Sydenham, opened (June)*. 'Marian' Evans leaves England for Weimar with Lewes (July). They meet Liszt. She begins the translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* in Berlin
- 1855 Return to England (March). They settle at Richmond (October)
- 1856 'Naturalizing' at Ilfracombe and Tenby. Begins 'Amos Barton' in September, and 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' on Christmas Eve
- 1857 Lewes's *Seaside Studies* continued in the Scillies and Jersey, where 'Janet's Repentance' is concluded. *Adam Bede* begun (October)
- 1858 Continued in Europe (April–August) and finished in November
- 1859 Move to Holly Lodge, Wandsworth (February). 'The Lifted

- Veil' written, and *The Mill on the Floss* resumed. Wales, Weymouth, and Gainsborough (August–September)
- 1860 *The Mill on the Floss* completed (March). Italy (March–June). 'Brother Jacob' written, and *Silas Marner* begun. Move to 16 Blandford Square in December
- 1861 *Silas Marner* finished (March). *Outbreak of the American Civil War*. Second visit to Florence. Preparation in London for *Romola*, which George Eliot begins in October
- 1862 Starts *Romola* afresh. Publication begins in *The Cornhill* (July)
- 1863 The novel completed (June). Move to the Priory, Regent's Park, in November
- 1864 Visit to Italy. First version of *The Spanish Gypsy* abandoned
- 1865 *Felix Holt* begun (March). *End of the American Civil War*
- 1866 The novel completed, and work on *The Spanish Gypsy* resumed
- 1867 In Spain (January–March). *The Second Reform Bill passed*
- 1868 *The Spanish Gypsy* completed (April). Germany (June–July)
- 1869 Fourth visit to Italy (March–May). *Middlemarch* begun (August). Death of Thornton Lewes (October)
- 1870 *Forster's Education Act passed, to provide primary education for all*
- 1872 All but the finale of *Middlemarch* completed by September. Homburg, Stuttgart, and Karlsruhe
- 1873 Preparations for *Daniel Deronda*
- 1874 First sketches of the novel (January–February). *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* published (May)
- 1876 *Daniel Deronda* finished in June
- 1878 Essays written at Witley (published as *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* in 1879). Death of Lewes on 30 November
- 1879 Death of John Blackwood, George Eliot's publisher (29 October)
- 1880 She marries J. W. Cross (May). Dies at 4 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, on 22 December
- 1885 *George Eliot's Life* by J. W. Cross published

George Eliot's Life

The most critical turning-point in the life of Mary Anne Evans came when she decided to live with George Henry Lewes. But for this she might not have been a novelist, and would never have been known as 'George Eliot'. She chose 'George' for her *nom de plume* because it was her husband's name, and 'Eliot' because it was 'a good mouth-filling, easily-pronounced word'.

The most important event in the genesis of the novelist George Eliot took place much earlier, in June 1840, when Mary Ann (as she wrote her name at the time; later it was 'Marian') drove at the age of twenty with her widowed father Robert Evans on family visits, first to Wirksworth in Derbyshire, then on to Ellastone, Staffordshire. After staying overnight and much of the next day with Samuel and Elizabeth Evans at Wirksworth, they spent three days at Ellastone. Aunt Elizabeth had been a guest at Griff House the previous year, and the story of her life had made a deep spiritual impression on Mary Ann; one episode in it was the germ of *Adam Bede*, and Ellastone and its surroundings, with some of her father's recollections, were to form one of the main inspirations of the novel. The journey included memorable visits to Ashbourne Church, Alton Gardens near Ellastone, and Lichfield Cathedral.

Robert Evans was a man of great physical and moral strength, who showed unusual competence, versatility, and industry. Born in a small cottage at Roston Common near Ellastone and Norbury (where he sang in the church choir), he began working for his father, the local carpenter. Like Adam Bede's, the master who kept the 'night-school' which he attended not far from his home was named Bartle Massey. Orthography plagued Robert for the rest of his life, but his intelligence, excellent craftsmanship, and sense of responsibility soon selected him for recognition. Francis Parker of Wootton Hall (where Rousseau began his *Confessions* in

1766) engaged him, first as forester and then as bailiff of his estate. Harriet Poynton was on the domestic staff at the time; her home was at Ellastone, where she and Robert were married in May 1801. The following year they moved to Kirk Hallam near Ilkeston, where Robert had taken a farm, his main responsibility being the management of the property his master had inherited at West Hallam. The most famous of the Newdigate-Newdegates, Sir Roger, founder of the Newdigate Prize for poetry at Oxford, lived at Arbury Hall near Nuneaton, Warwickshire. When he died in 1806, his estate passed to Francis Parker, who promptly invited Robert Evans to manage it. Robert's place at West Hallam was taken by the brother who had succeeded him at Wootton, where the resulting vacancy was filled by another of Robert's brothers, who had developed a thriving carpentry and building business at Ellastone.

Robert Evans moved with his wife and two children to Arbury Farm (later called South Farm). Mrs Evans died in 1809, after giving birth to a child who did not long survive her. As a memorial tablet in Astley Church testifies, she had been 'for many years the faithful friend and servant' of the Newdigate family. When Robert Evans married again, in 1813, he had deservedly acquired respect and social status. His wife Christiana was the youngest daughter of Isaac Pearson, a farmer of yeoman descent at Astley, where he was churchwarden; her brother Isaac had a profitable farm at Fillongley, and her three sisters (from whom the Dodsons of *The Mill on the Floss* derive some of their features) had made good marriages, all living within a few miles, Mary (Mrs Evarard) at Attleborough, Ann (Mrs Garner) at Sole End, and Elizabeth (Mrs Johnson) at Marston Jabbett. Three children were born to the Evans at Arbury Farm: Christiana (1814), Isaac Pearson (1816), and Mary Anne (on St Cecilia's Day, 22 November, 1819). At the end of March 1820 (on or about Lady Day) they moved into the large red-brick farmhouse facing the Coventry coach-road near its junction with Arbury Lane. This was Griff House, the home which meant so much in retrospect to George Eliot. Soon after the removal, Robert and Frances Lucy, the children of the first marriage, returned to their former home at Kirk Hallam, Robert to act as his father's sub-agent, and Frances to keep house for her brother.

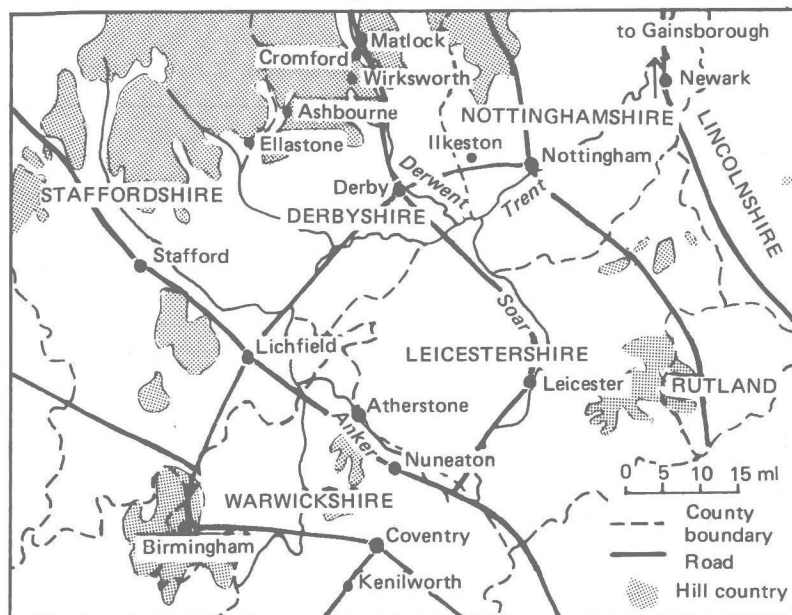
Robert Evans' estate duties were not limited to forestry and the maintenance of farms; he was responsible for the improvement and building of roads, the mining of coal, and its transportation

by tramway and canal. Other landowners, including Lord Aylesford of Packington, engaged his services. He was, George Eliot tells us, *unique* among land-agents for the width of his knowledge and experience, and particularly because he saved landowners the payment of large fees to more professionally qualified advisers (30.ix.59). He could have been rich, but his greatest reward was in work well done regardless of time.

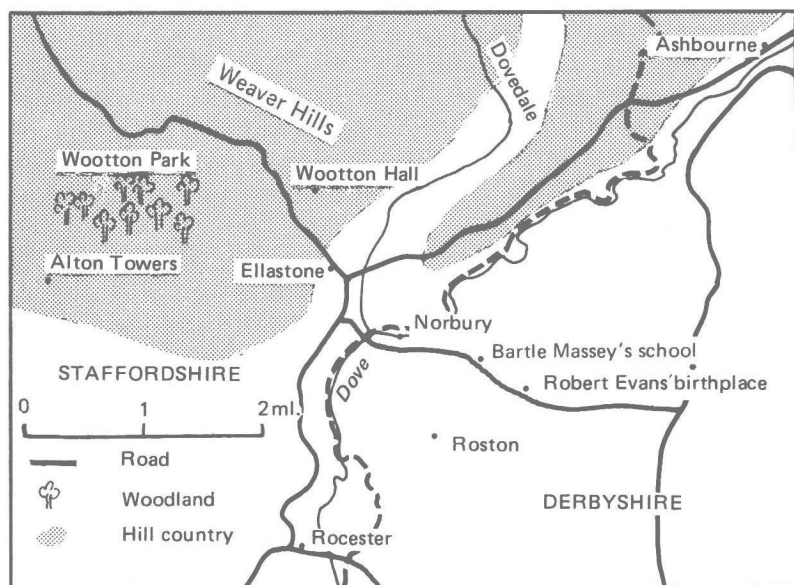
The French Revolution and its imperialistic aftermath made Mr Evans and the majority of English people apprehensive of reformers and radical ideas. In his work he could see the widespread benefits of enlightened order and progress. Fear of rioting and extremism stiffened his conservatism both in politics and religion. Near the end of her life, in the essay 'Looking Back' (TS), George Eliot recalled his prepossessions:

Nor can I be sorry, though myself given to meditative if not active innovation, that my father was a Tory who had not exactly a dislike to innovators and dissenters, but a slight opinion of them as persons of ill-founded self-confidence. . . . To my father's mind the noisy teachers of revolutionary doctrine were, to speak mildly, a variable mixture of the fool and the scoundrel; the welfare of the nation lay in a strong Government which could maintain order; and I was accustomed to hear him utter the word 'Government' in a tone that charged it with awe, and made it part of my effective religion, in contrast with the word 'rebel', which seemed to carry the stamp of evil in its syllables, and, lit by the fact that Satan was the first rebel, made an argument dispensing with more detailed inquiry. . . . Altogether, my father's England seemed to me lovable, laudable, full of good men, and having good rulers, from Mr Pitt on to the Duke of Wellington, until he was for emancipating the Catholics . . .

Mrs Evans was a shrewd, industrious farmer's wife 'with a considerable dash of the Mrs Poyser vein in her'. Unfortunately her health declined after the birth of twins, who died when they were ten days old. Christiana was sent to a boarding-school at Attleborough; Isaac and Mary Anne played indoors and out, much like Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and attended the dame-school across the road. Griff House and its surroundings afforded ample room for adventure. In front there was a spacious garden with lawns,



1 A General Map of George Eliot Places



2 The 'Adam Bede' Country