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OCTAVIA HILL AND GEORGE ELIOT - COINCIDENCES

by Margaret Wolfit

For a long time I have been performing two one-woman shows based on the Victorian novelist George Eliot - Firstly, "The Mill on the Floss", and later a biographical portrait of George Eliot herself. About three years ago, I began to feel that perhaps it was time to move on, and I searched around for another Victorian who might be of interest. One of the names that came to mind was that of Octavia Hill. As it happened, I had confused her with someone else, and when I came to research, discovered that I really knew nothing at all about her.

Here was a woman with enormous influence in her day who had encompassed many vital reforms. She was a Co-Founder of the National Trust, a great conservationist who had devoted a great deal of her time and energy to preserving parks, commons and, in London, finding Open Air sitting rooms, as she called them, for the general public; all this besides her great work on better housing for the poor. She was born in Wisbech and came from a family devoted to work on social problems. Here, indeed, were fresh woods and pastures new!

As I explored and researched, I discovered that much of her early life had been spent in and around the district of Hampstead and Highgate, where I also spent much of my childhood. She moved at the age of 13 to Fitzroy Square, London W. 1. with her mother and sisters. My husband, an architect, had an office there for many years. The name of John Ruskin is closely connected with the world of architecture and he had become Octavia's friend, art teacher and financial backer at the onset of her work on Housing Management. There seemed to be one coincidence after another drawing us together. Octavia's last years were spent in Kent not far from Sevenoaks,

and during a walk in some woods at Ide Hill near to the home of some distant relatives, I discovered a National Trust plaque in her memory.

All this naturally made studying her life doubly interesting, and then I discovered, surprisingly, that Florence Nightingale had written of Octavia Hill in a review of the novel Middlemarch. Here she expressed her astonishment that,

"George Eliot could find no better career for Dorothea Brooke than to marry first of all an elderly sort of literary impostor and secondly an inferior fawn, yet close at hand, in actual life, was a woman an idealist too and if we mistake not a connection of the author's who had managed to make her ideal very real indeed. By taking charge of buildings in poorest London, while making herself the rent collector, she found work for those who could not find work for themselves. She organised a system of visitors. She brought sympathy and education to bear from individual to individual. Were there one such woman with power to direct the flow of volunteer help, nearly everywhere running waste in every street in London's East End, almost might the East End be persuaded to become Christian. Could not the sweet sad enthusiast have been set to such work as this?"

So I had, in fact, strayed only a short distance from George Eliot!

Octavia's sister Gertrude married Charles Lewes, eldest son of George Henry Lewes with whom George Eliot had lived for many years, in 1865. At this time George Eliot and Lewes were living at the Priory, a house on the North Bank of the Regents Park Canal. She took a great interest in Octavia's work. In 1874, a group of friends, aware of her shortage of money, raised a fund which freed Octavia from the necessity of earning and left her at liberty to devote herself to Housing reform.

The following is a letter to Edward Bond from George Eliot on the subject dated March 19th, 1874.

Dear Mr. Bond,
Unless you can let us have the pleasure of seeing you again very soon - which would be quite the most agreeable way for me to learn anything of you - will you kindly let me know whether the plan we talked of has been making progress and what is the amount already assured.

Sincerely yours,
M. E. Lewes

The accounts in G. H. Lewes' Diary for 1874 show that he and George Eliot contributed £200 to Octavia's fund, no mean sum in those days!

After reading Florence Nightingale's article on Middlemarch, I decided to do a bit of sleuthing! I began to wonder if, perhaps, George Eliot had not been influenced in some way by Octavia in her characterization of Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of the novel. Searching for the model of an author's character can prove an intriguing occupation! George Eliot wrote in her journal of December 2nd, 1870.

"Miss Brooke" "I am experimenting in a story which I began without any very serious intention of carrying out lengthily. It is a subject which has been recorded among my possible themes ever since I began to write fiction, but will probably take new shapes in the development."

Then, one day, I discovered something that upset my theory. In Macmillan's Dictionary of Women's Biography I read that

"Emily Pattison Dilke, the English Trade Unionist, married Mark Pattison - Rector of Lincoln's College, Oxford. Their circle included George Eliot who reputedly took them as models for Dorothea and Casaubon in Middlemarch."

Yet this is categorically denied by Sir Charles Dilke, Emily's second husband, who declares that

"Emily was no more Dorothea Brooke than Pattison was Casaubon but it is the case that the religious side of Dorothea Brooke was taken

by George Eliot from the letters of Mrs. Pattison. Dorothea's defence of her marriage with Casaubon and Casaubon's account of his marriage to Dorothea are as a fact given by the novelist almost in Mark Pattison's words - Here the matter ends."

Emily Pattison Dilke studied at the South Kensington Art School, London, on the recommendation of John Ruskin who deeply influenced her artistic and social theories. There is an extraordinary similarity here to his relationship with Octavia.

Dorothea is obsessed, in the early part of the novel, with the desire to build better cottages for the poor inhabitants of Lowick.

"Worth doing", she says in reply to a question put to her on the subject, "yes, indeed!" said Dorothea energetically. "... I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful homes with a scourge of small cords - all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us."

Octavia had visited Ruskin and told him of her dream of finding better housing for the poor just as, in the novel, Dorothea sought help of Sir James Chettam for her project.

At the time that the reviews of Middlemarch were coming out in the press, George Eliot was seeing both Emily Pattison and Octavia Hill.

George Henry Lewes' Diary, January 25th 1873.
"Octavia and Hall dined with us"

- and on the 21st of January, George Eliot had sent a letter inviting Mrs. Mark Pattison "To tea on Thursday".

The review on 7th March of the same year was very long and favourable.

"There are few novels in the language which will repay reading again as well as Middlemarch."

In the early part of her life as Mary Ann Evans,

George Eliot had been deeply involved with the village life of Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, where she lived. She had helped among the sick and poor, particularly after her mother's death when she was housekeeping for her father. She was deeply religious at this time.

The Hill family came into her life when Charles married Gertrude and with their deep involvement with social causes would, almost certainly, have impinged on George Eliot's thinking. Octavia was also deeply religious. The Reverend Mark Pattison married Emily in 1861 and together, I believe, these two events may have struck a chord reminding Mary Ann of those far off days when she too had been deeply involved with the poor and their welfare. At 51, always somewhat melancholic, she may well have had wistful thoughts of how her life might have progressed, had she trodden the practical rather than the artistic and intellectual path.

It is only a hypothesis, but I think not an unreasonable and perhaps an amusing one, that Octavia, whose original ambition was to be an artist, albeit a painter, should in some way have been the inspiration for one of the greatest heroines in Victorian literature. It is certainly a possibility, I think, that an amalgam of Emily, Octavia and George Eliot herself were the models for Dorothea.

In an article entitled "Octavia Hill and the Homes of the London Poor" A.S. Wohl writes -

"It has been Octavia Hill's fate to survive rather like some great classic, well known by name, but neglected and unread. Of the major Victorian reformers perhaps the most misunderstood and inadequately handled. Abruptly dismissed, on one hand, as an absurd anachronism, a devout believer in individualistic solutions in an age of creeping state and municipal socialism, she has been too uncritically praised on the other by those who were related to her or closely associated with her work."

So often ideas seem to float in the ether to be received and interpreted in different ways. Each contribution may be of value. It is too easy, with hindsight, to dismiss a person's achievements be they great or small. Fashions change and envy is still rife in the world.

On the 1st of December 1898 at the Grosvenor House Hotel, London, Octavia Hill was presented with a portrait the American artist, John Singer Sargent, had painted of her. This portrait now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. In her speech of thanks afterwards she said,

"When I am gone, I hope my friends will not try to carry on any special system or to follow blindly in the track which I have trodden. New circumstances require various efforts and it is the spirit not the dead form that should be perpetuated. When the time comes that we slip from our places and they are called to the front as workers - What should they inherit from us? Not a system, not an association, not dead formulas. We shall leave them a few houses purified and improved, a few new and better ones built, a few open spaces, some of which will be more beautiful than they would have been, but what we care most to leave them is not any tangible thing, not any memory, however good, but the quick eye to see, the true soul to measure, the large hope to grasp the mighty issues of the new and better days to come - "

I have found learning about this humble, humane and remarkable woman, Octavia Hill, fascinating and rewarding.

References:

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