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BOOK REVIEW

by Kathleen Adams

George Eliot

by Jennifer Uglow

Virago Pioneers 1987 Paperback £4.95

When I first heard that Virago were to publish a book about George Eliot (the author sought my help in locating certain photographs) I was a little apprehensive. I feared that this might be a militant feminist view of a lady who concerned herself deeply about the 'Woman Question' but who did not align herself with the growing Victorian feminist movement. But a first reading allayed my fears, for Jennifer Uglow treats her subject with sympathy and understanding and does not try to prove that George Eliot was an active feminist when she was not.

The book opens with a useful chronology linking George Eliot's life and work with events and publications which affected the position of women in society - the passing of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, the formation in 1859 of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women and, in 1866, the presentation of the first Women's Suffrage Petition. G. H. Lewes's publications are also included, showing his own output while he was so successfully nurturing hers.

George Eliot did not make a defiant claim for independence and personal fulfilment although she was keenly aware of sexual exploitation and the low status of women. In the 1850's she knew many of the leading Victorian feminist campaigners and Jennifer Uglow devotes a most interesting chapter to this gallant band of women who were trying to obtain recognition for their sex.

George Eliot's female characters are a mixture. There are the sexual playthings like Hetty, strong heroines like Romola and Dorothea and the troubled ones like Maggie and Gwendolen. The worst of them are treated with compassion but their creator was fully aware how far some of them had to go before they had earned the right to be responsible for their own destinies. George Eliot

was outwardly a rebel, defying her father and her brother, and, later, society by living with a married man, yet ending her life rich and famous and the darling of the establishment. But her letters and journals show her weakness and self-distrust. She needed constant reassurance and was always afraid that she would achieve little of lasting value.

Biographically there is nothing new in this book. Indeed, there are some factual errors but these are minor. Chilvers Coton is described as being on the edge of Coventry rather than Nuneaton, Charles Bray's illegitimate family, and particularly the daughter he and his wife adopted, are muddled, Cara Bray's close man friend is called Edward Wood when his real name was Edward Noel, and 4, Cheyne Walk appears as 4, Cheyne Row in one instance but is corrected later. But, as I said, these are minor and the book does not set out to rewrite George Eliot's life story but to appraise her work and her ambivalent attitude to choice and change, especially in a period of great changes in society.

This new Virago publication makes us look more closely at George Eliot's attitudes to her characters, particularly her female ones. She set her novels in a world which no longer existed, and she was creating the good daughter, wife and mother before the wider responsibilities were thrust upon them. Perhaps she, in her emancipated lifestyle, was secretly regretting the lost opportunity for herself in these roles.

Jennifer Uglow reminds us that George Eliot was a writer who felt that a woman artist had special gifts and special responsibilities yet, ironically, could only speak out wearing the mask of a man.

The book is very well written, nicely set out and has that special quality which makes the reader want to go back to it again, not only to look at George Eliot the woman but, chapter by chapter, at her novels.