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Harper, David, "In Janet Dempster's Footsteps: Reminiscence" (2016). *The George Eliot Review*. 382.
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IN JANET DEMPSTER'S FOOTSTEPS: A REMINISCENCE

By David Harper

The road from Trent Valley Station down towards the town centre curves gently past the row of horse-chestnuts in Bond Gate with their white candles. To the young boy arriving to take up residence in Nuneaton it promised something new, always interesting, always just out of reach.

From my earliest years I was a keen reader and felt the privilege of our local author's being one of the unquestioned greats; but it was George Eliot's north Warwickshire that initially attracted me, with *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* my favourites. This was reinforced by cycling the lanes for miles around, admiring the cottages and farmhouses, absorbing the atmosphere of the churches and, though much less consciously than she expressed it in a letter, 'being made happier by seeing well-cultivated land'. I already felt that her sane treatment of central issues of being human was rooted in the beautiful ordinariness of these landscapes. But in later years, while retaining the general admiration, I've become more subjective and idiosyncratic in my reading, and above all, strangely slowly, I've come to realize the unusual degree of integration of my early years with George Eliot's Nuneaton in the narrower sense, the Treby Magna of *Felix Holt*, and above all the Milby of 'Janet's' Repentance'. My entire thirteen school years were spent next to Milby parish church, first at Vicarage Street Church of England Primary School, just across the road from where Mary Ann Evans herself went to school, and then at King Edward VI Grammar School, supposedly attended by the narrator of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. The window of our Arts Sixth Form room set high in the school's end wall looks just as it did in the nineteen-fifties, and overlooks the grave of James William Buchanan, Gentleman; so the original of the arrogant wife-beater to this day seeks redemption in a single word of social prestige.

My younger sister had a lengthy illness after she was born, so her baptism at Milby Church was later than customary. When Canon Herbert, florid, substantial, easily imaginable as the protagonist of a fourth *Scene*, bent over her to make the sign of the cross with cool font water, everyone laughed as she smiled and reached up to baptise him.

I happen to know that King George VI died early on a Wednesday morning; so what? – the answer to a quiz question too trivial ever to be asked. But Wednesday was the day we walked the fifty yards from the gate at the back of the fives court across the churchyard for our weekly service. Halfway through Mr Amos, the school caretaker entered and walked up quietly to whisper to the headmaster at the pulpit, who announced it. In such small ways I interrelate George Eliot's world and my own.

Obviously George Eliot's Midlands, primarily centred on North Warwickshire, gave her the subject matter for her early and mid-period novels and a range of characters worthy of her intellect and capacity for human sympathy and understanding; equally obviously she had to get away from it to develop fully. But it seems to me that Nuneaton itself tested these powers of human sympathy almost beyond endurance. She rarely alters significantly the local places that she fictionalizes, though much scholarly detective work has been needed for readers to identify them. There is just one instance, right at the very beginning of her authorial career, where fiction is strangely out of accord with geographical fact. In Chapter Two of 'Amos Barton' she transforms the geography of Chilvers Coton in her account of the College, the workhouse feared by local people well past the middle of the twentieth century, describing it as 'standing on the best apology for an elevation of ground that could be seen for about ten

miles round Shepperton.' In fact neither Coton nor Nuneaton itself is conspicuously flat, and the ten miles would take in Tuttle Hill and Oldbury and reach out to substantial upland areas of the county. It's a strange little spat of personal anger and disgust, all the more striking in that Griff Hollows, so movingly transmuted into the 'Red Deepes' of *The Mill on the Floss*, is another industrial site less than a (quite hilly) mile away. The journalist Owen Jones made his name with *Chavs* (2011) expressing his shock and disgust at the way many of his liberal acquaintances regarded those at the bottom of our society with thoughtless contempt. I must admit to smiling shamefacedly at Poll Fodge, with her unlikely child, but 'Old Maxum', 'Silly Jim' and Mr Fitchett are less vivid but treated as equally beyond the pale of human sympathy; it is, fortunately, not typical of this most humane of writers.

'Janet's Repentance' reminds me of Patrick White's great, if over-schematic novel *Riders in the Chariot*: a few superior spirits, Janet, Tryan, Mr Jerome, Mrs Pettifer, stand in contrast to their complacently conventional society. This is not to say, of course, that the presentation of the society lacks power and conviction: Dempster is a nuanced portrayal of a drunken bully; the differences between the genteel Church society and the respectable dissenters and the rather apathetic tolerance governing their relationship are nicely shown; and to me the way Mrs Linnet, in a society where thought and language are suffused with religion, instinctively secularizes everything she's told equals any of Eliot's later humour.

But whatever the sectarian differences, Milby society is homogenous, conventional, inward-looking and self-satisfied, and the author wants to get out of it. The opening of Chapter Two of 'Janet's Repentance' pretends to praise the sober superiority of contemporary Milby with its handsome railway station, rector who keeps his own carriage and church 'enlarged by at least five hundred sittings' and has gentlemen whose only excess is 'the perfectly well-bred and virtuous excess of stupidity' and some dilettante, quarter-educated young ladies. And Eliot's ambiguity about the superiority of the new to the old is finally encapsulated in contrasts which seem intended to prove nothing, between two styles of dress and two inn signs.

Yet there are further complications in an interesting paragraph towards the end of the chapter when she seems to worry that she has been unfair to Milby; she assures us that the town 'had that salt of goodness which keeps the world together in greater abundance than was visible on the surface' and gives examples of occasional transfiguring natural beauty and human charity. It is a half-apology for the way this tale presents the town as petty and mean, and even subconsciously perhaps for the angry contempt of Chapter Two of 'Amos Barton', but the generalized qualification does little to counteract the mood of the main narrative.

Until Manor Park recently disappeared under houses, you could look from the terrace at the Cock and Bear end into Paddiford, across the canal, with its towpath that formed a section of our school cross-country course, and along which Felix Holt walked to and from his encounters with the Sproxtton miners at Mr Chubb's. Even before I'd grasped the close connection between my world and that of 'Janet's Repentance' I was amused by the irony of this view into the new estate centred on the concentric circles of Blackatree Road and Tryan Road; half the perpetrators of the crimes reported in the *Trib.* seemed to come from the road commemorating the saintly clergyman. And from the stand a Borough supporter barracked the opposition in a strangely mechanical way, shouting loudly, but with a peculiar absence of heat and no obvious reference to events on the pitch, 'You dirty bleeders' at regular intervals of about ten minutes. I think he even shouted it during the half-time interval. His name was Joe Liggins: a descendant of the imposter who attempted to claim *Scenes* as his own work? Or even

a reincarnation?

In Chapter Four George Eliot tells us that Janet Dempster's house 'lay in Orchard Street which opened on the prettiest outskirts of the town – the church, the parsonage and a long stretch of green fields; in the next chapter Janet (described admiringly with an emotion that the author can hardly control) turns out of Orchard Street 'making her way as fast as she can to her mother's house, a pleasant cottage facing a roadside meadow from which the hay is being carried'. Soon the main line slid in from the south-east, wide and often embanked, cutting off this attractive area from the fields beyond, hemming it in tightly. By the nineteen-forties any remnants of its pastoral glory were lost. My walk to school through the Oaston fields, themselves now gone under the bricks and tarmac of the Horestone Grange estate, retained, with its bird-filled hedgerows and ponds rich in newts, something of this country feel further out from the town; but the final bit to the schools under the railway through the dank and smelly passage from Oaston Road was via some very ordinary terraced streets, albeit retaining pastoral names – Wheat, Orchard, Glebe.

On May 17, 1941 the Lutwaffe made a serious effort to destroy the town; Vicarage Street and Church Street were among the areas extensively damaged, Photographs on the internet show many houses ruined, including Lawyer Dempster's superior residence. A few hundred yards away in Anker Street my wife's family lost their best tea-service, left out following the celebration of her second birthday the previous evening. She still remembers the canary, jet black with soot, singing its head off. As for myths of the British people's wartime solidarity, she was later told that the damaged house was looted, in spite of (or because of?) the guard placed on the street. Then again, in the bitter winter of 1947, a colleague of my father's, learning that we were out of fuel, walked his bicycle the two miles from Manor Court Road through the town centre and on to our house with a hundredweight sack of coal wedged through the frame. *The Riders in the Chariot* world of 'Janet's Repentance' again.

I've always accepted, if with some reluctance, that the Raveloe in the BBC's superb dramatization of *Silas Marner* should be set in a yellow stone, Cotswoldy location. For all its social realism it is the most 'fabulous' of Eliot's works, and the rural archetype is appropriate to heal the wounds inflicted on Silas in the harsh, dark urban north. Yet I also know that the flooded stone-pit where I waded calf-deep to cut a bullrush for my fiancée was the quarry not far from Griff House where Duncy Cass lost Silas' hoard of gold and his own life.

As a child I resisted my mother's attempts to pull me into a world directly descended from that of 'Janet's Repentance'. The superintendent of the church Sunday school, held in the parish hall next to where Mrs Wallington's school had stood, surviving the bombing but not the depredations of the council, was a mature, grave man who took his duties seriously. Freud could doubtless explain why I have forgotten his name yet still sense it at the edge of my memory. Even as I resisted his influence I knew that he was a fundamentally good man and still feel ashamed of my mute refusal to respond. So I started playing truant, skulking every Sunday under the railway bridge at the foot of Leicester Road and going home at what I felt to be about the right time. My mother meanwhile had checked with the superintendent's assistant, waylaid him as he cycled home, so my lies were as futile as they were juvenile. My mother, with whom I was on the best of terms throughout her long life, was finally so exasperated that the sixth time she pushed me down and kicked me. The seventh time she shut me out of the house and smacked my older sister for feeding me crusts through the window. Then the demand to attend was quietly dropped for ever.

As I walk my young grandson home from primary school I ask him to stay close for safety. He laughs and runs away energetically along the footpath of the busy suburban road. When we reach the house we play a game he has devised for the garden, where we try to kick a football against the post of a revolving clothes-line. He constantly modifies the rules so that I always lose. I feel more like old Mr Transome every day. Yet the clothes-line evokes memories of the maypole dancing we did at primary school fetes in the glebe behind the vicarage of the parish church; to the explicit symbolism of the unity of male and female in fertility rites it is easy to add other unforced implications – the intertwining of past and present, and of the ‘real’ and the fictitious. And these regular returns to Surrey a few miles from the town where I was born, enable us to visit occasionally the Royal Horticultural Society’s gardens at Wisley. There is a long ditch-like pond where giant carp rise like memories from the black, peaty water, move in separate yet interrelating paths and sink into the depths again. And in the lily-pond shoals of small fish with scales of different intermixtures of black and gold move kaleidoscopically.

I list these images in an attempt to pass beyond the metaphor in the title of this piece, which is inadequate. I find it impossible to relate the wanderings of Felix Holt and the rioters he is trying to control in the novel’s climactic chapters to the Nuneaton I know. And as I’ve already stressed, the narrowly circumscribed area in which Janet Dempster lived and moved, and which I have known intimately between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and ninety years later, has changed enormously and is constantly modulating. Even Vicarage Street School has been demolished bit by bit and is now gone under the Warwickshire Justice Centre.

Yet I feel a sense of privilege at having been so close to a world created with such solidity by Eliot’s physical and social observation to which my own experiences so many years later coalesced and accreted into something solid and coherent. Today I live in rural Shropshire. At its most beautiful the countryside is lit up with a paradisial golden glow; I don’t recall experiencing this in Vicarage Street or even Riversley Park. Yet for me there is no literary or social context, and even the physical one is muted. (Locally-born enthusiasts for Mary Webb would naturally deny this and rewrite my article in their own terms). But the parish church, the traffic island by it, and the unchanging brown-brick edifice of the Christadelphian Hall satisfy me nicely as the focus of what Eliot terms in the third chapter of *Daniel Deronda* ‘some spot of a native land [...] where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection’, and undying significance.