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## Enter the Aunts....

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## ENTER THE AUNTS ...<sup>1</sup>

By Kathryn Hughes

My title is taken from Chapter 7 of 'Book First' of *The Mill on the Floss* which describes the moment we first meet Aunts Glegg, Pullet and Deane in all their bustling, sharp-tongued, comic glory. The full title of the chapter is 'Enter the Aunts and Uncles' and the three redoubtable Dodson sisters are indeed accompanied by their husbands, the Uncles, as they descend upon Dorlcote Mill for a family summit about their nephew Tom Tulliver's education. Yet while Messrs Glegg, Pullet and Deane subsequently play their individual parts in the unfolding of the novel's plot, it is the Aunts who at this point elbow their menfolk out of the way and bustle to the front of the stage. With their brisk opinions on everything from the inadvisability of going to law to the design of teapot spouts, the three redoubtable women form a choric commentary on the unfolding action. (Tom's 'eddication',<sup>2</sup> of course, provides a starting point for one of the novel's main plot strands as well as one of its key themes – the varying capacities and social roles of men and women in the early nineteenth century.)

If proof were needed of the lasting impact of the Dodson Aunts on the reader, you have only to look at the way in which they have dominated subsequent film and television adaptations of the novel throughout the twentieth century. Typically played by leading character actresses of the day, including Athene Seyler and Martita Hunt (1937), and Barbara Hicks (1978) and Joanna David and Jessica Turner (1997) the Aunts continue to occupy an imaginative space in the British cultural imagination that is out of all proportion to the actual volume they occupy in either Eliot's original text or in subsequent scripted versions.

Given the Aunts' impact both at the time (contemporary critics often picked out the Dodsons for special mention) and since, you might assume that literary sleuths had long since tracked down documentary details about the historical women on whom they were modelled. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. For while the publication of Eliot's first two books, *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, provoked a posse of biographical detectives into matching up characters to their real life counterparts, no such frenzy greeted *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>3</sup> By early 1860 the revelation that 'George Eliot' was actually Marian Evans, the common law wife of G. H. Lewes, was circulating widely in the novelist's native Midlands, as well as in London where she now made her home. With this central mystery solved, it no longer seemed rewarding or even relevant to comb through her latest novel looking for real world correspondences. (Such reticence was, of course, not to last: once Eliot was dead her biographers, from Mathilde Blind onwards, insisted on conflating details of Maggie Tulliver's childhood with that of Mary Ann Evans.<sup>4</sup> We are still dealing with the damaging consequences of that elision today.)

While Eliot hated the penetration of her pseudonym, she was doubtless relieved at the way it stopped people, in the short term at least, wanting to read her fiction as if it were a simple transcription of actual happenings in various Midlands communities up to half a century earlier. During the storm surrounding the publication of *Adam Bede* the previous year, when various of her paternal cousins on the Derbyshire/Staffordshire border had been heard to exclaim that the novel was the 'true story' of Samuel, Robert and Elizabeth Evans, she had dismissed them with scathing remarks about 'simple men and women without pretension to enlightened

discrimination' who insisted on taking a reductive approach to imaginative art.<sup>5</sup> For those of us, however, who find it fruitful to work at the interface between literary texts and their historical contexts, the fact that *The Mill on the Floss* appears not to have attracted sustained attention from local literary detectives means that we have forfeited a rich source of information about its biographical sources. Or, to put it another way, we don't know half as much about the three women on whom the Dodson Aunts are based as we would like to.

It was J. W. Cross, in his 1885 biography of his late wife, who first made the generic identification between the Dodsons of *The Mill on the Floss* and the sisters of Eliot's mother Christiana, whose maiden name was the similar-sounding 'Pearson'.<sup>6</sup> The Pearsons were yeomen who had farmed for generations in and around Fillongley, five miles South West of Nuneaton. Not only were they relatively prosperous, but the fact that they owned their own land rather than renting it from a local landholder meant that they were considered socially superior to men like Robert Evans, Eliot's father, who held his farm as a tenant of the Newdigate family for whom he also acted as land agent.

Matching up each individual aunt to her historic 'counter-part' was a more gradual business. By 1910 when the American Charles Olcott produced his biography of George Eliot with the sustained input of her nephew Canon Frederick Evans, a firm identification had been made between the fictional Mrs Glegg and Mary Pearson Evarard, the second wife of a well-to-do local Attleborough quarry owner. Illustrative proof came in the form of a portrait of Mrs Evarard, sporting what appeared to be Mrs Glegg's best 'crisp and glossy front', which hung in Rev Evans' rectory and which Olcott was allowed to reproduce in his book (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 1: Mary Pearson Evarard

By the time Gordon Haight published his classic biography in 1968, two further identifications had been made. The character of the fashionably-dressed, hypochondriac Sophy Pullet was based on Elizabeth Pearson Johnson while Susan Deane was Ann Pearson Garner.<sup>8</sup> Both sisters were married to prosperous local farmers. Since the publication of Haight's book, now over forty years ago, no further information has been forthcoming about the Pearsons.

In this paper I shall use genealogical and archival research to see what can be added to these scanty fragments. For all that the Dodson aunts take over their sections of *The Mill on the Floss*, bending the novel out of shape with their linguistic exuberance and bustling physical presence, the Pearson sisters have left surprisingly little trace on the material world. They may indeed, like their fictional counter-parts, have made terrific cheesecake, spun their yarn and

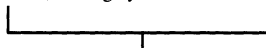
debated endlessly the comparative merits of spots and stripes, but little of that vigour is recoverable now. There are no surviving letters, diaries or pictures (save for that single portrait of Mary Evarard) that yield any sense of what it was like to behold a Pearson sister in all her glory. In her famous chapter, ‘A Variation of Protestantism Unknown to Bossuet’, where she summons up those ancient Rhône villagers and their long-vanished way of life, Eliot’s narrator speaks of ‘a gross sum of obscure vitality, that will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers.’<sup>9</sup> What is surprisingly off target here is not her prediction that people as solid-seeming as the Dodsons will one day vanish from the earth, but that her timing is so far out. It did not take centuries for the Pearson sisters and their way of life to be swept away. Just 170 years since they drew their last breaths, and they have all but disappeared.

In part this is because all the sisters were born and all save one of them died before the first national census of 1841 and the commencement of civil registration in 1837, those great technologies of counting and accounting introduced by the Victorians. So we have no birth, marriage or death certificates for the Pearsons and no breakdown of their households. Instead, we need to turn to parish records dating from the late eighteenth century to start constructing the most basic outlines of their lives.

What that search reveals is that the Pearson sisters were the children of Isaac Pearson and his wife Ann Baker of Old Castle Farm, Fillongley. Fig. 2, which I have compiled from the parish records, shows that the family consisted of nine children born in the 21 years between 1770 and 1791.

Fig. 2: The Pearson Aunts.

ISAAC PEARSON 1744-1829 m ANN[E] BAKER 1747-?  
Of Old Castle Farm, Fillongley



William 1770-71 \*

**Mary 1771-1844**

**Ann 1773-184**

Thomas 1774-1778 \*

Susanna 1777-1784 \*

Isaac 1778-1826

**Elizabeth 1781-1883**

Christiana 1787-1836

Hannah 1791-1806 \*

*\*marks children who died early*

**bold shows sisters who provided a model for the Dodson Aunts**

What strikes one immediately is that the Pearsons were not a particularly robust family. Of the nine children, four had died by the age of seven. The survivors comprised the three sisters who form the basis for the Dodson aunts – Mary, Ann and Elizabeth – together with Eliot’s mother Christiana and one brother, Isaac. Even in those days of high infant mortality, this represents a shocking level of loss and suggests that, behind Aunt Pullet’s hypochondrical fussing and Aunt Glegg’s anxious scolding there may well have loomed the pressing sense that a human life could be snuffed out at any moment.

Close attention to the parish records also reveals something that has not been noticed before. Just like the Dodsons whom we are told made a point of marrying late, all the Pearson sisters were mature brides. Mary Pearson married John Evarard at the advanced age of forty-one, Ann Pearson married George Garner at twenty-eight, and Elizabeth Pearson wed Richard Johnson at twenty-nine.<sup>10</sup> This means that all three Pearson sisters spent at least a decade as single adult women under the watchful eye of each other. And it was perhaps her aunts’ protracted immersion in their native family culture that Eliot was thinking of when she described the tenacity of Dodson traditions:

There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams and keeping the bottled gooseberries; so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson.<sup>11</sup>

My search of the parish records also revealed that the Pearson sisters were a surprisingly unfecond group, which may well have added to their sense of the human body as unreliable and liable to fail. Only one of them, Ann Pearson Garner produced children – a string of boys followed by a solitary girl, Elizabeth. It is this girl, known within the family as ‘Bessie’, who seems most likely to have suggested the character of Lucy Deane to Eliot. Bessie was, after all, Eliot’s only surviving female cousin on the maternal side (there were Evans girl cousins, to be sure, but they lived in far-away Derbyshire and Staffordshire), just as Lucy is Maggie’s only maternal girl cousin. The name ‘Lucy’ is an exact conflation of ‘Bessie’ and ‘Lizzy’, the latter being another shortening for ‘Elizabeth’ common in the Midlands at the time and the name which Eliot gives to one of Maggie’s paternal cousins.<sup>12</sup> Chrissie Evans Clarke, Eliot’s elder sister who is frequently touted by biographers as the model for Lucy Deane, seems to morph more easily into both the character and the name of ‘Gritty Moss’.

Even after their late marriages, the Pearson sisters continued to live in close proximity to one another. Indeed none of them settled more than a few miles from their childhood home at Fillongley, with the Evanses at Griff House, Chilvers Coton, the Garners at Sole End Farm (now Sole End House), Astley (Fig. 3), the Evarards at Attleborough and the Johnsons at Marston Jabbett Hall (Fig. 4). Of course just because the sisters were near enough to call on each other on a weekly (or more) basis doesn’t mean that they actually did. We are fortunate, however, in having the extant diaries of Robert Evans, George Eliot’s father and husband of the youngest surviving Pearson sister, Christiana. In between the careful noting of the weather, the harvest and the current price of wheat, Evans describes a busy schedule of visits between the four households. Nor does this seem to be simply a case of reinforcing family ties through the

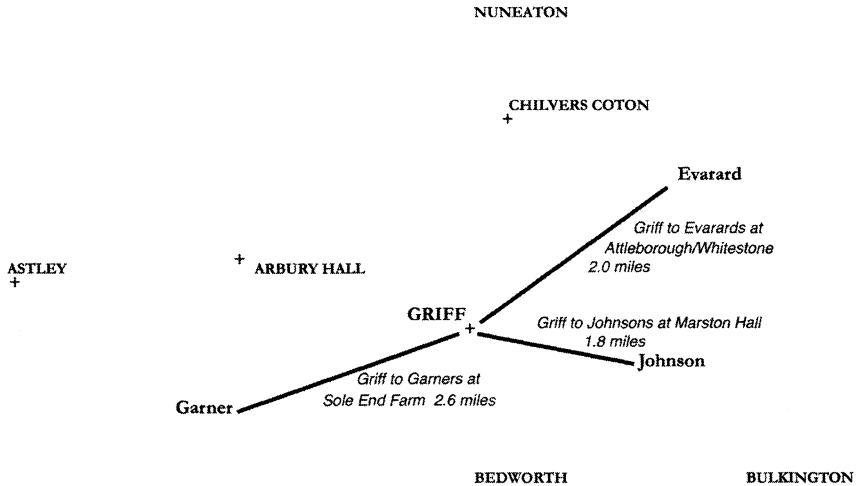


Fig. 3: Sole End House. Photo by John Burton, courtesy of Mike Ross.



Fig. 4: Marston Jabbett Hall – John Burton collection.

formulaic rituals of farmhouse hospitality, the taking of tea and dinner. Evans' diary, terse and matter of fact though it is, reveals that the Evarard, Johnson, Garner and Evans households were engaged in a continuous exchange of skills, knowledge and labour. Indeed, at times, the four families functioned almost as extensions of one another.



A sample of the diary entries will help make this clearer. I've taken five weeks in the Autumn of 1830 – around the time that *The Mill on the Floss* opens – and noted each time that Robert Evans mentions meeting with his in-laws.

Oct 15<sup>th</sup> 1830 Went to Coventry with Mr Everard he made myself, Mr Mallabone and Mr Geo. Garner Trusts for his personal estate.

Oct 19<sup>th</sup> Mr Evarard and Mr Garner stopd all day with us

Oct 21<sup>st</sup> Went to the Johnsons with Mrs Evans this afternoon in the Gig

Oct 28<sup>th</sup> Mr and Mrs Johnson and Mr and Mrs Evarard came to Tea with us.

2<sup>nd</sup> [Nov] [went to] Mr Garners

3<sup>rd</sup> [Nov] [went to] Mr Evarard's

Nov 4<sup>th</sup> Mr & Mrs Jeffery and Mrs Shakespeir dined with us today Mr & Mrs Evarard came to tea with us

5<sup>th</sup> went to Mr Evarards and met Mr Rd Johnson to look over some writings

9<sup>th</sup> Met Mr Evarard & Mr Johnson at Mr Greenways Office and we Recd Mrs Evarards money £1000 and £7000 belonging to Mr Evarard, we put it into the

Bank and I brought the Bank cheques one for 1000£ & one for £7000.

Nov 10<sup>th</sup> went to Fillongley this afternoon to look at Isaac Pearsons, Building and Manger to tell him what to do at it,

Nov 25<sup>th</sup> Went to Thomas Garners at Corley Ash to Dinner, Mr & Mrs Johnson, Mr & Mrs Evarard, Mr & Mrs Garner, Mr & Mrs Bower, Mr & Mrs Hadcock, and myself & Mrs Evans – were there & Mrs Hands of Marton & Thos Garner and his wife –

29<sup>th</sup> set off for Wordsley this morning took Bessey Garner with me<sup>13</sup>

These entries confirm that the former Misses Pearson continued to have weekly or twice-weekly contact with each other even once they were matrons in their fifties. During these episodes of tea drinking and dining they doubtless shared personal and public news, in the process reinforcing a sense that there was a ‘Pearson way of doing things’: not just of making your butter and spinning your yarn, but of responding to local public events, which in Nuneaton that year included several incidents of public disorder.<sup>14</sup> These diary entries also reveal how the sisters’ husbands – Messrs Evans, Johnson, Evarard and Garner – drew upon each other’s professional know-how. In the space of a fortnight Robert Evans, well-respected throughout the area as a ‘man of business’, is asked by his brothers-in-law to give advice about farm buildings, look over legal documents and supervise important financial transactions at the bank. On a more domestic level Evans also participates in childcare when he transports his young niece Bessie Garner in his gig following what we might today call a ‘sleepover’ with her girl cousins at Griff House.

Yet while Robert Evans’s diary shows the Pearson sisters meeting continually in conditions where talk about family matters might be presumed to flourish, it still doesn’t get us any nearer knowing what was actually said and thought during these encounters. It would be easy to assume that during these get-togethers the Pearson women shared their Dodson counter-parts’ tendency to criticize, nag and boss the younger members of the extended family, beginning their sentences with ‘it’s for your own good I say this’.<sup>15</sup> But this would not be quite right. Consider the little sliver of evidence that comes in the introductory chapter at the beginning of J. W. Cross’s *George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Journals*.

On coming home for their holidays the sister and brother began, about this time, the habit of acting charades together before the Griff household and the aunts, who were greatly impressed with the cleverness of the performance; and the girl was now recognized in the family circle as no ordinary child.<sup>16</sup>

I am indebted to Professor Barbara Hardy for pointing out that this anecdote, which Cross got either directly from ‘the girl’ during the last year of her life or from ‘the brother’ immediately afterwards, suggests an important way in which the Pearsons differed from the Dodsons.<sup>17</sup> While the fictional Dodsons are full of remarks about what happens to ‘little gels’ who show off, draw attention to themselves, or are otherwise outlandish, the Pearsons are ‘greatly impressed’ by the ‘cleverness’ of their niece and are happy to recognize that she is ‘no ordinary child’. Imagine how incongruous – impossible, actually – it would feel to hear those phrases



coming out of a Dodson mouth.

There is another piece of evidence that suggests that the Pearson aunts, or at least one of them in particular, were thoughtful and generous in ways that seem far removed from their Dodson doppelgängers. It turns on a subject that the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* tells us is a crucial part of the Dodson way of doing things – the leaving of ‘an unimpeachable will’. Here is the full reference, which appears in that key chapter ‘A Species of Protestantism Unknown to Bossuet’ during which the narrator stands back from the main action and considers the Dodsons in the broadest anthropological and historical terms.

To live respected, and have the proper bearers at your funeral, was an achievement of the ends of existence that would be entirely nullified if, on the reading of your will, you sank in the opinion of your fellow-men, either by turning out to be poorer than they expected, or by leaving your money in a capricious manner, without strict regard to degrees of kin. The right thing must always be done toward kindred. The right thing was to correct them severely, if they were other than a credit to the family, but still not to alienate from them the smallest rightful share in the family shoebuckles and other property.<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately we have the will of one of the Pearsons against which to test this set of criteria. Mary Evarard was the only Pearson sister who outlived her husband and the only one for whom I’ve been able to find a will.<sup>19</sup> The census for 1841 suggests that she had managed to attain the status that Mrs Glegg aspired to, that of being ‘a widow well left’.<sup>20</sup> Mrs Evarard is living in what had probably been the marital home, adjacent to the quarry that was the source of her late husband’s wealth. To look after her she employs an impressive three servants including a status-boosting man.<sup>21</sup>

Is Mrs Evarard’s will the sort of document of which a Dodson Aunt might be proud? In other words, did she divide her money ‘with perfect fairness among her own kin’? The answer is yes, but with important emphases that deserve further scrutiny. The childless Mrs Evarard’s will is certainly meticulous when it comes to describing exactly which household goods should go to which of her three nieces. Her ‘Dear Niece’ Elizabeth Hobday – Bessie Garner’s married name – gets Aunt Mary’s two silver gravy spoons, six table spoons, six desert spoons and the wardrobe in the back bedroom. Christiana Clarke – Eliot’s married sister Chrissie – gets the best bed, the looking glass and sofa in the parlour and the silver tea service. Mary Ann Evans – the future George Eliot – gets Mrs Evarard’s watch, twelve tea spoons and sugar bowls, a wardrobe, chest of drawers and the kitchen clock. Finally, she is also to have ‘Four Salt Spoons marked MP’. ‘MP’ was Mrs Evarard’s ‘maiden mark’ and stood for ‘Mary Pearson’, her name before she married John Evarard in 1812.<sup>22</sup>

Initialed household goods are, of course, a matter of almost obsessive concern to the Dodson Aunts in *The Mill on the Floss*. When the Tullivers’ domestic furnishings are sold following bankruptcy, it is the loss of her monogrammed linen and crockery that causes Mrs Tulliver most anguish. Specifically, it is the thought of them being bought up by the local ‘public house’, the Golden Lion, and put to use in the service of ‘travellers and folks, and my letters on it – see here, E.D. – and everybody to see ’em’ which tips her into paroxysms of grief. Moreover, this is a humiliation that her sisters keenly sympathize with for, as Aunt Pullet

agrees, 'shaking her head with deep sadness, "it's very bad – to think o' the family initials going about everywhere – it niver was so before"' .<sup>23</sup> So in the light of the Dodsons' anxiety about 'the family initials going about everywhere', it is fascinating to see the lengths to which Mary Evarard has gone to prevent this happening to her own monogrammed salt spoons. By leaving them to the niece whose Christian name she shares, Mrs Evarard ensures that her 'maiden mark' is less likely to come under the impertinent stare of 'strangers and travellers' but will, instead, stay anchored to a properly named body that has at least some Pearson blood running through its veins.

Other aspects of Mrs Evarard's will also reveal clear parallels between Dodson and Pearson family culture, especially concerning the importance of married women's control of their own money. In the novel Mrs Glegg sets great store by the fact that the money she brought into her marriage – Dodson money – is reserved for her own use, despite the fact that it legally belongs to her husband. Indeed, during one of their many marital spats, the most insulting thing that Mrs Glegg can think to hurl at her husband is that he only 'pretended to leave my money at my disposal'.<sup>24</sup> Evidence from Mr Evarard's will, however, reveals that he was scrupulous about honouring his wife's financial independence. In a codicil drawn up in 1839 to his original will of 1830 Mr Evarard specifically refers to the fact that Mary Pearson brought £1600 into the marriage, a sum that has 'been always considered the private Property of my said Wife although in law they [sic] are really mine'. He is 'desirous' that this state of affairs should continue after his death.<sup>25</sup>

Mrs Evarard was likewise determined to make sure that her own nieces (she had no children of her own) enjoyed the well-defined financial independence that she had herself enjoyed. In her original will, written promptly in the aftermath of her husband's death in 1840, she makes her three nieces, Bessie Garner, Chrissie Clarke and Mary Ann Evans her residual legatees and declares that 'the receipt alone of my said Nieces who shall be married shall be a sufficient discharge for their share without the concurrence of their Husbands and that the whole of the Bequests to my said Nieces shall be delivered into their own Hands'. In other words, Bessie and Chrissie are to be treated as if they are single rather than married women, and their husbands Edward Hobday and Edward Clarke are to have no control over this capital inheritance. But in a codicil to the will written three years later, Mrs Evarard changed the terms of the residual legacy. Instead of receiving a lump sum once the estate had been settled, each niece was to have the money invested by Mrs Evarard's executors and to receive the interest as annual income. Even then Mrs Evarard's imagination seems to have been haunted by the spectre of greedy or incompetent husbands. This income, her will states, is to be for each niece's 'separate use, independent of her Husband'. To underscore the point, Mrs Evarard further emphasizes that each woman is to be regarded as 'feme sole' rather than 'feme covert'.

Why was Mrs Evarard so obsessively concerned to ring-fence her nieces' money from their husbands? Inserting the provision about delivering bequests into the married nieces' own hands was now a reasonably common feature of middle class wills. But there is something mightily determined about the way in which Mrs Evarard repeats this point a further two times. In fact, the origins of her caution lay deep in the particular history of her own family and concerned the marriage of her favourite niece, Chrissie Evans Clarke. Under the terms of John Evarard's will, proved in 1840, Chrissie had been left a house in Attleborough – the only one of Evarard's

wife's nephews or nieces to be so favoured (his own nephews and nieces were of course another matter). But just two years later Chrissie's husband, a gentlemanly but financially inept doctor, sold the house to his father-in-law Robert Evans for £250.<sup>26</sup> The money was needed to pay off debt caused by extravagant living (the 1841 census shows the Clarke household employing a luxurious four servants – a single maid would have been more usual for a struggling country physician).<sup>27</sup> It wasn't enough. A few months later Clarke borrowed a further £800, with Evans recording grimly in his journal that if Clarke failed to repay the money 'it must be stoped out of my Daughters fortune after my Death'.<sup>28</sup>

Clarke never did manage to pay the money back and, indeed, by 1844 was even further indebted to his father-in-law when Robert Evans was obliged to take over paying the rent on the Clarkes' luxurious house in the nearby village of Meriden.<sup>29</sup> The next year he was formally declared bankrupt. So when Clarke himself died in 1853, Chrissie was virtually destitute. The Meriden house would of course have to be given up since there was no longer any need for the late doctor's family to keep up genteel appearances. It was decided that Chrissie and her six young children would move into the Attleborough house that had once briefly been hers but which had, on Robert Evans' death in 1849, passed to her younger brother Isaac. There Chrissie lived for the rest of her short life in wretched dependence on a younger brother who, while he probably did not charge her rent, was reluctant to make any but the most niggardly provision for her. Although a prosperous man, Isaac happily allowed his younger sister Mary Anne to make regular payments out of her modest annual income of £80 to fund a much-needed holiday for Chrissie, or to pay one of her daughter's school fees. Indeed, Isaac, putatively the model for Tom Tulliver, seems to have shared that 'conspicuous quality in the Dodson character' which believed that, while 'inconvenient kin' should never be deprived of their daily bread, they should be required 'to eat it with bitter herbs'.<sup>30</sup>

In the light of this information about Chrissie's disastrous marriage, Mary Evarard's will and its codicil starts to make sense as a way of heading off a scenario so terrifying that it would surely have caused the Dodsons to rise up in united fury: the use of Pearson money to pay off Clarke debts. Written in 1843 just as the full extent of Edward Clarke's financial mismanagement was becoming clear, two years before his final bankruptcy, the codicil was designed to ensure that Edward could not get his hands on Chrissie's capital. Instead that money would be invested for Chrissie not by her spendthrift husband but by her brother, whose full name is carefully given in the document as 'Isaac Pearson Evans', as if to underscore his connection to the upstanding, financially prudent Pearson clan. The second executor is another Pearson, Mrs Evarard's nephew John.

Mrs Evarard's will, then, demonstrates all the qualities associated with a Dodson – absolute fairness, an abiding belief in the right of married women to manage their own money – but adds some that we might not have expected. It is, in its own way, tactful. Mrs Evarard's codicil does not seek to shame her niece's husband by explaining why she has decided he should not be able to get his hands on Chrissie's legacy. Her object is, rather, to protect her own capital from being frittered away after her death and to ensure that her already desperately poor niece has at least some security in the form of a regular income.

It is salutary to compare this will of Mrs Evarard's with the one left by her brother-in-law

Robert Evans in 1849.<sup>31</sup> For Evans's will seems calculated to hurt and punish. The eldest four of his five children are bequeathed designated household items, ones which presumably carry a particularly strong associative value: thus the eldest boy Robert gets a six-volume History of England, second son Isaac receives an iron chest filled with maps and papers, while Frances is left some silver forks and Chrissie gets her late mother's Bible. But Mary Ann, the youngest, is coldly allotted only 'such part of my household goods (not here before disposed of) as she pleases to select but not to exceed in value the sum of one hundred pounds'. In other words, she is permitted to choose from whatever is left over once her siblings have claimed the choicest things. Whatever object she chooses will, in any case, mean less since it has not been chosen for her by her father.

The snub is deliberate, the result of Robert Evan's continuing anger at Mary Ann's decision to give up going to church eight years earlier which had triggered a crisis from which the Evans family never recovered. But there was worse to come. In addition to bequeathing his eldest daughter Frances Houghton some silver forks, Evans also left her his collection of Scott's novels. Walter Scott was Mary Ann's favourite author, a fact that Robert Evans knew perfectly well. In the last five years of his life, during all those dreary evenings at Bird Grove and in various seaside hotels, these were the novels from which his youngest daughter and constant companion had most often read aloud to him. It is hard, then, to avoid the conclusion that Robert Evans was deliberately trying to hurt Mary Ann by ostentatiously refusing to leave her the objects that had come to symbolize her devoted care for him. Instead they went to his equally bookish but far less attentive daughter, Fanny.

In addition Robert Evans seems to have paid no thought as to how his only unmarried daughter was going to support herself in the weeks immediately following his death. Mary Ann had, to be sure, been left £2000 capital which, when invested at 4%, would give her a life time's income of about £80 a year. But it would take many months before the estate could be wound up, the capital invested, and the first year's interest harvested. How would Mary Ann support herself until then? She would have no choice but to become entirely dependent on her brother Isaac, reduced to the humiliating status of a spinster sister helping out in the very house where she had once romped freely as a child. It was an uncomfortable prospect, but one which Robert Evans seemed unable – or unwilling – to discern.

In the end it was the Evans family solicitor, Vincent Holbeche, who spotted the potential difficulty and came up with a solution. He pointed out to Robert Evans that he was, in effect, leaving his youngest daughter temporarily destitute at his death and suggested that, instead of choosing household goods to the value of £100, she was given an almost immediate cash payment of £100. This would tide her over until her investment income started to trickle through over a year later.

In the end this £100 made a great difference to the course of Mary Ann's life. Rather than languishing at one of her siblings' houses after her father's death in March 1849 she was able to travel abroad for the first time and live independently for several months in Geneva. On her return at the end of that year she moved to London, and embarked on a career in journalism. None of these options would have been possible without that crucial £100, a fact of which Mary Ann remained aware years later. Writing to Holbeche in 1857 she thanks him for his

‘thoughtfulness’ in getting her father to alter his will, doubtless still remembering how stubborn – not to say vindictive – the old man could be.<sup>32</sup>

I want to finish with a final anecdote, one which both confirms certain similarities between the Dodson aunts and the Pearson sisters and suggests important ways in which they differed. Amongst archival material held by the George Eliot Fellowship I discovered a cutting in a 1959 edition of the Nuneaton Tribune which reported the sort of event that local papers are apt to report.

Memories of amateur dramatics in Nuneaton nearly 70 years ago have been recalled by the gift of a dress to the George Eliot Fellowship. This dress was originally owned by Mrs Richard Johnson of Marston Jabbett, an aunt of George Eliot, and the original of Mrs Pullett in *The Mill on the Floss*. It was handed down to Miss Lucy Clay Evans, afterwards Mrs W T Garratt of Astley Hall Farm, who wore it when she took the part of ‘Mrs Poyser’ in a performance of ‘Adam Bede’ at the Nuneaton Drill Hall in Mill Walk in October 1890.<sup>33</sup>

Now this is remarkable little passage. First, it is worth remarking that just ten years after Eliot’s death, the local community was mounting dramatized productions of her books, books whose stories and characters originate from within that very community. Here are people acting, if not themselves exactly, then certainly their aunts, uncles and grandparents. And the mood is one of commemoration. George Eliot’s reputation was plummeting by 1890 amongst the literary elite who deemed her books dreadfully high-minded and parochially old-fashioned. Yet in the local community it was a different story. Despite having every reason to feel offended by the way it had been portrayed as sectarian and narrow-minded in Eliot’s novels, Nuneaton radiated civic pride in its most celebrated daughter.

What, though, about that fascinating detail that a dress belonging to Mrs Johnson, the original of the fashionable Mrs Pullet, has been, ‘handed down’ to Miss Lucy Clay Evans? Research reveals that Lucy Evans was the daughter of the chief gardener at Arbury. Her grandfather, another Evans from Staffordshire/Derbyshire, was a cousin of Robert Evans and had been bailiff at Arbury during his tenure as land agent. She is, then, an Evans through and through.

So by what circuitous route did Lucy Evans come to be ‘handed down’ a dress from Mrs Johnson, a former Miss Pearson? The two were not, by any stretch of the imagination, blood relations. In truth we will probably never know. What we can say, however, is that the Dodsons’ obsession with parceling out their material goods according to exact degrees of kinship is in marked abeyance here. Mrs Johnson seems to have been positively skittish in her willingness to donate a dress to a girl with whom she had little connection. Could it be that the Pearson sisters were a more open-handed, open-hearted trio than any of us ever suspected?

#### Notes

- 1 This essay is a revised version of a talk given at *The Mill on the Floss* conference at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, November 2011.
- 2 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. Gordon S. Haight, with an introduction

- by Dinah Birch (Oxford: OUP, 1996), Book First, ch. 11, p. 9. All further references are to this edition.
- 3 See Kathryn Hughes, 'But Why Always Dorothea?', *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies* (September 2010), pp. 43-57.
  - 4 Mathilde Blind, *George Eliot* (London: W. H. Allen & Co, 1883), pp. 9-21.
  - 5 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), III, p. 177.
  - 6 J. W. Cross, *Life of George Eliot*, new ed. (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, n.d.), p. 7.
  - 7 Charles S. Olcott, *George Eliot: Scenes and People in her Novels* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1910), facing p. 94.
  - 8 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot* (Oxford: OUP, 1968), p. 2.
  - 9 *Mill*, Book Fourth, ch. 1, p. 272.
  - 10 Ages of brides are not given in parish registers. I have calculated these using date of marriage and date of birth.
  - 11 *Mill*, Book First, ch. 6, p. 43.
  - 12 *Ibid*, Book First, ch. 8, p. 80.
  - 13 Robert Evans diary, 13 Oct 1830 - 9 June 1832, held at Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery.
  - 14 See Anon., [John Astley] Nuneaton Diary: Memorandum Book of Occurrences 1810-1845, transcripts held at Nuneaton Library.
  - 15 *Mill*, Book Third, ch. 3, p. 209.
  - 16 Cross, *Life*, p. 12.
  - 17 Private correspondence with Professor Barbara Hardy.
  - 18 *Mill*, Book Fourth, ch. 1, p. 274.
  - 19 Mary Evarard, Will, 9 March 1840, codicil 18 December 1843, proved 14 February 1845.
  - 20 *Mill*, Book First, ch. 14, p. 127.
  - 21 Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Piece: HO107/1127/20 Place: Folio: 32 Page: 14
  - 22 *Mill*, Book First, ch. 9, 96.

- 23 *Ibid*, Book Third, ch. 3, p. 213.
- 24 *Ibid*, Book Third, ch. 3, p. 214.
- 25 John Evarard, codicil 29 October, 1830, proved 20 March 1840.
- 26 Haight, *Life*, p. 33.
- 27 Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Class: *HO107*; Piece: 2063; Folio: 315; Page: 11
- 28 Quoted in Haight, *Life*, p. 33.
- 29 Robert Evans, Will, 28 September, 1844.
- 30 *Mill*, Book Third, ch. 1, p. 275.
- 31 Robert Evans, Will, 28 September 1844; codicil, 5 January 1849, proved 24 November 1849.
- 32 *GEL*, 11, p. 346.
- 33 Dorothy Dodds, notebook, in possession of George Eliot Fellowship, on loan to author.