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A LIFE RECLAIMED: GEORGE EVANS (1766-1857) OF NORBURY, WINSTER, DERBY AND BELPER

By Rosemary J. Burges Woods

George Evans, the elder brother of Robert Evans, George Eliot's father, has generally been disparaged as a drunkard who died young, but the following account of further research into his life aims to set the record straight. What is known for certain is that he died on 28 October 1857 at his daughter's house in Swinney Lane, Belper, Derbyshire, and was buried in the Churchyard of St Peter's Parish Church at Belper. He was 90 years of age. On the death certificate his occupation is given as 'A shoemaker at Derby (Master)'.

The immediate descendants of his daughter, Elizabeth, knew that there was a definite link between 'their' Evans and the Norbury Evans family and that Elizabeth was a first cousin of Mary Ann – although they were unable to piece together her exact background and history. It was fortunate that her father's Bible, with pages giving birth and death entries from 1800 to 1857, passed down to her son, William Wheeldon, to his daughter Florence Annie and to her son Dr Douglas Woods (father of John Woods, a current member of the George Eliot Fellowship). These entries in George Evans's Bible provided the crucial information needed to begin the current investigation.

The Wheeldons of Belper were proud of their connection with the great writer. Florence encouraged her three sons to read the Eliot novels 'because she was family', saying that when she herself was a child (in the late 1870s and 80s) there was always much talk at home about Mary Ann. The Wheeldons were acquainted with Herbert Spencer and Florence was pleased to tell her sons that 'her father, William Wheeldon, had brought her from Belper to take tea with Herbert Spencer at his home in Derby'.¹ Herbert Spencer's father was secretary to the Derby Philosophical Society – founded by Dr Erasmus Darwin of Derby and William Strutt² – and William Wheeldon, a thinking as well as a practical man, had an interest in Darwinism and spiritualism. It would be surprising if his Evans ancestry were not also a topic of conversation.

Research carried out by later generations of the Wheeldon family and by Dr Woods was unquestionably deflected and thrown off course by accounts of alcoholism and the early demise of George Evans of Norbury, elder brother of Robert and uncle of Mary Ann. In 'The True Story of George Eliot', written by Rev. William Mottram – a sermonizing Methodist minister of the late nineteenth century and descendant of the youngest sister, Ann Evans – George Evans is cast as pariah:

The eldest brother was a generous good-hearted fellow, but the blighting and paralysing temptation of strong drink fastened its cruel fangs on him in early manhood. In consequence of this evil he did not make the best of his life, and was the only one of the brothers who did not survive to old age.³

The Rev. Mottram declares that George Evans (providentially but astoundingly, given his apparent fondness for liquor) was converted to Methodism before he died and was interred in the burial ground of the Methodist chapel at Snelstone, a village close to Norbury.

This portrayal of him, as black sheep and incurable inebriate who died young, has become the fixed and unalterable one. Later biographers have continued in the same vein and

have even added to the opprobrium. The entry for 'Bede, Matthias (Thias)' in *A George Eliot Dictionary* refers to him as a drunkard and the real-life model for the character of Thias:

George Evans, father of Robert Evans (Adam Bede), has been suggested as the original for Thias Bede, but there is no evidence to bear this out, as George Evans was a man of steady character, not a drunkard. An uncle of George Eliot's was drowned in the same way as Thias Bede and that probably furnished the suggestion for Thias' death.⁴

Marghanita Laski states that George Evans 'went off to nearby Rocester, drank heavily and died young'; and she too consigns him to 'that watery death':⁵

Though Robert Evans' father died at his son William's house in Ellastone in 1830 at the age of ninety, he has been widely named as the original of 'Thias Bede – but it is tempting to substitute his eldest son George, who took to drink and died young'.⁶

The eldest son's rejection of family tradition and the disapprobation of the father is emphasized in Ina Taylor's biography:

it is evident that George Evans was a man of exceptional ability who imparted to four of his sons the necessary talent and ambition to develop impressive careers. Only his eldest son [...] disappointed him, and George Evans junior's career is shrouded in secrecy. He refused to toe the line, rejected involvement in the family carpentry business and went off in pursuit of his own ideas. As happened a generation later when his niece Mary Ann chose an independent line, the family were disgusted with his way of life and cast him off. No mention of this black sheep was ever made, no visits were paid, and when he died young, no assistance was given to the seven children he left.⁷

In the two Eliot biographies of the 1990s, Rosemary Ashton (guardedly) refers to 'one story' of drunkenness and disgrace,⁸ and Kathryn Hughes describes George Evans junior as 'unsteady'; she writes that he 'boycotted the family's carpentry business and there was talk of heavy drinking' and that after his death 'the Evans clan turned its collective and implacable back on his young children'.⁹

There are some elements of the brief life portrayed in these accounts which correspond with the facts. George Evans was undoubtedly a maverick, who turned his back (for whatever reason) on kith and kin and left his home village of Norbury; and he certainly took up a different trade from that of his father and brothers. Then it seems that he disappeared altogether from view, covered his tracks and, as far as his Norbury family was concerned, left no trace (there is evidence of a George Evans in Rocester in the late 1790s and early 1800s but it is not the same man). This was not the only instance of a deep rift opening up within the Evans family.

The tales of heavy drinking and alcoholism do however conflict with the evidence presented below. George Evans may have been a carouser and drinker in his youth but he could not have been an immoderate one if he actually lived to be ninety. Where is the primary evidence to support these claims and the accounts of his early death, either as a Methodist convert or as a hopeless drunkard – or were the later versions based solely on Rev. Mottram's tirade (with a more sensational ending) or even on rumour? And what became of his numerous offspring, apparently abandoned by the Evans clan after he 'died'?

The actual history of George Evans is less dramatic and his death far less sudden. His

life was unremarkable, apart from his longevity, his (apparent) robust health and work routine well into his eighties and his somewhat unconventional domestic 'set-up'. Although only the bare bones of his existence have been uncovered, the findings are sufficient to put the record straight.

George Evans was baptized on 2 November 1766 at the church of St Mary and St Barlock in Norbury, Derbyshire. He was the third child and eldest son of George Evans and Mary née Leech and his home was at Roston Common, Norbury. (The house, now called 'Adam Bede Cottage', and the adjoining workshops of his father are still there). We know that in the mid to late 1790s he went to live in the lead-mining village of Winster in the parish of Youlgreave, about sixteen miles north of Norbury. During the time that he spent in Winster (at least fifteen years) he most likely learned his new trade, that of shoemaking. He was either acquainted with the Evans family of Winster before he settled there or developed a close friendship with them, as the deaths of several members of that family were recorded in his own Bible. It is evident from the script on these pages and the composition of a sixteen line poem, that the subscriber, albeit only a humble shoe-maker, had received a good basic schooling.

In 1805 he married Ellen Wheeldon at Chesterfield and in the next few years four children were born to them at Winster: George, Richard, William and Hannah, who died the same day. In his Bible he wrote the names, dates and precise times of their births. On 1 June 1814 a fifth birth was recorded. The baby's name inscribed on the Bible page was Hannah and she was born, not at Winster but at Derby. The mother of the baby was Elizabeth Evans, daughter of Anthony Evans of Winster.¹⁰ She was forty years of age. This birth was also recorded in the register of Derby Infirmary for 1 June and the baby was named Elizabeth. The entire family, including Elizabeth and her baby, then left Winster and went north to Stockport in Cheshire. The eldest boy, twelve year old George Evans, died there in 1818 and was buried in St Mary's churchyard.

By the mid-1820s they were living in Derby and George Evans was listed in the trade directories as Boot and Shoemaker, of Bloom Street. Between 1827 and 1835 he suffered the loss of his two other sons, William (aged seventeen) and Richard (aged twenty one), his wife Ellen and Elizabeth Evans. All were buried in St Werbergh's churchyard in Derby. The only remaining child, Elizabeth, daughter of Elizabeth Evans, married John Wheeldon¹¹ at St Michael's Church, Derby in 1837 (the very first marriage recorded in Derby Register Office). The name of the bride's father on the marriage certificate is George Evans, shoemaker.

In 1841 George Evans was resident at his daughter's house in Swinney Lane, Belper. On the census of that year he gave his occupation as shoemaker and his age (wrongly) as '61'. He returned to Derby and ten years later was still working, as a cordwainer in the parish of St Peter's. On the 1851 census he gave his age (wrongly) as '79' and his place of birth (wrongly) as Winster. He died, aged ninety, at Elizabeth's house in Belper on 28 October 1857 and was buried the following day in St Peter's churchyard. On the certificate the cause of death was given as 'decay of natural'. He had lived one year longer than his father and had outlived all of his younger brothers except Samuel, who died the next year.

John Wheeldon and Elizabeth remained in Belper where John worked as a carpenter, joiner and cabinet maker. Their three sons, Henry, George and William became builders and founded a large building and contracting business, employing over fifty men and boys. Many of the public buildings in that area of Derbyshire were constructed by Wheeldon Bros Ltd. There is a certain irony in the knowledge that the career in carpentry, building and construction,

mapped out (in all probability) for George Evans junior, was the one eagerly taken up by his son-in-law and grandsons. He lived long enough to see his grandsons learning the trade but not long enough to see them establish a successful business, similar to the one set up by his father and brother, William in Ellastone. The tradition and the skills had continued down the line, despite skipping a generation.

As for Florence Annie Wheeldon, grand-daughter of Elizabeth Evans, she married an architect and surveyor and became part of the Woods family, members of which have collaborated on producing this article.

Notes

- 1 From an account written by William Henry Woods, youngest son of Florence Annie Woods (née Wheeldon).
- 2 Dr Erasmus Darwin was the grandfather of Charles Darwin. William Strutt was an engineer, cotton manufacturer and mill-owner at Belper and the son of Jedediah Strutt, who had collaborated with Arkwright to build the first water powered cotton spinning mills.
- 3 Rev. William Mottram, *The True Story of George Eliot* (London, 1905).
- 4 *A George Eliot Dictionary*, ed. Isadore G. Mudge and M.E. Sears (London, 1924)
- 5 *Adam Bede*, chapter 4.
- 6 Marghanita Laski, *George Eliot and her World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 65.
- 7 Ina Taylor, *George Eliot: Woman of Contradictions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 2.
- 8 Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), p. 179.
- 9 Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 9.
- 10 Little is known about Anthony Evans, other than his birth date (1733) and his death date (1797), which was recorded in George Evans's Bible, together with the deaths of his wife, Sarah and two of his nine children in 1801. Anthony's father was Robert Evans and his grandparents were Anthony Evans, yeoman farmer and lead-mine entrepreneur and Hannah Ferne of Bonsall. The wealthy Evans family of Darley Abbey, including Thomas Evans (1723-1814), banker and cotton manufacturer, descended from their eldest son Edmund. Anthony and Hannah Evans were the third great-grandparents of Florence Nightingale. There is evidence of Evans in Winster from the mid seventeenth century (from wills and parish records) but they may have been there long before that. There was no apparent connection with the Norbury Evans – at least not until George Evans of Norbury went there.
- 11 The Wheeldons had also originated in Winster but they left the village around 1789 and

went to Darley Dale, Hulme and Derby. John Wheeldon's father, Joseph, came to Belper and worked as a millwright at Strutt's Mill. The Wheeldons were tenants of a house in 'The Clusters', built by the Strutts for the overseers at the mill.