2012

Review of George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections

K.K. Collins

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/619

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

In his introduction to this fascinating collection of accounts and comments by those who met George Eliot, K. K. Collins points out that modern biographies draw on about forty recollections that have come to form a canon of reminiscence. To this canon his volume adds a large number of unfamiliar sources, arranging more than two hundred items in sections which follow the chronology of her career, with subdivisions for the years of her fame under headings such as ‘Sunday Gatherings at the Priory’ and ‘Eton, Cambridge and Oxford’, and with full and helpful annotation of names and details. Of the canonical sources, he has omitted John Chapman’s diary and Edith Simcox’s ‘Autobiography of a Shirt-Maker’ as too extensive and self-contained to provide excerpts appropriate for this collection; but instead he presents, for instance, a hitherto unknown and surprisingly friendly account of the young Marian Evans by Chapman’s wife Susanna. Writing in 1881, she recalls the future novelist, ‘small in person, and always beautifully neat in her dress’, engaging in cheerful conversation over the breakfast table and sharing her hostess’s joke that she, Marian, used too much soap because ‘she seemed to have washed all the colour out of her face’. According to Susanna, ‘she never took very kindly’ to the work of editing the Westminster Review, but ‘used often to say to me that it was the great ambition of her life to write a good novel, and when any book was under discussion she would remark “I hope I may do better than that!”’ (p. 28). If this may raise the suspicion of being a retrospective construction, other details have an authentic ring, such as Marian consoling Susanna, who was caring for a dying aunt, by maintaining that ‘you will never regret your labour of love’, and claiming that her own greatest consolation was ‘in looking back at the time when I nursed my father in his last illness’ (p. 29). There is a liveliness to this reminiscence that comes from its incidental details, like the joke about the soap, or the expression of disgust on Marian’s face when she is detained by an American with a dreadful pun: ‘Why is Punch like a dealer in hardware? [...] Because he deals in irony!’

Descriptions of George Eliot tend to highlight the same points – the heavy jaw, the face that lights up when she speaks, the low, sweet voice – but evaluate her features differently. Many find them plain, some even ugly, but Bret Harte, expecting plainness, ‘found them only strong, intellectual, and noble – indeed, I have seldom seen a grander face!’ (p. 210). Comparisons to Dante and Savonarola abound, the most memorable being perhaps Robert Browning’s when he was overheard at a reception stating that ‘She has the nose of Dante, the mouth of Savonarola, and the mind of Plato’ (p. 124). Most of those who met her at the Priory were powerfully impressed, many noting, like the future publisher Charles Kegan Paul, that her ‘every sentence was as complete, as fully formed, as though written in her published works’, although few could recall anything specific or remarkable that she actually said. The benefits of her conversation seem to have been tonic in a more general way. The publisher George Smith remarked on the stimulating effect of talking to her which left him feeling more intelligent than when he entered the Priory, a feeling shared by George du Maurier, the young mathematician Soph’ia V. Kovalevskia and the Irish historian Justin McCarthy, who found that she made him talk with a fluency that surprised him.

Many visitors noted her refusal to talk about her own works, but McCarthy tells a different story. When his young daughter ‘with the unconscious audacity of childhood, bluntly asked the great authoress which of her novels she herself liked best; [...] George Eliot sweetly told her that she liked “Silas Marner” best’ (p. 115), and there followed a conversation about
that novel which the author herself joined in, although, sadly, nothing of what she said was recorded. On another occasion, in Harrogate, she is reported to have replied to a question about which of her works she thought the best by answering, *The Spanish Gypsy* – an answer that underlines how authors are seldom the best judges of their own work.

Most of the recollections seek to honour the great writer, and the unanimity of admiring testimony lends a particular interest to the occasional dissenting voice. Eliza Lynn Linton’s is well-known, but many of the others are American, reacting critically perhaps to English reserve. One American journalist, Grace Greenwood, looking back from the 1890s to her encounter with Marian Evans at John Chapman’s in the early 1850s, recalls that ‘Miss Evans seemed to me to the last lofty and cold. I felt that her head was among the stars – the stars of a winter night’ (p. 39). An anonymous American lady met the novelist in 1875 and found her manner ‘abrupt and harsh’, and was so unimpressed that she ‘took quite a dislike to her’ (p. 126). The American textile and interior designer Candace Wheeler was more nuanced but was struck by a lack of sympathy, finding the Leweses ‘very pleasant, but self-absorbed and unsympathetic, as we count the outgiving of human kindness’ (p. 186). G. H. Lewes himself is often the object of criticism particularly from members of the English establishment like the Cambridge don, Sedley Taylor, who thinks him ‘inordinately conceited’ and, even though he is ‘clever and interesting and overflowing with knowledge’, finds him ‘quite insupportable’ (p. 171). Lewes’s vanity, noted even by the sympathetic Susanna Chapman, is frequently cited, as by the future civil servant Almeric Fitzroy, at that time a student, who observes that he ‘was always seeking to absorb the interest of the company by drawing attention to himself instead of allowing it to concentrate on the lady’ (p. 149). Although most visitors bear witness to Lewes’s devotion to his partner, the discrepancy between the two of them is well observed by Joseph Jacobs who, in 1877, was struck ‘by the contrast between the boisterous Bohemian bonhomie of George Lewes and the almost old-maidish refinement of his life’s companion’ (p. 113).

It is a mark of K. K. Collins’s fine editing that, when George Smith comments on how George Eliot was sometimes uneasily conscious of the social price she had paid for living with Lewes, the footnote refers us to two other little-known comments along the same lines by people who knew them.

An important feature of this collection is the inclusion of little-known sources such as Benjamin Jowett’s manuscript notes on his conversations with George Eliot in her later years. These show, among other things, how in the last year of her life she is still at pains ‘to diffuse herself’ Dorothea-like, and ‘to pour into the lives of others more than was contained or could be contained in any single one’ (p. 204). She maintains to the end the novelist’s curiosity about life, insisting to Barbara Bodichon that ‘the world was so intensely interesting’ (p. 200). The same tribute can be paid to this volume, which brings to fascinating life the small world of the novelist and her circle of friends, acquaintances and admirers. Collins’s editing is exemplary, and the pedant can find only the occasional detail to quibble about – a redundant definite article that has insinuated itself, as it often does, into *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, and a mistranscription, or misprint, of the German word ‘oft’ as ‘aft’ on p. 45. Altogether this collection will prove an invaluable resource for scholars and future biographers of the novelist and a rich fund of interest for all George Eliot enthusiasts.

**John Rignall**

**University of Warwick**