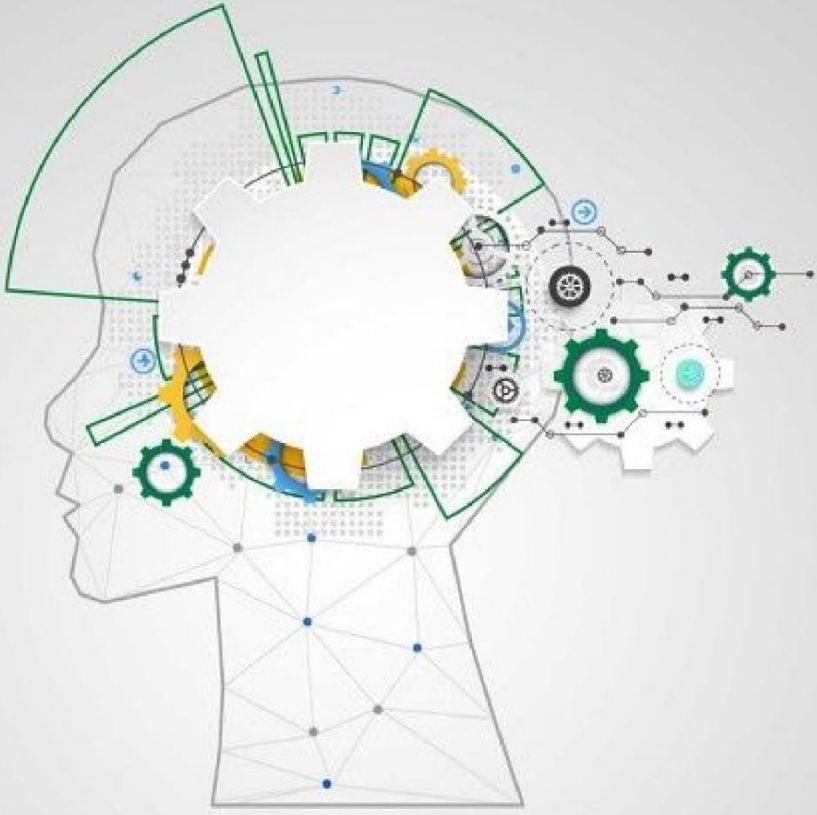
EDITED BY

Jerret Engle



THE WISDOM OF GEORGE ELIOT

CITADEL PRESS books are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
850 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Library of Congress Control Number: 2002100671
ISBN: 978-0-8065-2389-7

Table of Contents

FOREWORD

The World of George Eliot

In 1857, Marian Evans allowed her friend and companion George Lewes to submit stories she had written to an influential publisher he knew named John Blackwell. The stories, which she titled *Scenes of Clerical Life,* were attributed to "George Eliot," a pseudonym she had created for herself. Although she was already a published essayist and working editor, Marian was apprehensive about the project.

". . . If George Eliot turns out to be a dull dog and an ineffective writer—a mere flash in the pan—I, for one, am determined to cut him on the first intimation of that disagreeable fact," she wrote.

She needn't have worried. Far from a folly, *Scenes of Clerical Life* marked the birth of one of the world's most influential fiction writers and the beginning of a literary legend.

Today, George Eliot's work is found in most modern libraries and collections—not in dusty corners, but in well-traveled spots—a dog-eared paperback or threadbare hardcover exhausted by countless readers. Why has George Eliot endured? To her fans, George Eliot is a world as much as a writer. Her staying power is the uncanny reality of her characters' inner lives. At her best, Eliot gives us characters whose worlds may be radically different from our own, but who struggle with the same dilemmas of intellect and spirit we ourselves tangle with daily.

The quotable heart of Eliot lies in the very personal commentary she adds to her stories. While many authors use

an all-knowing voice to comment on the action, Eliot's voice has a gentle empathy as well as a unique ability to take the situation so acutely observed to another level. She pinpoints common moments in all our lives and frequently adds a stunning glimmer of perspective. By the end of an Eliot novel, the reader feels a closeness and trust in this voice, like a good friend whose instincts rarely fail you.

This trust was a major reason for George Eliot's enormous popularity in the 1860s and '70s. The height of Victorian England and its soul-rattling Industrial Revolution was a period of tumultuous social change. Eliot's Victorian fans not only read her books, but wrote her countless letters, sharing their own fears and asking for sympathy and advice.

As the twentieth century got under way, Eliot's work seemed to some readers to be speaking more of a life gone by —certainly not of the infinite possibilities of that auspicious century. George Eliot fell from favor for a time. But as readers became increasingly apprehensive of the approaching Age of Technology, Eliot began to ring remarkably true once more. Writing between world wars, Virginia Woolf called Eliot's masterpiece *Middlemarch* "one of the first English novels written for grown-up people." More "grown-up" doubts about the individual's place in perilous times soon emerged. As the century progressed, George Eliot was quoted, studied by scholars, and read with enthusiasm and identification. Her popularity hit rough waters again in the turbulent 1960s and '70s, when her ardent belief in basic social values ran counter to the revolutionary tenor of those times. Individualistic to the core, Eliot had been fundamentally leery of movements, even early feminism.

But interest in Eliot rekindled as the century waned and

continues as a new one begins because as we look for a moral and spiritual path through our present, some of the questions examined in Eliot's world remain uncannily contemporary. Eliot's passionate mission as arbiter between our personal journeys and society's demands and expectations continually grows more poignant. Could Marian Evans have dreamt of more for George Eliot? She would be proud.

The Real George Eliot

So who was this remarkable Marian Evans and how did she become the moral and spiritual conscience of a generation? So many generations? Her life reads like her novels: a story of great and ambitious aspirations, played out on a small, constricting stage. Like the stories of George Eliot, Marian Evans was deceptively simple and genuinely complex.

She was born Mary Anne Evans, in England, in late 1819 (she always said 1820), the youngest of a large, rather rambling family (her father had married twice). Robert Evans, her father, managed a large estate in Warwickshire for a noble family, and was well respected. His job made him something of a broker between classes. He knew and worked with the dairymen, farmers, weavers, and ribbon makers of the community as well as the aristocrats and clergy. Mr. Evans had a social fluency rare for England at that time and, as his daughter, so did young Mary Anne. While making the rounds with her father, she'd get treats from the aristocrats and their servants, and gossip from the dairymaids and field hands. While other Victorian writers saw an England of two major classes—the rich and poor—Mary Anne would one day write of an England peopled with a myriad of subtle classes

and distinctions, based fundamentally on this childhood look at sociology. From her perspective, simple spirits could envision limitless horizons and even the privileged led constricted lives. Her beloved father showed her the territory.

But Mary Anne and her father were on a collision course. Mr. Evans was not an intellectual particularly and neither, by all sketchy reports, was his second wife and Mary Anne's mother, Christiana. Still, they sent Mary Anne to the best local schools. These weren't much of a challenge to the extremely bright and restless child. Under the tutelage of a soon-beloved local teacher named Maria Lewis, eager "Mary Ann" became devoutly Evangelical, and the e in her Anne a frivolity. It was dropped. (Much comment has been made of her habit of revising her name, seemingly to signpost momentous changes in her life.) Like most of the projects of Mary Ann's passionate life, she went for Evangelism wholeheartedly. She soon forbade herself even minor fun, as well as novels and music. She became rather a stick in the mud about anybody else having a good time either. All of this was undoubtedly trying at times, but conflicts over Evangelism were not when she and her father would come to blows.

After a few years, Mary Ann's nimble mind had pretty much run through the major Evangelical quandaries and begun to question its confident absolutes. It was then, when Mary Ann was only sixteen, that her mother became ill and died and Mary Ann's schooling was dropped so that she could take over the household. Her father indulged her in weekly Italian and German lessons and supported her voracious reading habit, but he expected her to run the household and

care for his needs. Mary Ann's older siblings were mostly gone from home by then, and even her idolized brother Isaac was about to marry. The aging Mr. Evans had begun giving over his duties to Isaac, looking to help his son and rest on his considerable local laurels. Soon it made sense for Mary Ann and her father to give the homestead, Griff, to Isaac and his new bride and move to a smaller house in nearby Coventry. It made sense, but it was painfully lonely at first for Mary Ann. Her father became active in the local church, at least in part to help their social connections.

Coventry, however, had a silver lining. It was there Mary Ann met the Brays and the Hennells, two young, eccentric, freethinking families who loved ideas and loved to question existing notions. The Brays' home, Rosehill, had become a magnet for young liberals passing through Coventry, and even for an original-thinking foreign visitor like the American Ralph Waldo Emerson. Mary Ann's headfirst dive into friendship with the Brays and Hennells would set a pattern for relationships throughout her life: her enthusiasm for the ideas they shared manifested in a passionate, if somewhat mercurial, attachment.

Charles Hennell had written a controversial book challenging literal Biblical interpretations of Jesus' life and miracles. His book intrigued the impressionable Mary Ann and fueled her growing doubts about Evangelism. Most excitingly, her interest led to talk—dinners, debates, and letters—that challenged her extensive, if self-propelled, scholarship on the subject. Matters intensified as she also developed a crush (at the very least, depending on her biographer), on Charles Bray, Hennell's married brother-in-law. It is certain they talked often and avidly. On January 2,

1842—coincidentally while her old religious mentor, Maria Lewis, was visiting—Mary Ann reached a turning point. She announced that, due to a profound change in her convictions, she was not going to church. And her previously patient and even indulgent father was furious.

It is so like a George Eliot novel that this date was documented and is still cited today for the earthshaking crisis it precipitated in Mary Ann's life and, in some part, in the small town of Coventry. Mary Ann came to call the crisis her declaration spurred "The Holy Wars." Essentially, her father (not actually much of a church man himself until then) was appalled. Not going to church didn't look good to the community, where he was trying to install himself, and it wasn't going to help Mary Ann find an eligible match. And that was yet another story.

Mary Ann Evans was not pretty. Her father, whom she seems to resemble from photographs, was a reasonably handsome man. Unfortunately, the same features that worked well for him were something of a disaster for Mary Ann. Pictures of Mary Ann when she had become "Marian" and was famous and flattered show a dismally uncomfortable woman with a large-featured, sensitive face, frankly unflattering hair, and insecure, complicated clothing. Nothing about Victorian fashion helped Marian, or Mary Ann before her. Her intelligence was reportedly always apparent and appealing, but Mary Ann Evans was plain and she knew it. Throughout her entire life she tried very hard to not let it bother her or determine her fate, but she was never secure enough to honestly have said it didn't matter. In the end, her intellect did triumph, but her homeliness extracted a heavy price.

At the time of the Holy Wars, her plain looks also underscored her precarious position as a twenty-one-year-old single, young lady living with her father. She was significantly without "prospects" (at least those she would consider) and dangerously close to spinsterhood. This was not the ideal position from which to launch an iconoclastic philosophical campaign. It could only irritate and tantalize the neighbors. The world did not seem to acknowledge the importance of Mary Ann's moral crisis. Most critically, her father thought it absurd. He stopped talking to Mary Ann and even seemed, at one point, to be planning to move to another, smaller home—without her. It's worth pointing out that in Victorian times, such a young lady did not strike out on her own.

The Holy War was Mary Ann's first experience with the limits of philosophical discourse, and it was to be a powerful one. Though she agonized mightily, she knew that she didn't have a lot of options. In the end, she compromised. She agreed to begin attending church with her father, even as she insisted he understand that it was an act of duty to him and not religious devotion. Her father accepted, but apparently not with appreciable gratitude, and their relationship was never the same again. Mary Ann took refuge in her friends Cara Bray and Sara Hennell to find comforting sympathy for the painful compromise. But she had marked herself in the community of Coventry as "odd" and "headstrong." On top of "plain," those labels apparently sealed her fate there, and she cared for her aging father, with only spinsterhood looming before her, until his death in 1849 when she was twenty-nine years old.

To soothe her thwarted sense of mission during this long

officially began.

With the Strauss translation as her professional credit, Mary Ann adopted the more sophisticated name "Marian" and took on the job of assistant to her publisher, John Chapman, also, incidently, the landlord of 142. Working for little more than room and board, Marian was soon indispensable to the flamboyant, if not particularly talented Chapman, and she was instrumental in making his magazine, *The Westminster Review,* a success. Chapman soon recognized this, as did his writers. But in the tradition of the time, Marian's role was uncredited, and so were the essays she began to contribute to the magazine. (Both sexes then wrote in such publications anonymously.) Still, what today would seem untenable was then a remarkable opportunity for a bright young woman.

Marian thrived in this working relationship and Chapman quickly came to value her absolutely. The problem (a recurrent one in her life) was that Marian fell in love. Chapman can't be said to have discouraged her, but he already had a jealous wife and mistress (and there were various rumors about other women boarders at 142). He did not want to risk everything for the unenticing Marian. After a brief affair she was sent ignominiously into exile, (this time she did land at Rosehill) only to be called back a few months later as Chapman discovered he really could not publish his magazine without her. The terms of their relationship were "clarified," and Marian set back to work.

The pain of all this is apparent, and it wasn't even a first for Marian. Besides her crushes on Charles Bray and Charles Hennell, she had been humiliatingly dispatched from another household she visited when her relationship with Hennell's


image
not
available

George Lewes's minds that the George Eliot pseudonym was a necessary device. Marian was insecure enough about the fiction venture itself, and she was reluctant to further burden it with the scandal attached to her own name. Surely, she thought, if she signed her name, the work would be looked at strictly through the lens of her story—as a curiosity, not a work of art in its own right. She had her way. The book earned enough respect from Blackwell for him to encourage Lewes to send on further work from his friend, "the clergyman."

Eliot's second work, *Adam Bede,* stayed in the same world, but with more conviction and ambition. *Adam Bede* is the work that made George Eliot's reputation and forever changed Marian Evans's life. The vivid peasant characters and the illegitimate birth in its plot were unusual and considered rather scandalous by some. Yet people identified deeply with this story and the issues of love, class, and fidelity that it raised. Even Queen Victoria was a fan. Blackwell thought it strong and was eager to support it, but was probably surprised by its widespread popularity. He had lucked into a book that spoke to its times. Soon readers were clamoring to know who this George Eliot was.

Still intensely insecure, Marian was gratified by and proud of the response to *Adam Bede* but in no mind to give away her cover. Lewes himself was delighted and seems to have enjoyed his role in the deception. He was also very aware of Marian's sensitivity to criticism, and carefully filtered any even slightly critical reviews. Happily, there were many encouraging notices to share, and Marian was inspired in her third book, *Mill on the Floss,* to not only stay in her beloved Warwickshire territory, but to use many events in her own

life. *Mill on the Floss* is a compendium of the pains of growing up, early love, and favorite Eliot themes like family love (and its limits) and fidelity to friends. Blackwell was delighted with it and eager to get it into print. By then he knew who George Eliot was, but was happy to help keep the secret.

This had become difficult Marian and Lewes found themselves unable to avoid the evolving dilemma of a seedy, Warwickshire pastor named Joseph Liggins who humbly claimed to be the real George Eliot. As much as Marian wanted the protection of her pseudonym, her pride and ambition would not let someone else take credit for George Eliot. Gossip raged again. Strangers stepped forward and claimed that they were the models for characters from the books. Worst of all, there were even some insiders who whispered that Marian Evans had written the books but was too ashamed of her private life to own up. Marian wrote letters and an unsigned editorial disputing Liggins's claims, but things had gone too far. With Blackwell's somewhat reluctant encouragement, George Eliot's identity was revealed. By the time *Mill on the Floss* was published, everyone knew who George Eliot was. The book still sold well and earned praise, leaving Marian relieved and gratified. But the pseudonym was not retired.

The World and George Eliot

The secrecy surrounding George Eliot tried many of Marian's close friendships. As the ruckus died down, most of her closest friends gradually reacted with measured support. Many belatedly claimed they had guessed the truth. Some enjoyed her newfound fame, but if Marian hoped the


image
not
available