

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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A Victorian Novelist

If George Eliot was born into a great time she did her utmost to make it real to us. There is hardly anyone more accurate and informing than she as a delineator of the rural life of England in the earlier part of the last century. She had the power of representing that life as it was, and as she knew it, and she exercised that power to the utmost. Her early life fell in a time of crisis and unrest. The French wars that made rural life so easy, and farming such a prosperous occupation, had come to an end. But though the laborers suffered, the farmers were still carrying on their comfortable existence, and the landowners were happy, since rents were still high. None of these country folk realized

that all the time a great industrial revolution was brewing, and they took no account of the misery that had developed in manufacturing districts—misery that Disraeli describes so well. George Eliot's English tales are mostly about rural villages or market towns such as she knew best, and though Dinah Morris and the Rev. Mr. Tryan went deliberately to work in forlorn towns like Snowfield, these towns are never so real to us as the pleasant villages of the rich midland pasture-land. The interest of George Eliot's novels is that she tells of the placidity that one associates with the picturesque life described by Dickens, but from another angle. A hundred years ago coaches were still in full swing and steam-engines half a horrid dread and half a possible coming excitement. George Eliot herself had lived the perfectly happy country life, was well fed and well clad, and yet deep down in her nature there was the same rebellious self that was springing up in all around her, and that shouted aloud for liberty. She was no fanatic—no iconoclast. She loved her images too well to break them! but she knew that the surface which she could describe better than almost any of her fellows was not the whole. That is what gives her writing so much reality for her times and ours. She had the power of expressing herself in wonderful, telling sentences, full of pith but never exaggerated, and she used her powers to show us what life was and is—that with an apparently untroubled surface such as a backwater society presents, life may be a tremendously deep and complicated matter, full of influences of which it itself is scarcely sensible.

Now this is apt in these days to be called a high-brow view of life, for which the young generation has little use. George Eliot possibly just missed being a pedant because of her enormous sympathy with actual human beings and their doings. She had not for nothing given up her impressionable young womanhood to the study of philosophy. That is to say, she had gone about her life-work in a way opposite to that of most writers of her kind. She looked first and foremost deep down into the heart of the things she wrote of, and not at their surface significance. Her characters are like those of her great friends, but she lacked his immensity. They are no mere puppet-fancies of the day, but human beings showing forth the truths of eternity. It was these great truths that George Eliot always had in her mind, but as one generation passes to another the truths that appeal to the one have little of interest to the other. So that the writer of pure romance has a great advantage over the psychologist when the question of endurance comes to be considered, though George Eliot was not, by any means, a mere subjective writer. The feminist movement had not taken practical shape, but thoughtful women were conscious of its approach. Thus with her as with so many others, we have a combination of inherited convention and inherent rebelliousness that makes life a puzzle.

And then to George Eliot the awakening was not merely political; it was religious as well. The new evangelicism had for a time influenced her deeply, and it produced some of her most attractive characters. Perhaps if she had not thought so long and deeply over the philosophical side of things, and had begun to write fiction while the freshness of youth was upon her, she might have written with greater freedom and spontaneity. The systems she had thought out for herself were just too much formed, and too constantly before her mind to allow free play to her fancy. This gives the somewhat didactic flavor to her writings that is often criticized. It is complained that in certain of her works we require a real effort to follow her reasoning, and at the end are hardly certain that we have grasped it. On the other hand, she gained in depth and understanding by her long years of preparation, and she could hardly have had the same acute discernment of character, of human values, and human weaknesses, had she not passed through this preliminary training.

It must not be thought that with all her seriousness George Eliot was a writer devoid of humor. Her work is full of humor of the most delightful sort. It was a different sort of humor from the rollicking humor of a Dickens. I am more true to life in the sense that there is no exaggeration that adds so much to the

lights of the "Pickwick Papers." George Eliot may not have had the bright fun that is most common in youth, or the ludicrous which involves the juxtaposition of oddly incongruous things. But she saw the inherent absurdity of much that passes as serious in ordinary life. It is merciful that she had what she had of the sense of humor, though it seemed more of a development than of a native gift since in her letters and essays it is not prominent. Mrs. Poyser, as a humorous character cannot be surpassed, nor can the charm of the children in George Eliot's writings. Swinburne appreciated this characteristic at its full. "No other man or woman," he says, "so far as I can recollect, outside the order of poets, has ever written of children with such adorable fidelity of affection as the spiritual mother of Totty, of Eppie, and of Lillo." And Swinburne adds that we never wonder how Totty will grow up—"She is Totty for ever and ever, a chubby immortal little child, set in the lap of our love for the kisses and laughter of all time."

We are probably justified in thinking that it requires a woman to write of children as George Eliot did. Comparatively speaking, Dickens's mothers and children are lacking, less pathetic as they often are. It seems strange to us that the world was so long deceived by a masculine name as regards the sex of the writer of "Adam Bede" and "The Scenes of Clerical Life," for surely no man could have entered into the relationship between Totty and Mrs. Poyser or Lizzie and Mrs. Jerome as did George Eliot: to her motherhood was as Swinburne says "a most vivid and vital impulse," though she never was herself a mother.

But still the quality that strikes us most in reading George Eliot is her intense realization of the spiritual side of life. This was a side quite independent of any orthodox religion and yet one sometimes wonders whether it is ever as real to those who did not "experience religion" as to those who did. Evangelical religion was understood by her as only those who were brought up in it can do and it was never more real than when she broke with its outward forms. The Puritan Fathers

and name endure in spite of the passing of the particular forms in which lay the problems she grappled with. She may be old-fashioned in one sense and her tales may be cast aside in favor of the latest problem novel. But the older of us at least return to her with renewed zest when we wish to study the struggles and aspirations of a generation at a time of special difficulty. Her great lesson was that it is the spiritual alone that counts, and though that lesson may seem a tedious one it has to be taught now as much as when it seemed a necessary alternative in an age of materialism and industrial development.

Lively Letters

LADY ANNE BARNARD AT THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE: 1797-1802. Edited by DOROTHEA FAIRBRIDGE. New York: Oxford University Press. 1925.

Reviewed by HAMISH MILES

WHEN Lord Macartney set sail for his Governorship at the Cape of Good Hope in 1797, he took with him, as Secretary to the Colony, a not particularly noticeable young man named Andrew Barnard. But that experienced diplomat had no cause to be disappointed. He had in Andrew Barnard as devoted a servant as any governor could desire; and after his return to England only eighteen months later, Lord Macartney was to find that in Lady Anne, Andrew's wife, he had as witty a correspondent as even that exacting age could demand. "Ex Africa . . ." the retired Governor may well have murmured as the inward frigates brought back to England the mails from the new colony. For hardly one arrived during these five years without a letter from Lady Anne; they are now open to us, in as entertaining a volume as any of its kind, and embellished with more than fifty of the writer's delicious drawings.

Lady Anne Barnard was whose marriage, to the superficial eye, was at least brilliant and whose life was the happiest.

Daughter of the Earl of Balcarres, Anne Lindsay was born in 1750 into that coldly delectable little world of the Scottish aristocracy of the later eighteenth century: Spartan living in the country, with crowded excursions into the Athenian delights of the Edinburgh of Hume and Boswell and Monboddo. She was beautiful and lively, and at twenty-one, though it was not known till much later, she had practised her pen enough to be able to write the ballad of "Auld Robin Gray." In her early twenties she came to London, and there tasted the social delights in even more various flavors. The Prince of Wales, who called her "Sister Anne," Mrs. Fitzherbert, whom once she tried to wean from the Prince by a little trip abroad, Pitt, Burke, 'Old Q'—her friends were admirably catholic: a brilliant match must surely be in the offing. But no: amid the excitements of Berkeley Square her heart, which was a warm one, grew somewhat confused. For years she was courted by William ("Weathercock") Windham, then too by Henry Dundas, a suitor warmly recommended by her sister as "a noble Jupiter and, though ancient, in perfect preservation." But in vain. Lady Anne remained dangerously detached until, at the grave age of forty-two, quite quickly, and with an express determination to "stand the world's smile," she married Andrew Barnard, twelve years her junior, and with neither fame nor wealth to his name.

The world, as it turned out, did not smile so unpleasantly at the queer match: Barnard was an honest, sober fellow, older perhaps than his years. They were happy, and everyone wished them well. And they were unexpectedly helped by none other than the ancient Jupiter himself, who had meanwhile married another and become Colonial Secretary: in 1796 Dundas offered Barnard the post with Macartney. It was accepted, and in May, 1797, Lady Anne landed at the Cape.

There, in these pages, we discover her. The stage is fittingly set for a most diverting comedy of manners. Enclosed between Table M and the Bay in its own restive flurry, this is a fragment of English society, dumped among the savages, who, seen through the eyes of the time as does the Englishman's. Occasionally the Englishman's guns comes through: the Englishman, Sir Horatio Nelson, son manoeuvres to discomfit him. But that (being History) is all very far away. At Cape Town, we can engage in our own little wars, our own politics, our own scandals, and all in a neatly staked-out claim of Empire right beneath the very practised eye of Lady Anne.

Needless to follow the intricate feuds and jealousies and bickerings of garrison and civilians. After Macartney's departure in 1798, the Barnards were left as the chief representatives of an honest and capable régime, of which the newcomers, Sir George Yonge and his staff, were eager to destroy or discredit every remnant. Their pettiness was at first amusing, then disheartening, at the last perilous. "They have made me bilious, my dear Lord!" cries Lady Anne in one outburst. But to fight the forces of evil, what could she do? "The only weapons I brought against that league was cold chicken, music, Misses to flirt with the aide-de-camps, & such little agréments as our house can muster, which . . . I think good auxiliaries in aid of a proper purpose."

As indeed they were. But why did she not add, her pen? In these letters, certainly, her native humor glitters most amusingly, not to say keenly. And her tongue must have had an attractively sharp edge to it.

Yet whose heart does not warm, when she writes to Mrs. Mercer?—

Her name was Clarinda O'Grady, bred in France & Germany. She was a fine lady, polished diamond here, & rough she is as the contents of the fine ladies' drawers. She has more conversation than the fine ladies who chat & who chat, & more sense than the fine gentlemen put together. Her behaviour when her awkward old husband had an affair with her was beautiful, as they say at Limerick, it was artless unstudied kindness, which overturned everything in its way to support an unlovely object, for in the fall the poor man had knocked out some of his teeth; but the Clarinda looked at him with her heart, not with her eye. "Lord!" said Mrs. Kelso, "I should have run away & locked myself up, I should have been so much frightened." This is thought a much prettier sentiment at the Cape than the other, but—

That concluding dash is characteristic of Lady Anne, and we may leave her with it pointing silently to her rare personal "the intrinsic." In letter-writers especial most commendable virtue.