Portrait of George Eliot. Etched by M. Rajon.

GEORGE ELIOT'S LIFE *as related in her Letters and Journals*

ARRANGED AND EDITED BY HER HUSBAND J. W. CROSS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

IN THREE VOLUMES.—Volume I

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PREFACE.

With the materials in my hands I have endeavored to form an *autobiography* (if the term may be permitted) of George Eliot. The life has been allowed to write itself in extracts from her letters and journals. Free from the obtrusion of any mind but her own, this method serves, I think, better than any other open to me, to show the development of her intellect and character.

In dealing with the correspondence I have been influenced by the desire to make known the woman, as well as the author, through the presentation of her daily life.

On the intellectual side there remains little to be learned by those who already know George Eliot's books. In the twenty volumes which she wrote and published in her lifetime will be found her best and ripest thoughts. The letters now published throw light on

another side of her nature—not less important, but hitherto unknown to the public—the side of the affections.

The intimate life was the core of the root from which sprung the fairest flowers of her inspiration. Fame came to her late in life, and, when it presented itself, was so weighted with the sense of responsibility that it was in truth a rose with many thorns, for George Eliot had the temperament that shrinks from the position of a public character. The belief in the wide, and I may add in the beneficent, effect of her writing was no doubt the highest

happiness, the reward of the artist which she greatly cherished: but the joys of the hearthside, the delight in the love of her friends, were the supreme pleasures in her life.

By arranging all the letters and journals so as to form one connected whole, keeping the order of their dates, and with the least possible interruption of comment, I have endeavored to combine a narrative of day-to-day life, with the play of light and shade which only letters, written in various moods, can give, and without which no portrait can be a good likeness. I do not know that the particular method in which I have treated the letters has ever been adopted before. Each letter has been pruned of everything that seemed to me irrelevant to my purpose—of everything that I thought my wife would have wished to be omitted. Every sentence that remains adds, in my judgment, something (however small it may be) to the means of forming a conclusion about her character. I ought perhaps to say a word of apology for what may appear to be undue detail of travelling experiences; but I hope that to many readers these will be interesting, as reflected through George Eliot's mind. The remarks on works of art are only meant to be records of impressions. She would have deprecated for herself the attitude of an art critic.

Excepting a slight introductory sketch of the girlhood, up to the

time when letters became available, and a few words here and there to elucidate the correspondence, I have confined myself to the work of selection and arrangement.

I have refrained almost entirely from quoting remembered sayings by George Eliot, because it is difficult to be

certain of complete accuracy, and everything depends upon accuracy. Recollections of conversation are seldom to be implicitly trusted in the absence of notes made at the time. The value of spoken words depends, too, so much upon the *tone*, and on the circumstances which gave rise to their utterance, that they often mislead as much as they enlighten, when, in the process of repetition, they have taken color from another mind. "All interpretations depend upon the interpreter," and I have judged it best to let George Eliot be her own interpreter, as far as possible.

I owe thanks to Mr. Isaac Evans, the brother of my wife, for much of the information in regard to her child-life; and the whole book is a long record of debts due to other friends for letters. It is not, therefore, necessary for me to recapitulate the list of names in this place. My thanks to all are heartfelt. But there is a very special acknowledgment due to Miss Sara Hennell, to Mrs. Bray, and to the late Mr. Charles Bray of Coventry, not only for the letters which they placed at my disposal, but also for much information given to me in the most friendly spirit. The very important part of the life from 1842 to 1854 could not possibly have been written without their contribution.

To Mr. Charles Lewes, also, I am indebted for some valuable letters and extracts from the journals of his father, besides the letters addressed to himself. He also obtained for me an important letter written by George Eliot to Mr. R. H. Hutton; and throughout the preparation of the book I have had the advantage of his sympathetic interest, and his concurrence in the publication of all

the materials.

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Special thanks are likewise due to Messrs. Wm. Blackwood & Sons for having placed at my disposal George Eliot's long correspondence with the firm. The letters (especially those addressed to her friend the late Mr. John Blackwood) throw a light, that could not otherwise have been obtained, on the most interesting part of her literary career.

To the legal representatives of the late Charles Dickens, of the late Lord Lytton, and of Mrs. Carlyle; to Mr. J. A. Froude, and to Mr. Archer Gurney, I owe thanks for leave to print letters written by them.

For all the defects that there may be in the plan of these volumes I alone am responsible. The lines were determined and the work was substantially put into shape before I submitted the manuscript to any one. While passing the winter in the south of France I had the good fortune at Cannes to find, in Lord Acton, not only an enthusiastic admirer of George Eliot, but also a friend always most kindly ready to assist me with valuable counsel and with cordial, generous sympathy. He was the first reader of the manuscript, and whatever accuracy may have been arrived at, particularly in the names of foreign books, foreign persons, and foreign places, is in great part due to his friendly, careful help. But of course he has no responsibility whatever for any of my sins of omission or commission.

By the kind permission of Sir Frederic Burton, I have been enabled to reproduce as a frontispiece M. Rajon's etching of the beautiful drawing, executed in 1864, now in the National Portrait Gallery, South Kensington.

The view of the old house at Rosehill is from a drawing by Mrs. Bray. It is connected with some of George

Eliot's happiest experiences, and with the period of her most rapid intellectual development.

For permission to use the sketch of the drawing-room at the Priory I am indebted to the Messrs. Harpers, of New York.

In conclusion, it is in no conventional spirit, but from my heart, that I bespeak the indulgence of readers for my share of this work. Of its shortcomings no one can be so convinced as I am myself.

J. W. C.

Camden Hill, *December, 1884*.

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GEORGE ELIOT'S LIFE.

INTRODUCTORY SKETCH OF CHILDHOOD.

"*Nov. 22, 1819.*—Mary Ann Evans was born at Arbury Farm,[1] at

five o'clock this morning."

This is an entry, in Mr. Robert Evans's handwriting, on the page of an old diary that now lies before me, and records, with characteristic precision, the birth of his youngest child, afterwards known to the world as George Eliot. Let us pause for a moment to pay its due homage to the precision, because it was in all probability to this most noteworthy quality of her father's nature that the future author was indebted for one of the principal elements of her own after-success—the enormous faculty for taking pains. The baby was born on St. Cecilia's day, and Mr. Evans, being a good churchman, takes her, on the 29th November, to be baptized in the church at Chilvers Coton—the parish in which Arbury Farm lies—a church destined to impress itself strongly on the child's imagination, and to be known by many people in many lands afterwards as Shepperton Church. The father was a remarkable man, and many of the leading traits in his character are to be found in Adam Bede and in Caleb Garth—although, of course, neither of these is a portrait.

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He was born in 1773, at Ellaston, in Staffordshire, son of a George Evans, who carried on the business of builder and carpenter there: the Evans family having come originally from Northop, in Flintshire. Robert was brought up to the business; but about 1799, or a little before, he held a farm of Mr. Francis Newdigate at Kirk Hallam, in Derbyshire, and became his agent. On Sir Roger Newdigate's death the Arbury estate came to Mr. Francis Newdigate for his life, and Mr. Evans accompanied him into Warwickshire, in 1806, in the capacity of agent. In 1801 he had married Harriott Poynton, by whom he had two children—Robert, born 1802, at Ellaston, and Frances Lucy, born 1805, at Kirk Hallam. His first wife died in 1809; and on 8th February, 1813, he married Christiana Pearson, by whom he had three children—Christiana, born 1814; Isaac, born 1816, and Mary Ann, born

1819. Shortly after the last child's birth, Robert, the son, became the agent, under his father, for the Kirk Hallam property, and lived there with his sister Frances, who afterwards married a Mr. Houghton. In March, 1820, when the baby girl was only four months old, the Evans family removed to Griff, a charming red-brick, ivy-covered house on the Arbury estate—"the warm little nest where her affections were fledged"—and there George Eliot spent the first twenty-one years of her life.

Let us remember what the England was upon which this observant child opened her eyes.

The date of her birth was removed from the beginning of the French Revolution by just the same period of time as separates a child, born this year, 1884, from the beginning of the Crimean War. To a man of forty-six to-day, the latter event seems but of yesterday.

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It took place at a very impressionable period of his life, and the remembrance of every detail is perfectly vivid. Mr. Evans was forty-six when his youngest child was born. He was a youth of sixteen when the Revolution began, and that mighty event, with all its consequences, had left an indelible impression on him, and the convictions and conclusions it had fostered in his mind permeated through to his children, and entered as an indestructible element into the susceptible soul of his youngest daughter. There are bits in the paper "Looking Backward," in "Theophrastus Such," which are true autobiography.

"In my earliest remembrance of my father his hair was already gray, for I was his youngest child, and it seemed to me that advanced age was appropriate to a father, as, indeed, in all respects I considered him a parent so much to my honor that the mention of my relationship to him was likely to secure me regard among those to whom I was otherwise a stranger—his stories from his life

including so many names of distant persons that my imagination placed no limit to his acquaintanceship.... Nor can I be sorry, though myself given to meditative if not active innovation, that my father was a Tory who had not exactly a dislike to innovators and dissenters, but a slight opinion of them as persons of ill-founded self-confidence.... And I often smile at my consciousness that certain Conservative prepossessions have mingled themselves for me with the influences of our Midland scenery, from the tops of the elms down to the buttercups and the little wayside vetches. Naturally enough. That part of my father's prime to which he oftenest referred had fallen on the days when the great wave of political enthusiasm and belief in a

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speedy regeneration of all things had ebbed, and the supposed millennial initiative of France was turning into a Napoleonic empire.... To my father's mind the noisy teachers of revolutionary doctrine were, to speak mildly, a variable mixture of the fool and the scoundrel; the welfare of the nation lay in a strong government which could maintain order; and I was accustomed to hear him utter the word 'government' in a tone that charged it with awe, and made it part of my effective religion, in contrast with the word 'rebel,' which seemed to carry the stamp of evil in its syllables, and, lit by the fact that Satan was the first rebel, made an argument dispensing with more detailed inquiry."

This early association of ideas must always be borne in mind, as it is the key to a great deal in the mental attitude of the future thinker and writer. It is the foundation of the latent Conservative bias.

The year 1819 is memorable as a culminating period of bad times and political discontent in England. The nation was suffering acutely from the reaction after the excitement of the last Napoleonic war. George IV. did not come to the throne till January, 1820, so that George Eliot was born in the reign of

George III. The trial of Queen Caroline was the topic of absorbing public interest. Waterloo was not yet an affair of five years old. Byron had four years, and Goethe had thirteen years, still to live. The last of Miss Austen's novels had been published only eighteen months, and the first of the Waverley series only six years before. Thackeray and Dickens were boys at school, and George Sand, as a girl of fifteen, was leaving her loved freedom on the banks of the Indre for the Convent des Anglaises at Paris. That "Greater Britain" (Canada

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and Australia), which to-day forms so large a reading public, was then scarcely more than a geographical expression, with less than half a million of inhabitants, all told, where at present there are eight millions; and in the United States, where more copies of George Eliot's books are now sold than in any other quarter of the world, the population then numbered less than ten millions where to-day it is fifty-five millions. Including Great Britain, these English-speaking races have increased from thirty millions in 1820 to one hundred millions in 1884; and with the corresponding increase in education we can form some conception how a popular English writer's fame has widened its circle.

There was a remoteness about a detached country-house, in the England of those days, difficult for us to conceive now, with our railways, penny-post, and telegraphs; nor is the Warwickshire country about Griff an exhilarating surrounding. There are neither hills nor vales, no rivers, lakes, or sea—nothing but a monotonous succession of green fields and hedgerows, with some fine trees. The only water to be seen is the "brown canal." The effect of such a landscape on an ordinary observer is not inspiring, but "effective magic is transcendent nature;" and with her transcendent nature George Eliot has transfigured these scenes, dear to Midland souls, into many an idyllic picture, known to those who know her books. In her childhood the great event of the day was the passing of the

coach before the gate of Griff House, which lies at a bend of the high-road between Coventry and Nuneaton, and within a couple of miles of the mining village of Bedworth, "where the land began to be blackened with coal-pits, the rattle of hand-looms to be heard in hamlets and villages. Here were

powerful men walking queerly, with knees bent outward from squatting in the mine, going home to throw themselves down in their blackened flannel and sleep through the daylight, then rise and spend much of their high wages at the alehouse with their fellows of the Benefit Club; here the pale, eager faces of hand-loom weavers, men and women, haggard from sitting up late at night to finish the week's work, hardly begun till the Wednesday. Everywhere the cottages and the small children were dirty, for the languid mothers gave their strength to the loom; pious Dissenting women, perhaps, who took life patiently, and thought that salvation depended chiefly on predestination, and not at all on cleanliness. The gables of Dissenting chapels now made a visible sign of religion, and of a meeting-place to counterbalance the alehouse, even in the hamlets.... Here was a population not convinced that old England was as good as possible; here were multitudinous men and women aware that their religion was not exactly the religion of their rulers, who might therefore be better than they were, and who, if better, might alter many things which now made the world perhaps more painful than it need be, and certainly more sinful. Yet there were the gray steeples too, and the churchyards, with their grassy mounds and venerable headstones, sleeping in the sunlight; there were broad fields and homesteads, and fine old woods covering a rising ground, or stretching far by the roadside, allowing only peeps at the park and mansion which they shut in from the working-day world. In these midland districts the traveller passed rapidly from one phase of English life to another; after looking down on a village dingy with coal-dust, noisy with the shaking of looms, he might

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skirt a parish all of fields, high hedges, and deep-rutted lanes; after the coach had rattled over the pavement of a manufacturing town, the scene of riots and trades-union meetings, it would take him in another ten minutes into a rural region, where the neighborhood of the town was only felt in the advantages of a near market for corn, cheese, and hay, and where men with a considerable banking account were accustomed to say that 'they never meddled with politics themselves.'"[2]

Griff House—Front View.

We can imagine the excitement of a little four-year-old girl and her seven-year-old brother waiting, on bright frosty mornings, to hear the far-off ringing beat of the horses' feet upon the hard ground, and then to see the gallant appearance of the four grays, with coachman and guard in scarlet, outside passengers muffled up in furs, and baskets of game and other packages hanging behind the boot, as his majesty's mail swung cheerily round on its way from Birmingham to Stamford. Two coaches passed the door daily—one from Birmingham at 10 o'clock in the morning, the other from Stamford at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. These were the chief connecting links between the household at Griff and the outside world. Otherwise life went on with that monotonous regularity which distinguishes the country from the town. And it is to these circumstances of her early life that a great part of the quality of George Eliot's writing is due, and that she holds the place she has attained in English literature. Her roots were down in the pre-railroad, pre-telegraphic period—the days of fine old leisure—but the fruit was formed during an era of extraordinary activity in scientific and mechanical discovery. Her

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genius was the outcome of these conditions. It would not have existed in the same form deprived of either influence. Her father was busy both with his own farm-work and increasing agency business. He was already remarked in Warwickshire for his knowledge and judgment in all matters relating to land, and for his general trustworthiness and high character, so that he was constantly selected as arbitrator and valuer. He had a wonderful eye, especially for valuing woods, and could calculate with almost absolute precision the quantity of available timber in a standing tree. In addition to his merits as a man of business, he had the good fortune to possess the warm friendship and consistent support of Colonel Newdigate of Astley Castle, son of Mr. Francis Newdigate of Arbury, and it was mainly through the colonel's introduction and influence that Mr. Evans became agent also to Lord Aylesford, Lord Lifford, Mr. Bromley Davenport, and several others.

His position cannot be better summed up than in the words of his daughter, writing to Mr. Bray on 30th September, 1859, in regard to some one who had written of her, after the appearance of "Adam Bede," as a "self-educated farmer's daughter."

"My father did not raise himself from being an artisan to be a farmer; he raised himself from being an artisan to be a man whose extensive knowledge in very varied practical departments made his services valued through several counties. He had large knowledge of building, of mines, of plantations, of various branches of valuation and measurement—of all that is essential to the management of large estates. He was held by those competent to judge as *unique* among land-agents for his manifold knowledge and experience, which enabled him to save the special fees usually paid by landowners

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for special opinions on the different questions incident to the proprietorship of land. So far as I am personally concerned I

should not write a stroke to prevent any one, in the zeal of antithetic eloquence, from calling me a tinker's daughter; but if my father is to be mentioned at all—if he is to be identified with an imaginary character—my piety towards his memory calls on me to point out to those who are supposed to speak with information what he really achieved in life."

Mr. Evans was also, like Adam Bede, noteworthy for his extraordinary physical strength and determination of character. There is a story told of him, that one day when he was travelling on the top of a coach, down in Kent, a decent woman sitting next him complained that a great hulking sailor on her other side was making himself offensive. Mr. Evans changed places with the woman, and, taking the sailor by the collar, forced him down under the seat, and held him there with an iron hand for the remainder of the stage: and at Griff it is still remembered that the master, happening to pass one day while a couple of laborers were waiting for a third to help to move the high, heavy ladder used for thatching ricks, braced himself up to a great effort, and carried the ladder alone and unaided from one rick to the other, to the wide-eyed wonder and admiration of his men. With all this strength, however, both of body and of character, he seems to have combined a certain self-distrust, owing, perhaps, to his early imperfect education, which resulted in a general submissiveness in his domestic relations, more or less portrayed in the character of Mr. Garth.

His second wife was a woman with an unusual amount of natural force; a shrewd, practical person, with a considerable dash of the Mrs. Poyser vein in

her. Hers was an affectionate, warm-hearted nature, and her children, on whom she cast "the benediction of her gaze," were thoroughly attached to her. She came of a race of yeomen, and her

social position was, therefore, rather better than her husband's at the time of their marriage. Her family are, no doubt, prototypes of the Dodsons in the "Mill on the Floss." There were three other sisters married, and all living in the neighborhood of Griff—Mrs. Everard, Mrs. Johnson, and Mrs. Garner—and probably Mr. Evans heard a good deal about "the traditions in the Pearson family." Mrs. Evans was a very active, hard-working woman, but shortly after her last child's birth she became ailing in health, and consequently her eldest girl, Christiana, was sent to school, at a very early age, to Miss Lathom's, at Attleboro, a village a mile or two from Griff, while the two younger children spent some part of their time every day at the cottage of a Mrs. Moore, who kept a dame's school close to Griff gates. The little girl very early became possessed with the idea that she was going to be a personage in the world; and Mr. Charles Lewes has told me an anecdote which George Eliot related of herself as characteristic of this period of her childhood. When she was only four years old she recollected playing on the piano, of which she did not know one note, in order to impress the servant with a proper notion of her acquirements and generally distinguished position. This was the time when the love for her brother grew into the child's affections. She used always to be at his heels, insisting on doing everything he did. She was not, in these baby-days, in the least precocious in learning. In fact, her half-sister, Mrs. Houghton, who was some fourteen years her senior, told me that the child learned

to read with some difficulty; but Mr. Isaac Evans says that this was not from any slowness in apprehension, but because she liked playing so much better. Mere sharpness, however, was not a characteristic of her mind. Hers was a large, slow-growing nature; and I think it is, at any rate, certain that there was nothing of the infant phenomenon about her. In her moral development she showed, from the earliest years, the trait that was most marked in her all through life, namely, the absolute need of some one person

who should be all in all to her, and to whom she should be all in all. Very jealous in her affections, and easily moved to smiles or tears, she was of a nature capable of the keenest enjoyment and the keenest suffering, knowing "all the wealth and all the woe" of a pre-eminently exclusive disposition. She was affectionate, proud, and sensitive in the highest degree.

The sort of happiness that belongs to this budding-time of life, from the age of three to five, is apt to impress itself very strongly on the memory; and it is this period which is referred to in the Brother and Sister Sonnet, "But were another childhood's world my share, I would be born a little sister there." When her brother was eight years old he was sent to school at Coventry, and, her mother continuing in very delicate health, the little Mary Ann, now five years of age, went to join her sister at Miss Lathom's school, at Attleboro, where they continued as boarders for three or four years, coming, occasionally, home to Griff on Saturdays. During one of our walks at Witley, in 1880, my wife mentioned to me that what chiefly remained in her recollection about this very early school-life was the difficulty of getting near enough the fire in winter to become thoroughly warmed, owing to the circle of girls

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forming round too narrow a fireplace. This suffering from cold was the beginning of a low general state of health; also at this time she began to be subject to fears at night—"the susceptibility to terror"—which she has described as haunting Gwendolen Harleth in her childhood. The other girls in the school, who were all, naturally, very much older, made a great pet of the child, and used to call her "little mamma," and she was not unhappy except at nights; but she told me that this liability to have "all her soul become a quivering fear," which remained with her afterwards, had been one of the supremely important influences dominating at times her future life. Mr. Isaac Evans's chief recollection of this period is the delight of the little sister at his home-coming for

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