GEORGE ELIOT REVIEW

Title: François D'Albert Durade (2.12.1804 – 27.6.1886): An Overlooked Influence

Author(s): Valerie Fehlbaum

Print source: Fehlbaum, Valerie. "François D'Albert Durade (2.12.1804 – 27.6.1886): An Overlooked Influence." *George Eliot Review*, no. 56, 2025, p. 55-64.

FRANÇOIS D'ALBERT DURADE: AN OVERLOOKED INFLUENCE

By Valerie Fehlbaum

[*Adapted from a talk given at the George Eliot Weekend 25–26 May 2024*]

François D'Albert Durade (1804–1886)[1] must initially seem a rather eccentric, if not outright bizarre, choice when considering those who were influential in the life of George Eliot. For, apart from the fact that he painted a well-known portrait of her, who has ever heard of him? Even in Geneva, the city where he grew up and worked for decades, the mention of his name is greeted with quizzical looks. Nevertheless, I would claim that, thanks to a chance meeting in 1849, he played a very significant role in the life of George Eliot or, more precisely, in the life of Mary Ann Evans before she ever became George Eliot, and even after her demise as Mary Ann Cross.

To most of us, then, the name D'Albert Durade is synonymous with the famous portrait, an oil painting which hangs … Ah! but here there is some controversy. Where *is* the original? Is it in Geneva in the Salle des Périodiques in the Bibliothèque de Genève, the main library of the university and the city, one of the very few portraits of a woman to be found there? Or is it in The National Portrait Gallery in London, or in The Herbert Gallery in Coventry? How many copies are there? Did D'Albert Durade paint several replicas, including one for John Cross in 1881, and which one is that? From the very beginning Mary Ann Evans, as she then was, raises doubts in a letter to the Brays:

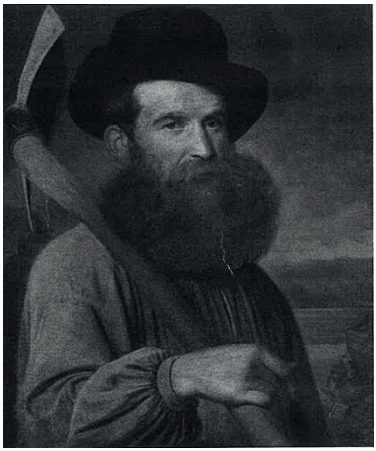
> You will be amused to hear that I am sitting for my portrait – at M. D'Albert's request – not mine. If it turns out well, I shall long to steal it to give to you – but M. D'Albert talks of painting a second and in that case I shall certainly beg one.[2]

My own belief is that Geneva holds the original, but I will leave that debate to other, better-informed scholars.

Certain elements, however, such as D'Albert Durade's dates, are irrefutable. He was born in 1804 in Lausanne and died in 1886 in Geneva, grew up in Veyrier, on the outskirts of Geneva, and subsequently spent most of his life in the heart of the city. He initially set out to be an evangelical minister, surely a noteworthy detail bearing in mind George Eliot's relationship with religion, but he then re-trained as an artist, and in 1834 married Antoinette Covelle (1800–1880), also a painter, better known as Julie. In 1849 he joined the Société des Arts, not as its name might suggest limited to the so-called Beaux Arts, but to promoting progress in all the Arts, Industry and Culture,

Agriculture, Commerce, Science, Technology, and so on, and the following year he became the curator of the permanent exhibition.[3]

But what does any of this reveal about the *man*, the individual behind the bare facts of living and dying, apart from the implication that in many ways he seems typical of Calvinist Geneva, a hard-working, high-minded Swiss. Not surprisingly, living as he did during a period of great change and concerned with preserving images of a city in transition, he took to making sketches or, experimenting with modern technology, taking photographs of places which were rapidly disappearing.[4] As expected, he also left several portraits, usually of local dignitaries now largely forgotten. His portraits of unknown or un-named people, on the other hand, are much more pertinent for present purposes, as they no doubt would also have appealed to George Eliot.



The first, above, is a 'Portrait of a Bearded Man with a Pickaxe (1852)', showing a very dignified labourer, pre-dating Ford Madox Brown's noble navvies in 'Work' (1863).[5] The second is a simple, but evocative image of an anonymous older woman. There is no evidence that George Eliot ever saw these paintings, or that she and D'Albert Durade ever discussed the role of the artist or the function of Art. It is nonetheless tempting to imagine such discussions whilst she was sitting for her portrait, especially as they would appear to agree that Art should depict 'the real characteristics of the working-classes', as she later wrote in her seminal essay on 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856).[6] Later still, in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859), she further praises 'the faithful representing of commonplace things' and everyday 'fellow-mortals […] as they are' in Dutch paintings. Her vivid descriptions of Adam Bede himself, and the Garth family in *Middlemarch* (1871) would surely testify to such beliefs.

Sadly, D'Albert Durade left no personal diaries, and very few letters, so we can only surmise. What does remain, however, are first-hand accounts of their relationship by Mary Ann Evans/George Eliot, and through *her* correspondence and diaries much can be gleaned about the man. Letters written during her stay as a paying guest with D'Albert Durade and his family in the old town of Geneva in the autumn of 1849 offer valuable insight into her own state of mind as well as into the daily goings-on in the D'Albert Durade household which must reflect on the personality of D'Albert Durade himself. The circumstances of their meeting can also help to understand why the friendship developed in the first place and then flourished as it did.

After her father's death in May 1849, Mary Ann Evans had been persuaded by her friends Charles and Cara Bray to join them on their planned European trip. Earlier correspondence reveals that she had always had a hankering for foreign travel. Only the previous year she had written to her friend John Sibree envying him his forthcoming trip to Europe and the possibility of spending a year in a town like Geneva:

> O the bliss of having a very high attic in a romantic Continental town, such as Geneva, far away from morning callers, dinners, and decencies and then to pause for a year and think 'de omnibus rebus et quibusdam *aliis*', and then to return to life, and work for poor stricken humanity, and never think of self again. (*Letters*, I, 261)

That opportunity thus presented itself rather sooner than expected, and not perhaps in the most propitious circumstances. After journeying through France and Italy, they arrived in Switzerland in July, but, somewhat predictably, the trip had not proved an unmitigated success. On 23 July, Mary Ann wrote to her half-sister Fanny Houghton, perhaps recalling her earlier words to Sibree:

> The day after tomorrow I part from my friends and take up my abode at Geneva where *I hope rest and regular occupation will do more for my health and spirits than travelling has proved able to do so.* [Italics added] (*Letters*, I, 289)

It must be remembered that she had spent the previous few years looking after her father, practically night and day towards the end of his life. She was thirty years old, a spinster, her siblings were both married and had children. What was she to go back to or for? In short, what was she to do with her life? The final words of one of her letters to the Brays written on 5 August 1849 shortly after their departure: 'Pray that the motto of Geneva may become mine – Post Tenebras Lux' (*Letters*, I, 295), clearly indicate her mood.

She initially stayed in a *pension* at Plongeon just outside Geneva, but her diary entries suggest that the rather transitory nature of life there was not particularly good for her, and, as winter approached, she toyed with the idea of going to Paris. Finally, however, she decided simply to move into town. At the beginning of October she wrote to Fanny on her decision to become the 'only pensionnaire' with the D'Albert Durade family:

> He is a highly respectable artist, a man I am told of *beaucoup d'esprit*, fond of music and possessing a circle of superior friends. His wife is a very pleasing ladylike person with a most kind face […]. The D'Albert-Durades are middle-aged, between 40 and 50, and have two nice boys about 14 or 15. They seemed pleased with the idea of having me and are very anxious to accommodate me as far as possible. (*Letters*, VIII, 18)

Consequently, on 9 October 1849, she moved to 107, rue des Chanoines[7] in the old town of Geneva, and took to the family immediately, as testified by her enthusiastic letter to the Brays two days later:

> M. and Mde. D'Albert are really clever people, people worth sitting up an hour longer to talk to. […] I have a piano which I hire. There is also one in the salon. M. D'Albert plays and sings [...]. I think I am just in the right place. They appear to be evangelical and conservative but one finds these views in company with more breadth of culture here than one can ever augur from them in England […]. It would really have been a pity to have staid [*sic*] at Plongeon out of reach of everything and with people so little worth talking to. (*Letters*, I, 314–15)

Portrait of D'Albert by Julie D'Albert

Self-portrait of D'Albert[8]

Even more significant details, not only about the physical appearance of her hosts, but also about their personalities, can be found in another letter written a couple of weeks later to the Brays:

> Mde. D'Albert anticipates all my wants and makes a spoiled child of me. I like these dear people better and better – everything is so in harmony with one's moral feeling that I really can almost say I have never enjoyed a more complete bien-être in my life than during the last fortnight.
>
> *For M. D'Albert I love him already as if he were father and brother both.* You must know that he is not more than four feet high with a deformed spine – the result of an accident in his boyhood – but on this little body is placed a finely formed head, full in every direction. The face is plain with small features, and rather haggard looking, but all the lines and the wavy grey hair indicate the temperament of the artist. I have not heard a word or seen a gesture of his yet that was not perfectly in harmony with an exquisite moral refinement – indeed one feels a better person always when he is present. (Italics added; *Letters*, I, 316–17)

She then goes on to describe the qualities of Madame Durade before concluding 'There – I promise to weary you less for the future with my descriptions. I could not resist the temptation to speak gratefully of M. and Mde. D'Albert.'

On 4 December she writes again to Cara once more emphasizing both the emotional and intellectual support that she felt:

> My good friends here only change for the better. Madame d'Albert is all affection; Monsieur d'Albert all delicacy and intelligence […]. In fact I want nothing but a little more money to feel more at ease about my fires etc. etc. I am in an atmosphere of love and refinement – even the little servant Jeanie seems to love me and does me good every time she comes into the room. I can say anything to M. and Mde. D'Albert. Monsieur D'Albert understands everything, and if Madame does not understand, she *believes* – that is, she seems always sure that I mean something edifying. She kisses me like a mother.[9] (*Letters*, I, 322)

Money, however, was always a worry, and her stay could not continue indefinitely. By mid-February, with very mixed feelings, she began to plan her return to England, and at the begininning of March she wrote to Charles Bray:

> The weather is so glorious that I think I may set out on my journey soon after the 15th […]. I am so ex[cited] at the idea of the time being so near when I am to leave Geneva – a real grief – and see my friends in England – a perfect overwhelming joy – that I can do nothing. I am frightened to think what an idle wretch I am becoming. (*Letters*, I, 331)

So, on 18 March, 1850, she did leave Geneva, accompanied by D'Albert Durade who, in her words, 'smoothed the horrors of the way' for her (*Letters*, I, 333). He remained in England for two months and returned to Geneva in May, and the story could have ended there.

Most biographers have chosen to pass over Mary Ann Evans' Geneva interlude very rapidly. John Cross and Katherine Hughes, on the other hand, have both commented on this period, giving it a rather different slant. In his *Life of George Eliot* Cross writes:

> It was a delightful, soothing change after the long illness and the painful death of her father […]. In the first months following a great loss it is good to be alone for a time – alone, especially amidst beautiful scenes – and alone in the sense of being removed from habitual associations, but yet constantly in the society of new acquaintances, who are sufficiently interesting, but not too intimate.[10]

Kathryn Hughes is more tempered:

> It is too easy to write up these Geneva months as a kind of heroic turning point in Mary Ann's life, a breaking out of provincial spinsterhood into something brave and independent. John Cross certainly saw it like that. It would be good to imagine Mary Ann expanding in the bracing atmosphere of this most liberal of cities, transforming herself from provincial blue-stocking into European intellectual. But much of the time she spent in Geneva was marked by loneliness, disappointment and the familiar frustrated longing for intimacy.[11]

However we interpret her stay in Geneva, D'Albert Durade and his family represented significantly more than merely a host family, and Mary Ann Evans more than a simple lodger. They must have constituted an ideal family unit providing a much-needed haven of love and comfort for her, a welcome change from the unhappiness of her own home life. And if proof of such mutual affection were needed years later she took George Henry Lewes to meet them, in June 1860 to be exact, and he was welcomed – a reaction very dissimilar from her brother Isaac's. Even after her death D'Albert Durade continued to remain in contact with John Cross.

But to return to 1850, although before she left Geneva she had received 'the kindest possible letters from [her] brother and sisters promising [her] the warmest welcome' (*Letters*, I, 330), Mary Ann Evans wrote from Griff to Fanny Houghton already on 30 March that she felt 'more of an outcast here than at Geneva[…]', and a few days later wrote to Martha Jackson:

> I am not yet decided as to my future plans – whether I shall remain in England or return to Geneva. […] My return to England is anything but joyous to me. For old associations are rather painful than otherwise to

> me. We are apt to complain of the weight of duty, but when it is taken from us, and we are left at liberty to choose for ourselves, we find that the old life was an easier one.' (*Letters*, I, 334)

As has been well-documented, she *did* stay in England, and much has been written about those subsequent turbulent years, before meeting and eloping with George Henry Lewes.[12] Tellingly, in the first letter she sent to D'Albert Durade in October, 1859, after the 'birth' of George Eliot, she addressed him as 'My dear friend' and signed the letter, as she would sign all future correspondence 'Marian E. Lewes'. Beginning with apologies for her long silence, she then writes of the 'great change' which had come over her life and of having found her vocation:

> I have turned out to be an artist – not, as you are, with the pencil and the pallet, but with words. I have written a novel which people say has stirred them very deeply – and *not a few* people, but almost all reading England […]. The title is 'Adam Bede'; and 'George Eliot', the name on the title page, is my *nom de plume*. I had previously written another work of fiction called 'Scenes of Clerical Life', which had a great literary success, but not a great *popular* success, such as Adam Bede [h]as had. Both are now published in Tauchnitz in his series of English novels. (*Letters*, III, 186)

Bearing in mind that they had not been in contact for nearly a decade, her concluding remarks are particularly significant for what they reveal about their relationship:

> I think you will believe that I do not write you word of this out of any small vanity […]. I write you word of it, because I believe that both your kind heart and Madame D'Albert's too will be touched with real joy, that one whom you knew when she was not very happy and when her life seemed to serve no purpose of much worth, has been at last blessed with the sense that she has done something worth living and suffering for. And I write also because I want to give you both proof that I still think of you with grateful affectionate recollection […].
>
> Farewell, dear friend. Ask Madame D'Albert to accept my affectionate regards, and believe me faithfully yours [...]. (*Letters*, III, 187–88)

Not only did this rekindle their emotional ties, within a few months D'Albert Durade was assuming another crucial role in her life, professional this time: making her work available to the French-speaking world. In reponse to one of his letters in December, she mentioned being 'very anxious to get an accomplished translator for "Adam Bede"', having earlier 'rejected propositions of translation, from the dread of having one's sentences metamorphosed into an expression of someone else's meaning instead of

one's own.' She concluded, 'I particularly wish my books to be well translated into French' (*Letters*, III, 231). When in January 1860 she consulted D'Albert Durade about a suitable translator, he offered to undertake the task, and, significantly, she accepted (*Letters*, III, 258). A little later she wrote enthusiastically:

> I think you have made rapid progress with the translation […]. It is a very sweet thought to me that the work may be a source of some pleasure to you and Maman (I am very glad to be assured that I may still say 'Maman', for that is the name by which she has always gone in my silent memory). It will interest you, perhaps, to know that it is translated into Hungarian, and the first volume is fairly rendered in German – possibly also the second by this time. You see I am counting on your and Maman's interest in everything that belongs to me.
>
> […]
>
> With affectionate regards to Maman, I am always yours, with sincere and faithful friendship. (*Letters*, VIII, 263–64)

By November the task was completed. In her journal of 28 Nov 1860, she notes:

> Today I have had a letter from M. D'Albert, saying that at last the French edition of *Adam Bede* is published. He pleases me very much by saying that he finds not a sentence that he can retrench in the first volume of 'The Mill'. (*Letters*, III, 360)

One cannot help wondering if later D'Albert Durade recognized himself or certain traits of his character in Philip Wakem, as some critics have done. There is no evidence, but by May 1861 he had finished translating the whole novel, as testified in George Eliot's letter to John Blackwood:

> My dear Sir,
> 'Adam' and 'The Mill' *are* translated into French. The former was published some time ago, the latter will be published soon. The translator is an old friend of mine in whose family I lived for some months at Geneva after my father's death, and since he is an accomplished man and his work of translating my books brings some extra happiness to himself and his wife, I don't mean to take it away from him, though I give up any share in payment. By this time I have no doubt he has begun to translate 'Silas'. But if Mrs Blackwell, who, I imagine, is a competent person, would like to translate the 'Scenes of Clerical Life', I am under no obligation to reserve them for M. D'Albert, and, if I live, I dare say there will be something else for him to do. (*Letters*, III, 416)[13]

As indeed there was. Over the next few years D'Albert Durade translated *Silas Marner* (1863) and *Romola* (1878) and continued even after George Eliot's death with 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story' from *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1884).

From her letters it is clear that she and Lewes meant to visit the Durades more often, but ill-health prevented further meetings. They nevertheless continued to correspond regularly, with George Eliot often reminiscing over her Geneva stay, as in this letter of 21 March 1873:

> How long it seems, dear Friend, since we walked together in the old and now vanished walks on the fortifications at Geneva. I had no bright hopes about my life then. But your affectionate heart will delight – has already delighted in the good that has been given to me – and more in that chief gift of having one's life felt to be of some value by others. For the direct personal joy of living can never be intense with me, though it is stronger now than when I was young.
>
> I fall into that egotism because I am recalling old times. How vividly I see Maman's entering my room and opening her arms to greet me […].
>
> Tell her that Minnie[14] values that memory all the more as the years deepen her impressions of the goodness shown towards her in the past. Life I find seems to strengthen, not wither my affections of youth with a comparatively hard unsympathetic period.
>
> […]
>
> Always, dear friend, yours and Maman's,
>
> With grateful affection,
> M. E. Lewes. (*Letters*, V, 393)

Besides being a celebrated portrait painter, then, D'Albert Durade first became, in her own words, 'father and brother both' to Mary Ann Evans, lifelong 'dear friend' to Marian Lewes, and highly-appreciated translator of George Eliot. For over thirty years, he provided not only much-needed emotional support but also invaluable intellectual impetus. Without question D'Albert Durade deserves more than a footnote.

NOTES

1 Rather like George Eliot herself, his very name poses problems. Is it 'd'Albert Durade', small 'd', capital 'a', capital 'd', or all capital 'd's, with or without a hyphen? In a letter to John Cross dated 23 February, 1885, responding, presumably, to this very question, D'Albert Durade wrote, 'Mon nom s'écrit toujours avec un grand "D" et non un "d"', and he always wrote it *without* a hyphen (*The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954–78], I. 313n). This can partly be explained because he was actually born Alexandre Louis François D'Albert, but was orphaned at a young age and adopted in 1829 by his godfather's sister – Jeanne Sara Durade. He then added her surname to his, hence his double name, and in the process lost two of his first names. George Eliot herself nearly always referred to him as 'M. D'Albert'. Gordon Haight in his *Biography of George Eliot* claims that when writing to him in French she usually used the 'tu' form, the more intimate form of 'you', but then D'Albert Durade explained to John Cross that he later burnt

those letters because he feared people might misconstrue their relationship. Haight maintains that the only letters D'Albert Durade did not burn were those written to his wife.

2 15 February, 1850. Characteristically, she adds, 'The idea of making a study of my face is droll enough' (*Letters*, I. 350). Further references to the volume and page of the *Letters* will be given in the text.

3 He would no doubt be delighted to know that in 2026 the Société des Arts will be celebrating its 250th anniversary. It is still located in the Palais de l'Athénée in Geneva and continues to play an important role in the life of the city, organising as it does classes, conferences, concerts and exhibitions.

4 Archives of the City of Geneva possess many such drawings and photographs.

5 Currently held in Manchester Art Gallery.

6 'The Natural History of German Life.' *Westminster Review*, Vol. LXVI, 129, (July 1856), pp. 51–79.

7 Rue des Chanoines, where the Société des Arts was also located, became rue Jean-Calvin, but the house where George Eliot lived, which now bears a plaque testifying to the fact, is in the adjacent rue de la Pelisserie.

8 This self-portrait can also be seen here: https://georgeeliotarchive.org/items/show/2659.

9 In her letters both then and later Mary Ann continued to refer to Mme D'Albert as 'Maman'.

10 J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life*, Vol 1 (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons, 1885), pp. 208–9.

11 Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian.* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1998). p. 87.

12 See in particular Rosemary Ashston, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London.* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

13 19 May 1861. Apparently Anna Blackwell had contacted Blackwood on the topic of translating George Eliot into French.

14 The Durades' pet-name for her.