



GEORGE ELIOT REVIEW

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Oxford Handbook of George Eliot,
ed. Juliette Atkinson and Elisha Cohn
(Oxford University Press, 2025). xxiv + 856 pp.
ISBN 978-0-19-285659-3.

This is a monumental achievement and an exceptional addition to George Eliot studies. Statistics alone are impressive. For a start the book weighs in just under two kilograms; nearly 900 pages all up. It contains fifty-two essays by fifty-five authors from six countries, all of them bar one in academic positions. The biographical description of the outlier may be a comment on the academic industry right now – or, more positively, on the durability of Ruskinian notions of work:

Thomas Owens read English at St Andrews and Oxford; he has held academic positions at Cambridge, UCL and Stanford; he now works in a quarry on the Jurassic Coast. *Wordsworth, Coleridge, and ‘the language of the heavens’* appeared with Oxford University Press in 2019.

There are numerous ‘Figures’ that include – in colour – Titian’s *Bacchus and Ariadne* that ‘probably served as a model for the self-serving miniature that Tito commissions [...] to give to Romola as a betrothal gift’ (p. 248) and ‘*Sleeping Ariadne*, formerly known as the Cleopatra’ (p. 250: the reference is early in *Middlemarch*, chapter 19, Clarendon edition, p. 183). The black-and-white images mainly illustrate chapter 47, ‘George Eliot’s East Asian afterlives’, by Sungmey Lee and Olivia Loksing Moy – I come back to this fascinating chapter later. There is also a splendid index to which I turned often in writing this review. Those who customarily approach a book from the back by reading the index will be very happy.

So, a handsome volume, and I hasten to say that its contents are likewise impressive. In their introduction, the editors declare that ‘this volume builds upon the existing and vibrant body of scholarship on Eliot’s thematic impact by centring above all the author’s enduring preoccupation with form’ (p. 5). The phrase ‘this volume builds upon’ is salient, as it becomes evident already in chapter 1, ‘George Eliot’s Life-Writing’. In his gnarly introduction to *The Transferred Life of George Eliot: The Biography of a Novelist* (2017), Philip Davis describes his study as an intellectual biography. For the *Handbook* chapter he takes off from the arguments with himself that occupied that full-length study. He declares that the subject of his essay is ‘the shapeshifting of how Mary Ann Evans morphed into becoming George Eliot’, the writer who starts again ‘by thinking beneath the level of conventional surfaces’ (p. 12). Davis

quotes from George Eliot's 1849 review of Froude's *Nemesis of Faith*, then comments:

[a] book which, as we read, seems to undergo a sort of transfiguration before us. We no longer hold heavily in our hands an octavo of some hundred pages [...] but we seem to be in companionship with a spirit, who is transfusing himself into our souls.

This was what she might truly have called life-writing: when a book, a page, a phrase came to life (p.13),

Davis's discussion is an original version of familiar material: it is not simply descriptive; rather, ruminative, grounded in thinking about the choices Marian Evans made as George Eliot. His concluding paragraphs offer a proposition describing 'A George Eliot [...] who was able at once to create her people, and to judge, mitigate, and stand as proxy for them' (p. 27). This aspect of Davis' achievement, making new, in its turn stands as proxy for the volume as a whole.

While the *Handbook* centres on form, that centre has extensive – and comprehensive – peripheries, as is signalled in the titles of the five divisions among which the entries are distributed: 'Life and Networks', 'Influences', 'Works', 'Form', 'Afterlives'. In 'Life and Networks', there are five more chapters after Davis. In 'Evangelicals, Dissenters, and Freethinkers', Sebastian Lecourt cogently spells out current thinking on Victorian secularization, the particulars of his account making clear why 'religion' is too generic a term to use in talking about George Eliot and belief. His discussion chimes with chapter 8, Anthony Ossa-Richardson's 'George Eliot and Early Modern Practical Divinity', which concentrates particularly on the significance of Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying* (1650–1), so important to Dorothea Brooke and to Eliot herself, he contends, both for its devotional precepts and its style.

This chapter contains the only error I have identified in the *Handbook*: Ossa-Richardson mentions Jeremy Tulliver and Adam Bede as other characters besides Dorothea who read Taylor. He has misread Mr Tulliver's statement to Mr Riley about the books bought at Partridge's sale: 'There's Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Living and Dying" among 'em [...]. Mr Tulliver felt somehow a familiarity with that great writer because his name was Jeremy' (Clarendon, p. 16) – meaning that Jeremy was a fairly common name. Mr Tulliver's own name is unquestionably Edward, as is clear when he dictates to Tom the curse he is to write in the family Bible (end Book 3, chapter 9, Clarendon, p. 233). I labour the point because the *Handbook* is virtually error free: not a typo caught my eye.

To put the matter another way: this is not simply a case of old wine

in new bottles. So Fionnuala Dillane's 'Marian Evans. "George Eliot" and Nineteenth Century Media Communities' provides a more granular exposition of her trailblazing work on George Eliot's early publishing career. Similarly, the chapters 'George Eliot among Philosophers and Scientists', 'George Eliot and Contemporary Writers', and 'George Eliot Abroad' develop new perspectives. Taking the last of these as exemplary, Nancy Henry adroitly expands her important earlier work, especially that in *George Eliot and the British Empire* (2002), demonstrating that 'While Eliot did represent British travellers abroad, she was even more interested in the impact their travels do or do not have on them when they return home' (p. 97), discerning further how interrogation of Englishness proceeds through encounters with all that was not English.

Some works emerge from footnotes to provide the shoulders upon which later works stand. One such is K. K. Collins, *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections* (2010), which has supplied many delicious quotations that might otherwise not have been to hand. Elsie Michie in chapter 5, 'George Eliot and Contemporary Writers', explicitly acknowledges Collins's work along with that of Kathleen McCormack and Nancy Henry when in her closing paragraph she firmly rebuts any lingering notion that Eliot was a social pariah (p. 94). The 'networks' idea, as I have indicated, is reinforced by cross-referencing among the essays, whether by the respective authors referring to previous work, or by the attentive editors pointing to connections and contrasts. In a number of places there is welcome reference to publications as recent as 2024: among its many merits the *Handbook* is up to the minute.

The 'Works' section is the largest (17 chapters), distinguished by the inclusion of essays on the notebooks, manuscripts, letters, journals, essays and translations as well as on the novels and short fiction, plus one on 'George Eliot's Poetry' with a separate 'The Intersectional *Spanish Gypsy*'. Inclusion of two essays on poetry reflects increased attention to this aspect of Eliot's work, extending beyond the few poems that used to be discussed. Stephanie Markovits's chapter takes stock of such recent work in an essay that reiterates the extinction of the longstanding view of Eliot's poetry as 'essentially the work of a novelist on leave' (quoting Angela Leighton, p. 386).

There is a general point to be made here, that Atkinson and Cohn promulgate a broader than customary definition of George Eliot's oeuvre that is well supported in this volume. For among notable features in 'Works' is the attention to categories not usually considered as 'works'. Letters are such a case, and Rosemarie Bodenheimer returns to *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot Her Letters and Fiction* (1994), explicitly acknowledging that earlier work, developing a penetrating discussion of the negotiations between Mary Ann Evans, George Eliot, Marian Lewes, and finally Mary Ann

Cross in the language of the letters. ‘Translations’ is by Clare Carlisle, editor of Eliot’s translation from the Latin of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, unpublished in her lifetime (incidentally Davis places weight on the significance of Eliot’s decision to translate Spinoza: an instance of the incidental conversations among the chapters). While Carlisle’s apparatus in her 2020 edition is extensive, she is able to offer new angles in her *Handbook* essay, particularly taking into account Eliot’s more famous translations (Strauss and Feuerbach), her unfinished translation of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and her discussions of the process of translation. Carlisle’s work, drawing as it does on her thorough acquaintance with previous accounts of Eliot and Spinoza, establishes the value of including the *Ethics* as an integral part of George Eliot’s canon.

It may seem that *Middlemarch* gets short shrift. Gage McSweeney’s ‘Distantly Reading *Middlemarch*’ in the ‘Works’ section certainly subscribes to the *Handbook*’s mission of breaking new ground in its enlightening account of statistical approaches to the novel. But while the novelty of this methodology earns McSweeney’s discussion that place in ‘Works’, *Middlemarch* naturally features in a number of other chapters along the way and returns triumphant in the final five (shorter) chapters under the banner ‘Perspectives on *Middlemarch*’. All five authors are eminent critics, whose diverse professional experiences inform their contributions. Howard Jacobson’s standing as a novelist explains his topic, ‘*Middlemarch* and Contemporary Fiction’; retired academic and administrator Dinah Birch writes on ‘*Middlemarch* and the Value of the Humanities’; Caroline Levine, a wide-ranging scholar, takes on ‘*Middlemarch* as World Literature’; Nancy Yousef’s particular scholarly expertise informs ‘*Middlemarch* and the Art/Work of Philosophy’; and Oxford don Robert Douglas-Fairhurst puts in an elegant last word on ‘Two *Middlemarch* Sentences’. The ongoing conversations in the *Handbook* are enacted by these contributions in a manner less formally constructed than Henry James’ canonical essay, ‘*Daniel Deronda*: A Conversation’. Thus, there are several allusions to Virginia Woolf’s much quoted *Middlemarch* is ‘one of the few English books written for grown-up people’, where Jacobson enterprisingly reflects on what Woolf meant by ‘grown-ups’ (pp. 796–7).

Given the manifesto that the *Handbook* centres on form, the section so labelled duly looks at dialogue (Jonathan Farina), character (Yi-Ping Ong), rhythm (John Plotz), and so on. I’m unable to give the attention they deserve to these chapters, as is the case with many others that also encompass much that is original and engaging. I would not necessarily have expected that there was much more to be said about ‘George Eliot as Omniscient Narrator’, but Jesse Rosenthal proves me wrong; likewise, Ayelet Ben-Yishai in ‘Revisiting George Eliot’s Realism’.

'Afterlives' has interesting takes on the notion of afterlife, not least George Eliot's penetration into non-English territory, notably Asia. I have already mentioned 'George Eliot's East Asian Afterlives', by Sungmey Lee and Olivia Loksing Moy (respectively in post at Korea National Open University and City University of New York), a chapter that does a lot of work. A number of chapters other than Carlisle's deal with translation in passing. In Lee and Moy's chapter, the focus is translations of Eliot's work into other languages than English, and their discussion turns the world if not upside down then definitely sideways on. It certainly introduced me to unfamiliar material and issues. Their aim is to explore 'the complexities behind the global reception and the many "uses" of Eliot in an East Asian context, considering disparate but related moments in literary translations published in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan since the 1880s' (p. 774). It opens with a case study of Min Jin Lee's novel *Pachinko* (2017: written in English), in which characters at Waseda University in the 1960s study and debate George Eliot. This discussion enables the authors to draw out a number of paradoxes, of which a dominant one is 'Eliot's simultaneous canonicity and unreadability' where unreadability can be synonymous with illegibility '[d]ue to problems of density, length, and access' so that translations not infrequently 'truncate, paraphrase, or publish only portions of her novels' (pp. 774–5). *Silas Marner* was one of the first novels translated – into Chinese, not because of its brevity, but for its moral values. It was followed by an abridged version of *Romola* under a title that translates as 'a heroine amid turbulent times' who might serve as a moral and philosophical guide to Chinese women. The translators were often missionaries, and hence the curious phenomenon of George Eliot's work being used for moral instruction of girls. There is mention of a television adaptation of *Pachinko* and while dramatic adaptations (stage, film, TV) are frequently discussed (including by me) as afterlife, they are given a long footnote by Caroline Levine (p. 824, n. 46) but not examined as a topic in the *Handbook*.

Full disclosure: with Matthew Sussman and Daniel Tyler I am editing a Routledge *Companion to George Eliot*, a volume in preparation on a similar scale to this Oxford *Handbook* (and encouragingly footnoted by Ruth Abbott – p. 284, n. 8). A point of difference is that we are encouraging authors to offer explicit discussion of the intellectual formation and methodologies of their essays in this time of climate crisis. Accordingly, we expect that contributions will address either full-on or in passing environmental aspects of her writing. The comprehensive Oxford *Handbook* anticipates this development in a note: 'Environmental George Eliot is emerging' (p. 772, n. 59).

It will be apparent that I have taken both profit and pleasure from *The Oxford Handbook of George Eliot*. The volume deserves a wide circulation,

probably to be achieved principally as the foreshadowed e-book. The calibre of the contributions as of the whole conception and execution guarantee its durability, just as the volume itself is evidence of George Eliot's durability, and of her capacity to excite.