PART I

Life and afterlife

CHAPTER I

George Eliot's life

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George Eliot was born Mary Anne Evans on 22 November 1819, although her name changed many times in the course of her sixty-one-year life. Christened 'Mary Anne', she dropped the final 'e' during her pious adolescence, perhaps bothered by its suggestion of a French, that is Catholic, resonance. By the time she was thirty and had left Evangelical Protestantism far behind, 'Mary Ann' had mutated, ironically enough, into the distinctly Gallic 'Marian'. On settling into an unmarried partnership with G. H. Lewes in 1854 Marian insisted on being known as 'Mrs Lewes' or, when signing herself formally, 'Marian Evans Lewes'. Yet by the time of her wedding to John Cross at the end of her life her autograph had changed to 'Mary Ann Cross'. In addition there was the *nom de plume* 'George Eliot' by which she was known professionally throughout her life, and by which she continues to be known today.

George Eliot's ambivalence about her given name may have been to do with the way it placed her precisely in class and regional terms. Mary Ann(e) – customarily shortened to 'Polly' – was a very popular name among the Midland farming community into which she had been born. She was the youngest child of Robert Evans and his second wife Christiana Pearson. Evans had risen from being an enterprising carpenter to become land agent to the Newdigate-Newedegate family, whose holdings stretched from Derbyshire in the North to Kent in the South. Their chief seat, however, was in Midlands Warwickshire, at Arbury Hall near Nuneaton, and it was in a substantial farmhouse, Griff House, just outside the park boundary that Mary Anne lived until she was twenty-one.

Of her two parents, Mary Anne was closer to her middle-aged father whom she often accompanied on his rounds of the estate. Through his expert eyes Mary Anne came to know a landscape that was by no means exclusively pastoral. The Newdigate holdings included a colliery, and in the nearby villages miners lived alongside ribbon-weavers whose livelihood was often strafed by trade depressions. As an adolescent during the

struggle for parliamentary reform in the early 1830s Mary Anne had witnessed rioting in the streets of Nuneaton, while as a young woman she ran a clothing club for the local poor. Yet the studious Miss Evans was also given the run of the magnificent library at Arbury Hall by her father's employers. Thus while Mary Anne's childhood adhered to her later prescription of being 'well rooted in some spot of a native land' (*DD*, ch. 3), there was nothing remotely parochial about it. Seven of her eight novels are populated with characters from every stratum of society including weavers, artisans, clergy, aristocrats, lawyers, doctors and farmers, all types which she had first encountered within a few miles of her family home.

Mrs Evans's ill health following the birth and death of twin sons in 1821 may have been the reason why Mary Anne was sent away to school at the age of just five. She spent her most formative years at 'The Elms' in Nuneaton where she forged a strong bond with the assistant mistress, the evangelical Irishwoman Maria Lewis. Mary Anne's piety intensified still further when she transferred to a school in Coventry, run by the daughters of a local Baptist minister. Her ostentatiously 'Quaker' dress, fierce bookishness and proficiency at the piano meant that her awed classmates regarded the formidable adolescent as 'immeasurably superior to themselves' (Cross, 1: 26).

In 1836, at the age of seventeen, Mary Ann – now minus the final 'e' – was called home to help nurse her mother, who was dying of breast cancer. Following the marriage of her older sister Christiana in May 1837 she became sole housekeeper to her father and brother Isaac yet also continued the ambitious programme of study begun at school. In her correspondence with Miss Lewis she commented in detail on the historical and religious books she was reading in the slivers of time between domestic duties. She also took language and music lessons from visiting masters.

In 1841 Robert Evans retired, handing over the land agency to Isaac who continued to live at Griff with his new wife. Mary Ann accompanied her father to a handsome house on the outskirts of Coventry, which had been taken to launch the rather plain twenty-one-year-old onto the Midlands marriage market. But these careful plans were disrupted on 2 January 1842 when Mary Ann announced that it would be hypocritical to continue to attend church, since, as she explained a few weeks later, she now believed that Christianity was based on 'mingled truth and fiction' (*L*, 1: 128). If Robert Evans was bewildered by Mary Ann's behaviour, her brother was furious. The very close relationship that the siblings had enjoyed as small children had long since cooled, rendering the differences in their temperaments more apparent than ever. According to the highly

censorious Isaac, Mary Ann's rebellious attitude was imperilling the good name of the entire Evans clan.

There was no doubt in the Evans family's collective mind as to who was to blame for this reckless reversal in Mary Ann's religious beliefs. Shortly after arriving in Coventry she had been introduced to near-neighbours Charles and Cara Bray. Charles was a ribbon manufacturer and newspaper proprietor who held progressive views on everything from education to marriage while Cara was an intellectually independent woman raised in the Unitarian church. Through the influence of this charismatic pair, amplified by Cara's elder sister Sara Hennell, Mary Ann had started to read some of the new 'Higher Criticism' which threw doubt on the literal truth of the Bible, in particular the supernatural elements in the New Testament's account of the life of Christ. It was this reading, including *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) by Sara and Cara's brother Charles Christian Hennell, which had loosened Mary Ann's attachment to Anglican observance and nudged her towards the agnosticism that endured for the rest of her life.

After a few painful weeks a truce was called in what Mary Ann dubbed her 'Holy War', and she continued to live with her father as companion and, increasingly, nurse until his death in 1849. In later life she regretted the way in which she had allowed intellectual vanity to cause such pain to the man she called 'The one deep strong love I have ever known' (*L*, 1: 284). However, every minute she could spare from tending the elderly man was spent at Rosehill, the Brays' large house through which passed the radical elite of the day.

It was through the Brays that in 1846 Mary Ann came to publish her first book, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, a translation from the German of the second edition of D. F. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, which went even further than Hennell in showing that Christianity was based on a series of 'mythi' rather than verifiable historical facts. Despite agreeing with Strauss's intellectual position, Mary Ann found the implications of his outlook bleak. Her next translation – of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* as *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) – was much more compatible. Feuerbach argued that it was in the loving bonds between individuals that one could best reach the divine.

Both these translations were published by the radical publisher John Chapman, a friend of the Brays based at 142 Strand, London, from where he ran a bookshop and publishing business. And it was to this address that Mary Ann moved in 1851. She agreed to work as an uncredited assistant and *de facto* editor on Chapman's flagship publication, the recently

acquired *Westminster Review*, while also lodging in the hostel for transient intellectuals run on the premises by his wife. Over the next five years the newly styled 'Marian' not only edited articles from some of the most important thinkers of the day, including J. S. Mill and J. A. Froude, but also reviewed hundreds of books on a range of subjects including history, science and literature. She also pursued love affairs with John Chapman himself and with the bachelor Herbert Spencer, whose rejection caused a serious wound to her already precarious self-esteem.

It was, however, through Chapman and Spencer that, in 1851, Marian met the man who would become her emotional and professional partner for the next twenty-five years. George Henry Lewes was a journalist and author whose complicated private life had long been the subject of London gossip. His wife was conducting an affair with his former best friend and colleague, Thornton Hunt, by whom she would eventually have four children, in addition to three surviving sons by her husband. At the time Lewes became intimate with Marian he had lived apart from his wife for several years but because he had agreed to be named as the legal father of Hunt's children he was unable to seek a divorce.

Marian's decision in July 1854 to 'elope' with Lewes for a nine-month working holiday in Germany caused immense shock. It also set up a pattern of extended travel, both within Britain and abroad, which was to become an important feature of the Leweses' life together. Cara Bray and Sara Hennell were offended that Marian had not revealed the seriousness of her new relationship, let alone taken their advice on such a drastic step. Men of the world who had previously professed admiration for the clever Miss Evans were now incandescent with rage, insisting that no wife or daughter of theirs would be allowed to have anything to do with her. It was for this reason that, on returning from Germany where Lewes had been working on his biography of Goethe, the couple set up home in the anonymous suburbs of south-west London. In this state of near purdah Marian wrote some of her most accomplished essays for the *Westminster Review*, including 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (October 1856), which mounts a searing satire on the conventions of the commercial fiction of the day. Her choice of subject suggests that she might have now been toying with writing a novel of her own.

In November 1856 Lewes sent thirty-seven-year-old Marian's first story to John Blackwood, the Edinburgh publisher whose family firm produced the eponymous monthly magazine to which Lewes regularly contributed scientific articles. Blackwood liked 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', taking on trust Lewes's cover story that it was written by a

shy, implicitly male, friend who wished to conceal his identity. When, after a few weeks, Blackwood pressed for a *nom de plume* for his new author, Marian volunteered 'George Eliot' (she later explained that 'the reason she fixed on this name was that George was Mr Lewes's Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily-pronounced word': Cross, 1: 430–1). 'Amos Barton' was followed by 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story' and 'Janet's Repentance', all based on incidents and people that Marian recalled from her youth. Unfortunately, so did many other people: Nuneaton was in an uproar trying to work out the true identity of the mysterious 'George Eliot'. For a time a penniless alcoholic called Joseph Liggins allowed people to think that he was the author, a state of affairs that initially amused Marian and Lewes but eventually forced them into revealing the actual situation.

Figure 1 An 1858 photograph by John Edwin Mayall, of which George Eliot's friend Mme Belloc (Bessie Rayner Parkes) commented that it gave 'the only real indication left to us of the true shape of the head, and of George Eliot's smile and general bearing'.

Marian's first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), did nothing to disperse the excited chatter. This time it was her late father's Derbyshire relatives who recognised the true story on which the narrative of Hetty Sorrell, the milkmaid who gets pregnant by the young squire and is brought to repentance by a young female Methodist preacher, was based. The novel was a commercial and critical success and resulted in the definitive unmasking of George Eliot as Marian Lewes or, to the watchful eyes of her remaining family in the Midlands, Mary Anne Evans. By this time Marian had revealed her irregular domestic situation to her brother, who responded by breaking off contact and instructing his sister Chrissey to follow suit. It was now too that Lewes travelled to Switzerland to reveal to his three schoolboy sons that he was separated from their mother and living with the rising literary star 'George Eliot'.

It was perhaps the realisation that she might never see her brother and sister again that steered Marian towards the subject matter of her next novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Set in the Midlands in the early part of the century, it deals with the estrangement of Tom and Maggie Tulliver and features a chorus of maternal aunts who are based on Christiana Evans's fearsome sisters. The book's sales suffered slightly from the fact that its author was now known to be none other than the scandalous Marian Evans. This sense that critical eyes and tongues were judging her leaked into the account of Maggie's exclusion from the town of St Ogg's but also into 'The Lifted Veil' (1859), a short story written around the same time that seethes with a sense of suffocating paranoia.

Gradually Marian's isolation began to lessen and by the autumn of 1860 she had moved with Lewes into the centre of London. This was partly so that Lewes's eldest son Charles could commute easily to his Post Office job. Marian now felt sufficiently confident to attend concerts, theatre and even dinner parties. The longevity of her relationship with Lewes, combined with her new fame and wealth, had softened people's attitudes to her domestic position. Nonetheless, she and Lewes made the decision not to have children of their own in order to avoid further stigma. Significantly, her next novel, the fairy-tale-like *Silas Marner* (1861), concerns a single middle-aged man who adopts a baby that has arrived unexpectedly on his doorstep.

Silas Marner, set in Marian's signature Warwickshire landscape, was a comparatively easy book for her to write. The next would prove the hardest. *Romola* (1863) was an over-researched account of the life of the Dominican friar Savonarola in counter-Reformation Florence. It failed to fulfil Marian's own edict that a novel should not 'lapse anywhere from the

Figure 2 Engraving by Paul Rajon of Frederic Burton's 1864 portrait of George Eliot, commissioned by J. W. Cross as the frontispiece for *George Eliot's Life* (1885).

picture to the diagram' (*L*, 4: 300) and, although well received by intellectual readers of the day, it remains the least popular of all her works. Rather than being published by Blackwood, the book was brought out by George Smith who offered an unprecedented £10,000 for it. Marian had been tempted not so much by the money as by a buried desire to punish Blackwood for not acting more decisively in the Joseph Liggins affair. However, the disappointing result of this collaboration with Smith, Elder pushed Marian into returning to Blackwood's where she remained for the rest of her career.

By 1863 the Leweses were wealthy enough to afford a large house to the north of Regent's Park. Lavishly decorated, 'The Priory' became the setting for their famous Sunday afternoon receptions which attracted the great and the good of the day, including Charles Darwin and a young, star-struck Henry James. Women, too, found themselves drawn to Marian, including Georgie Burne-Jones, wife of the painter, and Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria.

Marian returned to the Midlands of her youth for her next novel. *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) is based on her memories of poll-day rioting in Nuneaton in the 1830s. Although the central characters fail to spark, there is no disguising the pleasure with which Marian once again invokes the physical and social landscape of pre-Victorian Warwickshire. The book,

however, was not such a popular success as her earlier works. Though the long narrative poem which followed it, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), sold well, some sensed that George Eliot's writing career was on the wane.

These were difficult times personally too. In the summer of 1869 Lewes's second son Thornie returned from Africa where he had been farming, just in time to die of spinal tuberculosis. In this moment of greatest devastation, Marian turned again to her earliest memories. The sonnet sequence 'Brother and Sister' (1874) recounts the painful moment when she and Isaac first started to grow apart as children.

With her next novel Marian's reputation and finances spectacularly revived. *Middlemarch*, published mostly in two-monthly instalments throughout 1872, plaits the story of an idealistic doctor arriving in a Midlands market town with that of an equally high-minded young woman who insists on marrying out of misplaced duty and intellectual ambition. The book was an astonishing success and remains today Eliot's most highly regarded book.

Marian's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, was published in monthly instalments in 1876. Again, it knits together two narratives which seem only tenuously related. The first concerns a young man's discovery of his Jewishness and the second that of a young Englishwoman's marriage into the aristocracy. Although the book sold reasonably well, readers and critics were predictably puzzled by the 'Jewish part' of the book which struck many, then as now, as wordy and lacking in dramatic pace.

The purchase of a country house in Surrey in 1876 should have heralded the beginning of a more tranquil phase for Marian. Instead, her happiness was blighted by Lewes's worsening health. His death in 1878 left her devastated and unable to work, although *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, which she had been writing during the last months of Lewes's life, duly appeared. One of the few people Marian could bear to see during her early months of bereavement was John Walter Cross, the young banker who had negotiated the purchase of 'The Heights' at Witley and acted as the Leweses' financial advisor.

In 1880 the literary world was rocked by the private life of George Eliot for the first time in twenty-five years. Once again she had slipped away unnoticed to Europe with a man, although this time there had been a bona fide church wedding first. Soon an altogether more damaging story than the mere fact of her marriage to the much younger John Cross was filtering back to London. On arriving in Venice at the climax of the honeymoon, Johnnie had leapt into the Grand Canal apparently in an attempt to commit suicide. Whatever the real reasons behind Cross's sudden and