
Chapter 1

Life

George Eliot's life provides as compelling a narrative as any she ever invented. Born the same year as Queen Victoria, the woman known successively as Mary Anne Evans, Marian Lewes, George Eliot and Mary Ann Cross lived through dramatic personal and cultural changes that track those of the nineteenth century. While George Eliot refused to sanction any biography during her life, she showed a lively interest in the biographies of others. After reading J. G. Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1839), for example, she wrote: "All biography is interesting and instructive" (*GEL*, I:24). Her novels are devoted to following the shape of her characters' lives. Just as she emphasized the significance of early events as clues to the psychology of characters such as Maggie Tulliver, Silas Marner, Tertius Lydgate, and Daniel Deronda, so her well-documented life experiences – of both her childhood and adult years – help us to understand her as a person and artist and provide insight into aspects of her fiction.

Mary Anne Evans was born on 22 November 1819 at South Farm on the Newdigate family estate of Arbury Hall near Nuneaton, Warwickshire, in that central part of England known as the Midlands. Her parents were Christiana Pearson Evans and Robert Evans. Christiana was Robert Evans's second wife and Mary Anne's family included two children from her father's first marriage (Robert and Fanny), as well as her sister Chrissey (b. 1814) and brother Isaac (b. 1816). While second marriages and stepsiblings were common in the nineteenth century, as today, the basic fact of this extended family is important to the portrayal of her fictional families, few of which are simple, nuclear families. Orphans, adopted children, and nieces and nephews living under the care of relatives occur in all of her novels except *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), for example, Gwendolen Harleth is the daughter of her mother's first marriage, and tolerates her younger stepsisters with barely disguised disdain.

Christiana Pearson Evans died in February 1836 when Mary Anne was sixteen years old. Her health had been poor since the death of twin boys shortly after their birth in 1821. One may search the numerous mothers in Eliot's fiction

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for clues to Christiana's character, yet these figures are contradictory: Milly Barton, Mrs Poyser, Lisbeth Bede, and Mrs Tulliver in the early fiction alone provide various forms of mothering. With little information offered by Eliot's letters, Christiana Evans remains elusive.

Much more is known about her father, Robert Evans, who played a central role in her life. An estate manager for the Newdigate family, he had responsibility for overseeing the tenants, the timber and various forms of land usage including coal mining. He acted as a liaison between the landholding and the working classes, an intermediary role that may shed some light on the origins of Eliot's own social and political perspectives. Her narrator Theophrastus reminisces about a Midlands childhood similar to Eliot's and a father who "knew very well what could be wisely expected from the miners, the weavers, the field-labourers, and farmers of his own time – yes and from the aristocracy" (*TS*, 2). It is clear that Eliot, like Theophrastus, considers those who have experienced the "mixed commonality" of our "national lot" to have a superior perspective on life generally (*TS*, 2).

Her father's privileged position allowed the young Mary Anne a glimpse of the life enjoyed by the landed aristocracy, and she had occasional access to the Newdigate library. She stored her observations from this period, incorporating them into her fiction, especially "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" (1857), with its detailed description of the architecture and interior design of Arbury Hall [Cheverel Manor] and the earlier generation of Newdigates who had "Gothicized" the Tudor manor according to the late eighteenth-century fashion. The influence of this inside perspective on the landed classes is evident in the depiction of characters with an inherited sense of superiority, such as Arthur Donnithorne, Mrs Transome, Mr Brooke, and Sir Hugo Mallinger.

Eliot's memories of her life in Nuneaton and her companionship with her brother Isaac are most vividly recalled in her early fiction. For example, the town of Milby in "Janet's Repentance" (1857) is based on Nuneaton. In *The Mill on the Floss*, St. Oggs is based on Gainsborough and the river Floss on the Trent, but landmarks from her Midlands landscape (like the round pond) are transferred to this fictional composite. Her recollections of her father are incorporated in characters such as Adam Bede and Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch* (1871–2) – hard-working, morally upright men who attain the position of estate agent for wealthy employers.

The young Mary Anne was an excellent pupil at the girls' schools she attended and seems always to have had an intense intellectual life fueled by reading of all sorts and by the study of languages. Beginning with French in 1832, she learned (with the help of tutors) Italian, German, Latin, and Greek. Later in life she would acquire Spanish and Hebrew.

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From 1828–1832, she attended boarding school in Nuneaton and became a favored pupil of her devoutly evangelical teacher, Maria Lewis. When she removed to the Misses Franklin's school in Coventry in 1832, she continued to correspond with Miss Lewis. The Franklin sisters were Baptists so that by this time she had come into contact with a variety of unorthodox religious views. In 1834, she underwent her own evangelical conversion and, for a while, all her intellectual energy was channeled into her reading of religious texts and her correspondence with Miss Lewis and a similarly religious friend, Martha Jackson. At times her ardor and renunciation bordered on fanaticism, and yet these letters show the future writer experimenting with metaphor:

We are like poor creatures of whom I have read, who, for some cause or other, have been thrust out of the ship by their companions, try to grasp first one part of the vessel then another for support, until by the successive lashes that are given to make them loose their hold, they have no fingers left by which to venture another hopeless experiment on pitiless hearts. So we, having voluntarily caused ourselves to be cast out as evil by the world, are continually indicating a vacillation in our choice by trying to lean on some part of it within reach, and it is mercy that orders the lashing of our disobedient fingers, even though for a time we be faint and bleeding from the correction. (GEL, I:59)

Images of lashings and bleeding – in the tradition of the Passion of Christ – are frequent in her religious letters. In her fiction too she would not shy away from violent images of cuttings and torture as metaphors for mental anguish, albeit of a secular kind. At this time the Evanses were steadfast members of the Church of England. She exceeded their conventional beliefs and practices, and they thought her melodramatic and odd. But her piety and renunciations – of theatre, music, and novels – were tolerated because they were Christian and reflected the evangelical revolution within the Church of England.

In June 1841, Isaac married, and Robert Evans gave him Griff House where the family had lived since 1820. Mary Ann (who had dropped the “e” from her name) and her father took a new residence at Foleshill on the outskirts of Coventry. At least part of the intention of moving to a less isolated locale was to provide Mary Ann with opportunities for marriage, but the move had an effect quite unintended by her father, for here she struck up new friendships that were to transform her religious beliefs and open a new world of intellectual inquiry and fellowship.

She was already beginning to have religious doubts. At some point in 1841 she read Charles Christian Hennell's *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), a persuasively written treatise that was sympathetic to Christianity

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but concluded that there was no rational basis for belief in the miracles of the New Testament. In Coventry, Mary Ann found an environment in which she could debate and discuss such ideas, which would have been neither understood nor tolerated by her family or her religious friends. Her developing friendships with the local ribbon manufacturer Charles Bray, his wife Cara, her sister Sarah Hennell, and brother Charles Hennell, author of the *Inquiry*, led to a new regimen of reading in non-religious literature and exposure to progressive intellectual and social thinking among the guests at the Bray's home in Coventry. As a result, she experienced what might be called a reverse conversion as she began to question and eventually reject formal Christianity. Just as she had gone too far for her family in her religious fervor, so now she went too far in her scruples about practicing a religion in which she could no longer believe.

The story of Eliot's intellectual, religious, and political development is an interesting combination of susceptibility to influence by friends like Miss Lewis and the Brays, and an independence that set her at odds with specifically patriarchal authority (her father and brother). This is a combination of traits that she shares with Maggie Tulliver, and which, more than any situational parallels between Eliot's life and that of her heroine, shows why *The Mill on the Floss* may be considered a partially autobiographical novel.

Her refusal to attend church with her father and friend Maria Lewis on 2 January 1842 was a profound experience in her intellectual and emotional development, primarily because she came to repent this "Holy War." She later saw the damage she had done by not compromising her principles for the sake of her personal relationships, regretting that she had caused pain and dissension.¹ And yet, her intense desire to pursue truth and knowledge, as well as personal fulfillment, would lead to further rifts with her family and her past. According to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, the most astute reader of Eliot's letters: "The incident established her intellectual and moral honesty, her understanding that such honesty would be socially misunderstood and punished, and her need to expiate or redeem the consequences of her unconventional intelligence through sacrificial service."²

For the next several years, she performed the duties of an unmarried daughter to her widowed father, even attending church, but her intellectual expansion continued. She took over from Charles Hennell's wife Rufa the task of translating David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835–6) as *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. In completing this demanding labor, she brought one of the foremost examples of the historical biblical criticism called the German Higher Criticism to English audiences. The book examines the life of Jesus as told in the four Gospels, finding evidence for the origins of the story in myths rather

than in history. It applied a rational, scientific method to its study of texts that Eliot, who already viewed the Scriptures as “mingled truth and fiction” (*GEL*, I:128), also saw as great literature, and dissecting the beautiful story of the Crucifixion depressed her (*GEL*, I:206). Yet characteristically, she fretted over every detail to produce an impressive translation, which was published anonymously in 1846.

Meanwhile, Charles Bray purchased the radical newspaper, *The Coventry Herald and Observer*, and she began to contribute essays and reviews so that reading, writing, and discussions with friends rendered the daily caring for her demanding father less oppressive than it might otherwise have been. She was rewarded by the sense of fulfilling her duties, especially in her father’s last year when he required constant nursing. At the same time, her mind had transcended the limitations of her country upbringing and she was longing to see the world beyond her Midlands home.

Upon Robert Evans’s death at the end of May 1849, she set off with the Brays to enjoy the experiences of foreign travel that would eventually become central to her intellectual and creative life. After traveling to France, Italy, and Switzerland, she parted with her friends, electing to stay in Geneva and live alone for the first time (July 1849–March 1850). Drawing on her small inheritance, she passed the time reading, people-watching, and getting to know the family in whose home she lodged, the D’Albert Durades, who remained life-long friends.

When she returned “home,” she found herself outcast and unhappy amongst her family, and having had a taste of independent living, decided to try London. The significance of her decision to move to London cannot be overestimated. Young women in mid-nineteenth-century England did not do such things. She commented that it always surprised her when people found her being alone odd (*GEL*, I:301), and she would not allow other people’s opinions now, or later, to deter her from pursuing her desire to be at the intellectual center of the country, indeed – at this time – of the world.

In London, she lodged at 142 the Strand, office and home of John Chapman, friend of the Brays and publisher of progressive books, including her own translation of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*. He had recently purchased the *Westminster Review*, a periodical that had a long history of advancing liberal thought. The enthusiastic, over-committed Chapman was at a loss how to regenerate the journal as a newly important medium of intellectual debate. Marian (as she now called herself) had contributed her first of many reviews to the *Westminster* in January 1851 (of R. W. Mackay’s *The Progress of the Intellect*). Chapman recognized the extraordinary talents of his lodger and invited her to become his editorial assistant, the (unacknowledged) editor of the journal.

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Marian Evans acted as the editor of the *Westminster Review* – without formal credit or pay – from 1851–1854, an intellectually exciting and emotionally turbulent period. Chapman’s domestic life was as chaotic as his professional life. He lived with his wife, children, and the children’s governess who was also his mistress. Despite becoming entangled in a romance with Chapman that put her into conflict with both his wife and mistress (and which sent her temporarily packing to Coventry), she kept her focus on work. She wrote a Prospectus for the journal and was responsible for keeping it at the forefront of mid-Victorian intellectual life. This work introduced her to the leading thinkers of the day.

At a meeting on 4 May 1852 to protest price fixing among publishers, for example, she was the lone woman in the room where Charles Dickens, the scientific and sociological theorist Herbert Spencer, novelist Wilkie Collins, naturalist Richard Owen, and others made speeches and discussed a strategy to oppose the attempts of large publishing houses to squeeze out competition from smaller operations, such as Chapman’s.³ During this period, she also met the most important women on the intellectual scene, including the widely accomplished and published author Harriet Martineau and the early advocates of women’s rights, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Bodichon. Bodichon would become perhaps her closest friend in the years ahead.

As her flirtation with Chapman was cooling into a professional relationship, she found herself drawn to Herbert Spencer. Then an editor at the *Economist*, he would become a major proponent of evolution theory, coining the phrase “survival of the fittest” usually associated with Darwin. She had a brief, intense emotional involvement with him, which ended in July of 1852 with his rejection of her affections (at least partly on the grounds of her physical unattractiveness). Meanwhile, she was coming to respect and admire Spencer’s friend and *Westminster* contributor George Henry Lewes, a highly intellectual and versatile journalist, playwright, actor, drama critic, and novelist with a growing interest in natural science.

Lewes’s domestic life was, like that of so many Victorians, irregular. When he first met Marian, he was still living with his wife, with whom he had three sons. Agnes Lewes had become involved with her husband’s best friend, Thornton Hunt, who had his own wife and children. The two men co-founded the radical periodical, *The Leader* in 1850 and continued to publish in the midst of their interpersonal entanglements. It is thought that by the time Lewes moved out of their home in 1852, Agnes had had two children with Hunt, though Lewes signed as father on both of their birth certificates (1850 and 1851).

Although the facts about this period of their lives are obscure, biographer Rosemary Ashton believes that they became intimate at the end of 1852 or

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beginning of 1853.⁴ In October 1853, Marian moved out of Chapman's house and into her own lodgings. In December 1853, she resigned as editor of the *Westminster*. Work continued on the *Leader* and she contributed a number of reviews, helping Lewes to meet deadlines in April 1854 when his poor health prevented his working. She was also translating another important German work of Higher Criticism, Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841) as *The Essence of Christianity* (1854), which had a strong influence on what has been called her religious humanism or sometimes her "religion of humanity," a term originating with the contemporary French philosopher, Auguste Comte (1798–1857). For Feuerbach, who took an anthropological approach to analyzing Christianity, religion was fundamentally human rather than divine, answering human needs and projecting human ideals as deities to be worshipped. Feuerbach argued that the essence of Christianity should be found in human relations, a notion that George Eliot would emphasize repeatedly in her fiction as well as in her justifications for the course she and Lewes were about to follow.

In July 1854, Eliot and Lewes took the momentous step of traveling together to Weimar, Germany in a gesture that announced their intention to live together as a couple. This dramatic act began for both of them a period of intellectual and social enlightenment. Lewes pursued research for his groundbreaking English biography of the great German poet, novelist and man of science, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), while both wrote review essays for the *Westminster* and other English periodicals that helped fund their travels. The unmarried couple enjoyed a honeymoon of social acceptance in a European community of artists and intellectuals that included the composer and pianist Franz Liszt and which was much more tolerant of their relationship than the censorious circle of gossiping friends and acquaintances they had left behind.

But both of their lives were in London and return was inevitable. The scandal they had evaded by leaving confronted them upon their return. Eliot stayed alone in Dover, working on a translation of the seventeenth-century Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, while Lewes went to find lodgings for them close to London. Eventually they settled in Richmond as the Leweses, a fictional identity to which they would adhere for the rest of their life together.

While today the decision of two mature adults to live together in a committed relationship seems unexceptional, for the time it was a radical gesture that served to alienate and isolate the woman from social respectability much more than the man. Marian was not "received," even by her own and Lewes's acquaintances, and she clung to her belief in the moral rightness of this relationship based on love rather than legal marriage to sustain her through a

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difficult period when most people regarded her as a woman living in sin. It is important to note that she did not set out to flaunt her independence or to defy the institution of marriage, though she had always been skeptical about the “noose of matrimony” (*GEL*, I:54). Rather, she was insistent that the true marriage was one of minds and of affections regardless of legal status.

It was not long before the professional benefits of her decision to stay with her intellectually compatible partner became apparent. She wrote several long review essays for the *Westminster*, including “The Natural History of German Life” (1856) and “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856). Lewes encouraged her to try her hand at writing fiction, and during a period when she accompanied him on his scientific research trips to various coastal locales in Britain (including Tenby in South Wales, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey), she set herself the task of writing stories. With his numerous connections in the publishing world, Lewes proved invaluable to getting his partner’s work published. He contacted John Blackwood, the editor of the *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, and told him about a friend who was writing fiction that might appeal to the journal’s audience. Lewes delivered Marian’s “clerical scene,” “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” to Blackwood in November 1856. All contributions to *Blackwood’s* appeared anonymously, but in this case, even her editor and publisher did not know her identity. Yet he astutely recognized talent in this mysterious new author and so played along when, in February 1857, “he” identified himself as George Eliot.

“Amos Barton,” “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” and “Janet’s Repentance” were serialized between January and November 1857. *Scenes of Clerical Life* was published as a book in 1858 under the pseudonym George Eliot. It immediately stirred up interest and controversy, not only in London, but also in Nuneaton where residents speculated about the identity of the author and about “originals” for characters in the stories. Isaac Evans had no way of knowing that his sister was writing about some of their former acquaintances and would soon become famous through novels that drew even more explicitly on family memories, but he was suspicious of a letter in which his sister informed him of her marriage to Lewes. He had his solicitor ask for particulars of the marriage and she was forced to admit that it was not a legal union. Just as she was finding success as an author, the break with her family became complete. They stopped writing to her and she was never to see any of her siblings again.

Rather than follow through with her plan to write more scenes, she decided to take a “broader canvas” (*GEL*, II:381) for what she described to Blackwood as “a country novel – full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay” (*GEL*, II:387). She began *Adam Bede* in October 1857 and progressed rapidly. By the time the novel was published in February 1859, she was already at work on another.

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The combination of humor and drama in this carefully observed portrait of rural English life during the Napoleonic wars made *Adam Bede* a critical and commercial success, its first edition selling out in a matter of weeks. George Eliot's popularity soared as did curiosity to know "his" identity.

Marian Lewes was dogged in her success and desire to preserve anonymity by the public claims that George Eliot was a Nuneaton clergyman named Joseph Liggins. Initially the Leweses joked about this claim published in the *Manx Sun* (July 1857), but the rumors became annoying when they turned Liggins into a victim who had gone unpaid for his writing. London's literary set was divided between pro and anti-Ligginsites. While everyone involved preferred to keep her identity anonymous, she was eventually compelled to admit that George Eliot was Marian Evans Lewes, sparking a new round of gossip about the woman living with George Henry Lewes.

Meanwhile she was writing her intensely personal next novel, which she had thought to call "Sister Maggie" or "The House of Tulliver." She paused in the composition of the novel to write "The Lifted Veil" (1859), whose dark, misanthropic tone may reflect her bitterness over the public's behavior in the Liggins matter as well as her sensitivity to criticism about her unmarried status. In September 1859, she and Lewes traveled to Gainsborough, finding that the town and the river Trent would serve well as models for the setting she had in mind for the new novel. In January 1860, Blackwood proposed a title, *The Mill on the Floss*, which, despite its inaccuracy (the mill is actually on the Ripple), had a sound that all parties liked.

By the time of the publication of *The Mill* (1860), Eliot's estrangement from her past had become a settled fact. Her identity was now that of a voluntary exile who could not go home again. Gradually, her writing took new directions that were not tied to memories. In March of 1860, she and Lewes set off for Italy where they pursued an energetic regimen of sightseeing. In Florence, Lewes suggested that the life of the Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) and his brief rule over the city at the end of the fifteenth-century might make a good subject for an historical novel. Eliot took to the suggestion, but not before writing a short story, "Brother Jacob" (finished in August 1860) and beginning another English novel in September. This would become *Silas Marner* (1861). Following its appearance, she and Lewes returned to Italy for further research on the historical novel, *Romola*.

The Italian novel proceeded through a great deal of research to recreate late fifteenth century Florence. *Romola* was a departure in many ways. She accepted a lucrative offer from the publisher George Smith (initially £10,000) to publish in the *Cornhill Magazine*, thus leaving Blackwood, who felt personally betrayed. Writing to monthly deadlines for the serial publication in a magazine was

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stressful; the material was difficult emotionally as well as factually to get right. *Romola* was her only real commercial failure, though some critics appreciated the remarkable historical and psychological accomplishment it represented. She offered Smith “Brother Jacob” for free as consolation for *Romola*’s losses, and when it was time to write her next novel, she returned to Blackwood.

That projected novel would also return to her favorite setting – England in the previous generation – and would use the first Reform Bill of 1832 as an indirect means of reflecting on the current debates about what would become the second Reform Bill of 1867. *Felix Holt* (1866) is not usually considered one of George Eliot’s more artistically successful novels, but its complex inheritance plot integrates separate stories in a way that anticipates *Middlemarch*, her greatest work. The juxtaposition of an older generation (Mrs Transome, Rufus Lyon) living with the consequences of its choices and a younger generation (Harold, Esther and Felix) struggling with its own moral choices, shows both an aesthetic and personal maturity. She was now writing from the mid-point of a life when she had made her choices, for example to live with Lewes and act as stepmother to his sons, who were now making their way in the world.

In the 1860s, Eliot began to experiment with poetry, some of which was published. One idea she had been contemplating since 1864, originally as a drama, was an historical tale of fifteenth-century Spain and of the heroic actions of a woman who learns that she is descended from Gypsy royalty. Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1857), the epic, book-length poem that became *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) is a coming-of-age story and a romance. Rather than realizing her identity as an artist, like Aurora, Fedalma answers her calling to lead her exiled people to a new homeland. Lewes and Eliot traveled to Spain to research this story, which looks back in its exotic setting to *Romola* and forward in its themes of cultural identity and nation building to *Daniel Deronda*.

In May 1863, when Eliot was contemplating the two stories, “Middlemarch” and “Miss Brooke,” which eventually merged to form the novel *Middlemarch*, Lewes’s son Thornie, who had left England for Natal, South Africa, full of hope and energy early in 1863, returned in an appalling physical condition. Their letters, as well as Lewes’s daily journal entries, tell the sad story of Thornie’s wasting away from what is thought to have been spinal tuberculosis. He died in October 1869 at the age of 25, passing away, according to Lewes, in the arms of his stepmother. She had felt close to the dying young man, the process of caring for him no doubt recalling her final year of nursing her father. She wrote in her journal for 19 October 1869: “This death seems to me the beginning of our own.”⁵ Amazingly, she channeled this grief, wisdom, and perspective into what was to become her masterpiece.