

## REVIEWS

***George Eliot and the British Empire*, by Nancy Henry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Repr. 2003. xi + 182. ISBN 0-521-80845-6. US\$50.00 (hardback).**

The title of this study leads the reader to certain expectations of the kind which Henry herself expresses when she states in her "Introduction" that "the empire and the domestic culture that sustained it" is crucial to understanding both Eliot's actions and her writings (3). At first, however, I have to confess to a certain sense of disappointment. It did not seem particularly significant that a reference to the Zambesi in *The Mill on the Floss* implies that the "empire was an inherent if abstract" part of Eliot's early realism. And subsequently it almost seemed as if this was to be a book about Eliot's possible encounters with the empire, rather than actual ones. For instance, Eliot trying to persuade her widowed sister Chrissie and the six children to emigrate to Australia and suggesting she might accompany them just to see them settled. And Henry contemplates that "Eliot might have striven to extend the contact of her readers to the experiences of English colonists" (20) or that she might have revealed the vices of oppressors and the oppressed (20, but cannot because Eliot has not seen these things for herself, a necessary refusal for someone whose work is predicated upon realism. Suddenly, however, Henry asks perhaps the significant question: where "did Eliot encounter a camel?" (21). The question arises from an analogy Eliot uses in "The Natural History of German Life" which includes mention of a camel's gait. The answer to the question is, probably at the London Zoological Gardens. In other words, Eliot's empire was limited to books and zoos.

Consequently, the first chapter is titled "Imperial Knowledge: George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, and the literature of empire." What Nancy Henry quite brilliantly does is to spread out before the reader a map (which the book's cover neatly encapsulates) offering the range of imperial possibilities, ideas, connections with which George Eliot came into contact. Thus chapter one contains a survey of Eliot's colonial and travel literature reviewing in the 1850s; a discussion of manliness; an exploration of G.H. Lewes's attack on big-game hunting in "Lions and Lion Hunting" (1856); Eliot's own musings on the knowledge obtained from books on travel in *The Mill on the Floss*; and Lewes's reviews of books on Africa. At first this seems a fragmented, piecemeal world but by the book's end these fragments have consolidated into a charted knowledge that will profoundly inform the last decade of Eliot's writing life, the 1870s, and more specifically, profoundly inform today's Eliot scholar. The limitations on knowledge are made clear, but so is the extent to which both Eliot and

Lewes abhorred violence, even though it is open to question “to what extent she associated colonialism with violence and how much violence she thought might be justified in the process of civilization” (40). What Henry does is to chart for her readers Eliot’s own colonial and imperial progress: the pathways, the byways, the tracks and the trails.

The second chapter, “Colleagues in Failure: emigration and the Lewes boys,” is a byway into the encouraged emigration of literary sons. As a narrative the work is eminently readable and engrossing, made so by the meticulous and at times original research. More important is the interpretation of that material which elucidates a compelling tale of foolhardiness, disappointment and tragedy: in particular the pitiful account of Thornton Lewes and the “ideologically inconsistent discourses that shaped Thornie’s perceptions of the Englishman’s part in warfare around the world” (66). Balanced against the tragic reality with which the Natal venture ends for the Lewes boys, the early deaths of Thornton and Bertie, are the cheerful fictions based on ignorance and lack of information and ideological assumptions that assured Victorian readers generally, and Eliot and Lewes in particular, of the viability of the colonial solution.

The connections made between the events taking place with regard to the Lewes boys and Eliot’s last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, at first seem tenuous. It seems like a grasping at straws to point out that Gwendolen Harleth is Thornton Lewes’s exact contemporary and to suggest that the portrait of Gwendolen is a version of Thornton’s experience from a woman’s point of view. More convincing is the discussion of Rex and Anna Gascoigne’s emigrant dream, symptomatic of “the ill-informed romance surrounding the colonies” (60) upon which poor Thornton Lewes’s destiny is based. What Henry is pointing to is the way in which Eliot’s construction of these fictional characters, who never leave England, is informed by those same ideologically inconsistent discourses that shaped Thornton Lewes’s perceptions (66). This chapter ends with an assertion that Eliot’s thinking about colonial economy (“the export of sons and of capital to South Africa”) is to be found in her journals and letters, but the impact of this thinking, this investment, is displayed throughout her fiction (76).

Titled simply “Investing in Empire,” chapter three explores Eliot’s financial and fiction investments in empire, and the degree to which the language of investment becomes metaphoric. Henry states: “I argue that she represented the nation to itself by recasting the colonial periphery in a domestic setting. [. . .] her fiction invests in the consolidation of Englishness within the bounds of England” (79). Some of this is managed via the investigation of narratives based on internal migration, *Silas Marner* for instance. More challengingly, Henry contends that Eliot’s economic dependence on her investments in the colonies is a specific which has been suppressed in biographical and critical traditions, a suppression which has resulted in the cultural context of her fictions being an incomplete record (90). My own experience as an editor, with Margaret Harris, of Eliot’s journals attests to this.

The accounts were reluctantly removed on the grounds of insufficient space only to discover, upon publication, seven blank end sheets suggesting that they might have been retained after all.

Henry's reading of Eliot's references to her accounts in the late diaries of 1879 and 1880 as consolation or the management of her grief at G.H. Lewes's death or as calming (93 and 94) seem to me only possibilities that might be part of a wider picture. Eliot's focus on her accounts might also be read as panicked reckonings by a woman for whom the light in life has gone out, who fears she may never write again, and who is accordingly asking herself if she will have enough to live on while maintaining the various Lewes familial charities. These elliptical diaries are open to interpretation in ways that the more expansive journals are not. But if we look back it is clear that Eliot was always engaged with and interested in her financial state, and that she was canny to say the least as far as money was concerned. So yes, the accounting has always offered a sense of "comfort and stability" (100) but at the particular moment being explored here, at the death of George Henry Lewes, other tensions may well come into play.

The last chapter of Henry's study is revelatory. Suddenly it is clear that all of the preceding work has been directing the reader towards a particular destination: that the postcolonial critiques of *Daniel Deronda* in particular are a fallacy. Henry engages with a range of specific critics: Terry Eagleton, Susan Meyer, Edward Said, and argues convincingly that these critics, by focussing on ideology, have ignored "the colonial connections to everyday Victorian life" that Eliot represents, for example, when she creates "Gwendolen's familial history" (111). Henry then offers the reader a fine-grained, insightful reading of the plot to substantiate her claims. She is scathing about criticism which she deems "irresponsible and anachronistic" (114) and in particular challenges two aspects of those readings based on Said's critiques which she labels "erasure of the author's life" and "anachronistic imposition of knowledge about later events" (115). The discussion is forthright, persuasive and timely. Henry's exposition of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* reveals explicitly Eliot's understanding of imperialism. More importantly, Henry's critique of *Impressions*, produces an acute awareness of that neglected work's relevance to Eliot's oeuvre as a whole.

Henry describes her own methodology as "historical cultural studies," an approach which she argues reveals the tensions that "complicate the notion of a determining ideology" (140). Her conclusion, which enmeshes Eliot's fiction and John Walter Cross's financial analysis, is a gem.

**Judith Johnston**

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