**George Eliot - The Griff Years**

***By Bob Muscutt***

**Fortunately, a lot has been written about George Eliot’s life, and we are grateful to all the scholars and other enthusiasts who have made a contribution to what we know about her. This doesn’t mean, however, that certain notions which over the course of time have become accepted truth shouldn’t be questioned. We want to look critically at some of these issues.**

A few months after the birth of their daughter Mary Ann(e) on 22nd November 1819, Robert Evans and his wife Christiana moved with their baby and two other children Christiana (Chrissey) and Isaac to Griff House. Although his employer, Francis Newdigate, the owner of Arbury Hall and its lucrative estate (he left 500,000 pounds when he died in 1835) was universally despised by his tenants, Robert Evans, the manager of the Arbury estate, shared an unusually close relationship to him and at the same time established his own formidable reputation as an expert on farming, timber, canals and even mining.

Mary Ann’s childhood was exceptional in that she spent so little of it in the family home. She was sent away to boarding school in 1824 at the age of 4 or 5, which meant that from 1824 none of the three children was at home except during school holidays. The most convincing explanation for this unusual domestic situation is the poor health of her mother, Christiana. Some George Eliot scholars have argued that Christiana Evans suffered from alcoholism, detecting in Janet Dempster (*Janet’s Repentance, Scenes of Clerical Life*) connections with the mother. If addiction did play a role in the decision to send Mary Ann to boarding schools then laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol and at that time the most commonly used medicine, is also a possibility. Christiana suffered long and painfully, and, along with the treatments with leeches, blood-letting and Blisters, laudanum was one of the very few “medicines” available.

Most biographers imply that the Nuneaton of Mary Ann’s childhood and youth was an uninspiring backwater which could offer no intellectual stimulation to the girl who was later to become arguably Britain’s greatest novelist. This is not the impression conveyed by the *Nuneaton Diary* conscientiously kept by John Astley. Apart from the wealth of local detail, there is hardly an event of national importance which is not mentioned in the Diary together with its repercussions in Nuneaton. The most significant is, of course, the historic election in December 1832, which formed the core of *Felix Holt.* According to her widower and biographer, John Cross, she witnessed the so-called riots which occurred during voting, and during which defenceless citizens were injured and even killed by a detachment of the Scots Greys, called after the presiding magistrates, one of whom was Colonel Newdigate, had read the Riot Act.

Astley provides a fascinating and detailed account of the circumstances of that election which clashes with the report quoted in John Cross’s biography. Whatever happened, the fact is that as a result of the violence in the Market Place on 21st December 1832, the Conservative candidate, Dugdale, won the contest which he would almost certainly have lost had the election proceeded normally. Robert Evans had, no doubt on instructions of his employer Newdigate, actively supported Dugdale’s campaign and had pressured tenant farmers, with threats or bribes or both, to vote for him.

At the end of 1835, Mary Ann returned from more than 12 years of mainly very good boarding education to the family home as a widely read, apparently highly-strung teenager subject to hysterical outbreaks whose accomplishments included music, drawing and French. Her religious fervor also seemed to be at its height in the years between 1836 and 1841.

In these years she helped her sister run the family household but still had time to become closely involved with the very mixed local community which stretched from Nuneaton to the north of Griff and “black” Bedworth just a mile or two to the south. Her published fiction, which she began to write in the late 1850s, testifies to her detailed knowledge of people, places and events, some of whom are also mentioned in Astley’s Diary.

On 3rd February 1836 her mother died after years of illness. Shortly before, her father had fallen ill, and it was the suddenness and severity of his illness that caused alarm in the family, not necessarily, as is sometimes maintained, a greater love for him to the disadvantage of the mother. It is remarkable that most biographical writing on George Eliot tends to idealize her relationships with men – with her father, with Isaac and, later, with George Henry Lewes – but to belittle her relationship with her mother and with her beloved sister, Chrissey..

At the end of May 1837 Mary Ann was a bridesmaid for Chrissey at her wedding to Edward Clarke, a medical practitioner, and they occupied a house in Meriden, leaving Mary Ann in sole charge of the Griff household, which must have demanded much of her character and organizational skills. Her responsibilities probably involved close cooperation with servants and tradesmen, and her later fiction also reveals her observation and understanding of the lives of those working on the estate and their families. The scene in *Amos Barton* in which the curate visits the College, as the workhouse in Nuneaton was nicknamed, has the authentic ring of her first-hand experience.

Although there are no indications of the enmity between her and her brother which emerged later, neither do the letters written between 1836 and 1839 provide any reason to believe there was an exceptionally strong bond between them. The legend of their relationship, to be found in Haight’s biography as well as in the locally-produced George Eliot brochures, is based almost totally on conjecture and fictional sources – her poetry and, of course, *Mill on the Floss*. Some writers even quote from these fictional sources to support the picture of the brother-sister idyll they want to convey. Even John Cross, who very much wanted to promote the idea of a close brother-sister relationship, can only claim that the idyll lasted until she was 7 at the latest. If such exceptional closeness ever existed, it probably only endured until she was 4 or 5, when she was sent to boarding school for the first time. Certainly, in her late teens, a fragile mutual tolerance was the only bond between her and her controlling brother.

In fact, when we read all her letters, we can’t help but be struck by her strong love for her sister, Chrissey, on the one hand and by the clash of personalities with Isaac on the other. Yet by and large the legend still prevails over the clear evidence. Her relationship with Chrissey remains unduly neglected in practically all biographical accounts. We can also say with confidence that Isaac gradually gained control of Chrissey’s life, especially after the death of her husband Edward shortly before Christmas in 1852, Despite his very healthy financial situation, Isaac had his older sister live in squalor in a house in Attleborough that had previously belonged to her but had become his property as a result of Edward’s debts owed Robert Evans. Chrissey named her first daughter after her sister, who became the child’s loving God-mother. None of Chrissey’s sons bears the name Isaac.

The smouldering antagonism between Mary and and Isaac escalated into albeit subdued hostility in 1840, when Isaac’s plans to marry Sarah Rawlins became known, and it was consequently decided that first Mary Ann and, some months later, her father were to vacate Griff House to make room for the newly-weds in summer 1841. At the same time Isaac would take over his father’s position in charge of the estate. It is beyond any doubt that this decision was made without consulting Mary Ann, that it was reached against her will and that it caused her enormous anguish. Her letters provide ample proof of the emotional pain as well as the fact that the decision was made without her involvement – probably by Isaac. Furthermore, there is good reason to suppose that the same is true of Robert Evans, for whom the decision meant losing both home and his position as land agent to his socially ambitious son. Isaac’s friendship with Charles Newdigate Newdegate (1816 – 1883), who was the same age as Isaac, lends weight to my very strong suspicion, which I argue in detail in a forthcoming issue of the George Eliot Review, that the two men exerted pressure on Robert Evans to leave the family home and make way for Isaac’s social and professional advancement.

In March 1841 Robert Evans and Mary Ann moved into Bird Grove, Foleshill, and for a short time it looked as if Isaac, who returned from honeymoon to take occupation of Griff House with his bride in June, had fulfilled his plan without a hitch. But a short time later, the family conflict which Mary Ann termed “The Holy War” broke out. During 1841 Mary Ann lost her belief in the literal truth of the Bible and in the central creed of Christianity, that Jesus was the son of God. This culminated first in her famous refusal to attend church with her father around the New Year of 1842. So in the space of a year or so her belief had swung from strident Evangelism to atheism, and the new friends she made in Foleshill, especially the Brays, contributed to this loss of faith.