

A VISIT TO THE GEORGE ELIOT COUNTRY

Special to the "Grain Growers' Guide" by Margaret Gemmill.

Of all the literary preferences of my early reading days that for George Eliot was the strongest, and it has been the most lasting. No word less strong than "enthusiasm" could describe my regard for her writings, and though now more repressed and self-contained, I do not think my admiration is less than when, in younger years, I lived so intensely in the world of her imaginative thought.

"Adam Bede," "The Mill on the Floss" and "Scenes of Clerical Life" were my first favorites, and as for the characters who live and move with such truth and reality through her pages, I do not seem to remember a time when I did not know and love them.

Nor is my debt to George Eliot as teacher and moralist less deep. I early learned to prize those parts of her writings in which she speaks directly, commenting on her characters, expressing her thoughts on their actions, revealing her own philosophy of life. These combined with the more impersonal influence of the artist, made up a "message" which I am glad I had "ears to hear," in the impressionable years of youth. For these reasons, my thoughts long revolved round the idea of some day going on a pilgrimage to Warwickshire to visit her early home, and see the country of "Adam Bede" and "Scenes of Clerical Life." In July 1904 I was there.

Though the old country is such "a little isle" a journey from Scotland to the English Midlands, for the first time, may be attended, for some, with a very pardonable degree of excitement. The distance is relatively short, but the contrast in speech and manners is great. For myself, I confess to some nervousness in exchanging Glasgow for Birmingham, but though I never lost, while in England, the sense of what Stevenson happily terms the "foreigner at home," my experiences there were all of a very pleasurable kind.

Nuneaton, the town nearest George Eliot's home, and closely connected with her early history, is in the County of Warwickshire, and is reached by a short railway journey from Birmingham. In the early years of last century its interests were mainly agricultural, but it is now an important mining and manufacturing centre. Numerous coal cars at the railway stations, and rows of miners' cottages in the suburbs, indicate the proximity of mines and these soon betray their whereabouts when you walk a short way into the country.

The centre of the town, however, must be essentially the same as it was a hundred years ago or more, and the houses in the long High St., down which I walked were as quaint and varied as any lover of the "past" could wish.

The "Ultima thule" of my pilgrimage was "Griff House" which lies a few miles out in the country, but there were a number of places in Nuneaton itself and enroute to Griff which I was eager to see also. The whole involved a walk, rather long for one not much accustomed to the exercise, but with the home of George Eliot for an objective, I could go far without weariness. A gentleman from whom I made some enquiries, on hearing of my intentions asked if I was "wheeling." On my replying "No, I'm walking," he smiled and assured me "I was plucky." I smiled too as I turned away for the question reminded me of an incident, which, till then, I had forgotten. A gentleman of my acquaintance had visited "Griff" years before and he also "was walking"—a circumstance that elicited the laughing remark from someone there, that, "all kinds of people came to Griff, Americans in hansom, Englishmen on bicycles, and Scotsmen on their feet."

It is well known that George Eliot in her earlier writings follows closely some actual histories. Though

the clergymen she describes in "Scenes of Clerical Life" were all resting in the quiet earth before they found an immortality in her pages, there were many living who knew the story of their lives as well as George Eliot and when the topography of the "Scenes" was recognized, the characters were easily identified.

Thus we know that the town of "Milby" the scene of "Janet's Repentance" is Nuneaton, and "Shepperton" is Chilvers Coton, a suburb. "Cheverel Manor" is Arbury Hall, for generations the family seat of the Newdigates, and "Knebley" "the little church with the chequered pavement which had often rung to the tramp of armed monks" is Ashley, situated near the north entrance to Arbury Park.

It is possible to visit all these and Griff House in an afternoon's walk. Such was my intention and as the day was a perfect one nothing was wanting to complete my pleasure.

Passing through the market square from the High St. of Nuneaton I found myself in Church St. It is the "Orchard St." of "Janet's Repentance" and known to us as the one up which once passed the Rev. Mr. Tryan, the Evangelical curate, to hold an evening meeting in the church—such a startling innovation, that he went "through a pelting shower of nicknames, bad puns, groans, howls and hisses." Dempster's house is also there, from the windows of which his wife Janet watched the scene.

This house is described somewhere as "an old-fashioned house with an over-hanging upper storey, a face of rough stucco, and casement windows with green panes and shutters." I had no difficulty in finding it and by the courtesy of the then owner I was allowed to walk through. Except that the rooms on the right which Dempster used as his office now serve another purpose, the house is the same as when he occupied it. A spacious dining-room on the left has French windows opening into the garden. As with most houses in the heart of old English towns, it is built close to a narrow pavement from which its main door opens. The grassy lawn and garden behind surprise one by their beauty and extent, and a stream which divides them from the green fields beyond adds to theirs the charm of running water. Some fine trees made a welcome shade from the heat of summer sun now shining straight overhead.

It was a pleasant place and I found it difficult to realize that so much misery once lodged there. I thought of Janet thrust out into the street in "the dead hour and middle of the night" by her drunken husband, of her sitting shivering and dazed on the door-step in the darkness while the bitter north-east wind drove against her and played with her long hair. Yet what old house is there that, if it had a tongue "could not a tale unfold,"



South Farm, Arbury, Nuneaton (Birth-place of "George Eliot")