
To do justice to *The Road to Middlemarch* one needs to consider it alongside the novel itself, because the novel is firmly entrenched within the book, together with Mead’s own response to the work of George Eliot and the life of Eliot herself. *Middlemarch* by George Eliot has been described as the best novel in English. This is a strong claim, and one with which I could not agree, but there is certainly a stronger case to be made for *Middlemarch* being judged the best Victorian novel. I first read it many years ago as an undergraduate at Melbourne University. I reread it years later when studying Victorian Literature as part of a Masters at Flinders University. It was not set as a text in this course because the lecturer deemed that students would not take the time to read such a long book, and I suspect that this is correct. This reluctance to undertake a demanding novel is to be deplored, as students were denied the opportunity to study a fine work. Rebecca Mead, on the other hand, has no reservations as to the length of *Middlemarch* and has read this novel at least once every five years, beginning at the age of seventeen. It made an immediate impact then: ‘I loved *Middlemarch* and I loved being the kind of person who loved it. It gratified my aspirations to maturity and learnedness’ (6). Over the many years since, Mead’s appreciation of *Middlemarch* has not waned, but it has developed and changed.

And as I continue to read and think and reflect I also realize that she [Eliot] has given me something else: a profound experience with a book, over time, that amounts to one of the frictions of my life. I have grown up with George Eliot. I think *Middlemarch* has disciplined my character. (266)

Has Mead succeeded in bringing readers into the same sense of involvement with the work of George Eliot and particularly *Middlemarch* as she has experienced? I can only speak for one reader, and I was inspired to return to the novel and read it for the third time. Mead has certainly provided not only insights into *Middlemarch* itself, but into the life and social period when Eliot was writing, as well as reflections on some of her other novels and essays. The book is part literary criticism, part literary biography, part memoir, all of which combine to make a very satisfying text. Apart from her undoubted enthusiasm for Eliot, Mead has embarked on very extensive research. Drawing on her experience as a journalist, she set out to ‘look at something familiar from an unfamiliar angle.’ She asked herself: ‘What if I tried to discern the ways in which George Eliot’s life shaped her fiction and how her fiction shaped her?’ (9) *Middlemarch* was originally published in serial form, which would have implications concerning its length and narrative structure. The story is complex in its exploration of relationships, the wider influences of the morality and political happenings of the day. Eliot has no qualms about stepping into the novel to speak directly to her readers; a device which Mead agrees can be awkward and off-putting, although more accepted at the time than it would be today. In fact Mead defends this authorial intervention by pointing out that

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Eliot … insists that the reader look at the characters in the book from her own elevated viewpoint. We are granted a wider perspective, and a greater insight, than is available to their neighbours down in the world of Middlemarch. (55)

In searching for the link between Eliot’s life and her portrayal of characters and relationships, Mead read letters that Eliot had written throughout her life, traced her movements about England, and noted her disappointments in love and eventual happy life with George Henry Lewes, a partnership that met with disapproval because they were unable to marry, but which brought her great intellectual and emotional enrichment. Mead examined reports by Eliot’s contemporaries, critics and friends. It is evidence of her thorough approach that she spent some days in the library in Edinburgh, reading the correspondence between Eliot and Robert Main, a Scotsman who had excessive devotion to both the novels of George, Eliot and their author, to the extent that he published a book entitled Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings, in Prose and Verse, Selected from the Works of George Eliot: Mead could not ‘think of surer way to be put off the work of George Eliot than trying to read [this book]’(231). This thorough research allows Mead to outline the events in Eliot’s life that might have shaped her fiction. The Road to Middlemarch is thus an informed and intelligent appraisal of a novel with continues to attract readers. By interspersing her analysis of the novel with her own observations and experiences, and descriptions of the landscape, that Eliot had referenced, Mead has imbued the book with her own passion and appreciation of Middlemarch. She presents a portrait of a woman who was respected by writers, philosophers and thinkers for her intelligence and wisdom, yet who was a woman who doubted her own abilities as a writer, and who accepted that being a plain woman was not an asset.

To have such a passion is one thing, but to then lead others to a renewed appreciation, or to a discovery of a novel is another. On revisiting Middlemarch after reading Mead’s book I found that I looked at in a more incisive way. The main characters are neither totally flawed not flawless, but fascinating in their complexity and contradictions. The description of the landscape and the country people is worthy of Hardy; the eccentric characters remind one of those found in the novels of Dickens, the twists in the plot again reflect both Hardy and Dickens. The authorial intrusions and explanations can be tolerated especially as the writing is so fine. The dialogue is reminiscent of Jane Austen at times. There is an excellence that compares favourably with those other writers. All this I came to realise in rereading Middlemarch, having followed The Road to Middlemarch with Rebecca Mead. It is a road that she encourages others to follow, as would I.

Emily Sutherland

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