A Brief Biography of George Eliot

A summary of George Eliot’s Life
Mary Ann Evans, who later became famous as the novelist George Eliot, was born in 1819 at South Farm on the Arbury estate near Nuneaton, where her father, Robert Evans, was agent to the Newdigate family at Arbury Hall. When she was four months old the family moved to Griff House on the edge of the estate and here she spent 21 happy years.

She had an elder sister, Chrissiey, who was as pretty as Mary Ann was plain, and a beloved brother Isaac, three years her senior. She attended three local schools before moving at age 13 to a school in Coventry where she did particularly well. In 1836 she returned home to Griff House as her mother was dying. Her father continued to pay for tutors to visit Griff House to complete Mary Ann’s education.

In 1841 Robert Evans retired from his job at Arbury and moved to Bird Grove in Foleshill on the outskirts of Coventry, taking Mary Ann with him. Chrissiey was by now married and Isaac was to succeed Robert as agent at Arbury and to live with his new wife at Griff House.

In Coventry Mary Ann made friends with Charles and Cara Bray. Charles owned the Coventry Herald newspaper, for which Mary Ann contributed some articles. At the Brays’ home, ‘Rosehill’, she met famous and important literary men and enjoyed stimulating conversations with them.

She and her father attended Holy Trinity Church and during that time she was questioning her religious beliefs and lost her faith, refusing to go to church with her father, who blamed the intellectual circle at ‘Rosehill’ for what had happened to his daughter, and which he quite failed to understand. In fact, it was her brilliant and questioning mind that had brought this about and she never again aligned herself to any religion, but had a strong understanding of Christian beliefs and the teachings of Christ. Many would agree that it was the challenging intellectual environment amongst the Coventry circle of the Brays that gave Mary Ann the confidence to tackle the literary intelligentsia when she moved to London.

In 1849 her father died and Mary Ann felt alone, and in need of an income. She had had some experience of writing and decided to make a new life for herself. She would go to London and begin a literary career. In 1851 she went to lodge at 142 Strand, the home and publishing headquarters of John Chapman.

She was now calling herself Marian Evans. She was in her early thirties and still single but longed for someone to love who would love her. She had a relationship with Chapman, despite the presence of his wife and mistress under the same roof. Susanna Chapman and Elizabeth Tilley resented Marian and after several attacks of jealousy both ladies insisted she return to Coventry. Eventually they relented and Marian went back to 142 Strand as joint editor of the ‘Westminster Review’ which Chapman owned and for which she wrote some articles.

Among many famous people she met at 142 were Charles Dickens, W.M. Thackeray, Harriet Martineau, Robert Browning and the philosopher Herbert Spencer. Herbert Spencer took the place of Chapman in her affections and she hoped he might marry her. Sadly for her Spencer was a confirmed bachelor.

Then she became friends with George Henry Lewes, and the friendship deepened into love. At last she had someone to love her, but they could not marry as Lewes was unable to divorce his faithless wife. However, in 1854 Marian and Lewes decided to live together as man and wife. That they did so openly shocked Victorian society. People who had invited Miss Evans to dine would not now wish to have anything to do with the lady who was calling herself Mrs Lewes.

Even more shocked was her family back in Nuneaton whose head was now brother Isaac. Isaac cut off all communication with her. She was now ostracised not only by those she thought were her friends but by her beloved family as well. But she had Lewes’s love and with his encouragement the diffident Marian began a new phase in her life – writing fiction.
Much of the huge success of her novels was that she was writing about real people, their warmth as well as their failings, and she was much influenced by her love of the Warwickshire countryside where her roots were. Only one novel was not set amongst country people - ‘Romola’ - which was set in 15th century Florence and was the least successful of all her books.

The first work of fiction was published in parts through the course of 1857, and as a complete book in 1858. It is ‘Scenes of Clerical Life’ and is actually three short stories, based on aspects of life and stories remembered a generation earlier in the Nuneaton area, but filtered through Marian’s approach to fiction. Three local churches are commonly held to be described in the stories. Nuneaton, Chilvers Coton and Astley are called Milby, Shepperton and Knebley, and local people rapidly made assumptions about the real sources for her fictional characters. Her first novel, ‘Adam Bede’ followed in 1859, a tragic love story in which the model for the title character was Eliot’s father. He was noted for his great physical strength, which enabled him to carry loads that three average men could barely handle. When impostors claimed authorship of Adam Bede, it was revealed that Marian Evans, the 'Westminster' reviewer, was in fact George Eliot.

Her decision to use ‘George Eliot’ as a pen name was not simply to disguise her gender in order to gain the interest of publishers. Owing to the controversy surrounding her unconventional relationship with Lewes, she also thought it necessary to conceal her identity so that her personal life would not affect the success of her professional works.

Marian and Lewes had 24 years of devoted ‘marriage’ and as the famous George Eliot she was now accepted into society, but not by her family. In 1878 her beloved partner died. He had been her constant support and a sort of ‘business manager’; she had loved him dearly and cared for his three sons, being a beloved ‘Mutter’ when their own mother had created another family with her lover.

After Lewes’s death she found comfort in an old friend, John Walter Cross and he became her constant companion. In May 1880 they married. Only then did her family acknowledge her; Isaac even congratulated her. She was now a respectable married woman, even though her husband was twenty years her junior. The marriage only lasted six and a half months for in December 1880 she died. She was buried in London’s Highgate Cemetery. There had been no more novels. With Lewes’s death, ‘George Eliot’ had also died.