

Elinor Shaffer and Catherine Brown, eds. *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe*. The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe, Series Editor: Elinor Shaffer. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. lvi, 453. £150.00. ISBN 978-1-44119-022-2.

JESÚS VARELA ZAPATA
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

In the mid-nineteenth century a select group of Englishmen were trying to change the world. Some of them were politicians and bureaucrats who, from the comfort of their office in London, seemed to rule the waves of the seas all over the world. Others were engaged in the battle for ideas, in the hope of breaking into new scientific and philosophical ground. Herbert Spencer, influenced by the novelty of Darwin's theories, was amongst these select few and particularly invested in laying the ideological foundation of Eurocentrism, while Charles Bray and Robert Owen were actively involved in social reform and the improvement of labour conditions. In turn, George Lewes represented the small but increasing influential minority of freethinkers and libertarians who departed from Victorian conventions and moral strictures. All of these thinkers, and some others, had in common their being acquainted with George Eliot. Eliot was another intellectual giant of the time who, from an early age, had developed a passion for reading and learning. This trait would eventually lead her to a later venture: translating the work of continental philosophers such as Friedrich Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Baruch Spinoza. By the time she was in her early thirties she was already the acting editor of the *Westminster Review*, where the leading reformist voices of the times aired their views.

She chose a male pen-name in order to gain credibility in a world where the rights of women were still being refuted and fought over. However, this disguise was more of an act of rebellion than a conformist move; it was a way of asserting her determination to go as far as any men could go and, in fact, she challenged all the conventional moral attitudes of the Victorian age; as her biographer Kathryn Hughes has put it: "Her avowed agnosticism, sexual freedom, commercial success and childlessness were troubling reminders of everything that had been repressed from the public version of life under the great little Queen" (2001: 2). Therefore, when marriage with Lewes proved impossible for legal reasons, they engaged in a permanent relationship bound by a passion for travel. Their journeys all over Europe would prove very influential in her career. On the one hand, they would mark the personality of the writer,

Received 01/04/16 – Accepted 25/05/16

making her more mature and aware of the depth of European philosophy, culture and linguistic diversity; on the other, her presence in the major capitals would make her an influential figure in the world of art; as John Rignall, in *George Eliot, European Novelist* (2011: 3), points out:

That she became a novelist of European stature, published in English on the Continent by Tauchnitz or Asher and translated into many European languages, is well known. Tolstoy included her in the list of those writers who made a great impression on him in the period in which he wrote his great novels, and she was on friendly terms with Turgenyev, who admired her work and *The Mill on the Floss* in particular.

The publication by Bloomsbury of *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe* is in itself a confirmation of the canonical status the writer still enjoys at present. If only because among other writers included by the publisher in the series called “The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe” we find the likes of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Jonathan Swift, William Butler Yeats, Henry James, or Oscar Wilde. It is unavoidable, at this point, to refer to one of Eliot’s admirers, F.R. Leavis, who started his critical piece, *The Great Tradition* (1913), with such an authoritative statement: “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad” (9). However, the fact is that, on the issue of canonicity, contributors to *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe* have acted in a restrained way, so as to not turn the featured writer into an idol. None of them have been tempted to go to great lengths to extol her popularity; on the contrary, some of them have been honest enough to admit that Eliot’s reputation has fluctuated with time, in some cases for the worse. For instance, Boris M. Proskurnin points out that interest in Eliot is still high in post-Soviet Russia among scholars, but is negligible if we consider her status among publishers and the general public (262, 284); similarly, the Norwegian contributor admits that Eliot’s case has been declining in her country (“The Enthusiasm that Petered Out”, runs the title of this contribution). The Hungarian Szegedy-Massák mentions the opinion of his countryman and scholar Antal Szerb who, in a history of world literature of his authorship, candidly reveals what seems to be an almost too forthright opinion: “the once immense popularity of George Eliot ... seems to have evaporated” (343). Very often throughout the volume we find Eliot’s popularity and assessment of her work put in relation to authors such as Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë or Jane Austen. This has been frowned upon by some critics, as is the case with Russel Perkin, who has remarked that Eliot should better be compared to Goethe, Balzac or Flauvert (1990: 45). The problem is that comparison with fellow British writers of the time, particularly with Dickens, often results in

unfavourable reports for George Eliot, either because she is considered a difficult read, or on account of the rural background of some of her works which are not particularly appealing to urban reading audiences. All in all, taking into consideration the different contributions gathered in the volume under review, one reaches the conclusion that the importance of Eliot abroad has been unequal. For instance, we can talk about the minor impact of Eliot on Spanish territories, especially when considered alongside Germany, where translations of her work were remarkable from the very moment of publication (let alone the fact that English reprints were also common in that country). Paradoxically enough, María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia argues that Eliot has probably influenced Spanish writers such as Galdós, Clarín or Pardo Bazán, while Röder-Bolton states that German literature of that time was not so responsive.

As it has been implicitly suggested above, *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe* has been arranged following geographical criteria. Editors Elinor Shaffer and Catherine Brown have allocated individual chapters to the major European countries, grouped in three sections (Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe). Some countries get full coverage, as is the case with Germany: a single chapter covers Eliot's reception in that country during her lifetime. This is followed by another section in which the differences between cultural policies of the East and the West are discussed. Finally, there is an appendix on the reunified German state. Italy is also dealt with in detail throughout three different chapters. In turn, Catalonia is considered separately from Spain, following linguistic and not political criteria. However, the editors have fallen short of being exhaustive in their coverage of the map, since we miss the entries for countries such as Portugal, Finland (partially covered in the chapter on Sweden) and the former Yugoslavia. The absence of Switzerland, Belgium or Austria might have been justified if they had been dealt with in other chapters devoted to cultures in the German, French or Dutch languages, but this is not the case. Chapters are not balanced in length; while it is only to be expected that the chapter on Greece or Bulgaria will be shorter than that on Spain, the fact is that there is no satisfactory explanation to account for the fact that the contribution dealing with France is only one third of the Spanish one.

There is no lack of technical detail in this edition: the initial appendix ("Timeline of the European Reception of George Eliot, 1819-2015") provides invaluable information and reference for the learned reader. This is complemented by other itemized entries in the appendices and footnotes included in individual chapters. Beyond the data, which is mainly oriented to scholarly specialists in George Eliot, those doing research on the assorted European national literatures dealt with in the volume or even the curious reader will embark on a fascinating cultural history of the continent during the last two centuries if they choose to read the book. Mihály Szegegy-Maszák makes it

explicit from the outset that his avowed intention is to row against the tide in reception studies by relating George Eliot's impact in Hungary to historical and political circumstances. However, this contributor must have been surprised at reading the final copy of the collected essays, since most of them have taken a similar approach. In fact, after reading the whole volume, one gets the impression that different ideological battles have been fought across Europe in the name of George Eliot, or, at least, some which have taken her books as an alibi of sorts. This means that although her work was frowned upon and restricted in Spain during Franco's regime, the same production was generally privileged by communist authorities in Eastern Europe. In this way, we learn that the Marxist East German regime gave an extra allowance of scarce printing paper at their disposal to publish Eliot's work. Perhaps it was only because she was considered a viable case in point to explain the decline of Capitalist societies. In this same line, Annika Bautz aptly compares the epilogues usually enclosed in East German editions with those appearing across the border in the twin Federal Republic where the emphasis seems to have been placed on moral issues. Similarly, Zdenek Beran points out that the papers and books published in Czechoslovakia on Eliot's work were often based on Marxist doctrine and "the demands for precisely this kind of analysis under the Communist regime" (316); these remarks resemble those relating Hungary's "clichés of the so-called Marxist criticism" (344). Diederik van Werven, in the chapter on the Netherlands, widens the coverage of the ideological manipulation of Eliot's work by mentioning her favourable reception among Protestant editors of that nationality in the nineteenth century, pointing out that "[they] certainly did not reflect the intellectual development of the author" (66). Religious bias, and particularly the Protestant background of her works, is also the basis to explain the relative unimportance of Eliot in French markets (165). Nineteenth-century Sweden constitutes an extraordinary case of ideological polyvalence in Eliot's appraisal: she finds favourable reviews among those sympathizing with French naturalism and secular radicals, while she is equally endeared to conservative reviewers.

In this volume, attention is also given to discussions of technicalities related to the art of translation. This is not surprising, given the fact that Eliot herself was not always pleased with the quality of some of the renderings of her work in other languages, not least because she was an indefatigable translator all of her life. Thus, Vesela Katsarova, deals extensively with the difficulties found by Bulgarian translators to accommodate Eliot's style; the chapters devoted to Poland, Hungary, or Romania also deal with these issues although more briefly. Along these lines, Alain Jumeau calls Eliot's personal choice of D'Albert-Durade as her translator into French "unfortunate," as he mentions a number of mistakes as well as stylistic issues that result in a "stiff, clumsy and unnatural" text (165). Translation always leaves ample ground for manipulation

of assorted ideological tenets; Spain, under Franco, saw many examples of omissions or changes to original texts (Rabadán 2000); in this case, Hurlley and Ortega, the contributors from Catalonia, mention how the Spanish translation of *Adam Bede* published in the early 1940s was able to circumvent the moral strictures that, in similar works, caused certain parts to be excised (252).

As a conclusion, we should say that this volume proves an interesting account of the reception of Eliot's work across Europe. In this way, it fulfils the main purposes delineated by the editors and contributors, providing readers with an overall view of Eliot's progress towards the canonical status she has arguably achieved. For example, as any scholar familiar to her work might expect, we learn that the most translated novels are *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. However, we can say, on a positive note, that the volume reviewed here ends up delivering much more than the minute archival detail. We find much insight on Eliot's creative progress and intellectual background. It is interesting to follow the writer's philosophical stance, especially her indebtedness to the work of Spinoza and Comte, as well as the impact of her views on agnostic and positivist thinkers all over Europe. Some of the keys to understand her work may be found in entries such as that of María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, providing a full account of Eliot's passion for Spanish religious painting. She also gives evidence of Eliot's popularity when she explains that after visiting several Spanish cities incognito she was immediately recognized by fellow travellers when the couple signed with their true name in a boarding house in Granada. This helps to understand Lewis' strong position when he was bargaining, in his condition as Eliot's agent, for royalties from the German editors. This interest has known ups and downs but it is reflected in the fact that a prestigious publisher such as Bloomsbury has thought it wise to produce yet another critical volume on George Eliot—one that stands to make a substantial contribution to scholarship in nineteenth-century studies.

REFERENCES

- Hughes, Kathryn. *Eliot. The Last Victorian*. New York: Cooper Sq Press, 2001.
- Leavis, Frank R. *The Great Tradition. George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. 1948. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Perkin, J. Russell. *A Reception History of George Eliot's Fiction*. Ann Arbor and London: UMI, 1990.
- Rabadán, Rosa, ed. *Traducción y censura inglés-español 1939-1985: estudio preliminar*. León: Universidad de León, 2000.
- Rignall, John. *George Eliot, European Novelist*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011.

