



George Eliot: Eight Unpublished Letters

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ABSTRACT

This article transcribes eight hitherto unpublished George Eliot letters arranged in chronological order. The sources for the letters are book and autograph dealers' catalogues, auction houses, the British Library, and recent acquisitions by university libraries. Placed in their context, chronologically they belong to the early years of George Eliot's intimate relationship with George Henry Lewes, the publication of her first three volume novel *Adam Bede* in 1859 through to his death in 1878 and Eliot's return to dealing with everyday business after a period of intense grieving. The letters reveal her empathy for others, friendships, appreciation of gifts, the significance of an object in remembrance of a friend, her taking over Lewes's business duties when he was trying to complete under pressure his work and following his death her efforts to preserve his legacy.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Since the publication from 1954 until 1978 of the nine-volume edition of *The George Eliot Letters (GEL)*, the 1985 *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, the publication of the two-volume *The Letters of George Henry Lewes* (1995) and a third volume with *New George Eliot Letters* (1999), plus a plethora of biographies, new letters, and documents have surfaced. The present article provides the texts and commentary on eight unpublished George Eliot letters. The sources for these letters are book and autograph dealers' catalogues, auction houses, or recent acquisitions by University libraries. The letters are arranged by date and placed in their context.¹

Letter One

The first unpublished George Eliot letter was in private possession before going to Blackwell's in Oxford and then to the Nineteenth Century Rare Book and Photograph Shop in Brooklyn, New York, where it appeared in an online announcement in October 2019 and was sold to an unknown buyer. The letter is from the period Eliot and Lewes went to live at Holly Lodge, Wimbledon Park, Wandsworth on 11 February 1859, ten days after *Adam Bede* was published in three volumes by Blackwood.² They remained at Holly

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¹In the transcriptions of the letters the original punctuation, spelling, and capitalization has been retained. Material in parenthesis [] represents material supplied by the author of this article and | represents a fresh line in correspondence. For new George Eliot letters, see for instance William Baker, "New George Eliot" and "George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes". For recent biographies of George Eliot see, for instance, Davis, *The Transferred Life*, and Henry, *The Life of George Eliot*.

²For the publication of *Adam Bede* see Baker and Ross, *George Eliot*, A4, 49–63.

Lodge until September 1860.³ George Eliot wrote in black ink to Elizabeth Blackwell (1812–1910), the first woman to be awarded a medical degree in the United States or Europe.⁴

MS: Present location unknown. Text: 19th Century Rare Book and Photograph Shop in Brooklyn, New York

Holly Lodge | Wimbledon Park | Wandsworth | Ap. 16 [1859]

Dear D^r Blackwell

Being unable to myself to respond to Barbara's appeal in the enclosed letter, I obey her wish by forwarding it on to you.

I remain | Yours very truly | Marian Lewes

George Eliot's close friend, the artist and suffragist, Barbara Bodichon (1827–1891), corresponded with Eliot over many years. Independently wealthy, Bodichon was active in raising money for various causes and assisting those less well-off than herself.⁵ In this letter to Bodichon, dated 29 April 1859, Eliot observes that she had sent a letter from Bodichon concerning a deserving case on to their mutual friend Elizabeth Blackwell.⁶ Blackwell accompanied Barbara Bodichon when she visited Eliot and Lewes, whose reaction to the visit is interesting. Lewes wrote in his journal on 26 June 1869 that Barbara brought “with her Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell—estimable for the energy, courage, and perseverance she has shown in studying medicine and taking a doctor's degree, but very repulsive and schoolmistress—like in manner”.⁷

Letter Two

The second unpublished George Eliot letter is a thank you note acquired from Christopher Edwards Antiquarian Books and Manuscripts in October 2005 by Northern Illinois University Rare Books and Special Collections. Edwards found the unsigned letter in an album of autographs and letters. George Eliot writes on printed letter headed paper in black ink:

MS: Special Collections, Northern Illinois Library

The Priory. | 21North Bank, | Regents Park.

August 29. [18]66

The author of Felix Holt begs leave to thank Dean Ramsay for the present of his interesting reminiscences of Scottish life and character the kind note accompanying the present, coming from a writer of keen discernment and long experience is a valuable encouragement.

³Haight, *GEL*, 1: xxvi.

⁴See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Blackwell, Elizabeth (1821–1910)” (by M. A. Elston), <http://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31912> (accessed March 3, 2020).

⁵Cf. Baker, “George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes,” 97–112.

⁶Haight, *GEL*, 2: 59.

⁷*Ibid.*, 2: 102–103, n7.

Felix Holt, the Radical was published in three volumes by Blackwood on 14 June 1866.⁸ The recipient of GE's thank you letter is Thomas Edward Bannerman Ramsay (1793–1872), the Dean of Edinburgh, who sent her a copy of his *The Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* (1858). H. C. G. Matthew writes in his ODNB revision of A. J. G. Mackay's original entry that the volume “gave Ramsay his widest reputation ... it was rewritten and much enlarged in successive editions, of which twenty-one were published during his life”.⁹ The present whereabouts of GE's copy is unknown and is not recorded in the *Dr. Williams's Catalogue* of George Eliot's and George Henry Lewes's books, or in Baker's *Libraries*. GE wrote to John Blackwood on 6 September 1866 that she “had a pretty note, in aged handwriting from Dean Ramsay with the present of his reminiscences of Scottish life”, and she added that she supposed that Blackwood knew “him quite well”.¹⁰ Blackwood replied to her on 10 September that

Dean Ramsay is our Clergyman and a very dear old friend both of my wife and mine. I sent him a copy of the book as a mark of respect and regard. The poor old man had a frightful catastrophe in his house last spring. Her favourite niece was attending him in his dressing room when her dress caught fire and she was burned to death. I went to see him when I came down from London and almost to my surprise he talked freely of it. He said that the scene was so ever present to his eyes that the talk of it to a friend was a kind of relief. A letter from you will I'm sure be a gratification to him.¹¹

Letter Three

The third letter surfaced at a New York auction. It is addressed to Oscar Browning (1837–1923), who at the time was an Eton housemaster. He returned permanently in 1875 to Cambridge as a Fellow of King's College. George Eliot and George Henry Lewes visited Cambridge towards the end of February 1868. George Eliot wrote in her Diary for 27 February 1868: “Returned last evening from a very pleasant visit to Cambridge. I am still only at p.5 of Part IV [of *The Spanish Gypsy*], having had a wretched month of malaise”.¹²

MS: Present whereabouts unknown. Bonhams New York 19 June 2012.¹³ Lot 3386. Sold for \$1750: text partially reproduced in the Auction Catalogue, GE use black ink, printed letter head

The Priory, | 21, North Bank, | Regents Park | Feb. 28.68

Dear M^r Browning

We promised M^{rs} Green,¹⁴ to whom we had the pleasure of being introduced by you under the Cambridge sunshine, that we would send her the address of a certain maker of feet-

⁸Baker and Ross, *George Eliot*, A8, 226–37.

⁹*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Ramsay [formerly Burnett], Edward Bannerman (1793–1872)” (by A. J. G. Mackay, revised by H. C. G. Matthew), <http://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23081> (accessed March 07 2020).

¹⁰Haight, *GEL*, 4: 305.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 4: 138.

¹²Harris and Johnston, eds., *The Journals*, 132. For Oscar Browning's recollections of the visit, see his *Life of George Eliot*, 99; and see Collins, *George Eliot Interviews*, 141. See also *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Oscar Browning (1837–1923)” (by Richard Davenport-Hines), <http://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32128> (accessed March 7, 2020).

¹³Bonhams New York 19 June 2001 lot 86 Catalogue description notes that this letter was also for sale at their “Robert H. and Danna L. Jackson Collection Part I: 19th Century Literature” sale, 18 October 2011, where it failed to meet its reserve and was brought in.

warmers, she & I sympathizing in the experience of cold feet. When you kindly forward the enclosed card to her with my compliments?

I thank you sincerely for the addition you caused to my pleasant memories of Cambridge ...¹⁵ morning. You wish us so to return shortly, I hope, with a heavy load of other loans.¹⁶

Yours always sincerely | M E Lewes

Oscar Browning Esq

Letter Four

The fourth unpublished Eliot letter is written from Earlswood Common, where George Eliot and Lewes stayed from 2 July to 23 September 1874 house hunting and writing.¹⁷ The recipient, Edward Frederick Smyth Pigott (1824–1895), was a close friend of Lewes, with whom he had worked on *The Leader* in the early 1850s after Pigott had obtained a controlling interest. Pigott was a leading writer for the *Daily News* and had just been appointed Examiner (censor) of plays. His new appointment was announced in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Spectator* on Saturday 1 August 1874. Most of the known correspondence between George Eliot, Lewes, and Pigott is between Lewes and Pigott.¹⁸

The congratulatory letter from George Eliot to Pigott is a reflection of her taking over Lewes's usual role of protecting her from business concerns whilst she was working. In this instance, as reflected in Eliot's letter, Lewes is suffering from ill health and absorbed with work. The brevity of her paragraphs in the letter is unusual in her letters. Lewes wrote to George Eliot's Scottish admirer Alexander Main on Sunday [2 August 1874] "My headaches and dyspepsia have been rather worse if anything since we left London – but I am working hard¹⁹ and that may have something to do with it".²⁰

MS: Present whereabouts unknown: Bonhams Auction 22464, New York, 22 September 2015. Lot 147. Written in purple ink.

The Cottage | Earlswood Common | Aug 2.74

Dear M^r. Pigott

¹⁴The reference to "M^s Green" eludes me. Browning writes that George Eliot and George Henry Lewes "stayed at the Bull Hotel, but were the guests jointly of Mr. W.G. Clark [1821–1878] then tutor of Trinity College, and public orator [Clark relinquished his position in 1869 but remained Vice-Master and Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge- Harris and Johnston, p. 400], and myself. I travelled down with them in the train, the journey giving me the impression that railway-traveling was irksome to her We dined in the evening, a small party, in Mr. Clark's rooms. I sat next to her, and she talked to me solemnly about the duties of life, about the shallow immorality of believing that all things would turn out for the best, and the danger of fixing our attention too much on the life to come, as likely to distract us from doing our duty in this world. The next day she breakfasted with me in my rooms in college". Browning, *Life of George Eliot*, 99.

¹⁵A section of the text is not illustrated in Bonham's Catalogue.

¹⁶George Eliot's and George Henry Lewes's next Cambridge visit seems to have been on Monday 19 May 1871 (see Harris and Johnston, eds., *The Journals of George Eliot*, 143). The reference to "loans" may well be to books George Eliot and or Lewes borrowed from Browning—she was writing *The Spanish Gypsy* at the time and Lewes was involved with various projects—see Ashton, *G. H. Lewes*, 336–37.

¹⁷Haight, *GEL*, 1: xxxii.

¹⁸See *Ibid.*, 2: 70n9, 9: 238n3; Baker, *Letters*, 2: 273; and Ashton, *G. H. Lewes*, 109. Pigott was also a close friend of Wilkie Collins, with whom he went sailing—see Baker et al., *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins*, I:51; IV:438–39.

¹⁹On the second volume of his *Problems of Life and Mind* published on 23 February 1875.

²⁰Haight, *GEL*, 6: 71.

Certain paragraphs in the Daily Telegraph & Spectator were a joy to us yesterday & the copy of the Daily News which reached us this morning gave us the added pleasure of knowing that you counted on our sympathy.

I trust that the new position is thoroughly satisfactory to you as it is to us likely to be. One great advantage is, that it will leave you much freedom for other things. I do so delight in the thought of your having some assured rest.

Mr. Lewes's health is not quite satisfactory just now. He is a little tormented with dyspepsia which often makes his working time less effective than he desires. And he is very busy, you know, & jealous of his hours until the 2nd volume is off his hands.

We hear of heat, but should be glad to have a little more for our own share. Ours is the breeziest of breezy Commons.

There was mention of you when George was at Mr. Kennard's the other day,²¹ but the good news had not then been heard.

We both feel that it is part of our happiness today.

Always yours most sincerely | M. E. Lewes

Letter Five

George Eliot was a friend of the well-connected Senior family, and twenty-six letters from her to Jane Senior, whom Eliot described as "Dear Friend", are extant (Baker and Nadel 89–114). Members of the family included the influential social reformer and political economist Nassau William Senior (1790–1864). His son Nassau John Senior (1822–91) received GE's and others' unsuccessful endorsement in 1871 to be the chief secretary of the Education Board. In 1848 he married Jane (1828–1877), the sister of the novelist Thomas Hughes (1822–1896), author of amongst other works *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). Jane, like Barbara Bodichon, was deeply committed to philanthropy and was a social worker and workhouse visitor, who in 1874 was appointed the first woman Poor Law Inspector. Jane died 24 March 1877.²² Her son, the recipient of George Eliot's condolence letter was Walter Nassau Senior (1850–1933).

MS: British Library. Printed letter head.

The Priory | 21, North Bank, | Regents Park | April 2. 77

Dear M^r Senior

The precious inkstand is by me at this moment & will be my constant companion till I too die – bringing to me often the inward presence of your beloved mother.

And some time, we hope, you will be willing to let us know more of the son who was her personal joy.

Yours most sincerely | M E Lewes

²¹"Coleridge John Kennard drove Eliot and Lewes from the station to his house, the Grove, Penshurst, where they lunched; 'then walked across the Park to Oakfield', a house belonging to the Hon. Charles Lane-Fox, which he wished them to rent. ([Lewes] Diary, 31 July 1874", qtd. in Haight *GEL*, 9: 132-33n6.

²²See Oldfield, *Jeanie, an 'Army of One'*.

Letter Six

Lewes died on 30 November 1878. Following a period of intense mourning, George Eliot gradually turned to management of everyday affairs, including dealing with publishers and their agents—a task that Lewes had performed—and to the completion of the final volumes of Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind*. She noted in her diary for Wednesday 12 March 1879: “Finished all at present included in Problem III | Drive in the clear air and walk – *alone*. | Charles”—a reference to Charles Lee Lewes (1842–1891), Lewes’s son —“came and took away my will to carry it to the lawyer’s | Read on the colour sense”. Eliot’s Diary reference to “Read on the colour sense” is to Grant’s *The Colour Sense*, published by Trübner.²³ Four days later, on Sunday 16 March, she wrote

Trübner came, and I arranged with him the printing of Problem I ‘The Study of Psychology’ to be published at the beginning of May. He brought Allen Grant’s volume on the Colour Sense, of which I read the early chapters in the Evening. It settled my determination not to do anything further with the subject of the Problems.²⁴

MS: Yale: Beinecke: General Collection Manuscript Miscellany GEN MSS MISC Grp 3159, item F-2. Accession date: 8/29/2012. GE uses black edged mourning paper.

The Priory | 21 North Bank | Mar 12 79

M^r Trübner

I shall be much obliged if you will call on me on Sunday morning at 12 o’clock. Should this date not be convenient to you will you mention another morning on which you can come to me on your way to the city?

I wish to speak to you about my Husband’s MSS.

Yours Sincerely | M E Lewes

Letter Seven

Sampson Low (1797–1886), was the head of Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, the London publishing house, and agent for Harper and Brothers, New York, with whom George Eliot and Lewes mainly dealt with for the American publishing of their work.²⁵ Following Lewes’s death on 30 November 1878, GE retreated from society. She went to Witley on 22 May 1879 and returned to her London home on 1 November 1879. Harper’s published *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* in early June 1879 in the cheap Franklin Square Library edition and the Harper’s Library edition (Baker and Ross 356).

MS: Present Whereabouts Unknown: on e-bay 8 December 2016 priced at \$7,500.00 by “Ernestoic Books”. GE uses black edged morning paper: her letter is written in purple ink

Envelope: Mess^{rs} Harper & Bros. | Franklin Square | New York | U.S.A. *Postmark:* GOD-ALMING | C [J[N] 25 | 79

²³Haight, *GEL*, 7: 116.

²⁴Eliot’s Diary, qtd. in Harris and Johnston, eds., *The Journals*, 166). See also George Eliot to Nicholas Trübner 8 June 1879, in Haight, *GEL* 7: 160. For Nicholas Trübner (1817–1884) see Harris and Johnston, eds., *The Journals*, 443.

²⁵See Baker, *Letters*, 3: 79, No. 570; and Baker and Ross, *George Eliot*, 669.

The Heights, Witley | N^r Godalming | June 25. 1879 | (Telegrams: Witley Station)

Dear Sirs

I have to thank you for a draft on M^r Sampson Low for £50, as payment in advance on “Impressions of Theophrastus Such.”

Mess^{rs} Harper & Bros.

Letter Eight

George Eliot’s concern to perpetuate Lewes’s memory and his scientific work is reflected in her association with Dr. Michael Foster (1836–1907), the Cambridge physiologist.²⁶ Lewes met Foster during his visit to Cambridge on 9 November 1875.²⁷ George Eliot consulted Foster concerning the proofs of the fourth volume of Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind* and also on the Lewes Studentships.²⁸ Eliot noted in her Diary for Friday 26 September 1879: “Feeling ill and depressed”. On Sunday 28 September she recorded “Last proofs came from Dr. Foster and Mr. Sully. | Better in the afternoon”.²⁹ Five days later she wrote in a similar vein to James Sully (1842–1923), who was assisting her: “You are almost at the end of your kind labours for me. I have five proofs by me awaiting your and Dr. Foster’s notes and I think there are only about three more to come”. She added “Do you object to my mentioning your name with Dr. Foster’s in a brief prefatory note?” Eliot wrote in her “brief prefatory note” to *Problems of Life and Mind* (1879) that “In correcting the proof-sheets the Editor has been generously aided by Dr. Michael Foster and Mr. James Sully”.³⁰

MS: Present whereabouts unknown. Text partially reproduced in Jarndyce Catalogue 217 “The Museum—A Miscellany” Christmas Catalogue 2015, Stock #66736 Price at £2800. Written in purple ink on black edged mourning paper and envelope postmarked “... SP| 26|79” addressed to “D^r Michael Foster | Huntingdon”.

The Heights, Witley, | N^r Godalming, | Sept. 26. 79

(Telegrams: Whitley Station)

Dear D^r Foster

I enter feelingly into your trouble. It is a sad preparation for your return to work. I shall think anxiously of you till I [remainder of text obscured] ...

Today or tomorrow you will have received the last proof, which has come to me this morning ... I am sending to the printer a short prefatory note of which I will ask him to forward you a proof if you think I have said anything remiss ...

I remain | Yours faithfully | M E Lewes

²⁶*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Foster, Sir Michael (1836–1907)” (by Terrie M. Romano), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33218 (accessed March 7, 2020). For Lewes’s inscribed copies of Foster’s works see Baker, *The George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Library*, 66–67, 196.

²⁷Haight, *GEL*, 6, 181n4.

²⁸Harris and Johnston, eds., *The Journals*, 410.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 182.

³⁰p.[v]—and see Haight, *GEL*, 9: 274 and n2.

Conclusion

Noticeable in George Eliot's letters to Dr. Blackwell, Dean Ramsay, Oscar Browning, and Walter Nassau are her concern for her fellow human beings, her empathy for their situation, especially when grieving, her sense of gratitude for gifts and memory for gifts, as in the case of Jane Nassau, and how much the gift of an inkstand meant to her: the presence of the object being a perpetual memory. Her congratulatory letter to Pigott, Lewes's friend of many years standing, shows George Eliot acting as Lewes's surrogate at a time when pressures of completing a work were accumulating for Lewes. The letters to Sampson Low of Trübner's and to Dr. Foster reflect Eliot carrying on with everyday matters following Lewes's death, her managing his affairs, such as dealing with publishers, her establishing a studentship as a memory to him, and his scientific endeavours.

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