
This compact but well-researched study of the contemporary responses to George Eliot's death offers a fascinating snapshot of Victorian attitudes both to religion and to literature. K. K. Collins sets out to challenge the standard account of the reception of Eliot's work in which the central problem is seen to be the disparity between the 'imagined' or implied author, a gentle and wise upholder of Christian morality, and the 'real' author, the radical propounder through essays and translations of what one contemporary critic called 'the godless humanitarianism of Strauss and Feuerbach' (p. 2).

Part of the solution to this problem, as Collins demonstrates, was the continuation long after the unveiling of her pseudonym in 1859 of 'a persistent uncertainty over who she was and what she believed' (p. 4). As late as 1875 the ninth edition of Men of the Time, a trusted authority to whom many journalists turned for information, was reporting her as the daughter of a poor clergyman adopted early in life by a wealthy one. Lacking reliable information about her life and beliefs, partly as a result of her own reluctance to adopt a public persona in any other form than through her works, the obituaries attempted to supply her with at least some kind of religious identity to which their readers could attach meaning.

Collins traces a number of false legends that arose (rather in the manner Strauss had supposed of the Gospels) from the discovery of a copy of The Imitation of Christ by her bedside along with another rumour about the supposed discovery of an unpublished study of varying ideas of a future life. He reports at some length the coverage of Eliot's surprisingly conventional funeral service. The fact that passages from the Book of Common Prayer were employed rather than the liturgy of the Religion of Humanity (to which she had herself contributed her 'hymn' on 'The Choir Invisible') was again taken by the religious press as a sign of returning sympathy towards Christianity. Almost all denominations, in fact, apart from the Roman Catholics, seem to have claimed her as (secretly or in some significant respects) one of their own.

One significant omission from Collins's account is any mention of the controversy over the possibility of her funeral taking place in Westminster Abbey. The then Dean, Arthur Stanley, told John Cross that he would offer no insurmountable objections if there were sufficient demand. The opposition ironically came rather from agnostics such as T. H. Huxley, as his Life and Letters would show. Collins records a similar debate which erupted in the correspondence pages of the Manchester Guardian over the raising of a memorial stone in the Abbey a century after her death; about the contemporary debate, however, he is silent.

Collins is generally content to record the evidence rather than attempt to reach any firm conclusions about the most accurate way of describing Eliot's faith (or lack of it). He is clearly sympathetic to Peter Hodgson's attempt to portray her as an 'unorthodox Christian theologian' (p. 76). He himself offers the term 'aporodoxy' to register her complex beliefs: 'pathless, and hard to see one's way within' (p. 77). This may not be a very satisfying 'answer' to the enigma of Eliot's religious position but it does at least reflect the difficulty of the question.