

George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, and the House of Blackwood 1856–60

Joanne Shattock

The story of how Marian Evans was encouraged to write fiction by her partner G. H. Lewes, who then introduced her anonymously to the Edinburgh publisher John Blackwood, is familiar to all students of George Eliot. Their ‘three-sided partnership’, in Rosemary Ashton’s words, was ‘one of the most remarkable in the history of publishing’.¹ Lewes and Blackwood were undoubtedly the two most influential agents in Eliot’s writing career. Lewes acted as her literary adviser, protector, and publicist, allowing his own career, by most accounts, to become secondary to hers. Next to Lewes, as Gordon Haight asserted, ‘John Blackwood did most to develop and sustain George Eliot’s genius as a novelist.’²

As David Finkelstein has demonstrated, George Eliot was quite simply William Blackwood and Sons’ most important acquisition in the mid-nineteenth century.³ What is often overlooked is the fact that as well as being the broker of a relationship of more than twenty years between George Eliot and John Blackwood, Lewes for a short period was also important to the publishing house and to *Blackwood’s Magazine*. In the well-known account ‘How I Came to Write Fiction’ in her journal for 6 December 1857, the future George Eliot recorded the important moment in May 1856 when she settled on a title for her first story, ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton’. As she recalled, ‘We determined that if my story turned out good enough we would send it to Blackwood.’⁴

It could have turned out quite differently. Blackwood was by no means an obvious choice of publisher for this new author. Lewes’s contacts among publishers and editors in the mid-1850s were prodigious. His article ‘The Condition of Authors in England, Germany, and France’ in *Fraser’s Magazine* for March 1847 argued that literature had become a profession, that it was now possible for a writer to earn an income and maintain a lifestyle commensurate with that of other middle-class professionals by writing

¹ Rosemary Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 188.

² Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 212.

³ David Finkelstein, *The House of Blackwood: Author–Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 34–36.

⁴ *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 289–90.

for newspapers and magazines.⁵ He was a perfect example of the modern man of letters, ‘the prince of journalists’ as Carlyle was famously to dub him.⁶ His close connection with the *Leader*, the radical weekly of which he was the co-founder, had come to an end by 1855, although he still reviewed for the journal. He was a regular reviewer for the *Westminster*, he wrote for the *British Quarterly* and occasionally for the *Edinburgh*, and he was a contributor to *Fraser’s Magazine*. In spring 1856 he was in the process of negotiating terms for a new ‘library edition’ of his *Biographical History of Philosophy* with the publishing firm of J. W. Parker who were also the proprietors of *Fraser’s Magazine*. *Fraser’s* might well have been interested in a story or series of stories by a new author. Another possibility was George Smith, who had taken over his father’s firm Smith, Elder in 1846 and who published Lewes’s novel *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* in 1848.

Lewes’s connection with *Blackwood’s Magazine*, by contrast, was tenuous. He had met John Blackwood in 1842 when the latter was in charge of the firm’s new London office, but had published only two stories in the magazine, the last in September 1848. His relationship with the publisher, who became editor of the magazine in 1845 and head of the publishing house in 1852, was cemented through the serialization of ‘Metamorphoses’, a slight three-part tale, in *Blackwood’s* from May through July 1856. The story was set during the French Revolution and based on a play Lewes had written with Charles Matthews which was performed at the Lyceum in 1853. Blackwood made a habit of reading everything submitted for his magazine closely, paying attention to detail, conscious of what would and would not be acceptable to the magazine’s conservative readers. On this occasion he was concerned about the story’s possible radical overtones. His brother and partner, Major William Blackwood, thought the tale was clever but that the ending was unsatisfactory. Lewes was quick to reassure them that the story would have no social or political implications. ‘No one’, he stressed, ‘is more ignorant of politics, or more indifferent to them.’ On the ending, he acknowledged that ‘your excellent criticism is unhappily too true’, but that the fault lay in the problem of turning a play into a story.⁷ This brief exchange prepared the ground for his approach to Blackwood on Marian Evans’s behalf seven months later.

It was the beginning of what would become a prolific, often daily correspondence between the two men and a relationship that grew more cordial as the years went on. Lewes’s reputation at this point had never

⁵ [G. H. Lewes], ‘The Condition of Authors in England, Germany, and France’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, March 1847, pp. 285–95.

⁶ Quoted in Ashton, p. 4. See Francis Espinasse, *Literary Recollections and Sketches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), pp. 276, 282.

⁷ *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*, ed. by William Baker, English Literary Studies Monograph Series, 3 vols (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1995–99), 1 (1995), 245.

been higher. As Margaret Oliphant astutely remarked in her history of the House of Blackwood, he was ‘one of those men of letters whose reputation is greater than their works, and to a great extent independent of them’.⁸ The success of his two-volume *Life and Works of Goethe* published in October 1855 had extended his European contacts and made him a minor celebrity in some circles. He continued to write for the theatre and began to contribute to the recently established *Saturday Review*. In John Blackwood’s eyes, Lewes was a man worth cultivating. A writer with extensive contacts in metropolitan literary circles, he epitomized the London world of letters, a world in which the Scottish publisher had a toehold but was essentially an outsider.

Lewes followed up on the modest success of ‘Metamorphoses’ with a proposal for an article based on his current research on marine life, work that would be continued during a forthcoming trip to Devon and North Wales with Marian Evans. ‘Sea-Side Studies’ extended to three parts and ran in *Blackwood’s Magazine* from August to October 1856. Encouraged by the articles, Blackwood urged him to expand them into a popular book, a proposal Lewes agreed to consider. ‘My relations with you as Editor & Publisher have been so uniformly agreeable, that it would be an additional pleasure in such a scheme to contemplate you as the possible publisher of the work’, he wrote effusively at the beginning of October (*Letters*, ed. by Baker, I, 250).

The experience confirmed Lewes’s instinct that Blackwood would be a sympathetic publisher for Marian Evans’s first story. ‘I don’t know what you will think of the story’, he wrote to the publisher on 6 November, ‘but according to my judgment such humour, pathos, vivid presentation and nice observation have not been exhibited (in this style) since the “Vicar of Wakefield”.’ The story, in two parts, was to be the first of a series of ‘tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its *human* and *not at all* in its *theological* aspect’.⁹

Blackwood’s response was characteristic. His friend’s ‘reminiscences of Clerical Life’ would do for the magazine, but he could not commit himself until he had seen more of the story, and of the proposed series. This was his standard practice. The death of Milly was ‘powerfully done’, the revulsion of feeling towards Amos was ‘capitally drawn’, and the ‘asinine stupidity’ of his treatment of the countess made one want to kick him, but the author spent too much time describing his characters rather than

⁸ Mrs [Margaret] Oliphant, *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and His Sons*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1897), II, 433. Volume III of the *Annals*, on John Blackwood, was written by Mrs Gerald [Mary] Porter and published in 1898.

⁹ *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), II: 1852–1858 (1954), 269, emphases in original.

letting them evolve through their actions. He also thought there was too much detail about the Barton children, few of whom featured in the story. ‘If the author is a new writer I beg to congratulate him on being worthy of the honours of print and pay’, he ended formally (*Eliot Letters*, II, 272).

Lewes’s reply was defensive. His clerical friend had been discouraged by Blackwood’s letter. He himself thought much more highly of the story. ‘It struck me as being fresher than any story I have read for a long while’, he persisted (*Eliot Letters*, II, 274). ‘I always think twice before I put the decisive mark “In type for the Magazine” on any M. S. from a stranger’, Blackwood responded by way of explanation for the apparent coolness of his initial reaction. He agreed to publish ‘Amos Barton’, but reiterated that he could not agree to publish the series until he had sight of the next tale. As if picking up a cue from Lewes he added, ‘I agree with you that there is great freshness of style’ (II, 275).

This exchange set the pattern of what was to follow. Lewes sent Blackwood the successive parts of the new series on behalf of his still anonymous ‘friend’. Blackwood read them with palpable enthusiasm, identifying scenes that delighted him, characters he liked or disliked, a phrase that caught his eye or one he thought should be altered, and occasionally his disappointment at ‘the wind-up’. No detail was too small for comment. At frequent intervals Lewes urged that he limit his criticism so as not to discourage his sensitive new author. Although he took the hint at the time, Blackwood soon returned to his close reading and his commentary.

Over a quarter of a century later, Margaret Oliphant, who became a Blackwood author and a regular *Blackwood’s* reviewer at the time that Lewes and Marian Evans were introduced to the publisher, reflected on his qualities as an editor, of which she had ample experience. Her comments were prompted by reading J. W. Cross’s *George Eliot’s Life* in preparation for a review in the *Edinburgh*:

The insight, the quick understanding, the excellent judgment represented by that name are known to many, yet not perhaps to so many as the place he deserved. For it is not too much to say of John Blackwood, though he never wrote a line, that he was a power in literature. Trusting to no opinion but his own, with no middleman between him and the literary workers to whom he was able to open the gates of access to the public, his excellent judgment had the additional advantage of being unprofessional, not that of a competitor and fellow-craftsman, but of a man of the world, living in the atmosphere of the reader rather than of the writer. His instinct was almost infallible as to what would and would not stand the ordeal of public discussion. His quiet ‘That will do’ was more satisfactory to those who were acquainted with the man than many a gush of praise, and at the same time his eye was keen and

quick to see the weak point of either a story or an argument. Few better or bolder critics ever existed. His pithy letters and terse indications of what dissatisfied him were not to be lightly disregarded, and he was always liberal, nay generous, in recognition, not only of that which pleased the general audience, but of that which he felt to be good and worthy.¹⁰

Oliphant was not impartial. She had been the beneficiary of John Blackwood's criticism and encouragement for many years and had reason to be grateful to him. He had taken a keen interest in the novels and tales that comprised her 'Chronicles of Carlingford', which were serialized in *Blackwood's* between 1861 and 1866, commenting on each instalment, making suggestions, proposing alterations, correcting details, asking what was in store for particular characters, and on one occasion intervening dramatically when he thought the story had taken a wrong turn. For the most part Oliphant accepted his suggestions willingly, regarding him as a collaborator rather than a critic, and buoyed up by his confidence in her ability.¹¹ She overestimated Blackwood's critical acumen and his impact on Eliot's writing, but she was right about one thing. His assessments were made from the perspective of the common reader; they were not those of a fellow professional. It was a strength in his dealings with George Eliot but it was also a limitation.

In her review of Cross Oliphant quoted at length from Blackwood's letter to Lewes after reading the manuscript of 'Amos Barton', noting that his 'calm approbation' would now seem almost profane to 'the worshippers of George Eliot' ('Life and Letters of George Eliot', p. 450). As she inferred, it was not clear from their correspondence when Blackwood recognized Marian Evans's exceptional talents. Initially, as far as he was concerned, he had two promising new recruits to his magazine. 'Are you going to confine yourself to the character of intermediaire at present', he inquired of Lewes after receiving the first instalment of 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'. Lewes replied jovially but cautiously, 'Think yourself lucky that I do! If I were to open the floodgates of my ink bottle, Maga would have enough to do to keep her course' (*Eliot Letters*, II, 296).

Blackwood and Lewes were by this time at ease with one another. The publisher teased Lewes about his research on marine life, claiming that he had scribbled a note on the cover of a letter in May 1857 that 'if you

¹⁰ 'The Life and Letters of George Eliot', in *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. by Joanne Shattock and others, Pickering Masters, 25 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011–16), III: *Literary Criticism, 1877–86*, ed. by Valerie Sanders (2011), pp. 423–63 (p. 449) (first publ. in *Edinburgh Review*, April 1885, pp. 514–53).

¹¹ See Joanne Shattock, 'The Making of a Novelist: Oliphant and John Blackwood at Work on *The Perpetual Curate*', in *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive*, ed. by D. J. Trela (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), pp. 113–23.

were not at the capital of Jersey, the postmaster should endeavour to find out a maniac answering to your name, hammering rocks, and dissecting seaweeds on the shore'. 'I am afraid you will find Richmond rather hot and dusty at present,' he wrote in August, 'but with such relaxations as the occasional eye of a cuttlefish to dissect, I daresay you will be able to rub on.'¹² Lewes in turn twitted Blackwood about his golf, which was a serious pursuit, passed on London gossip, reported on what he had seen at the theatre, and when Blackwood sent him a recently published textbook on geology, obligingly dashed off a review for the *Leader*. On a more personal note he gave notice that he would not be available for a meeting, should Blackwood be in London at the end of August, as he was about to take two of his sons to a new school in Switzerland. 'As you are a father', his letter ended, 'I needn't say more' (*Eliot Letters*, II, 372). It is possible to detect a slight calculation in some of the letters, particularly when Lewes displayed his metropolitan contacts, but in general he was spontaneous and open in his dealings with the publisher. For his part Blackwood was keen to encourage more contributions from Lewes, and was more than a little in awe of him, a situation of which Lewes was fully aware. Writing to his wife after his first meeting with George Eliot in February 1858, Blackwood reported:

Lewes says he would do ten times the work for me that he would do for any other man, and he does not think any other editor in the world would have been able to induce George Eliot to go on. It was very flattering, as his experience of editors is very great, and he is a monstrous clever fellow. (Porter, III, 46)

Marian Evans and John Blackwood, meanwhile, were forging their own separate relationship. Blackwood's first letter to her, on 29 December 1856, enclosed the January number of the magazine, in which 'Amos Barton' was the leading item, a compliment to the author and, as he explained, calculated to draw attention to the new series. Evans's reply, signed 'the Author of Amos Barton', acknowledged his 'cordial appreciation' and reported that in response to his suggestion she had removed the names of the children who clustered around Milly Barton's deathbed, apart from Patty and Dickey. She prefaced this with 'I think that the particularisation of the children has an important effect on the imagination'.¹³ The comment had a hint of steel that would become familiar in the ensuing months.

¹² Quoted in Porter, *Annals of a Publishing House*, III, 40, 41.

¹³ *Eliot Letters*, II, 288. Ruby V. Redinger points out that Marian Evans answered John Blackwood's letter of 29 December 1856 by writing to his brother William on 4 January [1857] (*Eliot Letters*, II, 283–84, 288). She later wrote to William rather than to John to announce the adoption of her pseudonym on 4 February 1857 (II, 291–92). Redinger argues that at this point she found William more sympathetic

Blackwood had by this time resumed his close reading with the first part of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’. He worried that Caterina’s affections were directed to ‘a Jackanapes’, Captain Wybrow, and not to the more worthy Gilfil and hoped that in the next part she would be made to appear less devoted to Wybrow and given more dignity. He also queried the many French phrases in the instalment. George Eliot, as she now styled herself, conceded the lesser point but stood her ground on the more substantive one. She acknowledged the justice of his criticism of the French phrases, but she refused to give assurances on a change in Caterina’s affections.¹⁴ ‘I am utterly unable to alter anything in relation to the delineation or development of character, as my stories always grow out of my psychological conception of the dramatis personae’, she replied, introducing an argument that would become familiar. She continued:

My artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy. And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character. If anything strikes you as untrue to human nature in my delineations, I shall be very glad if you will point it out to me, that I may reconsider the matter. But alas! Inconsistencies and weaknesses are not untrue. (*Eliot Letters*, II, 299)

Changing tack, Blackwood made his next suggestion to Lewes:

I daresay George Eliot will kick furiously at the base idea of altering a syllable at this point, but I am pretty sure that his dear little heroine would be more sure of universal sympathy if she only dreamed or felt as if she could stab the cur to the heart.

Eliot replied directly that ‘it would be the death of my story to substitute a dream for the real scene. Dreams usually play an important part in fiction, but rarely, I think, in actual life’ (*Eliot Letters*, II, 308–09).

What is striking about the early letters from George Eliot to her publisher is the firmness with which she defended her artistic integrity, and the passion and clarity with which she articulated the principles of her art. She in fact made very few alterations in response to Blackwood’s copious comments and the publisher seemed unperturbed. ‘You have much reason to be proud of your Literary Godchild George Eliot’, he conceded to Lewes

than his brother and was issuing a mute rebuke to John Blackwood. See Ruby V. Redinger, *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (London: The Bodley Head, 1975), p. 329.

¹⁴ She removed the French phrases when the tales were republished in two volumes in January 1858 (*Eliot Letters*, II, 299, n. 9).

when the first part of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’ was about to be published (*Eliot Letters*, II, 299).

Nearly forty years later Margaret Oliphant provided a shrewd assessment of the emerging relationship between author and publisher. She read through the uncatalogued correspondence between Eliot, Lewes, and the Blackwoods in preparation for her *Annals of a Publishing House*, noting the degree to which Eliot took charge of her own affairs at this stage and how comparatively infrequently Lewes acted in the role of her protector:

In the earlier correspondence [...] there are few traces of the almost extravagantly watchful and constant care with which he seemed in later days to surround the great novelist. Then she does her business herself, with the clear head and strong intelligence which might be divined from her work, but on her possession of which all later reports tended to cast doubt. (Oliphant, *Annals*, II, 448)

Again, Oliphant’s judgement was astute. Rather than a triumvirate in which the two men were focused on nurturing a great writer, in the early years the relationship was of three equals, in various combinations. Blackwood and Lewes were in negotiation about his articles for the magazine, one group of which, ‘Sea-Side Studies’, was extended to a second series in 1857 and published in two volumes in 1858, shortly after Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life*. The print run of 1250 for Lewes’s book was in fact larger than that for the *Scenes*, as was the initial subscription of 800.¹⁵ A second series of articles, ‘The Physiology of Common Life’, was collected and republished in 1859–60.

Simultaneously, Eliot and Blackwood were establishing a relationship that was to undergo a number of challenges and one serious breach, but ultimately to endure until Blackwood’s death in 1879. Lewes and Eliot were both equally busy with their careers, anxious about money, juggling the demands of family with their writing, and at this point uncertain of what prospects lay ahead for either of them. Blackwood continued to encourage both, but Eliot in particular, passing on compliments from a small group of regular contributors who acted as his advisers, two of whom, he told her, now approved of ‘Amos’, having previously been ‘dead against’.¹⁶ More

¹⁵ The subscription for the *Scenes* was 650, and the initial print run was 1000. Mudie took 350 copies for his circulating library, and 500 of *Sea-Side Studies* after negotiating an extra discount (*Eliot Letters*, II, 418, 432). See Joanne Shattock, ‘Publishers and Publication’ and ‘Editions of George Eliot’s Works’, in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 12–22, 23–33 (pp. 17, 25) for details of the editions and sales of the *Scenes*.

¹⁶ *Eliot Letters*, II, 290–91. One of these was the poet W. E. Aytoun. The other adviser, Col. W. G. Hamley, thought there was too much ‘sniffing and dirty noses’ in the story.

significantly, he relayed positive signals from Thackeray, an old friend from his London days and a novelist whose good opinion she particularly valued. He told Lewes that from June 1857 the *Scenes* would run alongside a new novel by Bulwer Lytton, *What Will He Do With It?*, and expressed the hope that ‘our Clerical friend’ would come out well in such company (*Eliot Letters*, II, 328).

Relations between author and publisher were tested when Blackwood read the first part of ‘Janet’s Repentance’. He listed his concerns: the bleak picture of life in an English county town, Dempster’s brutality, Janet’s alcoholism, all written in ‘the harsher Thackerayan view of human nature’. He urged Eliot to soften her picture, to present ‘a really good active working clergyman’ rather than her ‘absurdly evangelical’ and ‘absurdly High Church’ portraits. He tempered his criticism with accounts of the enthusiasm for the series in high places — Lord Stanley of Alderley had praised it at a recent gathering at Bulwer Lytton’s — and to lighten the tone suggested that if he were wrong about the new story she should put it down to ‘a fortnight of hot weather and hotter dinners in London’ (*Eliot Letters*, II, 344–45).

Eliot’s response was initially conciliatory. ‘I am able, I think, to enter into an editor’s doubt and difficulties, and to see my stories in some degree from your point of view as well as my own’, she began. But she would not give way:

The collision in the drama is not at all between ‘bigotted churchmanship’ and evangelicalism, but between *irreligion* and religion. [...] Everything is softened from the fact, so far as art is permitted to soften and yet to remain essentially true. The real town was more vicious than my Milby; the real Dempster was far more disgusting than mine; the real Janet alas! had a far sadder end than mine.

‘As an artist’, she continued, ‘I should be utterly powerless if I departed from my own conceptions of life and character’ (*Eliot Letters*, II, 347–48, emphasis in original).

What is impressive about Eliot’s letter, like those written in defence of the earlier tales, is her self-belief and her firmness in refusing to make any alterations that would undermine her art. She proposed that the *Scenes* should be brought to an end with ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’ and ventured that Blackwood might be willing to publish ‘Janet’s Repentance’ as part of a volume, if not in the magazine. ‘I shall accept that plan with no other feeling than that you have been to me the most liberal and agreeable of editors and are the man of all others I would choose for a publisher’, she concluded sincerely (*Eliot Letters*, II, 348). ‘I do not fall in with George Eliot’s every day’, Blackwood responded instantly, ‘and the idea of stopping the

Series as suggested in your letter gave me “quite a turn” to use one of Thackeray’s favourite phrases’ (II, 352). ‘Janet’s Repentance’ was serialized in five parts, but in Eliot’s mind the die had been cast. Later she recorded in her journal that the publisher’s lack of sympathy with the first two parts of the story had determined her to end the series and republish the tales in two volumes.¹⁷

From a publishing point of view it was not a good decision, as Blackwood knew. The three stories were sufficient to fill two volumes but not the magic three required to attract the circulating libraries. Mudie’s, the most influential, took only a modest number and did not advertise the book (Shattock, ‘Publishers and Publication’, p. 17). Nonetheless, Eliot experienced a new author’s pleasure at the transformation from serial to book, ‘to see one’s paragraphs released from the tight lacing of double columns, and expanding themselves at their ease’, as she described it to Blackwood (*Eliot Letters*, II, 399). In fact it was to be the only time she would experience the transition from a *Blackwood’s Magazine* serial to a Blackwood book.

The reason she gave Blackwood for bringing *Scenes of Clerical Life* to a premature conclusion was genuine. She wanted time to concentrate on a full-length novel and time also to write a substantial portion before showing it to him. She was already at work on *Adam Bede*. In the mind of both novelist and publisher the new novel was intended for the magazine. The division into parts was carefully marked up on the manuscript.¹⁸ She gave Blackwood the first volume of the manuscript when he visited her and Lewes at Richmond at the beginning of March 1858. As he was fond of relating, he read it avidly from the time he left Kew through his journey north until the failing light forced him to abandon it as the train neared the Scottish border. His first impressions were ecstatic and as usual his letters were filled with comments and suggested alterations. But as the relationship between Arthur and Hetty developed, his doubts as to the novel’s suitability for the magazine surfaced. He signalled his uncertainty in a letter at the end of the month:

The story is altogether very novel and I cannot recollect anything at all like it. I find myself constantly thinking of the characters as real personages, which is a capital sign. It will be very different from anything that has ever appeared in the Magazine

¹⁷ *Journals*, ed. by Harris and Johnston, p. 291. She paraphrased parts of this letter in the entry.

¹⁸ See George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Carol A. Martin, Clarendon edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. xxvi. In her letter of 27 March 1858 Eliot announced that she was sending the next section of the manuscript, ‘forming the fourth part of “Adam Bede” if he is destined to appear in parts, which your last pleasant letter has made me regard as probable’ (*Eliot Letters*, II, 442).

and as far as I can at present judge will do well there, but if you will allow me I shall not decide on the form of publication until I have seen more. (*Eliot Letters*, II, 446)

By April the decision had been taken. *Adam Bede* would not appear in *Blackwood's Magazine* but would be brought out in the traditional three volumes. The decision was presented as a mutual one, but ultimately it was Blackwood's.¹⁹ The novel, published on 1 February 1859, was an unprecedented success, critically and commercially. It went through seven printings in its first year and was to outsell all of Eliot's other novels in her lifetime. Notwithstanding the spectacular sales and the positive reviews, the novel was dogged by controversy after publication. The first issue was the 'Liggins' affair, in which a little-known Warwickshire resident claimed to have written it. The unwelcome publicity set author and publisher at odds as to whether George Eliot's identity should be revealed. Lewes and Eliot saw this as inevitable; Blackwood and his brother William resisted, fearing that the revelation would damage sales.

Blackwood sought to restore relations first by presenting Eliot with a pug and, later in the year, made her a payment of £800 in addition to the £800 specified in the contract for *Adam Bede*. Eliot and Lewes's seemingly cool acknowledgement of the additional payment caused fury in the publishing house. Donald Gray argues that as far as Eliot and Lewes were concerned, the sales of the novel had exceeded all expectations and the author had earned the additional sum. To John Blackwood and his colleagues the firm's spontaneous generosity had not been sufficiently recognized.²⁰ The incident was soon forgotten, if indeed its significance had registered with Eliot and Lewes, but it represented the first serious crack in the relationship of the three.

The tumultuous period following the publication of *Adam Bede*, with the Liggins affair and the threat of a sequel to the novel to be published by Thomas Newby, left no time to reflect on the consequences of not serializing it. For George Eliot it was a relief and confirmed her sense that she worked best when unimpeded by the deadlines imposed by serialization. As she was to indicate more eloquently with her next novel, she also disliked seeing part of a work in print before it was complete. Blackwood asked her for another tale for the magazine, and she complied with what she described as 'a slight story of an outre kind — not a jeu'esprit, but a jeu de melancolie', which she had written in the spring when unable

¹⁹ *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, VIII: 1840–1870: *Supplementary Letters* (1978), p. 203.

²⁰ Donald Gray, 'George Eliot and Her Publishers', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 181–201 (pp. 188–89) (repr. in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine and Nancy Henry, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 57–75).

to make any headway on her new novel.²¹ Lewes felt the need to explain that the new story, ‘The Lifted Veil’, was unlike anything Eliot had written to date and suggested that it should be published under her signature. Blackwood rejected this proposal, not wanting the unusual tale to be associated with the celebrated author of *Adam Bede*. He also indicated his dislike of the ‘revivifying experiment’ and recommended its removal. The story appeared in the July 1859 number with the blood transfusion scene at the end unchanged (*Eliot Letters*, III, 67).

Blackwood was now convinced that the new novel, which he referred to variously as ‘St Oggs on the Floss’ or ‘Sister Maggie’, should be serialized in *Blackwood’s*. Writing to William from London in June 1859 he remarked that he had very little doubt that a new work by George Eliot ‘might affect the sale of the Mag. most materially especially when there is an upward tendency already’ (*Eliot Letters*, III, 92). This time Eliot was less open to serialization. ‘My stories grow in me like plants, and this is only in the leaf-bud’, she wrote to Blackwood in August. ‘I have faith that the flower will come. Not enough faith, though, to make me like the idea of beginning to print till the flower is fairly out — till I know the end as well as the beginning’ (*Eliot Letters*, III, 133). Later she argued, wrong-headedly, that a serial would ‘sweep away perhaps 20,000 — nay 40,000 readers’ of a three-volume edition.²² Her other objection, and the one which crystallized her opposition, was that the novel would not appear under her name in the magazine.²³ Blackwood did not try to persuade her. He put in train plans to publish in the traditional three volumes. It was probably a mistake as far as the magazine was concerned, but not for his ongoing relationship with George Eliot, nor, as would become clear, for the profits of William Blackwood and Sons. *The Mill on the Floss* was published on 4 April 1860 and, like *Adam Bede*, was a critical and commercial success.²⁴

In all the discussions about the format of Eliot’s first two full-length novels, both during her lifetime and subsequently, there have been no reflections on the consequences to *Blackwood’s Magazine* of the decision not to serialize them. If John Blackwood had any inkling of the revolution in magazine publishing that would take place at the end of 1859 and the

²¹ *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, III: 1859–1861 (1954), 41.

²² *Eliot Letters*, III, 151. John Sutherland points out that most publishers at the time, Blackwood included, regarded magazine serialization as attracting additional readers rather than putting off those who would read the three-volume library editions. See J. A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (London: Athlone Press, 1976), p. 38.

²³ See the letter from William Blackwood to John Blackwood, 1 December 1859, in which William argued strenuously for the withholding of her signature, lest it affect the magazine’s circulation in families (*Eliot Letters*, III, 220–21).

²⁴ For details, see Shattock, ‘Publishers and Publication’, p. 19; and ‘Editions of George Eliot’s Works’, p. 27.

beginning of 1860 he gave no sign. His competitors Alexander Macmillan and George Smith were about to launch new house magazines for their firms, designed to showcase the authors on their lists. *Macmillan's Magazine*, edited by David Masson, an experienced reviewer and scholar, was published on 1 November 1859, selling for a shilling, in contrast to *Blackwood's* price of two shillings six pence. The contributions in *Macmillan's* were signed. In January 1860 George Smith launched the *Cornhill Magazine*, edited by Thackeray, and like *Macmillan's*, selling for a shilling. The *Cornhill's* first number serialized novels by Trollope and Thackeray, illustrated by prominent artists. It also carried the first part of Lewes's 'Studies in Animal Life', for which Smith had approached him the previous November.

By any measure both the *Cornhill* and *Macmillan's* outflanked and outshone *Blackwood's Magazine*, once the most celebrated magazine in the country, a miscellany that others, like *Fraser's Magazine* (1830–80) and the *London Magazine* (1820–29) had sought to emulate. The raft of so-called 'shilling monthlies' that sprang up in the 1860s now sought to emulate not *Blackwood's*, but the *Cornhill*. Moreover, the *Cornhill* vastly outsold the older, traditional monthly, its sales reaching as high as 110,000 in the first few months, reducing to 80,000 in the next two years, after which they steadily declined. *Blackwood's* circulation averaged just over eight thousand between 1859 and 1861, decreasing gradually in the next decade.²⁵

Had things worked out differently, the serialization of *Adam Bede* in 1858–59 followed by *The Mill on the Floss* in 1859–60 might have transformed the magazine's fortunes at a crucial moment in magazine publishing, and temporarily checked its declining circulation. *Blackwood's* undoubtedly lost ground to the two new shilling monthlies and their imitators in the 1860s. It is possible that this was inevitable, given John Blackwood's modest ambitions for his house magazine. He showed no concern over what he termed the 'shilling opposition', claiming to one correspondent that sales of the magazine were actually rising (Porter, 111, 87). The decision not to serialize the two novels had retained George Eliot for the publishing house, at least for the time being, and the profits on the three-volume publications exceeded all expectation.

The situation was not without irony. George Smith's approach to Lewes for his 'Studies in Animal Life' in November 1859 was no doubt made with the author of *Adam Bede* in his sights, an ambition that was fulfilled just over two years later when George Eliot agreed to serialize *Romola* in the *Cornhill*. Lewes joined an editorial board which ran the *Cornhill* following Thackeray's resignation in 1862, and later acted in an advisory capacity.

²⁵ Quoted in Laurel Brake, 'Maga, the Shilling Monthlies, and the New Journalism', in *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition, 1805–1930*, ed. by David Finkelstein (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 184–212 (p. 187).

John Blackwood's restrained response to Eliot's defection to the *Cornhill* paid off in the long term. *Romola* was not the success that Smith had hoped, nor did Eliot find him as congenial and supportive a publisher as Blackwood. She returned to her 'first friend' as Blackwood described himself in 1866 with the publication of *Felix Holt* and remained with Blackwood and Sons for the rest of her career.²⁶

One beneficiary of Eliot's extended absence from Blackwood and Sons was Margaret Oliphant. The first three tales of her 'Chronicles of Carlingford' were serialized in the magazine during 1861 and 1862. She was at work on *Salem Chapel*, the first full-length novel in the series, just as *Romola* began its serialization in the *Cornhill*. Blackwood now had time to devote to his young contributor. More importantly, he was in need of serial fiction that would retain the magazine's readers, who might otherwise be attracted by the rich fare on offer in the *Cornhill*. A close working relationship developed between the two which gradually turned into friendship. *Miss Marjoribanks*, serialized in *Blackwood's* in 1865–66 was a milestone in Oliphant's artistic development. It was published in three volumes in 1866, the same year as *Felix Holt*.

Oliphant's place in the firm and in *Blackwood's Magazine* was now secure. Her response to her eminent senior colleague over the years was complex, ranging from initial speculation about her identity through envy to gradual admiration. But her position as an insider in the Blackwood establishment and later as the firm's historian make her observations on Eliot and Lewes's developing relationship with John Blackwood worth noting.

The partnership of Eliot, Lewes, and Blackwood was reinstated but with a difference. John Blackwood and his house magazine no longer featured in Lewes's writing life. He and Blackwood now combined their talents to promote the work of George Eliot and in Lewes's case to keep her, as Oliphant memorably observed, in a 'mental greenhouse'.²⁷ The old three-way relationship between two new eager contributors to 'Maga' and their accommodating editor was in the past.

²⁶ In a letter to the Rev. Lucas Collins, 28 April 1866, quoted in Porter, III, 158.

²⁷ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant: The Complete Text*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 15.