**Prof Gordon Haight and Mr Robert Evans’s Will**

***By Bob Muscutt***

I have always been very uncomfortable with often repeated story that George Eliot’s father, Robert Evans, deliberately spited her in his will by leaving the set of Sir Walter Scott’s Waverly Novels not to his youngest daughter but to Fanny, his older daughter by his first wife. My feeling that this was just not the sort of thing Mr Evans would do together with certain apparent contradictions in Haight’s account of the will urged me to order the will from the Public Records Office and check it out myself.

In his monumental biography of George Eliot, Gordon S. Haight describes the last weeks of Robert Evans's life. He quotes a letter written by Cara Bray to her sister **dated 11th September, 1848** and comments with reference to this letter:

"**Two weeks later** Mr. Evans made his will." (George Eliot a Biography, Gordon S. Haight, OUP 1968 p. 66)

This would mean that Robert Evans "made his will" around 25th **September 1848**. A paragraph later Prof Haight writes:

"He (Mr. Evans) lingered on **five months longer** ... " (Ibid p. 66)

This, as the reference point is the date of the will, would mean that Mr. Evans died in **February 1849**, whereas we of course know that he died on **31st May 1849**.

How is this inconsistency explicable?

The fact is that Robert Evans made his will not in September 1848 but on **28th September 1844.** On the **5th January 1849** he added a codicil to the existing will. So the explanation for the incongruity of Prof Haight's comments is that he apparently overlooked the existence of two separate documents - the will and the codicil - and attributed the day of the will made in 1844 - the 28th September, which is indeed approx. two weeks after Cara's letter of 11th September - to the **wrong year, namely to 1848.** He then compounded the error by calculating the remainder of Mr. Evans's life from the date of the codicil; the time between **5th January and the 31st May** is indeed about five months. This is an untypical mistake for Haight to have made but even more surprising is that no-one seems to have picked it up until now.

Interestingly Prof Haight's false dating of the bequest is also the source of the much repeated anecdote that his will contained an act of spite directed against the daughter who had cared for him for years. He writes:

"Fanny (received) that set of Sir Walter Scott novels which Mary Ann had spent so many long hours reading aloud to him. Was this an intentional snub of his youngest child." (Ibid p. 66)

Most people acquainted with George Eliot’s biography would answer Yes! To Haight’s question. Prof Kathryn Hughes goes even further and she writes in her biography of George Eliot:

“The novels of Sir Walter Scott, from which Mary Ann had read so tirelessly during the last few years of his life, were given to Fanny who, as far as we know, had no particular attachment to them. It was a small, cutting gesture, the only way Robert Evans knew to show Mary Ann that he had still not forgiven her for the holy war.” (Kathryn Hughes *The Last Victorian* page 85)

Had the books been, as Prof Haight's account ambiguously leads us to believe, bequeathed to Fanny in either September 1848 or in January 1849, then there might be more credibility in the snub theory. But this bequest was actually made in the original will, in 1844, some time before the books had become such a powerful bond between the father and his daughter.

Furthermore, in a letter dated 7th May 1855, George Eliot, then still known as Marian Evans, asked her Coventry friend Charles Bray to lend her his two-volume edition of the Waverly Novels, as she was planning an article on Scott and needed the complete works. In her request, there is no mention whatsoever, not even a hint of any resentment or sense of being deprived of the books by her father’s bequest.

In 1860, after the success of Adam Bede, George Henry Lewes gave Marian a set of the Waverley Novels in 48 volumes as a New Year’s gift. In the inscription he refers to Scott as “her longest venerated and best-loved Romanticist” (Letters Vol 3 page 240) but nowhere is there any record of mention of the set of which her father’s will was supposed to have cheated her.

I suggest that these facts, based on the original transcriptions of the will of 1844 and the codicil of 1849 , both explain Haight's inconsistent dates as pointed out above, and are also relevant to a better understanding the relationship between Mary Ann and her father.

April 2013