CHAPTER 8

Conclusion
*1859 and 'the mother tongue of our imagination'**

How It Ends

The task of historicising 1859 began with newspapers' reflections on the year just gone. On 31 December, *The Times* looked back over the decade that was just ending, and noted with a nice balance of complacency and tetchiness: 'The year which ends this day fitly terminates a decade in which domestic prosperity and advancement have been only interrupted by a constant succession of external disturbances and surprises'.[1] It concludes:

> The shipping interest seems likely soon to recover from the exceptional depression which followed on the special demand for vessels during the Crimean campaign. Every other branch of industry is flourishing as abundantly as at any former period, and the England of 1860 is richer, stronger, and better contented than the wealthy and prosperous England which in 1850 commanded the respect and envy of the world.

The newspaper welcomes the Rifle Volunteers as critical in countering the 'external disturbances' represented by 'reiterated [French] menaces', European unrest, and the kind of 'American ingenuity' seen in the wilful incursions of the Pig War. So prominent were the Volunteers this year that *The Times* writes: 'rapid organisation of Rifle Volunteers, if it perpetuates itself in a national custom, will have been by far the most important movement of the year'.[2] Feeling the country safe within this wadding of questionable military force, *The Times* ingenuously anticipates that 'all future negotiations will be facilitated by the knowledge that, in the event of a rupture, no enemy can henceforth hope to inflict a deadly blow upon England' (p. 7) and that prosperity will continue unabated, underpinned as a matter of course by the threat of force.

The more liberal *The Daily News* also celebrates the Volunteers and 'the revival of the martial spirit which has rendered the year a remarkable one in

* George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 3 vols. (London: Blackwood, 1860), I, p. 70.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

our annals' and claims that Britain enjoys 'the honourable position of the freest nation in the world' because of that.[3] It makes no mention of the countries that might face that martial spirit in action and naively suggests that '1859 will always have the honour of having originated a national defence which will keep danger not only at arm's length, but below the horizon'. It also notes progress in calls for early closing and a half-day on Saturdays for workers, the abolition of '[t]hat terrible institution, the hulks', new waterworks in Glasgow and more water fountains throughout the country, a new system of hiring agricultural workers, and 'a further development of the National Lifeboat Association'. There are clear indications that these changes are believed to be part of an age of reforms that will bring greater prosperity at home and improvements in 'civilisation' and 'character' in other less-fortunate countries. On the other hand, there was significant loss of life through fires, building collapses, explosions, 'and other accidents, which may be considered preventible', which suggests that less care was expended on domestic problems than on international affairs. All this, however, was dwarfed by the impact of 'the violent caprices of the weather'. And there had been high-profile losses too, including Brunel, Stephenson, Macaulay, Alexander von Humboldt, and a string of British peers, soldiers, and churchmen.

In this balancing out, we can see the process of equipoise in action, a process that achieves equilibrium for existing structures and seats of power. Historiographically, the newspapers level out the contours of the year and the individual voices and events that they had previously reported on and that not only add texture and emotion but also challenge macro-narratives. One instance is the case of the seamstress Sarah Dyer, who was forced to steal from a haberdasher in order to continue her trade because her bills were not being paid by well-heeled women of fashion. The jury had a whip-round to pay off her immediate debt, and the judge suggested that he give 'to the world at large the names of the two benevolent ladies, one of whom lives in Highbury-terrace, Islington, and the other in Montague-place, Russell-square, and who drove SARAH DYER empty-handed from their door every time she called to claim what was her due'.[4] This is a case that complicates received notions of class and gender relations and that counters the papers' generally hostile reception of the year's strikes.

A book about one year can put some of those lost details and voices back into the narrative, not just as an important act of witness to lost voices and occluded events but as evidence of the specific acts of omission that go to make up our history and that can slow down change. There is little in these round-ups on voting reform; on the army atrocities at home and abroad; or

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

on the year's strikes as positive assertions of workers' views, voices, and their capacity for responsible and peaceful political protest, which is regrettable. There is scarcely any mention of the fortunes of Italy as it awaited the Paris Peace Congress in January, and there is also no Darwin, as yet. Thus, the articles lend some weight to Mill's fears about the torpid nature and dangers of customary thinking, which refuses to accommodate the new and allows prejudice to linger and even to flourish in the face of contradictory empirical evidence. Indeed, some of 1859's prejudices can still be seen shaping right-wing thinking in the UK today in a combination of hankering after past glories (which were not so glorious, as we have seen), ingrained Euro-scepticism (despite evidence of simultaneous cultural – and latterly, economic – enrichment), and a desire for and belief in exceptionalism.

George Eliot and 'Sister Maggie'

Eliot's work in 1859 offers a different, more generous, and forward-thinking take on the year. On 3 December, Eliot recorded in her Journal that she had finished the first three (of seven) books of what would become *The Mill on the Floss* (*Letters*, III, p. 228, n. 3). The new book had been the subject of a bidding war, with Dickens's *All the Year Round* and *Once a Week* both promising even more generous terms than Blackwood. Lewes was interested in these offers, but also in trying to publish 'Sister Maggie', in shilling numbers, which he believed might make between £5,000 and 10,000. He was concerned about money in a year when his own earnings were relatively modest: a notebook in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection shows that his earnings dropped from £433 and £462 in 1857 and 1858, respectively, to £353 in 1859.[5] But he was also considering how best to secure the popularity of Eliot's new work, a concern which was shared by her too. She told her old friend M. D'Albert-Durade about Lewes's *Physiology of Common Life* 'in which he has compressed in a popular form much hard study and independent research' (6 December; *Letters*, III, p. 231), and wrote to Barbara Bodichon about *On the Origin of Species* that its lack of 'illustrative facts' will 'prevent the work from becoming popular' (5 December; *Letters*, III, p. 227). Serialisation of her new novel might have led to greater sales, but it was not to Eliot's taste: as she wrote to John Blackwood on 20 December, 'I think we [i.e. Eliot and Lewes] have fairly dissipated the Nightmare of the Serial by dint of much talking' (III, p. 236); she had talked him round.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

At lunch on 7 December, she gave her manuscript to John Blackwood, and a few days later, John wrote to his brother from the Isle of Wight that the new novel:

> is wonderfully clever and shows an almost incredible wealth of fun and illustrations and power of painting character. It is impossible to read it quickly. This arises doubtless from the number of good things in every other page and partly also I fear from the want of the hurrying on interest of a taking narrative. This want is the defect of the book as far as I have gone; when at the middle of second volume the hero and heroine are not above 16.
>
> Still the genius of the writer is so manifest throughout that I think almost no one could fail to feel it and go on and there are symptoms of interest piling up. The mother and three aunts of the hero and heroine are beyond price. The heroine a child as yet is very good and quaint and the hero is a wonderful picture of a boy and lifelike contrast to the sort of Tom Brown ideals of what boys are. (12 December; III, p. 234)

On his return to London, Blackwood writes to Eliot, and we can see how carefully he modulates his comments for her eyes:

> I got back from the Isle of Wight last night. While there I was chiefly and most pleasurably occupied in reading the M.S. you gave me of Sister Maggie. It is a most wonderful portrait gallery and the humour and exquisite touches of nature make one pause upon every page.
>
> At first I was rather afraid that you hung too long over the childhood of your hero and heroine and that there was a want of narrative interest, but the striking merits overpower any feeling of this kind. (14 December; III, p. 234)

As Blackwood notes, the opening books of the novel deal primarily with the childhood of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, their upbringing in their family's mill, Tom's education – and Maggie's lack of it – and their father's downfall at the hands of Lawyer Wakem, with whose son Tom is being tutored by the Reverend Walter Stelling, whose financial needs far outstrip his educational insights. Stelling's approach to teaching is that there is 'one regimen for all minds' (I, p. 260), and he, like Latimer's tutors, believes that a natural indisposition for a particular topic must be corrected.

Whilst at school, Tom takes drill lessons from Mr Pulter, the village schoolmaster and a veteran of the Peninsular wars, who allows Tom to borrow his old sword for a week. Tom intends both to amaze and terrify his sister, who is visiting him, but when she laughs at his attempt to look like a stage brigand, he changes tack:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

> 'I'm the Duke of Wellington! March!' stamping forward with the right leg a little bent, and the sword still pointing toward Maggie, who, trembling, and with tear-filled eyes, got upon the bed, as the only means of widening the space between them.
>
> Tom, happy in this spectator of his military performances, even though the spectator was only Maggie, proceeded, with the utmost exertion of his force, to such an exhibition of the cut and thrust as would necessarily be expected of the Duke of Wellington. (I, p. 338)

Playing at soldiers is not exclusive to boys of any period, but Tom's amateur exercises, and his performance as Duke of Wellington, probably owe something to the prevalence of amateur Rifle Corps in 1859. Eliot might protest that she and Lewes live 'out of the political world', but even in their seclusion, 'the threatenings of war' still reached them (to Barbara Bodichon, 5 December; *Letters*, III, p. 227). And this sardonic comment firmly establishes the volunteer corps and the general population within a mutually constitutive theatre of war: 'It is doubtful whether our soldiers would be maintained if there were not pacific people at home who like to fancy themselves soldiers. War, like other dramatic spectacles, might possibly cease for want of a "public"' (I, p. 330).

Maggie is excluded from Tom's experience of education by Stelling's judgement on girls' minds as 'quick and shallow' (I, p. 281), and the first part of the novel engages deeply with the dilemma of the girl whose particular intelligence sets her apart, even from those other women whose energies and minds are barely contained by the rituals of domestic life that are their lot. The broader question of how intelligent women were to occupy their time is one of the novel's concerns: the Dodson sisters are consumed by their homes, by putting out their money to achieve a good rate of interest, safeguarding their status, and by parochial interests which stultify the novel's younger characters. Sister Maggie's analysis of lives and intelligence wasted for want of opportunity to use them productively is echoed in ongoing debates over women's employment.[6]

The Dodson sisters might have seemed 'priceless' to John Blackwood, but they have much in common with the women who were caught up in the domestic minutiae set out by Mrs Beeton. The sisters live in a matrix of rules and customs inherited through the generations, which set them apart from other families who, whatever their social standing, are necessarily their inferiors:

> Mrs. Glegg had doubtless the glossiest and crispest brown curls in her drawers, as well as curls in various degrees of fuzzy laxness; but to look out on the week-day world from under a crisp and glossy front would be to

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

> introduce a most dreamlike and unpleasant confusion between the sacred and the secular. Occasionally, indeed, Mrs. Glegg wore one of her third-best fronts on a week-day visit, but not at a sister's house; especially not at Mrs. Tulliver's, who, since her marriage, had hurt her sister's feelings greatly by wearing her own hair, though, as Mrs. Glegg observed to Mrs. Deane, a mother of a family, like Bessy, with a husband always going to law, might have been expected to know better. But Bessy was always weak!
>
> So if Mrs. Glegg's front to-day was more fuzzy and lax than usual, she had a design under it: she intended the most pointed and cutting allusion to Mrs. Tulliver's bunches of blond curls, separated from each other by a due wave of smoothness on each side of the parting. Mrs. Tulliver had shed tears several times at sister Glegg's unkindness on the subject of these unmatronly curls, but the consciousness of looking the handsomer for them naturally administered support. Mrs. Glegg chose to wear her bonnet in the house to-day, – untied and tilted slightly, of course – a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit, and happened to be in a severe humor: she didn't know what draughts there might be in strange houses. (I, pp. 93–94)

Satirical though this is, such expressive rigours of dress closely echo Mrs Beeton's first chapter of instructions to 'The Mistress', and suggest that, far from being an eccentricity on the part of the Dodsons, such nice discriminations were part of women's everyday lot. Mrs Beeton decoded their implications whilst Eliot showed up their restrictions.[7] This helps to create the sense of 'oppressive narrowness' that Eliot poignantly suggests 'may have weighed on [the reader] in watching this old-fashioned family life on the banks of the Floss, which even sorrow hardly suffices to lift above the level of the tragi-comic' (II, p. 149). This narrowness is not unique to St Ogg's, or to its moment, but has 'acted on young natures in many generations' (II, p. 150) who have nonetheless been 'tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts' (II, p. 151) to the generations before them.

It is this inheritance of 'oppressive narrowness', of custom, and younger generations' effort to 'rise above the mental level of the generation before them', that links the 'hundreds of obscure hearths' that are in 'every town' (II, 151). '[N]atural science' links together 'a large vision of relations [... in] which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions', 'a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest' (II, p. 151). This is the underlying assumption of Darwin's work, and Eliot extends it to the human and to the realm of the novelist: 'It is surely the same with the observation of human life' (II, p. 151). Eliot takes Darwin's interest in vertical/historical unity and supplements it with her own horizontal/synchronous description of the communities represented by 'obscure hearths'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

in order to describe the workings of custom as historically derived and both socially confirmed and contested. In this synchronous space, custom is what binds the mysteries of human lives together.[8] In this respect, Eliot's invocation of hundreds of hearths sets her definitively apart from Dickens' night-time vision of 'darkly clustered houses' and 'the hundreds of thousands of breasts' within them that each harbours its own secrets.

This is the principal agony of Maggie and *The Mill on the Floss*, and a central dilemma of living with custom. More than pure 'archaic provincialism' (Hensley, p. 55), custom is an inevitable inheritance with which each new generation has to deal, revolting against its oppressions perhaps, but nonetheless unavoidably having to face its emotional demands. It is in that confrontation that custom might shift and transform. Maggie faces the ineluctable difficulty of negotiating present relations and desires through the responsibilities of recognising the past, and however inhospitable and even 'sordid' that past might be, it constitutes a duty that is integrally linked to custom. In his brilliant reading of *The Mill on the Floss*, Nathan K. Hensley argues that the novel participates in a shift to modernity, 'by which the dreamlike era of custom is awakened into the rule of . . . law, and into the privatisation and capitalist exchange with which it is held to be coextensive' (pp. 61–62), but in that shift there is possibly less of an absolute dividing line between custom and law, or Mill's liberty, than Hensley suggests. As this book has shown, custom evolves and shifts, and its inheritance is not an easy one to escape and leave behind.

The final paragraph of *On the Origin of Species* echoes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,[9] and begins:

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. (p. 459)

It ends: 'There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved' (pp. 459–60). 'Wonderful' here carries the promise of both captivated joy and prolonged intellectual grappling, which operate synergistically in the present moment of observation.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot responds to the lure of the exotic that Darwin had described in his work, and his 'contemplation' of the entangled bank, by writing of a wood from her childhood, replacing his contemplation with her own active engagement in the familiar scene in language which, in its rhythms, rhymes, cadences, and echoes, is less purely descriptive than sensuously and emotionally immersive:

> The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet – what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows, – such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle, inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years which still live in us, and transform our perception into love. (I, pp. 69–70)

Eliot's invitation to immerse ourselves unlocks a way back to childhood and invokes memories in a way which is key to her moral aesthetic.[10] Her assertion that 'the mother tongue of our imagination' is to be found in the familiarity of nature is fundamental to how we understand the presence of the past in 1859. Eliot writes of the countryside here as an inheritance, a gift from nature to the human that asserts nature's emotional power and the importance of maintaining memories of it in a period of sharply increasing urbanisation, when the actual inheritance of land or of a life lived on the land was becoming less common.

Nature's inheritance is one that confers emotional and imaginative resonance, and it acts here as a synecdoche for custom. Custom too is a form of collective inheritance that may represent an active manifestation of something otherwise at risk of being lost, hence the period's investment in it: it is an emotional and imaginative necessity and not simply the clog on people's thinking feared by Mill. It may tie communities to their past, but without that embeddedness, Eliot argues, people are rendered too vulnerable to the scrutiny and deductions of the microscope, the calculations of political parties, and to fraud. Custom is a form of emotional, multi-dimensional network that extends through space as well as time in ways

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009

that Mill refused to accommodate and that Darwin took no account of, but which would for Eliot become the foundation of her fiction and the moral epicentre of her creativity. In extending custom's remit to her readers, Eliot performs a democratising act that is a measure both of the modernity of 1859 and a reason why 1859 should have become so significant a site of Victorian creativity.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 19:02:21, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.009