

Elizabeth Eastlake, *The Letters of Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake*, ed. Julie Sheldon, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2009, 662 pp., £70.00, ISBN: 9781846311949. Susanna Avery-Quash and Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World*, London, The National Gallery, 2011, 288 pp., £30.00, 31 colour and 12 black-and-white illustrations, ISBN: 9781857095074.

Coming to prominence in the Victorian art world from a precariously circumstanced family, Elizabeth Rigby (1809–93) might be said to have emerged from a “margin” as defined by historian Natalie Zemon Davis, “a borderland between cultural deposits that allowed new growths and surprising hybrids.”<sup>1</sup> The question of just how such a woman could come to be seen, in Francis Haskell’s words, as “one of the most articulate, representative, and influential figures of Victorian England”<sup>2</sup> has until recently attracted little searching attention. She has been casually identified as an aristocrat on the strength of a title acquired through the knighthood of Charles Lock Eastlake (1793–1865), whom she married in April 1849. Eastlake was knighted following his election as president of the Royal Academy in 1850, recipient of an honour customarily awarded the academician holding this office, and one unrelated to any genealogical claim. Elizabeth Rigby’s anonymous review of *Jane Eyre*, published in the *Quarterly Review* in 1848, has attracted the ire of feminist scholars of Charlotte Brontë, as it did that of Brontë’s biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, in the period. Yet the trenchant analysis of John Ruskin as art critic that Elizabeth Eastlake wrote for the *Quarterly* in 1856 seems to have gone unremarked by feminist art historians incensed by Ruskin’s hectoring paternalism and, in some instances, destructive judgments in his relations with women artists. As pointed out by Julie Sheldon, reader in art history at Liverpool John Moores University, Rigby/Eastlake’s reputation has also suffered from her categorization in Valerie Sanders’s *Eve’s Renegades* (1996) as a “phallic speaker.”<sup>3</sup> I would suggest that, so applied, this Lacanian formula attributes to women a version of the Marxist concept of false consciousness, i.e., misrecognition of one’s material situation in society. If received views of Rigby/Eastlake are now being overhauled, as the titles under review would argue, this revisiting may be favoured by a more prevalent understanding that women’s history must be more curious, and more critical, than the celebration of heroines. In this sense Sheldon’s edition of *The Letters of Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake* and her introduction to an imposing corpus offer a many-sided perspective on the vagaries besetting her subject’s reputation while greatly expanding the documentary basis for such a reassessment.

Julie Sheldon’s account of Elizabeth Rigby’s early life and previously unpublished letters relating her efforts to publish her translation of J.D. Passavant’s *Tour of a German Artist in Eng-*

*land* (1836) should dispel any impression that she was born to a life of privilege. Her father Edward Rigby (1747–1821) was a gentleman farmer and obstetrician in Norwich who published on his medical specialty and on agricultural topics. On his death in 1821 Dr. Rigby left a widow, Anne Palgrave (1777–1872), two sons whose careers had yet to be established, and six daughters at home, including Elizabeth who was then eleven. With means much reduced after his decease, family provision for the girls’ education, which was assumed to take place at home, does not seem to have gone beyond a French governess. However, the “cultural deposits” on which Elizabeth was able to draw certainly encompassed a value placed on intellectual discipline in both the Rigby and Palgrave families. She became proficient in French and taught herself German to a level enabling her to translate works important for art history in Britain by F.T. Kugler and G.F. Waagen, in addition to that of Passavant. Later she considered that her developing grasp of Italian and Charles Eastlake’s fluency in that tongue offered them a critical advantage in negotiating for pictures over most (English) collectors, whom she called in 1854 “too ignorant, and also can’t speak the language.”<sup>4</sup> As a girl and young woman, Elizabeth Rigby worked strenuously at self-cultivation to compensate for the inadequacy she felt in her education. She initially envisaged a vocation for herself, in some sense, as an artist, supported by instruction in drawing with John Sell Cotman and in etching with E.T. Daniell. As she looked also to possibilities of publication, the translator Sarah Austin and the antiquarian Dawson Turner numbered among relatives whose examples and advice were valuable for her at the outset of a career—though she would disavow the professional claim—that may be seen as a surprising hybrid.

It is in relation to the decades of Rigby’s emergence as a writer that Julie Sheldon’s edition of her *Letters*, opening with correspondence from 1830, most substantially alters what is known of her beginnings. By contrast, *The Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake*, brought out by her nephew Charles Eastlake Smith in 1895, sheds scant light on her young adulthood. A journal that Elizabeth Rigby kept sporadically from the early 1840s is Smith’s source for passages that resemble sententious entries in a commonplace book. Though often quite colourful, the letters he selects omit mention of personal or family crises besetting the Rigbys, as Julie Sheldon notes. Travel passages in *Journals and Correspondence* tend to evoke the leisured ambience of eighteenth-century tours and to associate with her an aura of mandarinism. Elizabeth Rigby’s first success as a published author, apart from translation, was indeed as travel writer with *A Residence on the Shores of the Baltic* (1841), the outcome of her visits to sisters who had married German superintendents of the Estonian peasantry under Russian rule. From Sheldon’s *Letters*, however, we glimpse the distress of the Rigby family,

Elizabeth especially, with these unhappy marriages. *A Residence* was important in initiating her long ties with the publishing house of John Murray and subsequent engagement, exceptional for a woman, with Murray's influential journal, the *Quarterly Review*. Elizabeth Rigby was initially assigned what were considered women's topics, but she gained leverage in proposing her subjects and wrote substantially on art and art history, as well as literature and foreign affairs. Her long relation with the *Quarterly* ended only with her death in 1893 when she was succeeded as its writer on art by Julia Cartwright. It had however seen extended interruption in the 1870s when, as the widowed Lady Eastlake, she challenged the judgment of John Murray III. Sheldon's edition of the *Letters* illuminates Eastlake's claim to be credited with editorship of the fourth edition of Kugler's *Handbook of Painting: The Italian Schools* (1874) in which, drawing on "the latest researches," she struggled to reconcile "the tangled fullness of [G.B.] Cavalcaselle" with the popular form of Kugler for its intended general readership.<sup>5</sup> Murray thought of naming on the title page only the work's former editor, Charles Eastlake, even though he had last worked on its notes in 1851. That she was "the right one" to be named as editor, as she urged Murray in 1874, seemed to Elizabeth Eastlake a question of justice and of her grounds of authority.<sup>6</sup> Both the world and her place in it had changed in the forty or so years since her publications, if not anonymous, were credited to "a Lady."

The Eastlakes as a couple, as well as their separate trajectories, are evoked in *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World*, which appeared in 2011. On this occasion Julie Sheldon collaborated with Susanna Avery-Quash, who is research curator in the history of collecting at the National Gallery, London. The latter's publication in the same year through the auspices of the Walpole Society of *The Travel Notebooks of Sir Charles Eastlake* has made accessible a major resource for the study of Eastlake's thinking and practices as artist and collector during his Continental tours.<sup>7</sup> A further convergence calling attention to the Eastlakes came in 2011 with a National Gallery exhibition, *Art for the Nation*, conceived as a tribute to its first director.

*Art for the Nation*, the book, is centred on the period from the Eastlakes' marriage in 1849 through his directorship, which ended with his death in Pisa in 1865. Those sixteen years are framed on one side by accounts of Charles Eastlake's early career and that of Elizabeth Rigby; on the other by treatment of the Eastlake legacy in a final chapter, "Keepers of the Flame," i.e., Lady Eastlake in the first instance, William Boxall as succeeding director of the National Gallery, and nephew Charles Locke Eastlake who became the gallery's keeper in 1878. The aim of Susanna Avery-Quash and Julie Sheldon in presenting biographies that "shed light on a wider culture"<sup>8</sup> is well-served by the book's organization. As would any such study, the au-

thors draw upon the work by a scholar of English literature, David Robertson, whose *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World* (1978) is impressive in the documentation of its subject. Nicholas Penny, the National Gallery's current director, states in a foreword to *Art for the Nation* that in many consultations he has never detected a factual error in Robertson's book (I managed to find *one*: omission in his list of Elizabeth Eastlake's publications of her translation of Kugler's *German, Flemish, and Dutch Schools*, 2nd ed., 1860, but such an exception speaks for itself). Penny suggests, however, that the very breadth of Robertson's purview might explain "a failure to penetrate to any depth the nature of its chief subject." One may suppose it would take an art historian to recognize what Penny calls Eastlake's "awe-inspiring knowledge, powers of perception and intellectual courage."<sup>9</sup> While expressing appreciation of Robertson's contribution, Sheldon and Avery-Quash explore questions this earlier scholarship did not raise.

One of these relates to Eastlake's personality and affections, prominently the relationship with his mother, "one of the closest of his life."<sup>10</sup> In his early desire to become a painter, he had the unusual good fortune to be encouraged by his father, George Eastlake. Along with family loyalties, including affection for the nephew who, after his death, entered the gallery as keeper, Eastlake established friendships that were personal as well as professional. G.F. Waagen, the German art historian, was from 1828 a lifelong friend, while J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Lawrence, and John Gibson numbered among Eastlake's circle in the artists' community. He also formed ties of friendship with cultivated women and not necessarily for reasons of patronage: in Rome with Elisabeth Hervey, Duchess of Devonshire, and with Maria Graham, whose *Memoirs of the Life of Nicolas Poussin* (1820) seems to the authors of *Art for the Nation* to read "like a record of Eastlake's life to date."<sup>11</sup> Avery-Quash and Sheldon see his marriage as characterized by deep affection as well as common purpose. In addressing this side of Eastlake's temperament, the authors valuably offset a more usual emphasis on his caution and his courtier-like qualities.

Eastlake had announced his aims as a history painter with the exhibition at the British Institution in 1815 of *Brutus Exhorting the Romans to Revenge the Death of Lucretia*. He also became known for scenes of Rome in the classical landscape tradition and for genre pictures of Italian peasant women (*contadine*) and brigands. His activity as a painter ended, however, in the mid-1850s. Why, the authors ask, did he conclude his painting life with idealized female portraits and religious pictures of divine compassion? Without resolving the issue, they note that one of his last pictures, *Ippolita Torelli* (R.A., 1851), represents the wife of Baldassare Castiglione and ingeniously propose a parallel between the subject, "a handsome and clever woman who enjoyed an intellectual affinity with her husband,"<sup>12</sup> and

Elizabeth Rigby, who had married Eastlake not long before. As to why from 1855 he ceased exhibiting altogether, their questioning unsettles a usual premise that the cessation was dictated by Eastlake's duties in the early 1850s when he was president of the Royal Academy, trustee of the National Gallery, and, from 1855, the gallery's director. They suggest that Eastlake may have felt his work as an artist fell short of the ideal of greatness that was his standard and that he may also have thought he could serve art better through his scholarly writings and the administration of public art institutions. However motivated, the fact that Eastlake made this move while holding a position conceived as necessarily held by a practitioner of art, marked a significant precedent for art history in the British context.

In treating the Eastlakes' relationship and all that has been written about it, Sheldon and Avery-Quash consider what primary evidence may exist for Elizabeth Eastlake's possible influence on decisions about pictures to be acquired for the National Gallery. They are circumspect on this question, but refer to some indications that Charles Eastlake might have depended on her reports, or drawings, of works which he was unable to see himself. The authors observe that he makes no mention of her participation in decisions, but in the strict economy with which he managed his time and energy, is it likely to think he would have done so? The whole question of *influence* is shadowed by a traditional anxiety around the possibly sinister effect of machinations by women close to men in positions of political power, though neither what would normally count as decisions of state nor sinister effects were in contention here. It seems to me fair to refer to a professional and personal solidarity between the Eastlakes based on all that is known about the collaborative character of their marriage. As they were together on all his collecting tours between 1852 and 1865, save those of 1853 and 1856, it seems plausible to suppose that they discussed decisions without any concern to record what was said. Of course, it is clear that the responsibility for decisions lay with Charles Eastlake, by whatever solitary or collaborative process they may have been reached.

An instance in which I would disagree with Avery-Quash and Sheldon concerns their interpretation of the Latin citation accompanying Oxford University's award of a D.C.L. to Charles Eastlake in 1853. They refer to a translation published in 1992 in which the honorand is held to be "fortunate in his friends but most fortunate in this, that he has a most distinguished wife as the partner in his fame and his work who is herself as distinguished in letters as he is in art."<sup>13</sup> "Distinguished in letters' Elizabeth may have been," we read in *Art for the Nation*, "but she was not distinguished, at least not in 1853, by anything that might be called art historical."<sup>14</sup> Here the basis for comparison seems to be misread. While her accomplishments are held to be literary, art history scarcely existed as a recognized realm of dis-

tinction in Britain at the time; neither partner is acknowledged for art historical achievement. Eastlake's distinction in art was understood as grounded in his status as a practitioner, his other services to art ranking as outgrowths of his primary claim. To see the citation as an undue inflation of Elizabeth Eastlake's gifts seems to me to mistake its sense and its evidence of a rare egalitarian marriage, evidence in which Charles Eastlake surely had a hand.

A further problem I would raise concerns the authors' interpretation of Elizabeth Eastlake's chronological organization of *The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art* (1864). In this work she completed what was conceived as the capstone of the "series" on sacred art by Anna Jameson, who died in 1860. The inference that Elizabeth Eastlake's historical ordering of the book reflected the imperatives of nineteenth-century empiricism overlooks her understanding of doctrinal premises in making scriptural subjects primary; stringently insisted upon, her method was informed by Trinitarian theology according to which history began with Christ's agency in the creation of the world. While she was hardly oblivious of Charles Eastlake's aim of a "sequential arrangement" of art in the National Gallery, this did not necessarily align with the basis for her chronology in the *subjects* of Christian art.<sup>15</sup>

Yet such objections risk sounding ungrateful relative to what has been accomplished here. Unaccountably neglected in Victorian studies, the Eastlakes are placed in *Art for the Nation* at the centre of a development critical for the institutionalization of art in Britain and for the formation of one of the world's most distinguished collections. Avery-Quash and Sheldon redress Charles Eastlake's image, from staid fixture of the Victorian art scene to connoisseur of extraordinary knowledge and acuity, and one who, as the gallery's first director, steered its difficult establishment through parliamentary toils and public attacks. His example as an art historian is shown to have left an inestimable template. Sheldon's edition of the *Letters* works to refashion the mainly capricious attention accorded Elizabeth Rigby/Eastlake and to create an understanding of her uncertain beginnings in the literary marketplace. In tracing her remarkable course for nearly six decades as essayist, editor, and translator; the collaborative nature of her marriage; and her role in promoting Charles Eastlake's legacy after his death, both publications augment significantly what is known about her presence in Victorian art and letters. They should direct scholars' attention towards her published corpus, which has remained largely unstudied. In its final section, *Art for the Nation* valuably fleshes out the gallery's fortunes up to the end of the nineteenth century, tracing a thread through Elizabeth Eastlake's later relation with the gallery, the directorship of William Boxall (1866–74) and Charles Locke Eastlake's role as keeper (1878–98), in which he managed a consistently chronological rehang of the

collection. The Rigby/Eastlake *Letters* and *Art for the Nation* represent a quantum advance in translating the Eastlakes from the margins of current consciousness in which they are currently held. These studies place them at a crucial convergence in the history of collecting and in the centre of mid-nineteenth century history of art and periodical criticism of art, while offering the example of an extraordinary marital partnership.

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## Notes

- 1 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA, & London, 1995), 210.
- 2 Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France* (London, 1976), 14.
- 3 Julie Sheldon, introduction to Elizabeth Eastlake, *The Letters of Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake*, ed. Sheldon (Liverpool, 2009), 2.
- 4 Elizabeth Eastlake, *Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake*, ed. Charles Eastlake Smith, 2 vols. (London, 1895), II, 20.
- 5 Eastlake, *Letters*, 331.
- 6 Eastlake, *Letters*, 396. The emphasis is in Eastlake's original letter.
- 7 Susanna Avery-Quash, *The Travel Notebooks of Sir Charles Eastlake*, 2 vols. (Huddersfield, 2011), comprising vol. 73 of the Walpole Society's annual publication of materials for the study of British art.
- 8 Susanna Avery-Quash, introduction to Avery-Quash and Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World* (London, 2011), xvi.
- 9 Nicholas Penny, foreword to Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, viii.
- 10 Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 1.
- 11 Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 26.
- 12 Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 97.
- 13 Quoted in Adele M. Ernststrom, "Equally Lenders and Borrowers in Turn': The Working and Married Lives of the Eastlakes," *Art History* 15, 4 (December 1992), 479.
- 14 Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 128.
- 15 Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 132. The doctrinal basis of Elizabeth Eastlake's work on this text is explored in Ernststrom, "Elizabeth Eastlake's *The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art*: Theology, Art and Aesthetic Reaction," *Art History* 35, 3 (September 2012), 750–77.