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6-29-1985

## Address by Margaret Wolfit

Margaret Wolfit

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Wolfit, Margaret, "Address by Margaret Wolfit" (1985). *The George Eliot Review*. 38.  
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**MARGARET WOLFIT** was the Guest of Honour at the Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying on June 29th, 1985 where she gave the following Address:

'The Quiet Conquest' is the title of the Huguenot exhibition celebrating Huguenot Heritage Year - 300 years since the revoking of the Edict of Nantes - currently showing at the London Museum.

The origins and earliest application of the term Huguenot, we are told, have always been and remain somewhat obscure. The word may derive from 'Eidgenoss', meaning confederal, a word used in Geneva where John Calvin and many Huguenots settled. Other explanations for the word belong to the world of myths - a 16th century Catholic apologist, for example, apparently suggested that John Calvin nightly summoned a devil named Nox to his side, using the words 'Huc Nox' and that their son 'Hucnox' was the sire of the Huguenot.

In people's mind John Calvin became the leading figure of the Protestant world. His theology was distinguished by the doctrine of predestination which said that "God hath once for all determined both whom he would admit to salvation and whom he would condemn to destruction". It was a particularly gloomy form of Protestantism.

The Church in Geneva was governed by a consistory made up of six ministers and twelve laymen. Its business was to enforce a discipline of life so that God would be worshipped through the citizens' dress and social customs. The Geneva Church dictated the character of the Huguenots' congregations in France and later in those countries that welcomed them as refugees at the time of the persecution.

You may be wondering what all this has to do with George Eliot .....

Religion in Mary Ann Evans' family was of a fairly easy-going Church of England variety. During her time at Miss Wallington's school at Attleborough, Nuneaton, she came under the influence of Maria Lewis, an evangelical of great enthusiasm whose evangelism was of a loving, sentimental variety which rested on a thorough study of the scriptures, and Mary Ann read the Bible every day, acquiring a great knowledge of the King James version.

It was not until she went to the Misses Franklin's school in Coventry that she came under the sombre influence of the Calvinist – this coincided with her adolescence, and we know that when Mary Ann did something she did it thoroughly. To the Calvinists "the pursuit of pleasure was a snare, and dress vanity". Mary Ann says "In the holidays I used to go about like an owl to the great disgust of my brother, and I would have denied him what I now see to have been quite lawful amusements". Her religious zeal at this time knew no bounds.

To Maria Lewis, in August 1838, she wrote, "I find, as Doctor Johnson said – respecting his wine – total abstinence much easier than moderation".

After her mother's death came the move to Coventry and her friendship with the free-thinking Brays, 'The Holy War' with her father when she threw off the shackles of her repressive views, in what appeared to be a sudden change of heart.

When Mrs. Congreve asked her to what influence she attributed the first unsettlement of her orthodox views, she answered quickly, "Oh, Walter Scott. He was healthy and historical" – it would not fit into her creed. These were the novels she read at this time to her father in the evenings. (During her calls on the miners near Foleshill, who were mostly Methodist, she had been shocked at the apparent union of religious feeling with a low sense of morality.)

In 1848 she met Emerson and he asked her what book first awakened her deep reflection, to which she

replied, "Rousseau's Confessions".

After her father's death, Mary Ann visited the Continent and ended up for eight months in Geneva - as she said 'The Romantic town of her dreams'. This was the birthplace of Rousseau and the home of Calvin. She began to keep a journal, but, sadly, only a few letters remain as a record of her eight months there.

After staying at Plongeon she made enquiries and found comfortable lodgings in the apartment of the artist, Francois D'Albert Durade and his family at the foot of Rue Jean Calvin. It is very interesting that she should have chosen to stay here where, from her room, she looked out into the street and watched the Sisters of Charity coming out of the convent on the very site of the house where Calvin died.

"When I was in Geneva", she wrote, "I had not yet lost the attitudes of antagonism which belong to the renunciation of any belief - also I was very unhappy and in a state of discord and rebellion towards my own lot."

The past, the present and the future: Geneva, the House of Calvin, are associated with her repressive religious views on the one hand. The Birthplace of Rousseau and his very different philosophy on the other. Geneva was a watershed for Mary Ann Evans. The months there gave her time to reflect on the past and plan for the future.

Throughout her writing, I would like to suggest that, in some way, these two influences went hand in hand - but she never left theology far behind, and, in her last novel, Daniel Deronda she was still exploring.

In 1875, five years before her death, she wrote to a friend "I was brought up in the Church of England and have never joined any other religious society, but I have had close acquaintance with many Dissenters of various sects, from Calvinism and Baptists to Unitarians."

Throughout her life, George Eliot always had a profound concern with religion.