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**WREATH-LAYING IN
THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDENS, NUNEATON
JUNE 28th 1992**

THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS CANON MICHAEL SADGROVE, WHO LAID THE FELLOWSHIP'S WREATH AND GAVE THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS:

I am honoured to have been asked to lay a wreath in memory of George Eliot this afternoon. And, I can truly say, I do it in *grateful* memory. Not many years ago I would have to have confessed that I had not yet read any of her novels. On coming to Coventry, I decided to remedy this situation. For me, whatever town or city I have lived in, its sense of place has been defined very much by its literary associations, the part it has played in the imaginations of its writers and poets. As far as Coventry is concerned, there is only one novelist. Her novels, I am sure you will agree, are among the greatest of their century, indeed, among the greatest in the language. To discover the power of George Eliot's writing was, for me, an illumination. And as I stand here today, with those who share my admiration and love of an outstanding Midlands lady, I have to say that I envy anyone who comes to the pages of *Adam Bede* or *Middlemarch* for the first time. Life would be less rich, less colourful, without the woman we honour here in her home town.

Now, perhaps there is a certain appropriateness in a clergyman laying a wreath here, and giving this address. Clergy seemed to be amongst George Eliot's favourite characters. There is a marvellous procession of clergy in her novels: Mr Casaubon, Mr Cadwallader, Mr Tyke, Amos Barton, Mr Gilfil, Mr Stelling, Mr Irwine, to name but a few — what a fascinating glimpse they give of nineteenth-century religious life, in all its strengths and weaknesses.

But there is also a pleasing irony in a clergyman taking part in this ceremony in this particular year. For 1992 marks a significant anniversary in the career of our authoress. One hundred and fifty years ago, in 1842, Marian Evans committed the famous act that was, in its day, both outrageous and courageous. She refused to attend church with her father. Robert Evans, the fine-looking man whose portrait hangs here in Nuneaton, was perhaps less interested in Marian's inner religious struggles than in making sure that his daughter behaved as was proper for a middle-class young woman with eligible prospects. As so often, religion was not so much a matter of conviction or truth, rather a convenient social tool.

This is what Marian's protest was about. As we all know, she herself had enjoyed, only a few years before, a fervently evangelical period of religious belief. I do not say she was fanatical, but her beliefs for that short period of her life were certainly not

lacking in conviction — so much so that one begins to wonder, reading her letters, what it was she was repressing, where was the struggle, the doubt, the searching in her Christianity. She turned out to be far too honest simply to accept the evangelical creed on someone else's say so. Her conscience demanded that she be truthful with herself in this matter of religion. Her reaction against it all was as fervent as her commitment had been. 'I could not without vile hypocrisy and a miserable truckling to the world for the sake of my supposed interests, profess to join in worship with which I wholly disapprove' she wrote.

Yet I want to say that in a very important way, her loss of faith was not really a loss of faith at all, rather a *recovery*, or perhaps a *discovery* of faith. I want to say that, because I believe, as a Christian, that throwing away the 'crutches of superstition', which is what they were for her, is always the prelude to a truer finding of oneself, to a greater openness to life as pure gift. In one of those letters of the time, she writes of 'the truth of feeling'. This, I think, gives a clue to her profoundly religious outlook on life. It may not have been orthodox Christianity. But it is the mark of a woman of a very sensitive spirit, a woman who, in a rare way, could see into the life of things.

Anyone who reads her novels will, I think, be struck by this sensitivity to what is spiritual, this openness to life. That is what makes her novels so *generous*, so illuminating. It matters less to me that George Eliot should have severed her links with organized religion than that she learned to read the map of the human heart with uncanny accuracy. Although we are in George Eliot country, and are proud of her Midlands origins, the true George Eliot country is as wide as humanity itself. It is the terrain of the human spirit she depicts so truthfully, in its nobility and in its tragedy, its agony and its ecstasy.

In that, the novelist makes common cause with the priest. The art of both is to invite men and women into an experience of life that is richer and deeper than perhaps they have yet glimpsed. Their common vocation is to explore meanings, make connections, point to the possibility that human life, in the midst of its brokenness and pain, can reach out towards wholeness. George Eliot was hesitant about giving this dimension the title 'God'. And I must not impugn her integrity by making her out to be a believer despite herself. Yet am I alone in sensing, in page after page of *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, a fellow traveller, someone for whom, in her unorthodox, highly individual way, the questions of religion were profoundly important? Those questions come down to three, simple words: light, life and love. I find George Eliot illuminates them all.

So I dare to hope that she would not be put out to know that a clergyman of the Established Church were paying tribute to her today. I like to think that she would be amused, in her generous, tolerant way. I am sure she would be surprised, but gratified,

that her works continue to offer such enjoyment and insight a century and more after her death that people come here to her monument to honour her.

And because I believe that all good things ultimately come from God, it is right that we thank God for her, and for the ways in which her works continue to enrich our own lives, our own pursuit of truth, in our own day.



The inscription on the Fellowship wreath:

A man can never do anything at variance with his own nature. He carries within him the germ of his most exceptional action; and if we wise people make eminent fools of ourselves on any particular occasion, we must endure the legitimate conclusion that we carry a few grains of folly to our ounce of wisdom.

Revd. Irwine, *Adam Bede*