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ADDRESS AT THE UNVEILING OF JOHN LETTS'S STATUE OF GEORGE ELIOT AT THE GEORGE ELIOT HOSPITAL, 29 AUGUST 1996

by Kathleen Adams

This is, of course, the second time many of us have attended the unveiling of a statue of George Eliot. The last time was in 1986 and John, I know, will remember what an exciting time that was. Even before the unveiling we had met in Newdegate Square to await her arrival from the foundry. She arrived on the back of a lorry, almost as though she had thumbed a lift up from High Wycombe. When she was unveiled by our President she shone like a new penny.

From that day on I have wished that the George Eliot Hospital should also have a statue of the lady. There is a beautiful bust in Cheverel Wing, unveiled earlier by Gabriel Woolf, but not everyone sees that. This one is going to be seen by all who visit the hospital and they will be even more aware of the lady whose name has been given to this splendid hospital.

We have had a very warm and close relationship with the hospital for more years than even I know, certainly much longer than my twenty-eight years of office as Fellowship Secretary. We have been asked to suggest names for the many wards and departments in the hospital and this, too, has made local people more aware of George Eliot and her works. We have the annual lecture in the George Eliot Centre, and this year's lecturer, Michael Harris, is with us today.

We feel we belong to the hospital and I know the hospital feels a part of us. What Marian Evans's feelings would be about the statues in her native Nuneaton are more difficult to assess. She was a shy and diffident person and might have been just a little embarrassed, but I am sure she would have also been very pleased and proud that the people of the county and the borough which she loved so much were paying this fine tribute to her, as a woman and as a great internationally known writer. She had mixed feelings about fame, as we are aware from her letters. To her publisher, John Blackwood, she wrote in 1874, six years before her death, 'Is it not odious that as soon as a man is dead his desk is raked and every insignificant memorandum which he never meant for the public is printed for the gossiping amusement of people too idle to re-read his books?' I hope we, as her admirers, have never done that; certainly we are not too idle to re-read her books, and the existence today of two statues in the place where her roots are must show our great pride in her here and our immense admiration for her genius. I feel an even greater pride in being asked to unveil the statue here today and I do so with enormous pleasure.