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## GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON

22 November 1998

### THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

by Tenniel Evans

great grandson of George Eliot's brother Isaac Evans

Sixty-two years ago, almost to the day — a freezing 25 November 1936 — I arrived at the London docks from Africa and came, without realizing it at the time, to live in the country of my background. I was to live with Alison and Rupert Winser and their family in the Rectory at Allesley, just outside Coventry, and it became my home for the next five years. By the end of that time, of course, the war had blown away the old life and it would never be the same again. So I was lucky that at least I had a taste of it, and met some of the old people.

Alison Winser, my father's first cousin, was the daughter of Canon Fred Evans, Rector of Bedworth for 50 years. Fred was my grandfather Walter's brother. And Fred and Walter were the sons of Isaac, brother of Mary Ann Evans and the model for Tom Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*. So that is where I fit in.

My Uncle Rupert Winser was a dear, gentle man and, like a lot of parsons before and since, fairly absent-minded. In a sermon once about the endless love of God he illustrated it with a description of Niagara. 'There I stood' he declaimed, 'trying to drink it all in'. I don't think he ever understood the titter that ran round the church. On another occasion he drove fifty miles from Peterborough to Daventry, and complained that the car was running very hot. Then he discovered that he had forgotten to change gear.

I have to admit that I hardly knew who George Eliot was when I came to England — my African family were not exactly literary-minded. But my aunt Alison gradually introduced me to the Warwickshire of my father's generation. I was shown Griff and Bedworth, Chilvers Coton, and the place where my grandparents' house, Caldwell Hall, stood before it was burnt down. My cousin Robert Winser took me with him when he went fishing for pike in the lake at Arbury, and I crunched along behind him when he tried to shoot snipe and knew, with Winnie the Pooh, how cold my toes, tiddley-pom, were growing. We went to the railway cutting at Ansley to see the silver train called 'The Silver Jubilee' thunder past.

And I was taken to the pantomime in Coventry by Old Aunt Nellie Rotherham, who sat like a chinese mandarin with pince-nez, fur hat and flowing moustache, passing a box of chocolates along a row of excited children.

And I was taken to tea with the Misses Robinson at Coton House. There were three of them — Kitty, the youngest and sharpest who I think had been a girl friend of my father's; Nellie, who was round and pink and fed me cake and asked every three minutes if I took sugar in my tea; and a third sister who I think was called Ethel or Nessie or some such Victorian name. She was quite silent all the time. After a great deal of excited planning she knitted me a pullover for Christmas and I bore the parcel home and put it under the tree. When I came to unwrap it

and tried to put it on, all I could get through the neck was a small tuft of hair. I became quite adept at inventing reasons for not wearing it when I visited. Every possible reason except that I couldn't get it over my head.

But Kitty remembered Great Grandfather Isaac (just. Not Mary Ann — she'd left years before). And Kitty remembered dancing the Lancers with my father at balls in the Drill Hall in Coventry.

So, gradually it dawned on me that I belonged to a proud heritage — provincial, *very* respectable, probably rather dull — but animated by the spirit of that lady whom none of my family knew much about, whose books few of us had read, but who we all knew was a remarkable and towering figure from the past. As a family we scarcely deserve her, but I am proud that I carry a vestige of her blood in my veins. And, whenever I come to Nuneaton or Coventry, Bedworth, Coton or wherever, I am always conscious that this is where I am from — it's a warming thought. It's George Eliot Country.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I would ask you to raise your glasses and drink a toast to the Immortal Memory of my very *great*, great, great Auntie Mary Ann Evans — George Eliot.

[Note: Tenniel Evans is an actor and clergyman. He has been a vice president of the Fellowship for very many years. He was president in the 1970s.]