2001

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Serena Evans

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NUNEATON, 9 JULY 2000

As one of two Millennium projects a garden was laid out around the George Eliot statue at the entrance to the Hospital. The garden was officially opened by Serena Evans, great-great-great-niece of George Eliot, who gave the following Address:

When I was asked to come here to open this lovely garden I wondered what on earth I could say about George Eliot that you hadn’t thought, read, written or said already – and then I decided that I should talk about the one thing that you don’t know about, and that is what has meant to be George Eliot’s great- great- great-niece.

It wasn’t a thing I questioned when I was little, it just was; at home the book shelves were full of leather bound volumes of her novels and the downstairs loo had pictures on the wall of her early homes. I would sometimes sit at my father’s desk, curled up in what I have only just discovered was Robert Evans’s chair.

I did know, from an early age, that I was supposed to be proud and I can remember going to school and telling all my friends that George Eliot was my great- great- great-aunt, even though, at six I had no idea why this was an impressive thing, and nor had they – but they were terribly impressed by the fact that I had an aunt who seemed to be a man.

Round about this time I got rather confused. I knew that my father, as a little boy, had come from Africa to live in England with an aunt (George Eliot, I presumed). I knew that he lived near Coventry during the war (and that was where she came from wasn’t it?). I was left with a vision of an aunt, who seemed to be a man, sitting with my father in an air raid shelter, both of them in their pyjamas.

A bit later on being George Eliot’s niece meant going to Westminster Abbey to see the dedication of the plaque in Poets’ Comer. I remember the slippery wood of the pew and the roof of the Abbey and not being able to see anything else because of the sea of ladies in huge hats sitting in front of me.

When I grew up and became an actor like my father, being related to George Eliot seemed to mean that my father and I were the only members of Equity never to have appeared in a television adaptation of her novels, but we’ve consoled ourselves with the thought that those poke bonnets wouldn’t have done anything for either of us.

Being George Eliot’s great- great- great-niece has its marvellous moments. It’s no longer a thing that I show off about but a golden nugget of information that I save to tell people that I know would really appreciate it.

I am currently rehearsing a play for the Chichester Festival Theatre and working with a female director which is rather unusual in an extremely male dominated profession. She is a woman I greatly admire and am slightly in awe of. When I told her I was coming here today to do this
she fell at my feet and said ‘What’s it like to be the niece of such a marvellous woman?’

The pressures on women today are in many ways different than in George Eliot’s day, but in many ways the same, and it has been an inspiration to have a female ancestor who, through her strength of spirit and confidence in her own abilities, has encouraged me not to compromise in my own professional life. She has woven herself through my life for as long as I can remember and I still feel proud and greatly honoured to be asked by the Fellowship to be here and to be able to say thanks to my great- great- great-aunt that I can declare this garden open.

Serena Evans opening the George Eliot Hospital Garden.