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## Address at Wreath-Laying in the George Eliot Memorial Garden, Nuneaton 8 June 2003

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## WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN, NUNEATON 8 JUNE 2003

*The Guest of Honour was Catherine Nisbet, who gave the following Address:*

It is now I suppose more than six months since Kathleen asked me to deliver this address and whilst I have given the task much thought, it is only now, a few days before the event, that I am committing myself to paper. I followed my usual course when faced with any task at the museum. I've thought a great deal around the subject often in the middle of the night or on my commute to and from work. I have done my research, scanned books, looked at previous examples and most important of all talked to other people who were patient enough to listen. I also thought about those of her works which I had read at school, during my adult life, and since I took up my post here. I, like many of my predecessors charged with this task, have felt wholly inadequate to it.

My job as a social history curator means I need to find aspects of any given subject and make them relevant to the museum's audiences. A good starting point is generally to find some relevance to myself and work out from there. It is not quite two years since I took up the post of Senior Museum Officer and Nuneaton became my museum home. I inherited a collection of at least 9000 objects, a collection of great variety and scope, many items of which were the everyday items of Eliot's time. I am often asked why I became or continue to be a museum professional. It was as a volunteer more than ten years ago that I was set to work documenting ladies' combinations. I fell in love with the fact that I could handle such old things; I was intrigued at their survival and speculated as to their owners' lives. As time went on I was allowed to work on the trousseaus. I would never forget the fragrance when I lifted the lids from their boxes, so evocative of romance and optimism. Today I am still excited about objects and what they tell us about their makers, users, or owners.

Whilst engaged on some research for our local history gallery I read Asa Briggs's book *Victorian Things*. In a passage dealing with the rise in cheaply available goods, the result of mechanization, Briggs highlights the varying ways in which Victorian novelists use description of everyday items within their works, and points out George Eliot as the first writer to describe objects. This, as you can imagine, intrigued me and I went back to Eliot's works to consider them in a new light.

A closer examination of *The Mill on the Floss* demonstrated Eliot's use of objects to interpret people and their lives through their possessions. Mrs Tulliver finds the loss of her teapot, sugar tongs, and damasks a sore trial. We learn that her preoccupation with status symbols is much like ours in the twenty-first century.

'O dear, O dear,' said Mrs Tulliver, 'to think o' my chany being sold i' that way – and I bought it when I married just as you did yours, Jane and Sophy: and I know you didn't like mine, because o' the sprig, but I was fond of it, and there's never been a bit broke, for I've washed it myself – and there's the tulips on the cups, and the roses, as anybody might go and look at 'em for pleasure. You wouldn't like your chany to go for an old song and be broke to pieces, though yours has got no colour in it, Jane – it's all white and fluted, and didn't cost so much as mine.'

We also learn from such detailed scenes what a middle-class household both contained and prized. So I have found my connection with this lady whom we honour. For I care for items such as she describes and I attempt to bring them to people's notice and to demonstrate their messages and what they can tell us about the past.

Through Eliot I saw a way not only to understand the functions of everyday items but their symbolism and their perceived value within the society that created them. This has provided some new lines of thought to consider in my working life and in particular the ways that the George Eliot collection might be interpreted in the future. In my career I have also been lucky to have many people share their stories – happy, sad and sometimes tragic – with me as they donated or loaned their objects.

I found my other connection when I read 'Janet's Repentance'. As a social historian I seek to tell the truth about the past, including that which is painful. As part of my work I have taped many oral history interviews, some of which have been distressing. People have told of tragic death, illnesses, accidents, and family tragedies. I felt therefore that I had developed resilience to such stories of distress. But I was still stunned when I read 'Janet's Repentance', a tale of abuse and alcoholism made all the more poignant by its local connections. George Eliot revealed many truths about life in the early nineteenth century. She exposed society's ills, many of which are with us still today. She wanted her writing to be read but I also believe that she wished to open people's eyes to the world around them. I think she hoped that they would take notice and care in the way that she did.

These new connections have therefore led to new thinking. Not only might new interpretations of our George Eliot collections make those objects come alive, but the objects themselves coupled with George Eliot's writings could also illuminate and bring to life the world, which she knew in its gritty entirety. I hope that one day we will produce a gallery that is not just about her but also tells the world about the things she wanted people to notice. Should we achieve that I hope it will be as fitting a memorial to her life and work, as this ceremony is each year.

[The following quotation from *Daniel Deronda* appeared on the Fellowship wreath:

A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may set the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth .... a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection.]