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## GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON, 21 NOVEMBER 2004 THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

By Rosemary Ashton

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a special year because it is 150 years since George Eliot and G. H. Lewes began to live together openly. 22 November 1854 was her thirty-fifth birthday. Where were she and Lewes? What were they doing?

They were in Berlin, having moved on from Weimar on 3 November. They had left England on 19 July, the day Marian Evans sent her famous telegram to her Coventry friends Charles and Cara Bray and Sara Hennell:

Dear Friends – all three

I have only time to say good bye and God bless you. Poste Restante, Weimar for the next six weeks, and afterwards Berlin.

Ever your loving and grateful

Marian.

The journey to Germany was undertaken to bring Lewes's research for his biography of Goethe to a successful conclusion; the more negative reason was the desire to get away from English curiosity and the scandal that would erupt at the news of their living openly together. In Weimar there was no problem about them cohabiting; the Kapellmeister was Franz Liszt, who was living with the Princess Caroline von Sayn-Wittgenstein without raising eyebrows. Once in Berlin, they were again able to socialise with the local literati without embarrassment. Varnhagen von Ense, the literary saloniste and former acquaintance of Goethe, whom Lewes had met on a previous trip to Berlin, was happy to invite them to his house. He bumped into them on Unter den Linden and commented with equanimity in his diary that Lewes, whom he knew to be married, was 'with an Englishwoman, a Miss Evans, editor of the *Westminster Review* and translator of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*'.

Lewes worked away at the *Life of Goethe*; Marian translated extracts for him, as well as getting on with her own translation of Spinoza. Lewes reported back to their friend Caroline von Sayn-Wittgenstein on 16 December 1854, making their relationship sound like that of a cosy old married couple:

Our mode of life is somewhat this. We rise at eight; after breakfast read & work till between one & two; walk in the Thiergarten [zoo] or pay visits till dinner, which is at 3; come home to coffee, and, when not at the theatre or in society Miss Evans reads Goethe aloud to me & I read Shakspeare aloud to her. There you have a programme of our lives.

Of course this quiet domestic happiness was set against a background of anxiety about the gossip going on back home. Marian's Weimar journal noted tersely the arrival of 'painful' letters from England on 22 October. We know that the only two friends who had been told of her intention to go to Germany with Lewes – John Chapman and Charles Bray – were not the most tactful people to cope with curious questions on her behalf. (Bray, in his autobiography

written late in life in the 1880s quotes the description of Mr Brooke in *Middlemarch* as a 'leaky vessel' and cheerfully claims to be the model.) Both he and Chapman became embroiled in an awkward correspondence with the Edinburgh phrenologist George Combe, who had felt the contours of Marian's head and pronounced her brain the largest of any woman's he had observed, and who was horrified that the woman whom he so admired – for her organ of Conscientiousness as much as for her intellect – had gone off with a married man. It is uncomfortable to read Chapman and Bray, both of whom were unfaithful husbands, having long-term mistresses at this time, writing in moralising tones of the liaison with Lewes.

Marian did not help matters with her proud way of approaching, or rather *not* approaching, her two best female friends, Cara and Sara. Shrinking from their known dislike of Lewes and fearing their disapproval of her actions, she wrote to Bray alone, sending only a perfunctory greeting to the women. Sara wrote indignantly, accusing Marian of 'coldly & proudly defying us to give up our friendship & boasting with what serenity you can bear it'. Marian protested, and friendship was restored with Sara (though it took many more months for Cara to come round); Marian wrote in the old vein of friendship her 'birthday' letter to Sara for the latter's birthday, one day after her own, on 23 November 1854. Nonetheless, Sara did have reason to complain. Marian's prickly pride and dislike of criticism made it hard for her to bear the social snubs she knew she would encounter, especially from respectable married women, when she returned to England. It is just as well, then, that Lewes, whose unfortunate marriage situation was the cause of the problem, possessed just the characteristics required to counteract the gloomy, depressive side of her nature and bring out the generosity and fun.

They had much in common intellectually, of course: free thinking, knowledge of several languages, a special interest in German literature and in Goethe, and an informed interest in recent scientific and philosophical scholarship. More important, given the trial they would face on their return to England in the spring of 1855, were the ways in which they complemented one another in terms of temperament. His careless, flippant attitude to sexual and marital relations had ended in making him unhappy; as a writer he was keen to make his mark as more than a versatile journalist and writer for the theatre. Marian's intelligence, seriousness, and learning, leavened by a trenchant wit most in evidence when she felt confident and at ease, appealed to him. Lewes's raffishness and experience, softened by his unhappiness when they met, attracted her. Tom Trollope, brother of the novelist, looked back on their relationship and suggested that part of Lewes's charm for Marian lay in that 'touch of Bohemianism' about him:

It must have offered so piquant a contrast with the middle-class surroundings of her early life. I observed that she listened with great complacency to his talk of theatrical things and people. Lewes was fond of talking about acting and actors, and in telling stories of celebrated theatrical personages, would imitate – half involuntarily perhaps – their voice and manner.

Trollope's shrewd observation is borne out by Marian's proud account in her Berlin journal on 21 November of a party at Professor Gruppe's house at which Lewes 'diverted' the company with card tricks, 'and so concluded the evening rather brilliantly'. It is pleasant to think of them living so happily exactly 150 years ago today, enjoying an extended honeymoon in Germany before coming home to face the music, which they did with mutual support which lasted for

their lifetime together.

Let us therefore toast the immortal memory of George Eliot as we always do at her birthday lunch, but today let us toast Lewes as well:

I give you, ladies and gentlemen, the immortal memory of George Eliot and Lewes.