


2005

Address at Wreath-Laying in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey 24 June 2004

Gabriel Woolf

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Woolf, Gabriel, "Address at Wreath-Laying in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey 24 June 2004" (2005). *The George Eliot Review*. 488.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/488>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY 24 JUNE 2004

The Guest of Honour was Gabriel Woolf, a Vice President of the Fellowship. In a year when the Fellowship is paying particular tribute to George Henry Lewes while also honouring George Eliot, Gabriel Woolf brought to the ceremony Lewes's final diary for 1878, the year in which he died.

150 years ago, in 1854, George Eliot, still Marian Evans at that point, and George Henry Lewes made the momentous decision to live together. They did so for 24 years until Lewes died and, in the first five years together, made literary history. We know they couldn't marry, we know that neither of them was regarded as physically attractive but, to quote an apposite line from a Shakespeare sonnet: Let me not to the marriage of true minds, admit impediment. Not even in this place.

The inspirational meeting of such minds and the rich love the two bore each other manifest themselves in their almost instant creative outpouring. For it was not just Marian's writing that commanded attention. The first fruit was Lewes's *Life of Goethe* which gave him a European reputation – long lived. As a young man I remember buying that *Life* in the Everyman edition. Marian helped him with it and was delighted. He encouraged her with *Scenes of Clerical Life*: they filled pages of the same numbers of *Blackwood's Magazine* with *Scenes* and Lewes's popular *Seaside Studies*. Then came *Adam Bede*. In one bound George Eliot overtook George Lewes and *he* was delighted. He remained always thrilled by her success. Looking through this little treasure trove, the diary from the end of his life, what better entry could I find than this:

At 11 went to the Abbey to attend the marriage of Lionel Tennyson and Eleanor Locker. The Abbey crowded – many of our friends and acquaintances there. The ceremony very touching and interesting One of the most interesting points – at least to me – was that as we all came out of the Abbey I saw a lady gazing devoutly at Polly and then quietly as if unobserved stroke the back of her cloak and pass on. Du Maurier afterwards told me that Mrs Kendall was in high spirits at having 'touched George Eliot'. Now the lady I saw was *not* Mrs Kendall – so that there were two who had this same inspiration.

He was still delighted for her. And it all happened here, in Westminster Abbey. Marian's debt to Lewes is incalculable in terms of love, support, enthusiasm and intellectual companionship. In turn she was able to make his life less hand-to-mouth in economic terms – supporting his first wife, sister-in-law, children; he could contribute to the scientific world that so fascinated him. It was a wonderful partnership.

How did I come by this Diary? I can never forget the gesture of its previous owner in offering it to me before the British Library in appreciation of my work on Lewes's behalf. It will eventually pass from me to the British Library. I call it a treasure trove not only because it is a unique and rare book, but also because the contents are a mine of fascinating information on their day-by-day activities. He was working to the end on his *Problems of Life and Mind*; they read together, received guests, visited Exhibitions, theatre, saw the telephone demonstrated, went to two or three musical events a week – Joachim, Ole Bull, Sarasate, Neruda: heard Tennyson read, and even went shopping together. In the summer in the country he was walking

at 6.00 a.m., often with Polly and, every fine day – as late as October 28, one month before his death – he was playing Lawn tennis. And there is the constant evidence of his humour, joke after joke pepper the pages. This was surely a happy corrective to Marian's seriousness, and can be seen reflected in the novels. It would be a joyous way to celebrate Lewes to tell you a dozen or more of his jokes now. If we were in another building it would be easy, but time and again I laughed but shook my head regretfully. Some are delightfully risqué, but even in French . . . Many are on aspects of religion and could not offend ninety nine percent of us. But the hundredth . . . Even those I have chosen are not all exactly suitable but I think are acceptable. Here they are. Some you will have heard before:

A little boy, observing that when his governess fainted they brought her a glass of sherry, next day, when his sister cut her finger, he threw himself into a chair, exclaiming, 'Oh dear. This has given me such a turn. Is there such a thing as a bun in the house?'

An Irish woman applying to a lawyer to get her a divorce.

On what grounds?

He's perfectly odious to me.

Is he brutal? Very. Violent? Very. State a case.

Well, one day I threw a tumbler at his head because he was so aggravating, and he locked me up in my room all evening.

That is not enough to go to court with. Have you no other accusations?

Well – then. I'm not certain he's the father of my child.

Lord Beaconsfield, when asked jokingly if there was any truth in the rumour that he was going to marry the Queen, said 'None. There are two men in the way – John Bull and John Brown.'

A landlord talking to an Irish tenant about a shooting incident aimed at another landlord said: 'Why does nobody shoot at me, I wonder.'

'Why, sor, bedad, it's because what's everyman's business, is no man's.'

Man at party. 'D'you happen to know who that p-p-purple-faced party is?'

Lady. 'That purple-faced party happens to be my husband.'

'Oh really? Oh good. Then you can tell me if he's p-p-purple all over.'

A maid of all work, leaving her mistress who was near her hour of delivery, wished her well and hoped 'The boy would be a fine one.'

'How do you know it's a boy?'

'Well, mum, no girl would stay with you nine months.'

Oct 16 An old costerwoman explained to Mrs Greville why she hadn't learned to write. 'You see in my young days they hanged for forgery. Now I'm that clever and acute in my mind, that I knew if I could write I would forge, and what's the use of saying "Lead us not into temptation" if you go and put yourself plump in the way of it?'

And on that deeply religious note may I ask you to remember for a moment George Eliot's helpmate for a quarter of a century, George Henry Lewes.