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Nuneaton Wreath-Laying

F.H.M. Fitzory Newdegate

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NUNEATON WREATH-LAYING

June 17th 1984

Guest of Honour: Mr. F.H.M. Fitzroy Newdegate
J.P., Patron of the Fellowship.

I am delighted to be here this afternoon to lay the annual wreath at this ceremony, which was for so long and so happily associated with my mother. As a child I was not over-encouraged to read the works of George Eliot, but I did, so to speak, grow up with her as part of the story of Arbury and the surrounding countryside, which she loved so much and which so greatly influenced her earlier works. It is not always easy to see someone who is part of one's own background as a world figure, a universal spirit whose works are now valued and studied in every country. There are, however, aspects of George Eliot's life which we must all find appealing. Her stories of the people and places she knew from her childhood days remain one of the richest literary possessions we have from the English countryside. How faithful and unforced is the character drawing and how rich and natural the humour, how tender the humanity and how direct the narrative. Her intellect and thirst for knowledge at an early age and her enthusiasm for religion led her to become one of the profound thinkers of her generation. No doubt some of you will recall that extraordinary conversation she had in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity College, Cambridge in 1873 with F.W. Myers, when she took as her text the three words which have been used so often as inspiring trumpet calls of men, the words "God, Immortality and Duty". She said these with terrible earnestness and then said "How inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third". But perhaps

the most appealing side of her character was her sense of humanity. Despite the first two comments she made in the Fellows' Garden, she developed in her later years her "religion of humanity"; a commitment to other people's wants and sorrows, which is something I am sure our own generation would find sympathy with. She once said, "Our moral progress may be measured by the way in which we sympathise with individual suffering and individual joy". Her independence of mind and judgement astonished her contemporaries, and does not seem out of place in the 1980's, but it is her novels of warm human insight and compassion that still engage the attention of her readers. Today we honour her genius as a writer and her stature as a caring human being; both aspects have added immeasurably to the richness of our lives.

