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Speech at the Unveiling of George Eliot Statue

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JONATHAN OUVRY, THE PRESIDENT OF THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP AND A GREAT, GREAT GRANDSON OF G. H. LEWES GAVE THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS BEFORE UNVEILING THE STATUE:

Putting up a statue has been, for some two or three thousand years, a favourite way of keeping alive the memory of a person worthy to be remembered. Whatever the reason, it must be the case that only the most exceptional talents are now memorialised in this way. It must, I think, be particularly exceptional for the subject of a statue to be female; I mean, of course, a statue as a memorial - in terms of pure art statuary must almost invariably be female. Leaving aside Greek goddesses, Queen Victoria and, looking a little to the south, Lady Godiva, the class of female memorial statuary must be a small one. The class of literary female statuary must be infinitesimal.

Why then should George Eliot be singled out for this remarkable distinction? How has this prophet acquired such honour in her own country? The answer is easy to discover. Nowadays books can be sold with the groceries - best sellers are marketed for instant entertainment on the shallowest level. But there are books and books. "A good book" said Milton, "Is the precious life blood of a master spirit Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are." George Eliot's 'progeny' have achieved the immortality which springs

from that 'potency of life'. Middlemarch, without doubt the peak of her creation, has been considered to be one of the greatest novels in the English language. "One of the few English novels written for grown-up people", said Virginia Woolf.

It is wholly appropriate that George Eliot's statue should find its place in the new centre of Nuneaton, and so near to her birthplace in the Parish of Chilvers Coton. Her fame was achieved during the years in which she lived in London, when circumstances estranged her, sadly, from her brother and other family. Her first public memorial, in Westminster Abbey, is now followed by this remarkable tribute in her earliest surroundings. Here it will serve as a permanent reminder to the people of Nuneaton of their most celebrated citizen, and will, I hope, serve as a magnet for tourists and travellers.

George Eliot had many names. Born Mary Anne Evans, she took to calling herself Marian. For 24 years she was proud to describe herself as Mrs. Lewes, and, in her last year, after Lewes's death, she became Mrs. Cross. There seems a possibility that the plinth of the statue will be a little overcrowded! I suspect, however, that only one name will appear - one of the most famous pseudonyms of English Literature - George Eliot.

George Henry Lewes, whose protégée, in the precise literal meaning of that word, she was, and who lent her his Christian name for half her nom-de-plume, would be delighted to see today's ceremony. As his great, great grandson, I am proud and privileged to reveal the statue to Nuneaton and the world!