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Westminster Abbey Wreath Abbey Wreath-Laying

John Kane

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Kane, John, "Westminster Abbey Wreath Abbey Wreath-Laying" (1987). *The George Eliot Review*. 79.
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WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH-LAYING - June 20th. 1987

Our Guest of Honour was JOHN KANE. After placing the wreath of laurel and white carnations on the memorial stone in Poets' Corner, he gave the following Address:

We are here today to pay our respects and do homage to the memory of a great artist and an astonishing woman. Although she died over a hundred years ago, I know that to many members of the George Eliot Fellowship and to readers around the world, she is still our contemporary and to some, she is more vibrant and alive than many living authors. But what if she really were alive today? What if we were actually here not to lay a wreath but to meet the woman herself. I for one would approach the event with some ambivalence.

For how could we impress on her the magnitude of the impact her work has made on us? She must have had that kind of praise from everyone around her. So what words would we choose to make her realise the strength of our feelings without embarrassing her by our enthusiasm?

I once elbowed my way through a crowd at a cocktail party given in honour of a famous author. I had grown up with his work and it had had a profound influence on me, so I was determined to speak to him. Naturally he was the centre of all attention, so I patiently waited my turn to tell him just how wonderful I thought he was and what pleasure his work had given me over the years. I had rehearsed the phrase in my head from the moment I knew I was to be attending. It wasn't over-enthusiastic, I thought, and certainly not sycophantic. It was in my estimation a quiet but considered declaration of gratitude and respect.

Eventually a lull occurred in the conversation and, seizing my chance, I leapt in with awesome sincerity and far too many decibels. The great author stepped back in alarm, his eyes wide as those of a rabbit caught in head-lights. I tried to reassure him by extending a friendly hand forgetting I had a glass of red wine in it and so compounded my onslaught by slopping some of the contents over his shoes. They were suede I remember, light fawn coloured suede.

By now my embarrassment was so intense, that I had what I suppose amounted to an out of body experience. I was no longer looking in to the terrified face of the guest of honour. Now my plane of vision was roughly in line with the light fittings. I was looking down on him and the people who had been talking to him earlier and the circles of acquaintances and other dignitaries attending the function. A hush had fallen on the room or so it seemed to me and everyone was turned slightly in my direction. And although I could only see the top of my head I knew it was transfused with sweat as I shuffled backwards grinning and mumbling and ducking my head like some half-witted mandarin.

Sad to say my enjoyment of that writer's work has never been quite the same. So I for one am uncertain whether I would really welcome the opportunity of speaking with the woman we honour today.

These painful memories come to mind when I think of a name that until a few years ago was little more to me than a footnote in biographies of George Eliot.

My family and I moved into Holly Lodge five years ago and when I mentioned its connection with The Mill on the Floss to a friend in Arbroath where I went to school, he sent me a small velvet covered sewing case which he said had been given to him by the previous editor of the local newspaper, a position which my friend, George

Shepherd, now occupies. According to local legend, the sewing case with Roma emblazoned on its cover had been sent by George Eliot to a local man of letters called Sandy Main who had died in 1918. My correspondent knew very little about the man and even less about why he should have received such a gift.

On receipt of the case I turned immediately to the Haight biography and there in the index were a number of references to Alexander Main.

Haight writes, 'Early in August 1871, George Eliot received a letter from a young Scot named Alexander Main, lauding Romola and inquiring whether it was not correctly accented on the first syllable. Marian assured him that it was. Her warm response to his appreciation of the novel was rewarded with another rhapsody, this time eleven pages long, declaring that no other writer but Shakespeare came near George Eliot. This letter too she answered gratefully, dwelling chiefly on her "worship for Scott", whom she had begun to read at the age of seven. "I have not much strength and time for correspondence," she concluded, "but I shall always be glad to hear from you when you have anything in your mind which it will be a solace to you to say to me." Upon this hint Main sent her within a few days two letters of eight pages each on "The Spanish Gypsy" which made her cry because, unlike the reviewers, he had understood so perfectly what she intended. On 25th. September Main wrote again sending sample pages of selections from George Eliot's works and asking permission to publish a volume of brief selections of sayings.'

Before agreeing to this, they asked their publisher Blackwood, who was holidaying in St. Andrew's just across the Tay from Arbroath at the time, to check on their young correspondent.

In a letter dated the 24th. of October 1871, Blackwood notes his reaction to the meeting.

"He is quite young, about 26 I should say, a little fellow, had been for 3 years at Glasgow college partially "with a view to the Ministry" but "for various reasons" he did not go on with that. He does a little in teaching or rather in reading with lads. He evidently has some means and has a mother who rather ties him to Arbroath. He is very quaint and thoroughly trustworthy I should say.

He is in the habit of reading your works aloud on the seashore and when he was telling this at lunch I made my little joke about his having been nearly caught by the tide. He replied "Well, I have no doubt she would have made a fine poem about it and if she could have sent it after me that would have been something. "He used his knife in a dangerous manner at lunch but the ladies were all taken with him."

Reassured by this, they allowed the book of extracts by Main. Wise Witty and Tender Savings of George Eliot appeared in December 1871. A second edition added sayings from Middlemarch in 1872. George Lewes next suggested that Main abridge Boswell's Life of Johnson which was published by Chapman and Hall in 1874 but proved much less successful.*

* Life and Conversations of Dr. Samuel Johnson (Founded Chiefly Upon Boswell) by Alexander Main. With a Preface by George Henry Lewes.

Haight continues in his notes to the collected letters: 'His correspondence with George Eliot and Lewes gradually dwindled away. About sixty of his letters to them are in the National Library of Scotland, but of those they wrote him only a few have come to light, though copies he made exist.'

Some of the letters from the mid 1870's show the impact this strange young man marooned in a very provincial Scotland had on George Eliot. Take for instance this letter written by her on New Year's Day 1873.

' My dear Mr. Main,

Your affectionate greeting to me and Mr. Lewes was very sweet to our feelings. We found it on our return from the country where we had been to spend our Christmas with a family of good hearty friends.

Until this evening I have not felt equal to writing even a brief note, but now that I am a little relieved, my first desire is to thank you for a whole year's sympathy, of which your last letter was the closing chord. I trust that it will always be a satisfactory thought to you that you came as a cheering faith creating influence to me when I was writing "Middlemarch" under all the obstructions of feeble health, occasionally of illness that made me fear lest I should never be able to carry out my conception. Always a letter from you gave me proof that I had made myself understood, and that no care to say the right word would be thrown away. Amid all the considerable trials of existence, men and women can nevertheless greatly help each other; and while we can help each other it is worth while to live. Let it increase your confidence in this sort of value which your life may always have, that you have really helped me simply by writing out your thoughts and feelings to me.'

I quote this letter copied not from the printed edition of the collected letters but from a small exercise book which came into my possession recently. It contains 48 letters from George Eliot and George Lewes copied out and numbered in Sandy Main's own hand.

After I had discovered the information culled from Haight about Main, I sent it with a few photo copies to George Shepherd in Arbroath who had sent me the sewing case. He noted that some of the letters quoted in the Haight edition were labelled the property of Mr. John R. Sprunt, another Arbroath worthy who had been known personally to George.

He had been sales representative for a local weaving firm and had died some years previously without leaving any family.

The very day after passing on this information to me by phone, a friend entered George's office, who happened to live in the flat once occupied by Sprunt. The issue of the Eliot letters to Main still uppermost in his mind, George asked if the present occupant of the flat knew what had happened to Sprunt's papers.

"Oh" said the present occupant, "there's a whole pile of them in a black plastic bag in the back of our wardboard." These were promptly delivered and were found to contain Main's note book, a brief not very important letter from Lewes to Main and one

rather interesting one dated the 18th. of November 1885, and written from the Hotel du Sud, Florence by George Eliot's second husband, J. W. Cross.

Obviously Sandy had written to compliment him on "The Life of George Eliot" which had just been published and to offer copies of the letters he had received so that they might be incorporated in later editions. Blackwood called Sandy, "the Gusher" and yet it would seem that his letters always managed to strike the right chord, for Cross writes...

'I have been taking advantage of some days of glorious wintery sunshine to make excursions in the neighbourhood of Florence long ago meditated and planned but only now achieved - or I would sooner have answered your verywelcome letter received last week which gave me and is still giving me keen pleasure. I know that you value the "Life" very highly. I have ceased to care much for the criticism - adverse or favourable of those who did not know George Eliot personally but I care as much as ever that all those who called her friend and whom she called friend should be satisfied.

Her tribute to you as the person whose appreciative sympathy in the writing of Middlemarch had done more good than any except Mr. Lewes ought certainly not to be lost or forgotten.'

It was certainly not forgotten by Main of course who had copied it some years previously into his little note-book. But not every letter he received from the Leweses received such treatment. The last letter copied is dated the 17th April 1877 and is a fairly cordial affair noting that both Lewes and Madonna, as he now called her were suffering from illnesses. But this is not the last letter of all between them, certainly not the last quoted in Haight's Collected Letters. This letter is a much briefer affair and shows signs that Lewes at least was growing weary of Sandy's correspondence.

'23rd Nov.1877

Dear M,

Blackwood has written to Mrs. L. about the book and she referred the decision to him. She is quite well but when you consider the arduous correspondence which is necessary, and her weak health, you really must give up the idea of her writing merely to say you are not "forgotten"! When there is any thing needful to be said be sure you will hear. G.H.L.'

I fear Sandy may have been a little too loud and spilt some metaphorical red wine. There appears to have been no more letters between them. A sad ending to the relationship which would seem to have been the most important period of Sandy's life. Among the other papers handed over to me is a copy of a letter written by John Sprunt to the poet Edmund Blunden dated the 22nd. of December 1948. It gives a picture of Sandy in his last years.

Sprunt writes . . .

'I first met Mr. Main when my family moved to a flat next to him over thirty years ago. I was then quite a young lad having just left school and my interest in books led me into his ken.

I used occasionally to visit him but I learned afterwards from some mutual friends that he rated my intelligence rather low - as he did in respect of everyone with whom

he came in contact here. Linking up my impressions then, with a better knowledge of people now, I should say that he was, when I knew him, rather a cantankerous body, self-sufficient (unless in a practical way. He had been waited on hand and foot by his own folks and subsequently by his niece). He lived only for his books, to which he would always refer endearingly as his only friends. As far as I can remember, he had little or no association with the town's people, unless for an occasional chat with his bookseller. He, I should imagine, was always an intolerant kind of chap, impatient, querulous and spoiled. As a youngster, I understand his Mother and sisters granted his every wish, and the only recompense they received was the knowledge that they had made of their son and brother a scholar, and I think that he too in his selfish way was satisfied that this knowledge was sufficient repayment for what they had done for him.

For a time he was a school-teacher, but with little success; his low opinion of other people's mental capacity militating against the successful execution of such a profession, which would call for patience and understanding, and he was always much too self-absorbed to bother about anyone else, unless he were forced to admit their intellectual superiority, as in the case of those literary folks with whom he corresponded. It certainly does appear, from those literary connections, that he was a man of some culture and literary ability and high critical acumen. I don't think that Mr. Main and George Eliot ever met. It has always struck me as strange that Main never made any attempt to get into personal touch with the Leweses, although they had frequently invited him to do so.'

I think I understand Sandy's reluctance although I have brought him into the Abbey now to help me to pay tribute to his idol. If this had been a reception for her I don't see Sandy attending or, if he did, he would be skulking at the back somewhere sniffing in a superior fashion as the rest of us pressed forward to speak with the great woman.

For Sandy, the genius he worshipped was always on paper, whether in the books or in her letters. How many of us would swop a personal introduction to her for a letter such as this from her own hand written on the 2nd. May 1876.

'Dear Mr. Main,

Having a leisure half hour unexpectedly this afternoon I use it in writing to you, rather than trust to the time nearer our departure, which may be filled with small details of preparation. Even if you had not asked me, it would have been my impulse to send you a few lines, that I might thank you, with more directness than through my husband's report, for all your affectionate sympathy and for the painstaking appreciation with which you continually cheer me. Generally it is not good for me to be within hearing of what is said about my books until they are at a good distance from their birth and I am in the dispassionate mood towards them of a hen towards her feathered chickens. But some genuine signs of understanding which assure me that I have not missed my aim are a helpful blessing and you are one to give such signs.'

Would that I had written the letter that had prompted such a response. George Eliot with all her greatness, her genius and her largesse of spirit, we honour with our ceremony here today. But Sandy Main with all his selfishness, snobbishness and shortcomings, I think some of us may envy.