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WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH-LAYING June 23rd 1990

June 1990 marked the tenth anniversary of the unveiling of the memorial stone to George Eliot in Poets' Corner. The anniversary service was held as closely in content as possible to the one ten years earlier and our Guest of Honour was the Revd. Dr. EDWARD CARPENTER K.C.V.O. who, as Dean of Westminster in 1980, conducted our service on that important day and had also been very much a part of our negotiations with the Abbey long before the project came to fruition. We have affectionate memories of our association with him during that time and it was particularly suitable that he should lay our wreath on the tenth anniversary. His own edited version of the address he gave in 1990 is published below.

The story, if it were told in its entirety and the evidence was available, of those who are memorialised in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey would make fascinating reading. Many of the illustrious whose names are there recorded had to wait long years for entry because their literary merit had yet to be firmly established or recognised; others who, though finally making it, had first to endure a pejorative judgement because their private lives were felt to be at variance with traditional norms of behaviour. Byron was a case in point in spite of giving his life for Greek independence. Thus his friend John Cam Hobhouse, an Old Westminster scholar, could not persuade the Dean of the day - and the decision had to be made by him - to give his permission.

In respect of George Eliot it was touch and go whether Stanley, most liberal of all nineteenth century Deans, would grant permission for an Abbey burial. That it should have been denied, *mirabile dicta*, by the intervention of Thomas Huxley, high priest of a reverent agnosticism and scientific rationalism, may well strike us as odd and remarkable - remarkable because George Eliot was a highly moral, sensitive and dedicated human being. Indeed, her relationship with G.H. Lewes, if non-normative, bears this out.

I must confess that George Eliot's memorialisation in the Abbey gave me personally great satisfaction and a unique pleasure. George Eliot was a person whom, in 'character, manner and style', it is almost impossible to praise over much. True it is, and this to her credit, she was impaled on the horns of an unsettling dilemma which she never finally resolved.

I refer to her highly intellectual approach to human experience with its compulsion to follow ruthlessly whither the argument seemed to lead. With this there also went a compelling and sensitive concern for ordinary human beings with all their faults and failures. The verdict of many is that it was the latter response which gave life, understanding and depth to the portrayal of her characters; while it was the intellectual preoccupation and the determination never to compromise her own integrity, which prevented a too easy reconciliation of the persistent tension.

‘Let both lie together until the harvest’

How far this seeming dichotomy is an ultimate one and hence unbridgeable, I myself am not certain. Maybe it was paradoxically her refusal to accept a facile optimism which gave encouragement to very ordinary mortals, and inspired them.

For myself I have never ceased to be grateful that I was Dean of Westminster at the time of the memorialisation of George Eliot. Equally, I never cease to admire all that the Fellowship, under the imaginative and dynamic leadership of Kathleen Adams, did to bring this about. May its work and its members continue and flourish. Certainly it is a good cause and I end with the words of Lord Acton:- “In problems of life and thought which baffled Shakespeare, her touch was unfailing. No writer ever lived who had anything like her power of manifold but disinterested and impartially observant sympathy”.