

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

---

6-16-1991

## Wreath-laying in The George Eliot Memorial Gardens, Nuneaton

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



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

---

"Wreath-laying in The George Eliot Memorial Gardens, Nuneaton" (1991). *The George Eliot Review*. 182.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/182>

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 THE  
GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDENS, NUNEATON  
June 16th 1991**

THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS DR. JOANNE SHATTOCK,  
WHO LAID THE FELLOWSHIP'S WREATH AND GAVE  
THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS:

We are here this morning to remember a great English novelist, and one of the most formidable intellectuals of her day. It is appropriate that we should do so in Nuneaton, close to South Farm, Arbury, where Mary Ann Evans was born, and also close to Griff, where she grew up. It is right, too, that I should say Mary Ann Evans, for this was her birthplace; the birth of 'George Eliot' took place elsewhere.

But why, it might be asked, should we honour a writer at her place of birth when her adult life, and more importantly, her entire professional life, was spent in London and in other places? Mary Ann Evans as we know, left Griff when she was 21, spent some formative years in Coventry, and then moved permanently to London. She scarcely ever returned to Warwickshire for more than a brief visit.

For those who know George Eliot's work, and particularly her early work, there is one obvious and immediate response to this question. Nuneaton and the surrounding Warwickshire countryside are at the very heart of those early books. She began to write the three stories which comprise *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton', 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story' and 'Janet's Repentance', during the early years of her life with George Henry Lewes, and very much with his encouragement. Living in London, in a period at once of great personal happiness but also a period of considerable social isolation and uncertainty as regards her own family, she turned to the world of her childhood, to the landscape, to familiar places, to actual people, clergymen in particular, whom she remembered, even to events she had heard about, and she wove her tales around those memories. We know too that Warwickshire was agog with excitement about them, that various 'keys' were in circulation as to who was meant to be who, that one man, a Mr. Liggins, actually put about the story that he was the author of the *Scenes*. Her family, now scattered through Warwickshire, though, were certain that the stories, and even more certainly, the novel which succeeded it, *Adam Bede*, could only have been written by Mary Ann. And of course in her next novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, she was writing from a great well of memories, of her childhood, of her immediate family, and of her relations, all of whom figure in that novel.

In her more mature phase, in novels like *Felix Holt*, and later still, in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, the local links are not with particular buildings or places, but in the emphasis she places on landscape, on the countryside. Her scenes are always midland scenes, her landscapes are Warwickshire landscapes. She remained, as her biographer

Gordon Haight reminds us, a country girl. When she was in London, when she was abroad, it was for a glimpse of Warwickshire countryside that she longed. She even thought when living in Germany for several months, that German sheep looked particularly scraggy in comparison with their Warwickshire counterparts, and consequently refused, where possible, to eat German lamb when it was offered to her.

‘A human life’, she wrote in chapter 3 of *Daniel Deronda*, ‘I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth ... a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection...’ The English countryside she describes, Loamshire, in *Adam Bede*, although bathed in a golden pastoral glow, the scenes described as from the eye of an outside passenger on the box of a stagecoach at the beginning of *Felix Holt*, are Warwickshire scenes. In chapter 12 of *Middlemarch*, when Fred and Rosamond Vincy are on their way to Stone Court, Peter Featherstone’s house, another Warwickshire landscape, with oak trees, ponds and hedges, is again lovingly described, and she adds: ‘These are the things that make the gamut of joy in landscape to midland-bred souls - the things they toddled among, or perhaps learned by heart standing between their father’s knees while he drove leisurely’. And this was of course how she came to know this area so well at such a young age, driving round it with her father, as he managed the Arbury estate. There are more specific references to this area in George Eliot’s novels. The churches she describes are churches many of you know well, and the description is accurate to an amazing degree. Cheverel Manor, the Red Deeps, Knebley, Milby, Middlemarch, are all local places, and when we read the novels today, we recognize at least some of them.

I first read George Eliot in Canada where I grew up. I had never been to England. I knew where the Midlands were on the map, and Warwickshire, and that George Eliot had been born there. But the landscapes she presented to me were entirely imaginary, nonetheless vivid for that, but I had nothing with which to connect them. When I came to England, and to Warwickshire, I began to see that her descriptions were not generalized but specific. And then, a bit later on, I was taken on a tour of the ‘George Eliot Country’ with members of the George Eliot Fellowship. That was in 1973, but I can still recall my excitement when I saw Griff House for the first time (then a bit closer to the original than it is today), the Red Deeps, where one has always had to use one’s imagination, Arbury, of course, and South Farm, Astley Church (my favourite of all), Chilver’s Coton, the chapel at Stockingford, Robert Evans’s grave, and her brother Isaac’s grave. One suddenly had a tremendous sense of place in Eliot’s work, and as I say, a feeling of excitement at seeing places that she had known.

Since that time I have in turn brought many visitors, from all parts of the world, to this same ‘George Eliot country’, some of them George Eliot scholars, others simply George Eliot enthusiasts, but all of them George Eliot readers: from French and German universities, from universities in the United States and Canada, from Australia and New Zealand, and from Japan. And in all of these visitors I have seen the very same delight that I first felt in 1973 and still continue to feel.

Those of us who live in Warwickshire should be and are, I think, proud that we live in a county with such a strong literary heritage. We have of course another great writer, to whose birthday celebrations the entire international community sends representatives. George Eliot will never I think command the same breadth of interest as Shakespeare. But that does not matter. I am particularly pleased to lay the wreath this morning on behalf of the George Eliot Fellowship which has done so much over the years to make us aware and to keep reminding us that Warwickshire is the birthplace of two great English writers, and that we should doubly rejoice in this.

Let me return to my initial question of why we should honour George Eliot at her place of birth as we are doing this morning. We are not here to remember her simply because she wrote about Warwickshire, or because she was born here. Her books are as alive and fresh for us today as they were for her contemporaries. The predicaments of her heroines: young women who find their lives constrained by the society around them, by the impossible marriage choices which confront them, by their imperfect education; and of her heroes: men who gradually realize that the tasks they have set themselves are impossible, that their lives will not follow the course they had hoped, men as she says in *Middlemarch*, 'once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little', and who then find themselves 'shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross' are universal predicaments. She shows us communities bound together and supported by family ties, history, and complex interconnections but also strangled by gossip, prejudice, conservatism. Again and again she places her characters against their society and demonstrates the tensions in that interrelationship. George Eliot's heroines and heroes, Maggie, Tom, Janet, Dorothea, Casaubon, Lydgate, Ladislaw, Gwendolen, engage today's readers as intensely as they did their original readers and will, I think, continue to do so.

That is not to say that tomorrow's readers will read her in the same way or see the same things in her novels that we do. Indeed recent readings of George Eliot depart quite radically from the way in which readers and critics in the 1950s and 1960s began to reread her after their Edwardian predecessors. This is all to the good. She will continue to offer fresh perspectives, new readings to future readers who will find things that haven't been seen before, in the same way that readings of Shakespeare have changed over the centuries.

And this is also, I suggest, why we are here this morning, to celebrate the fact that George Eliot has been read and reread by several generations since the nineteenth century, and to ensure that this will be the case for generations of readers to come. We hear a great deal of late about the importance of preserving our literary heritage, of the danger that younger members of society will not be given sufficient encouragement to read the classics, the 'great' writers of the past, the so-called 'literary canon'. I am not, let me hasten to say, about to urge a campaign to introduce George Eliot into GCSE syllabuses, in the same way in which it is being suggested that Shakespeare must be there. If she happens to be on some syllabuses well and good. If not, there will be time later to read her. I half incline to agree with Virginia Woolf's comment that *Middlemarch* is one of the few English novels written

for grown-up people. What we must keep alive is a sense of riches in store, a climate where writers like George Eliot are read and reread, where there is always something more to look forward to.

To talk about the importance of keeping alive our literary heritage this morning in the presence of the George Eliot Fellowship and of so many local institutions linked with George Eliot in various ways is perhaps preaching to the converted. Indeed I think we might all come away from this morning's ceremony feeling, somewhat smugly perhaps, that we have done our bit to keep that heritage alive and well. The inscription on one side of the obelisk reads, 'Lest we Forget'. I do not think, Ladies and Gentlemen, that there is any danger of this.

---

The quotation on the Fellowship wreath was one which had been used by the Chairman when he gave a lecture on George Eliot during an English Week in Roanne, France, Nuneaton's twin town, in June 1991. It was relevant there because it describes George Eliot's admiration of George Sand; it now surely relates to George Eliot's admirers when thinking of her:

I cannot read six pages of hers without feeling that it is given to her to delineate human passion and its results .... with such truthfulness, such nicety of discrimination, such tragic power and withal such loving gentle humour that one might live a century with nothing but one's own dull faculties and not know so much as those six pages suggest. (*George Eliot to Sara Hennell, February 9th 1849*)