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## George Eliot to William Blackwood III: Two Unpublished Letters

George Eliot's business and personal relations with John Blackwood, head of the Edinburgh publishing firm William Blackwood & Sons from 1852-1879, have been well documented in Gordon Haight's detailed biographical study and his edition of her letters. On John's death in 1879, his nephew William Blackwood III took over the running of the firm, and continued maintaining close business and personal contact with George Eliot until her death on 22 December 1880. Two unpublished letters relating to the death of William's brother George Frederick Blackwood, found in MS. 30,039 of the Blackwood files in the National Library of Scotland, and reproduced here in full, highlight further this personal relationship.

The first letter was written in response to a note from William on 13 August 1880. The note, of which there exists only an extract in the Blackwood outgoing letter books, reproduced in Volume 7 of *The George Eliot Letters*, ostensibly concerned business details and sales figures for George Eliot's works. From Eliot's response, however, it is obvious that William Blackwood had also written more intimately about his concerns over his brother's fate in Afghanistan. George Frederick Blackwood, a Major in the Bengal Artillery and William's sole surviving brother, had been engaged in fighting Afghan rebels throughout 1880. Following a battle against sizeable Afghan forces at Maiwand on 27 July 1880, he was reported missing in action, and presumed dead. It was not until early September, though, that his relations in Edinburgh received confirmation of this fact. The initial uncertainty over George's fate, and its effect on his family and close friends, is reflected in William's frequent references to him in his business letters of August and September. George Eliot's quick and heartfelt response highlights her sensitivity to the situation.

The Heights, Witley

Nr. Godalming

Aug. 18. 1880

(Telegrams: Witley Station)

My dear Mr. William,

I returned home last night after a few days' absence & found your sad letter. I feel for you & with you under this new, bruising sorrow, coming so close on your late trials of various kinds. It is your lot to be heavily laden with responsibilities. Everyone can understand your sense of loneliness in the prospect of being the sole male stay of your family, & there are many friends who will be sharing your anxiety & your faint hope of relief. But in such calamities as this

friends can give no help & one is almost ashamed of sending mere words at such a crisis. Forgive me for sending them. It is the stronger impulse that urges me to write them even in the fear that they may be an unwelcome intrusion.

Thank you for exerting yourself to write me a long letter & telling me about more indifferent matters, which you entered into for my sake. The account of sales is good, & I am much pleased to see Charles's bit of work in *Maga*.<sup>1</sup> The *jeu d'esprit* was worth translating.

Always yours sincerely  
Mary Ann Cross

The second letter by George Eliot, written after an official obituary notice appeared on 2 October 1880 in *The Times*, is equally sympathetic. It was composed during a period of convalescence in Brighton, where John Cross had taken her in early October in hopes of effecting a recovery from her renal ailments.

The Bristol Hotel  
Brighton  
Oct. 2. 1880

My dear Mr. William,

I learn from the 'Times' of today that your sad presentiment of loss is confirmed, &, however useless it maybe [sic], I cannot help writing to say that I am feeling for you. So many things have conspired to make this trouble fall with peculiar weight upon you — & you have not any [sic] to bear your own share but to help others to bear theirs.

The public testimony to your brother's value as an officer has at once a certain bitterness & consolation in it. It makes one feel his death the greater pity because a fine career has been broken off, & yet it makes the memory of him a satisfaction.

You are having these things said to you by many, but though I can write nothing new, I would not ever be absent from the number of those whose regard for you urges them to make a sign of their sympathy whether in your grief or in your joy.

I have not been well lately, & we have come down here for the sake of getting a more bracing air than that of Surrey.

Yours always sincerely,  
Mary Ann Cross

William Blackwood was deeply touched by these words of condolence. As he noted to her on 26 November 1880, 'Your kind words and sympathy with us in our heavy sorrow were very comforting and gratifying and sorely have I felt my gallant and warm hearted brother's death.'<sup>2</sup> Less than a month later, he was also to mourn George Eliot's death.

#### Notes

I would like to thank the National Library of Scotland and Jonathan Ouvry for permission to reproduce the Eliot letters, and I wish also to acknowledge the British Academy for funding my continuing research into the Blackwood papers.

- 1 This refers to 'Hans Preller: A Legend of the Rhine Falls. From the German of Wilibald Alexis', a piece by Charles Lee Lewes, George Henry Lewes's son, published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in August 1880.
- 2 MS. 30, 368, pp.172-3, reproduced in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven 1954-78), IX, 318.