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## Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying June 20th 1992

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Adams, Kathleen, "Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying June 20th 1992" (1992). *The George Eliot Review*. 203.

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## **WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH-LAYING JUNE 20th 1992**

**THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS THE FELLOWSHIP SECRETARY, KATHLEEN ADAMS, IN HER 25th YEAR IN OFFICE. AFTER LAYING THE FELLOWSHIP'S WREATH SHE GAVE THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS:**

George Eliot and religion is a vast subject and one that can only be lightly touched on today. But it is relevant to our being here because of the memorial stone in front of us. It took 100 years to get here and, because of the years of fund-raising by the George Eliot Fellowship as well as the many visits to the Abbey to negotiate the placing of the memorial stone in Poets' Corner in June 1980, is perhaps even more significant to us than a tomb or memorial would be that had been erected in 1880 instead of 1980. This tiny part of a great church feels as if it truly belongs to us. At this memorial which we worked so hard to provide we can express our veneration, our admiration, our gratitude for her genius and our affection for her as a warm, loving and human woman. As individuals, we all know what she means to us personally. Her place in our lives, whether small or large, is significant. If it were not, we wouldn't be here today. This is not just the last item in a visit to London from the provinces — it is an act of public and private tribute to a very great lady.

Why did it take 100 years for the memorial to get here? John Cross, whom she married only 7½ months before her death in December 1880, wanted her to be buried in Westminster Abbey among the other great names in our literary heritage. He asked their old friend Herbert Spencer to help and Spencer telegraphed Dean Stanley who replied that he would need strong representations before making such a decision. John Tyndall, an editorial friend, told Stanley 'The verdict of the future will be that Dean Stanley has enshrined a woman whose achievements were without parallel in the previous history of womankind'. But there was strong opposition, too. T.H.Huxley described her as having had 'a life and opinions in notorious antagonism to Christian practice in regard to marriage and Christian theory in regard to dogma'. John Cross did not press the issue, wisely, I am sure, and the unconsecrated part of Highgate Cemetery received her mortal remains instead of these hallowed walls.

It took another 100 years to place a memorial to her where her husband had sincerely felt she should be interred. When we began negotiations in the 1970's the attitude of the Dean had changed completely. Dear Edward Carpenter, a wise and deeply well-read man, welcomed the project most warmly. Those of us most involved in the negotiations will not forget the anxiety we felt about the cost of the project. Despondently leaving the Abbey after meeting the sculptor of the stone and realizing just how much we had to raise, we went to see one of our distinguished Vice-Presidents, the late

Herbert Van Thal. With his experience and breadth of vision he assured us most positively that of course we could raise that — and much more — for someone as internationally acclaimed as George Eliot. And, of course, he was right!

At least we were not hampered by her unorthodox life-style. In 1880 her 24 years of unwedded bliss with G.H.Lewes put her on the wrong side of respectability, even though, as the wife of John Cross, she had died a respectable married woman. But her unorthodox religious views were another important factor. She had been brought up in the Church of England back in Chilvers Coton, had been much influenced by her governess in Nuneaton, Miss Maria Lewis, who was deeply evangelical and taught the young Mary Ann to read and study her Bible. Then came the Baptist influence at her Coventry school where she led prayer meetings and saw herself as sinful and worldly. And yet, even at this time, Gordon Haight tells us she had been reading something which she had said had considerably shaken her impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence. She also laid some of the blame for later religious doubt on Walter Scott, whose books she knew intimately. But, at the age of 22, all those doubts which seemed inevitable in a young woman of her undoubted intelligence were crystallized and in January 1842 she told her father she could no longer attend church with him. Her subsequent letter to him trying to make him understand this change in her beliefs is well-known and was only a part of that sad and difficult time in her life which has become known as her Holy War. It was resolved eventually if not particularly satisfactorily.

A few years ago a plaque was placed in Holy Trinity Church, Coventry, the church she and her father were attending at the time of this unhappy dispute and, at the unveiling, the then Vicar spoke of the intransigence of the early 19th-century church and its failure to address and understand the problems of an enquiring mind such as hers. Her association with Holy Trinity was unmarked for well over a century until the arrival of the plaque in 1984.

Marian Evans never again aligned herself to any particular church or religious sect and yet her deep interest in all religions continued to the end of her life, particularly in Judaism, which is evident from *Daniel Deronda*.

Her life with Lewes was a loving and contented one. Indeed, without the fulfilment of that relationship, probably more devoted and faithful than many legal unions of the day, and the self-confidence it gave her, it seems certain that there would have been no George Eliot. Lewes nurtured her genius and subjugated his own talents to guide her along the road to fiction, a medium she doubted she could manage and yet that made her one of the greatest of English novelists. The relationship was condemned by many of her contemporaries and that condemnation lingered on even into the second half of the 20th century in some quarters. But without Lewes it is unlikely that we

should be here at this memorial stone today and what a debt of gratitude we owe him. She had no children of her own but Lewes's eldest son said of her after her death, 'She found us poor little mother-less boys, and what she did for us no-one on earth will ever know'.

Am I making excuses for her? I hope not for I am sure that there are few people nowadays who don't understand her religious doubts or who condemn her for living with a man who was not able to marry her. Certainly this great church has accepted her and with pride and pleasure.

Of course there have been those who expressed doubt at the memorial being placed in a church which is an important part of the establishment against which she rebelled in her youth. When we hold a religious service each year in Nuneaton to mark her birthday and involve local churches in the ceremony of wreath-laying, it has been said we should not celebrate an agnostic/atheist in this way. But we believe these criticisms are made by a few who have not thought the matter through completely and have not familiarized themselves with her own views. She said in a letter she wrote to John Cross in 1873, 'I have no antagonism towards any religious belief, but a strong outflow of sympathy... if there were not reasons against my following such an inclination, I should go to church or chapel constantly for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies....' To the Church today this may sound a somewhat unconvincing excuse for non-attendance, but a deeper reading into her views shows us how deeply interested she was in religious faiths of all kinds. But it is the use of the word 'fellowship' that has always fascinated me because, obviously, of the name given to our own society in 1930. I doubt whether our founder, Francis Cross, knew of the quotation but it is fortuitous, I feel, that he should have chosen 'Fellowship' instead of 'Society' — for a fellowship is what we are. (I might add that this can sometimes cause confusion, particularly amongst Americans, since I understand that a fellowship to them, apart from its academic meaning, is an institution which gives away money — something which we don't do unless it actively promotes the lady herself.) My dictionary also gives a number of totally inappropriate definitions of the word but it also defines it as a partnership of equal persons. I would like to feel that this is a definition of what we are, for we are all sharing the same admiration, respect and affection. I am laying the wreath today not because I am some exalted being amongst the officers of the Fellowship but because I have been working with you and for you all for almost 25 years, a labour of love for the Fellowship and for George Eliot. The other officers feel similarly, I am sure, and our Vice-Presidents, too, have all proved themselves worthy of the honour by their work in her name. We're all of us in it together and the Chairman and I were reminded of this during our very recent visit to the United States. We were the guests of an American member of the Fellowship whose M.A. thesis was on *Romola* and she and her husband treated us as though we were members of their own family. When

we toured the west coast we visited Harriet Williams in Long Beach, California, the lady who is our hard-working and generous representative in America. She had invited to her home several of the Fellowship members in that area and we had dinner together. This was a particularly happy gathering. The Chairman gave a short and appreciative speech and we all drank to the Immortal Memory of the lady without whom we would not have been gathered together. During the meal our other American Vice-President, Michael Wolff, phoned from Massachusetts, and asked to be included in the toast. There was a wonderful warmth at that dinner, a warmth which is echoed, I hope, in all of our gatherings as a Fellowship. If anyone ever feels that they are excluded from that warmth, I would be deeply dismayed, for it is our policy to make every member feel as if they truly belong. Some of them will remain only names and addresses on an index card, but even if their faces are unfamiliar, their names are certainly not. As your Secretary, I am very aware of all of you, and I hope that all of you feel something of the warmth, the friendship, the FELLOWSHIP that is an essential part of the gathering together of those who admire George Eliot. Our members number academics, scholars and ordinary people like me who love a fine story wonderfully told and who are fascinated by the teller. George Eliot was herself an intellectual but she wasn't writing for intellectuals. Behind the public face of genius was a loving and compassionate woman and I like to feel that her spirit, her immortality, is here with us as we make this annual pilgrimage to honour her in Westminster Abbey. If she were here with us, her natural diffidence would have kept her, I am sure, shyly in the back row — but I am certain she would be proud and happy to be amongst our Fellowship.