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## George Eliot and The British Museum Reading Room

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## Christopher Date

### GEORGE ELIOT AND THE BRITISH MUSEUM READING ROOM

I have recently undertaken a search of the Central Archives of the British Museum in an attempt to ascertain the date that George Eliot first used the facilities of the Reading Room of, what was then, the British Museum Library. It occurred to me that the George Eliot Fellowship might be interested in the result of my search.

It had been assumed that Eliot had been a reader here from the time of her move to London in 1851 when she became John Chapman's assistant editor on the *Westminster Review*. However, nothing had been found so far to verify this assumption and I therefore decided to undertake a systematic search of the relevant classes of records within the Central Archives.

The majority of Reading Room records have been retained by the British Museum: at the time of the British Library Act of 1972 all records that were closed and set aside were the responsibility of the creating institution. Two classes of Reading Room records can be examined for this period: the *Register of Readers Names* which alphabetically records, by year, the names, dates of application and reference numbers of readers; the register entitled *Signatures of Readers* which chronologically records the signatures and addresses of the readers when first visiting the Reading Room.

Naturally I searched under the various names used by Eliot but, by the time I had replaced the volumes for 1860 on the shelf, I was beginning to lose hope. However, the volumes for 1861 provided me with the information that I was keen to find. Two entries by a Museum clerk in the *Register of Readers Names* for 14th November 1861 record that George Henry Lewes and Marian Evans Lewes were admitted to the Reading Room. Their address was given as 16 Blandford Square, NW, and they were recommended for readers' tickets by O. Jones of 9 Argyll Place W. These entries enabled me to find their signatures in the relevant *Signatures of Readers* volume.

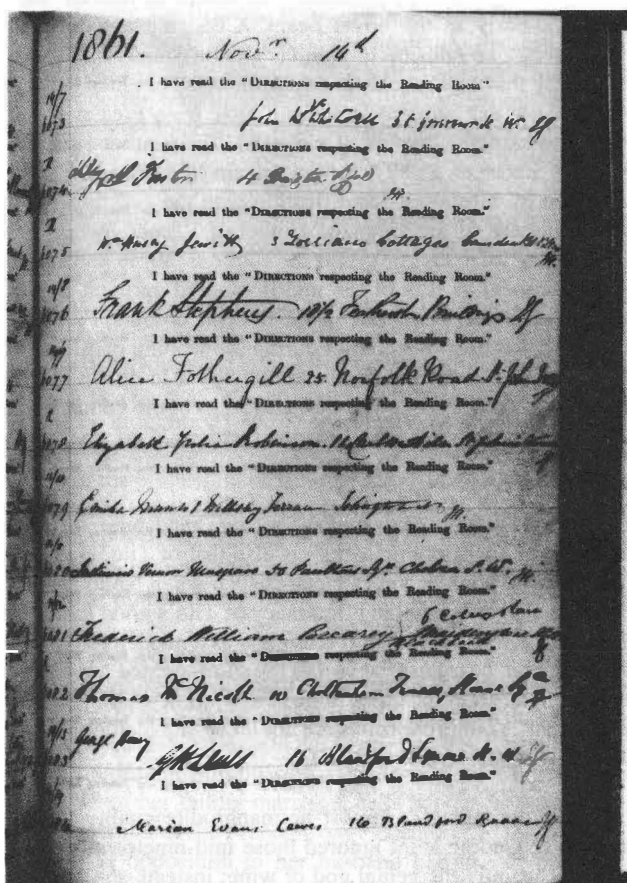
Unfortunately, readers' application forms for this period have not survived, but it is sometimes possible to find references to applications through other classes of records in the Central Archives. If a letter had been received by the Principal Librarian's Office in the 1860s it would have been recorded in a register of in-coming letters (*Register and Numerical*), given a chronological reference number and, if suitable for retention, set aside for binding within the class of *Original Papers*. Alternatively, if not relevant to the Principal Librarian's Office, it would have been transferred to the most suitable department. In this instance it was recorded that a letter had been received by Mr G.H. Lewes on the 5th November requesting readers' tickets for himself and Mrs Lewes. Unfortunately, his letter was not retained but a copy of the reply from the Principal Librarian's Office is to be found within the *Letter Book* for 1861 and reads as follows:

November 7 1861

The Principal Librarian of the British Museum has received Mr Lewis (sic) let-

Mr G H Lewis  
16 Blandford Square (with rules)

As readers' book slips have not survived it is not possible to know exactly which books Eliot consulted. However, I suspect that some were relevant to the Florentine Republic as she progressed with the 'great deal of study and Labour' which resulted in *Romola* for the Cornhill Magazine.



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