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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON
19 November 1995
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY
by Dr Beryl Gray

A friendly neighbour, who knew I was fond of 'old things', recently offered to let me look at a yellowing, crisply fragile newspaper that was in her possession. Unfolded, the crumpling broadsheet proved to be a copy of the *Daily Mail* for Wednesday, 23 June 1897 – the issue commemorating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. I gingerly perused it, enjoying it as a period curiosity without really expecting to see anything of specific interest – until I got to page seven, which presented an article headed 'Women in the Queen's Reign. Some Who Have Made Victorian History'.

The piece – which is about thirty column inches long – is illustrated by five tiny vignettes portraying, respectively, Florence Nightingale, Lady Butler, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot. Florence Nightingale is accorded pride of place in the article, and is cloyingly awarded 'all the encomiums the pen can heap upon her'. The philanthropic achievements of Charles and Catherine Dickens's friend, Angela Burdett-Coutts, are detailed. Princess Louise (as sculptor) with Lady Butler (as painter) are representative of the artists 'who have made the female sex eminent during the past sixty years, in the Academy, and other galleries', and the reader is reminded of the titles and subjects of five of Lady Butler's most famous pictures. The Queen's daughter, Princess Christian, is commended for her support of needlecraft. Her

devotion to the School of Art Needlework, South Kensington, is a very practical, as well as salutary, one, particularly as it was started in a day when the thimble and needle seemed to be standing a good chance of being pushed aside by women for less feminine callings.

We then come to Literature, which is acknowledged to have 'been adorned as much by women writers as by men' during the Queen's reign. The two poets, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, take precedence. Elizabeth Barrett merits a brief but crammed biography, which touches on her childhood – especially her precocity: we are reminded that, at the age of eight, 'she might often be heard reading Homer aloud in the original to her doll'. Her relationship with Browning is ecstatically evoked. 'The love of these two great souls for each other', says the journalist, 'was immense, tender, and lasting'. About Christina Rossetti we are told, inevitably, that she was the sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, that her work tended to be 'deeply impregnated with religious feeling', and that much of the best of it was written before she was twenty.

What, then, of the prose writers – of George Eliot in particular, whose pre-eminence is suggested by the inclusion of her portrait?

The first novelists to be mentioned are ‘Charlotte Brontë and her illustrious sisters – writers who would have been more famous had not the star of the family outshone them’. The writer continues:

We have had George Eliot. We still have Mrs Margaret L. Woods, Mrs Humphrey Ward, Miss Braddon, Mrs Oliphant, Miss Charlotte M. Yonge, Mrs Flora Annie Steel, with hosts of others, successful journalists too, as well as accomplished story writers

– but it’s nevertheless to Charlotte Brontë’s life and works that nine and a half lines are devoted. Mrs Steel’s story of Indian life, *On the Face of the Waters*, is praised. The state of Mrs Woods’s health is dwelt upon, and we are told – naturally – whose daughter she is (of the President of Trinity College, Oxford), and whose wife (of a former Provost at Oxford); a concern which reminds one immediately of Mr Wakem’s admonition to Philip in *The Mill on the Floss*: ‘We don’t ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to’. Elizabeth Gaskell isn’t mentioned; there is no reference to New Women writers such as George Egerton or Sarah Grand; and all that the columnist has to say about George Eliot after all, is that she ‘enjoyed the distinction of having her works admired very highly by the Queen’. That is it. There is no allusion to any specific work, and – predictably – no allusion to the ‘immense, tender, and lasting’ love that she and George Henry Lewes bore for each other. It would presumably not then have done to risk offending the sensibilities of the readers of the *Daily Mail* by acknowledging the existence of the liaison.

The page on which – on the extreme left – the article appears, is otherwise mainly devoted to sartorial matters. The centrepiece – ‘Sixty Years of Dress. Fashions of Her Majesty’s Reign’ – is flanked by pieces describing what Royalty wore on Jubilee Day, what children were wearing in 1837, and what children are wearing in 1897. All three articles are illustrated, while the whole assemblage is garnished by snippets entitled ‘Afternoon Tea. A Great Victorian Institution’, and ‘Setting a Royal Table’.

The facing page, however, is dominated by ‘The Queen’s Prime Ministers’ whose ten masculine portraits command more than half the central space, and which are in turn dominated by the then current prime minister, Lord Salisbury, looking (to me, at any rate) remarkably like the actor, Timothy West. The contrast between the two pages is striking, and distinctly gendered. The implication is that interest in women’s achievements – in the way they may have helped to make Victorian history – is itself confined to women, and necessarily refers back to the woman’s realm: the realm where ‘one can talk sentiment or chiffons by the yard’ with one’s special woman friend during the afternoon tea to which, we are told in the article on that subject, ‘Every woman owes much’.

The history of the decline and triumphant resurgence of George Eliot’s literary status is well known. What fascinates me about the article – and its context – in that *Daily Mail* of nearly 100 years ago is the way it somehow encapsulates the attitude towards George Eliot that prevailed only seventeen years after her death. The absence of any reminder to the

reader of so much as the title of one of her works, reinforces the sense that her unelaborated itemizing among the other female Victorian achievers depends not on the recognition of her genius by the newspaper's contributor, but on the fact of the Queen's admiration. It is the honour that is recorded, not the accomplishment that is celebrated.

In his excellent *George Eliot* (State of the Art, Bristol, 1990), which truly does guide us through the critical maze, Graham Handley points out (p. 24) that the critical rot had begun to set in by 1895, the year George Saintsbury declared, 'I never remember having read a single book of George Eliot's with genuine and whole-hearted admiration'. Then, the following year – and again as Graham reminds us (p.26) – Arnold Bennet was to confide to his journal that, having dipped into *Adam Bede*, his 'impression that George Eliot will never be among the classical writers was made a certainty'.

These assessments are critics' assessments; and yet, reviewing Sir Leslie Stephen's monograph on George Eliot in 1902, James Douglas pertinently contrasted the reaction against her with the reaction against Dickens and Thackeray. 'In her case', he says,

it is a reaction of the reader; in their case it is a reaction of the critic. Dickens and Thackeray have been depreciated by superior persons, but they never really lost their hold on the old audience, and they have steadily conquered the new. In this respect they resemble Sir Walter Scott, while George Eliot resembles Jane Austen. The critics have done something to restore the popularity of Jane Austen. It will be interesting to see whether they will be able to restore the popularity of George Eliot. I have my doubts Most young people would rather read bad novels by living authors than good novels by dead ones. They follow the booming of the boom rather than the still small voice of the literary assessor. They like to lay in a daily stock of material for small-talk. Who chatters about George Eliot to-day in the intervals of bridge and ping-pong? She is 'serious'; we are flippant. So we manage to rub along indolently without her. (*The Bookman*, No. 131, vol. XXII [August, 1902], 166)

James Douglas could be describing the *Daily Mail* reader of his time, for the company that 'Women in the Queen's Reign' keeps on its page itself provides a kind of explanation for the general relegation of George Eliot. The whole collocation is material for small-talk. It undermines the very idea of the possibility that, even collectively, women can be significant makers of so much as thirty column inches of an extensive period of history. With the eye-catching sketches illustrating royal Jubilee attire and seven phases of women's costume, supported by the cosy afternoon tea and royal table-laying items, the piece over on the top left-hand section of the page hardly *commands* attention. It's true that the article does conclude with the suggestion that women found a university for themselves; but while (with its reference to Elizabeth Barrett's precocity) 'Women in the Queen's Reign' doesn't entirely constitute a rejection of female intellectual power, it certainly isn't celebrating it. And the survey of women's creative output acknowledges their art while yet

promoting the twin ideas of traditional (and practical) 'feminine callings', and of propriety. The scope of George Eliot's intellect and imagination was immeasurable, her sympathy was profound, and her artistry was great; but the audience capable of the receptiveness required by *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, or *Middlemarch* seemed no longer to exist.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that the *Daily Mail* in the last decade of the last century represented or addressed the whole nation, or the nation's cultural élite. It is because its readership would seem to have been the broad, literate middle band of society that happening upon the article was such a salutary experience. Corroborated by assessments such as those recorded by Saintsbury and Arnold, it certainly threw into relief George Eliot's current, television-enhanced, and – by the end of her century – unpredictable popularity: who by now has not heard of *Middlemarch*? Who soon will not have heard of *Daniel Deronda*? But it also threw into relief the George Eliot whose life and works are now a vast academic field – so vast, that one can only hope that James Douglas was to be, or has been, proved wrong when he suggested that the voice of the literary assessor (no longer still or small, it has to be said) carried no influence.

What most gratifyingly emerges from the comparison between the reaction against George Eliot towards the end of the last century, and the celebration of her towards the end of this, though, is the sense that she has been restored to, and is relished by, readers of whatever category. The anonymous contributor to that Jubilee edition of the *Daily Mail* said that we have *had* George Eliot. I think that, since her death, it has never been truer to say that we *have* George Eliot. In the company of my fellow devotees, therefore, it is indeed my very great honour to propose the toast to the author's immortal memory.