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Gundry, Elizabeth, "Report of a Lecture on "George Eliot at the National Portrait Gallery"" (1995). *The George Eliot Review*. 287.

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**REPORT OF A LECTURE ON
'GEORGE ELIOT AT THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY'**
Delivered by John Cooper: December 1995

by Elizabeth Gundry

In an excellent lecture John Cooper of the National Portrait Gallery showed all the authenticated portraits of George Eliot, contrasting them with those of other women writers of the time such as Charlotte Brontë and Agnes Strickland and quoting contemporaries' views on how good a likeness each was.

The portraits included an early silhouette given to the Gallery by a niece of John Cross; an 1842 watercolour given by Caroline Bray, too delicate to be put on public display; D'Albert Durade's Geneva portrait, painted when she was still mourning her father and struggling with religious doubts; the celebrated Samuel Lawrence drawing – nine sittings and a whole series of drawings were done by Lawrence for a now vanished oil painting bought by John Blackwood because George Eliot and G. H. Lewes disliked it. Mr Cooper pointed out that the cameo brooch in the picture is now owned by Mary Haight, G. S. Haight's widow; the chalk drawing made by Frederic Burton, later Director of the National Gallery; two late sketches of George Eliot made at concerts, one by du Maurier; and, for the real truth, an 1858 photograph from the London Stereoscopic Company, showing her relaxed and smiling, together with photos of some pioneering women George Eliot admired – Barbara Bodichon, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and George Sand.

In every case, John Cooper said, the artists, whether professional or amateur, were people who knew George Eliot well. Many of them captured the flash of her eyes and her sensitive mouth. The strong chin and nose were clearly inherited as they appear also in a portrait of her brother Isaac which was also shown; far from beautiful, they nevertheless contribute to the impression of strength and grandeur in her bearing which developed in her later years – prompting contemporary comparisons with Dante and Savonarola.

In the second part of the lecture portraits of George Eliot's associates were shown and discussed: Chapman, Spencer, Lewes, Florence Nightingale, Harriet Martineau, J. S. Mill, Carlyle, Froude, Matthew Arnold (and his niece who became Mrs Humphrey Ward), Mrs Gaskell, de Quincey, Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Cruikshank from the Strand days; and, from the Leweses' years at The Priory, Rossetti, William Morris, Burne Jones, George Smith the publisher, Trollope, Browning, Tennyson, T. H. Huxley, Darwin, Princess Louise (a sculpted self-portrait) and Henry James, as well as the founder of the National Portrait Gallery itself, George Scharf whose review of the Lawrence portrait was quoted. A glittering roll-call of George Eliot's friends and admirers which gave the audience a richly rewarding experience.