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## Wreath-Laying in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey 1998

Roy Hattersley

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## WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY 20 JUNE 1998

The Guest of Honour was Lord (Roy) Hattersley, who gave the following address:

I take a strange pleasure in being associated, no matter how vicariously, with the greatest novelist in the English language. I am by no means sure that she would approve of this event. Asked about God, Immortality and Duty — strange topics of conversation to be raised during an afternoon's stroll — 'she pronounced with terrible earnestness how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second and how peremptory and absolute the third'. But there she is in black, polished marble on the floor of Westminster Abbey — the junkyard of the nation's vanities.

She keeps appropriate company, in a row of four disparate pagans. George Eliot would not have enjoyed a night out with Dylan Thomas; and Lord Byron and W. H. Auden — who occupy the flanks of the forward line — had little socially in common. But, in their different times and ways, they all defied respectable convention. George Eliot, having established her personal morality, lived without the slightest deviation from its precepts. If Westminster Abbey is a temple of virtue, as distinct from established Christianity, there is no one who has a greater right to be remembered in Poets' Corner.

Over her left shoulder there is a memorial to Henry James. A critic, whose name I no longer recall, said that his work could be divided into three periods — James I, James II and the Old Pretender. In 1878, he visited George Eliot in Surrey and, at the end of an unsatisfactory afternoon, was bidding her partner, George Henry Lewes, goodbye when he was asked a favour. Would he dispose of an unwanted book that a neighbour had brought round earlier in the week? It was *The American*, a novel from the literary reign of James I. George Eliot had not connected the author with her visitor. She simply did not like that sort of fiction and saw no reason to pretend otherwise.

I wonder what she would have thought about D. H. Lawrence who is next but one to Henry James on her left. I was brought up to believe that Lawrence was another moralist who obeyed the call of conscience from within him rather than listened to the echoes of convention from the cruel world in which he lived. But it is hard to believe that the whining, whimpering Lawrence would have been a soulmate of the didactic and indomitable George Eliot — even though they both fell in love too easily. Gerard Manley Hopkins, immediately behind her on the Abbey Floor, would have been bewildered by them both — despite approving of George Eliot spending her twenties translating a *Life of Jesus* from the German.

It is quite the wrong question to ask on a day when I take part in a wreath-laying ceremony, but I wonder if authors of genius should be commemorated by marble tablets laid — like Mary McCarthy's young Harvard ladies — end to end in Westminster Abbey. From time to time, there are arguments about new inclusions as if a piece of stone could enhance the glory of genius. The best way to pay proper tribute to George Eliot is by reading her novels — in my

case *Daniel Deronda*, at which I have taken several running jumps without ever landing on the final page.

I am in favour of the Fellowships and Societies that organize these events. They encourage reading their heroes' work and sponsor little biographical projects which, added together, produce real scholarship. But that is very different from the solemnity of laurel wreath and an encomium. Had George Eliot died last year, I would not have even considered attending her memorial service. I loathe conspicuous grief and ostentatious mourning. Those whom we love and admire should be remembered in private. But I have no regrets about attending the Abbey today — this ceremony is as near to George Eliot as I am ever going to get.