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Jennings, Margaret, "Wreath-laying in The George Eliot Memorial Garden Nuneaton, May 1998" (1998).
The George Eliot Review. 338.
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WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN NUNEATON, 17 MAY 1998

The Guest of Honour was Margaret Jennings who gave the following Address: 'George Eliot and the World Wide Web'.

In paying tribute to George Eliot today we acknowledge a debt of gratitude owed to her for the legacy of wonderful novels which have enriched so many lives during both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As we approach the twenty-first century I find myself considering how her work will be greeted by the coming generations, indeed not just in a new century but in a new millenium.

In the early part of this century, the Bloomsbury writer Virginia Woolf helped restore George Eliot's standing as a great novelist by claiming that *Middlemarch* was one of the few novels for grown-up people, and throughout the second half of the century George Eliot's work has featured in the halls of learning, both in school curricula and university degree courses, not only in a literary sense but also as a valuable secondary source in the areas of nineteenth century religion and philosophy. More recently we have seen George Eliot brought to the fore by the very twentieth-century phenomenon of television. Some of the adaptations may not have achieved full justice for the novels but even if only a few more people have been encouraged to read her books then we can view this medium as a successful way of promoting her work.

Perhaps more successful adaptations have been achieved by fringe theatre groups in recent years. We have seen very worthy productions of *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* and the benefit of fringe theatre is that it can reach a much wider audience than mainstream theatre by offering cheaper tickets and more accessible venues. This therefore encourages a younger audience who may already be studying her work.

Communicating George Eliot's work — her 'wit and her wisdom' — is the key to continuing her influence, so how does she fare on the most up-to-date of all communication tools, the Internet? I was very surprised to find that there are over 1700 entries relating to George Eliot on the world wide web, some relating to Victorian studies and some on religion, history and literature. Details of the George Eliot Fellowship are reproduced on a most comprehensive web page from Japan. There are also many pages from America so her influence is indeed worldwide. I believe, however that there is a need for input onto the Internet from this side of the Atlantic which could prove a very useful and interesting project. If anyone would like to have a look at examples from a selection of George Eliot web sites I have some printed out.

Interestingly, since the BBC Television adaptation of *Middlemarch* has been shown in America, George Eliot seems to have adopted a counselling role amongst a group of the population new to her work. A *Middlemarch* discussion page on the Internet has become a shrine for those who have found inspiration, guidance and consolation through the pages of this novel and some of the e-mails contained on this page are quite moving. Who needs to pay expensive

consellers when all one has to do is read a George Eliot novel to put things into perspective? It would seem that the wisdom of this remarkable woman is, like Casaubon's less noble hand, reaching beyond the grave.

She has indeed proved to be amongst that 'choir invisible' where minds have been and will continue to be made better by her presence. As we celebrate George Eliot's past and enjoy the spirit of her presence here today we can also, I am sure, look forward to her ongoing and benevolent influence for generations to come.

[The Fellowship chaplet bore the inscription:

The presence of a noble creature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us; we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we, too, can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character.

Middlemarch, chapter 76]