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Wreath-Laying in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey

Chris Smith

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The Guest of Honour was The Rt Hon. Chris Smith, MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The Address he gave is summarized below:

Mr Smith is a great admirer of George Eliot and it is said that he takes with him on holiday each year one of George Eliot’s novels! He began by noting that he was standing next to the memorial stone to Henry James and he reminded us of James’s admiration for George Eliot. Henry James wrote on 5 March 1873 ‘a marvellous mind throbs in every page of Middlemarch. It raises the standard of what is to be expected of women.... We know all about the female heart; but apparently there is a female brain, too.’ James wrote, too, of Dorothea in Middlemarch: ‘We believe in her as in a woman we might providentially meet some fine day when we should find ourselves doubting of the immortality of the soul.’

Mr Smith reminded us of Rosemary Ashton’s introduction to the Penguin edition of Middlemarch: George Eliot, more than any other nineteenth-century novelist, gives the impression that all her characters possess what might be called ‘inner space’, hearts and minds which she could analyse minutely if she had room. Her choice of material widened the horizons of the novel and her psychological insights radically influenced the novelist’s approach to characterization. Her novels were a culmination of the dense social, moral and historical direction given to the nineteenth-century novel at the time.

Mr Smith went on to say that George Eliot became a major naturalistic novelist because she was able to present so impressive and observant a picture of ordinary, and often conventional, men and women. She is a great moral novelist because she sought to explain and give substance to a personal morality which can function without recourse to religious doctrine. However much her novels expressed an evocation of stability and social order, she came to recognise that the range and subjects of her fiction had to expand in order to express more of the complexity of the nineteenth century. She knew that deference and complacency no longer held, either in the social or the intellectual sense.

In Middlemarch she studied provincial life in terms of its interwoven human relationships, and with supreme skill traced a series of developing individual destinies in a most substantial and carefully controlled narrative.

Middlemarch a masterpiece of English literature, was said by Virginia Woolf to be ‘... one of the few English novels written for grown-up people’. Mr Smith said that at times he feared that he may be becoming like Mr Casaubon. ‘Like him I have mountains of information and paper I must deal with, in my case on a daily basis. And, also like him, I too feel that I am expected to develop my very own Key to All Mythologies. I have given up, however, expecting to find the answer in my weekend red box.’

The wonderful finale to Middlemarch, states ‘... for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs’.
That was Dorothea. Thankfully for us George Eliot's historic literary acts did not mirror a hidden life. She used her formidable intelligence and acute powers of observation in an artistic life which not only means today that her tomb will be forever visited, but that her memorial here in Poets' Corner will continue to remind us of that greatness.