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George Eliot Birthday Lucheon, 25 November 2001 The Toast to the Immortal Memory

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I would like to thank you for inviting Jane and me to the wreath-laying and to this luncheon and the opportunity to propose the toast to the immortal memory of George Eliot.

It is over a year ago that I was walking through the corridors of Leeds University School of Healthcare Studies when I saw an advertisement for a lecture by Dr Jane Wood of the School of English – and the title of the lecture was “‘Webs, Tissues and Predisposing Causes’: George Eliot and Medical Science” (Yorkshire Medicine, Volume 12, No. 4, 105-109).

It is not the catchiest title I’ve ever heard, but because I was unable to attend the lecture I did get in touch with Dr Wood to find out more and what I have to say today is partly due to this unexpected encounter with a poster. It’s a bit like the explanation behind the ward namings in this hospital: when you scratch a little deeper you never know what you are going to uncover.

I’ve often wondered why Mary Ann chose the novelist name George Eliot and the consensus that I have come across is that George is a tribute to her companion in learning George Henry Lewes, and Eliot because in her own words it is ‘a good, mouth filling, easily pronounced word’.

Jenny Uglow in her biography says that Eliot may have been a nod to Jane Austen’s Ann Elliott in Persuasion; she was reading Jane Austen aloud that Spring of 1856.

It was the time her great experiment began to examine the great themes of fruitful sacrifice and in particular the vulnerability of women. She was also testing out her theories about realism and the social novel. It was trendy to describe everything in great detail in her era of writing and ironically she could only be free to make this experiment by posing as a man (Uglow, 83).

But what was different about her from other writers?

She broke the mould by commentating as a man when she was a woman. She had a thing about clergymen. And the loved ones are Amos Barton and, early on, Mr Gilfil, and Mr Tryan. Milly Barton shows heroic self sacrifice so that her husband’s influence may spread throughout the community. This is a familiar story for many clergy team members today, Jane, and it goes for men who are married to lady clergy. What would George Eliot make of all that?

But, as an aside, I suspect that if she were writing today she would pick up the vulnerability of men and their redefinition of their role in the community – and also the re-examination of the whole concept of self-sacrifice in an age when we are encouraged to make sure that all material comforts are accrued for the individual, sometimes to the detriment of the wider community. George Eliot certainly examined the areas of life that feed self-sacrifice like Hallowing, Consecrating and Sacredness and Love arising from men’s love of suffering women.
Facing life as it is was one of her recurring themes, and one of her interests was medical advances in her time. She kept up with it all and Lewes’s own writing encouraged this, as did their friendship with eminent scientists and doctors.

I now look at Lydgate Ward with new eyes since I have understood a little more of the background to Dr Lydgate of Middlemarch, who is finding new ways of doctoring through microscope and stethoscope – not in wide use at that time. Lydgate, Dr Wood suggests (quoting M. Faith McClellan’s article on Middlemarch in the Lancet in 1996) is the first doctor hero in a novel and the first modern physician to be represented as a scientist.

And to cut a long story short, despite the good doctor’s tensions with his wife who was wanting greater social standing, he stuck to his principles. These included his engaging with the patient in effecting his or her own cure from the underlying causes rather than the manifested symptoms.

I get the impression that a lot of doctors today want to make the person, the patient the centre of the healing team and want more time to bring people to a place where the cause is identified with the person in all their components of body, mind, and spirit. George Eliot examines the differing approaches of doctors (Mr Pratt and Mr Pilgrim in ‘Janet’s Repentance’) and asks us to see that meaning is not only to be observed in what is visible. As a novelist she was saying to the scientists and to the doctors, have a willingness to look beyond the evidence and push into the realms of pre-science: don’t just look at the parts; look at the bigger picture!

Dr Wood says this: George Eliot saw her task as a novelist as one of revealing what it is that binds individuals to each other and how separate parts contribute to the healthy functioning of the whole.

That is, she was seeking the higher aim of truth beyond the immediate business. That’s what made her different from other writers.

As a hospital chaplain I have to be with people and walk with them at their own pace into the mystery, sometimes, of extreme suffering. That mystery calls upon me and upon us all at times to ask questions of why and how ... to try to find meaning and purpose in this uncertain world.

In all this George Eliot and we are not far from the kingdom of God, and I lead into our toast with the words of Dr Jane Wood:

George Eliot always retained a place for the mysterious and the elusive. Whether we choose to call it supernatural or put it down to myth and superstition, George Eliot was ever mindful (and respectful) of forms of knowledge and experience for which science had no answers.

Let us give thanks and drink a toast to the immortal memory of George Eliot.