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I'm grateful for the editors' invitation to report on this conference. I was asked to organize it by Warwick Gould, Director of the University of London Institute of English Studies, in response to the auction and sale in 2001, of letters (published and unpublished) from George Eliot to Jane Senior, apparently the first woman to hold a salaried English government appointment. The 'stayed' export of these letters, eventually bought by the British Library, was in the news. The letters seemed too restricted a subject for a work-in-progress conference, and its theme became 'George Eliot: Life and Letters'. Scholars invited were doing interesting work on George Eliot and relevant contexts. Notice was short – the London IES responds quickly to literary matters of public concern – but everyone accepted. The IES got a grant from the British Academy, for which it is grateful.

Opened by Warwick Gould, the conference was attended by scholars, research students, ex-students and readers. It was open, authoritative and relaxed, with good discussion. The British Library put on a special exhibition of the new letters, and Christopher Fletcher of the Department of Modern Manuscripts attended our reception. We had a living historic link: Jane Senior’s great-granddaughter Pamela Milne attended and enjoyed the conference. My Dickensian colleague Michael Slater and I read dialogues of Casaubon and Dorothea, Tom and Maggie.

Subjects were previously discussed with speakers to ensure unity of theme and sufficient reference to Jane Senior. Rosemary Ashton (University College London) related problems in writing her biographies of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes. William Baker (Northern Illinois University) flourished a key to all categories of personal and professional recipients of George Eliot’s letters, to appear in a book of essays by various scholars. Rosemarie Bodenheimer (Boston College) gave a detailed study of Edith Simcox and George Eliot, sensitive to both women and their relationship, part of an essay, ‘Autobiography in Fragments: The Elusive Life of Edith Simcox’, coming out in Victorian Studies (44.3.2002). Margaret Harris (University of Sydney) read a historical and critical paper, ‘The Posthumous George Eliot: Biographical and Autobiographical Constructions’, part of her work in progress on George Eliot’s early critics and biographers. Beryl Gray (Birkbeck) is writing a book on the dog in Victorian life, art, and literature, a subject she has made her own in lectures and articles, and gave us a new sample in “'Pug Came!'’; George Eliot and Dogs’ (in this issue) including a bizarre dog-story by George Henry Lewes which he sent to Jane Senior. My speculation about links between Jane Senior and Middlemarch, part of some work on Eliot texts and contexts, will eventually appear in George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies. I consulted Sybil Oldfield (University of Sussex), once a Birkbeck graduate student and an expert on woman humanitarians: she got in touch with Jane Senior’s great-great-grandson Graham Milne, who was contemplating a Life of his ancestor; a project he has handed on to Sybil, with a rich family archive: her conference paper, “that fair, bright useful woman” – Jane Nassau Senior and
her Controversial Government Report’ started her off on a biography of this remarkable woman, which should enlarge our understanding of gender, public administration, poverty, pauper education, marriage and the arts, in the Victorian period. Like Beryl Gray, Sybil Oldfield illustrated her talk with slides, and also played an amazing (recorded) burst of Handel to tell us that the versatile Jane Senior was a fine (unrecorded) amateur singer.

A number of George Eliot letters to and about Jane Senior, including some sold and bought last year, were in Gordon Haight’s *The George Eliot Letters*, but attracted little attention from biographers, including Haight – his *Life* introduced Jane Senior only as a friend who suggested a house in Spain to ‘the Leweses’, sang, and sent grapes and flowers to Thornton Lewes in his illness, though the DNB entry for her father-in-law Nassau William Senior noted her Red Cross work during the Franco-Prussian War and her workhouse appointment, and letters Haight published discussed her Parliamentary Report and raised *Middlemarch* questions – diffuse influence, secular goodness, education, and women’s longing for a wider life. When the sale of Senior papers was advertised, I recalled – from recent study of George Eliot’s letters – only Eliot’s discreet recommendations of Jane’s husband Nassau John Senior to Emily Davies and Thomas Huxley, and Charles Lewes’s defence of her Report in an article published by the *Edinburgh Review* (142, July 1875). Sotheby’s auction, the stayed export, and the welcome purchase by the British Library, drew attention to Jane Senior.

The conference wasn’t confined to her but she was its subtext, emerging as its star, a brilliant humanitarian as active as Barbara Bodichon or Bessie Parkes, with direct and diffusive effect on lives around her, including George Eliot’s.