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WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN, NUNEATON 30 JUNE 2002

The Guest of Honour was Jonathan G. Ouvry, President of the George Eliot Fellowship. He gave the following Address:

I thought that I would talk today about a previously unexplored topic – George Eliot and cats. Unfortunately I find that the reason why the topic is previously unexplored is that George Eliot, unlike the other Eliot, had very little, or possibly nothing, to say about cats. There may have been the odd un-named farm cat lurking about in Adam Bede, but nothing on which one could construct a ten minute talk in the open air.

Dogs, of course, are quite another story, both real and fictional. There was Pug, a present from John Blackwood, sadly lost after only eighteen months, and replaced by the kindly Blackwood by a china pug, and Ben the bull terrier, and fictitiously any number of farm dogs, pet dogs and ‘unpetted sheepdogs’ with splendid names like Ponto (‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’) and Yap, Minny and Mumps (*The Mill on the Floss*).

Having been foiled in the matter of cats, my thoughts turned to George Eliot’s place in the literary pantheon. Just now, and I hope for always, she stands on the pinnacle of Mount Olympus, but it was not always so. After the burst of interest and commentary following her death little was said, and perhaps little was read, for some fifty years, though isolated commentators, for example Virginia Woolf, clearly recognized her worth. In the preface to the 1889 edition of Alexander Main’s *Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings* the adoring Mr Main affirms that ‘what Shakespeare did for the Drama, George Eliot has done for its modern substitute the Novel ... she has for ever sanctified the Novel by making it the vehicle of the grandest and most uncompromising moral truth’. In 1890 Oscar Browning wrote ‘The name of George Eliot is unique in English literature’ and referred to her execution of ‘so large a quantity of work of the highest merit and of far-reaching influence’. ‘At this moment’, he said, ‘ten years after her death, it is perhaps most difficult to forecast what will be her ultimate position. Reputations which stand highest at the period of a sudden dissolution, pass for a season into obscurity.’

What might be described as the George Eliot revival dates probably from an early work of Professor Gordon Haight, subsequently the great post-war biographer and editor of the Letters, who produced his *George Eliot and John Chapman* in 1940, but it was many years before his work bore fruit in the beginning of the extraordinary George Eliot industry which shows no sign of abating, and produces an immense body of scholarly work every year. Look up George Eliot on a search engine, and be prepared to spend many hours looking through the references.

In 1947 Gerald Bullett published *George Eliot – her Life and Books* in which, after listing the pantheon of nineteenth century English novelists he refers to one conspicuously empty place. In the interval between the two world wars, he says, a newcomer, Trollope, has been admitted to their company, ‘but the once formidable figure of George Eliot has fallen from its pedestal, to be swept away in fragments by the discreet janitor. A year or two ago (there have been signs of renewed interest since) little remained of her but an admiring reference to *Middlemarch* in a Shaw preface, and the memory, in middle aged and elderly readers, of having read *Adam Bede* in their childhood.’

Thirty years on George Eliot had become sufficiently established in the public consciousness, and was probably sufficiently often set for O and A Level exams (a great mistake in my view – I believe that the right age to begin reading George Eliot is roughly the age at which she began to write *Scenes of Clerical Life*) to make it worth the while of Hamish Hamilton to publish Phyllis Hartnoll's *Who's Who in George Eliot*, a very useful potted guide to the characters (though curiously enough none of the dogs referred to above gets a mention). In a foreword to the work Robert Nye mentioned, though not with approval, the reaction of readers referred to George Eliot: 'Now, hands up all those who groaned.' Clearly the message had still not got through, even in academic circles. In *The Triptych and the Cross: the Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (1979), Felicia Bonaparte's very first words are 'It is a very curious fact, whose implications have not sufficiently troubled us, that of George Eliot's seven novels [the number seven discounts *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a view followed by John Rignall in the recently published *Oxford Reader's Companion*, where the three components come under the head of 'stories'] we have very much disliked no less [sic] than half. Even her most enthusiastic admirers have invariably concluded that while Eliot wrote three and a half of the best novels in the English language, she also wrote three and a half very misguided books.'

Well, as some previous owner wrote in the margin of my copy of George Henry Lewes's *Dramatic Essays* à propos some comment of Lewes's – 'Rubbish'! Talking of Lewes, and not entirely irrelevantly, I can't resist quoting here from the introduction by Geoffrey Tillotson to the 1969 Gregg reprint of *The Principles of Success in Literature*: 'George Henry Lewes is sufficiently recommended as having married, all but legally, George Eliot, who herself might have married Herbert Spencer quite legally, if he had brought himself to the point of a proposal. All three were of formidable intellect, but Lewes's had the advantage of being more sprightly than Spencer's and even than George Eliot's.' If ever a phrase calls out for italics, the last five words do!

In recent years it would be difficult to find any criticism of George Eliot in the sense of disparagement. The huge body of scholarly analysis referred to above, the appearance on television of several of the novels (some more successfully than others) and, close to home, the work of Kathleen and Bill Adams and their enthusiastic supporters in the George Eliot Fellowship, have ensured that the name of George Eliot is now familiar to very many people throughout the world, of whom the majority may even know that she was a woman!

I will leave the last, and the most up-to-date of the comments on George Eliot which I am quoting, to a distinguished Vice President of the Fellowship, Professor Rosemary Ashton, who wrote in the preface to her acclaimed biography, *George Eliot – a Life*, published in 1996: 'With her formidable intellect, her wide-ranging knowledge of languages, literatures, philosophy and science, she was the greatest woman of the century.'

[The following quotation from *Middlemarch*, Book 1, chapter 6, appeared on the Fellowship wreath:

We mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinner time; keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to inquiries, say, 'Oh, nothing'. Pride helps us; and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts – not to hurt others.]