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## Address at Wreath-Laying in the George Eliot Memorial Garden, Nuneaton 13 June 2004

Nada Lyons

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**WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN,  
NUNEATON 13 JUNE 2004**

*The Guest of Honour was Mrs Nada Lyons, great-great-granddaughter of  
G. H. Lewes to whom tribute was being paid on this occasion.*

*She gave the following Address:*

I am honoured and delighted to be here today to pay tribute to my great-great-grandfather, George Henry Lewes, and to George Eliot in the year that marks the 150th anniversary of the beginning of their life together. From an early age they have been part of my life. At home I sat on a sofa that belonged to them. Books by and about them lined our shelves. And occasionally biographers would visit my mother when they were researching their books. I was always very proud of Lewes's wide achievements as a writer and literary critic, scientist and amateur actor, raconteur and so much more – and particularly proud of his role in the life and career of George Eliot. As I grew older I became more interested in what people were like as human beings and while re-reading Rosemary Ashton's biography of Lewes recently, I asked myself whether or not I would have liked him. Undoubtedly I would have found him a vivacious and entertaining man – risqué though he may have been in a way more appreciated today than in the Victorian era. But, more importantly in my eyes, I would have been impressed by his deep commitment to his family. Despite his earlier Bohemian lifestyle and the pain which the estrangement from his wife Agnes must have caused he continued to care for her welfare and that of her children by another man, as well as his own sons, his mother and nephew. And I would have been especially touched by the generous spirit in which he supported George Eliot's writing career, never showing any rancour or jealousy when she surpassed him in fame and fortune but rather taking great pride in her talents and celebrity. I too would have felt as George Eliot did that he was a man of high honour and integrity with the kindest heart – of which she thought all the better because it was devoted to her. And I think it is a measure of George Eliot's devotion to Lewes that, during his lifetime, she was committed to a role as 'mother' to his sons. This can not always have been easy for her, especially when nursing Thornie in his final illness. Even after his death George Eliot continued to support Lewes's family, leaving them a legacy in her will, something for which my mother always expressed deep gratitude. Marian, my grandmother, and my great uncle George, named after their famous 'literary grandparents', arrived in England as small children too late ever to see Lewes. But they did meet and stay with George Eliot who was somewhat exhausted by 'the Africans', as she called them and rather relieved when they decamped to Brighton. But underlying everything was the deep mutual affection between George Eliot and Lewes – loving and being loved in return. George Henry Lewes captured it all in his revealing remark: 'To know her was to love her – and since then my life has been a new birth'.

[The inscription on the Fellowship's chaplet of laurel and white flowers (the colours chosen each year because the flowers at George Eliot's funeral were described thus) is as follows:

The manuscript of Adam Bede, beautifully bound, reached George Eliot from her publisher, John Blackwood. On the flyleaf she inscribed: 'To my dear husband, George Henry Lewes, I give this M.S. of a work which would never have been written but for the happiness which his love has conferred on my life. Marian Lewes. March 23. 1859'.]