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**WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER,
WESTMINSTER ABBEY 30 JUNE 2005**

The Guest of Honour was Sally Brown, Head of Literary Manuscripts at the British Library. She gave the following Address:

Not all great writers are great readers, but George Eliot certainly was. A voracious reader of other writers – Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Scott – she was also very fond of reading aloud. Her husband, John Walter Cross, praised her ‘naturally rich, deep voice, rendered completely flexible by constant practice; with the keenest perception of the requirements of emphasis; and with the most subtle modulations of tone’. ‘The Bible and our elder English poets,’ he thought, best suited its ‘organ-like’ quality.

Reading aloud – now, sadly, an almost vanished pastime – was, of course, a customary one in Victorian times. It is an art which – as Cross also remarked – ‘dies with the possessor’, but it would be wrong to think of George Eliot’s reading as leaving nothing behind except a memory. She was a constant recorder of favourite literary passages, aphorisms, maxims and fragments of poetry which had caught her imagination – always on the lookout for quotations which could be used as epigraphs to set at the beginning of chapters in her novels. Some she composed herself, but well over half of them were quotations from other writers, many seized on and recorded in the course of her wide reading.

One of the most unusual items to be found in the manuscript collections of the British Library is George Eliot’s blotter-cum-writing case, which she used as a commonplace-book. At once impressively learned and delightfully entertaining, it contained a record of her reading in several languages: English, Greek, Latin, German, French and Italian. Measuring seventeen by ten and a half inches, it was reverently passed down through the family of George Henry Lewes, the beloved companion whom she movingly addressed at the beginning of her manuscript of *Middlemarch* (now also in the British Library) as ‘my dear husband’, declaring that this long work ‘would never have been written but for the happiness which his love has conferred on my life’.

The blotter dates from the end of 1868 or the beginning of 1869, when Eliot was not quite fifty. Her most recent novel, *Felix Holt*, had been published in 1866. *Middlemarch*, though a start was made on it in 1869, lay some way in the future; it was finally published in 1871-2. The long poem *The Spanish Gypsy* had been her most recent publication (in June 1868) and another poem, *Agatha*, was to be the next. Eliot was, in fact, in the middle of her ‘poetical’ period and the commonplace book bears witness to her poetical reading as well as her plans for poetical writing.

I would like to read a poem from the many copied into this book, but before doing so I must thank the George Eliot Fellowship for asking me to say a few words about my favourite author in this great Abbey. When his wife died, Cross enquired about the possibility of a Westminster Abbey burial, and many friends – including Herbert Spencer – thought that she should have a place in Poet’s Corner. Others, however, declared that her religious unorthodoxy and ‘irregular’ (though entirely loving and monogamous) life with Lewes ruled this out – and so she was finally buried next to him in Highgate Cemetery. It was fitting that she was laid to rest beside the man who had cherished and encouraged her genius, her extraordinary ability to enter

imaginatively into the consciousness of so many different kinds of human being. But it was also entirely fitting that in 1980, a hundred years after her death, a memorial stone was placed in Poets' Corner, so that this great writer could be honoured with all the others who have enriched our national literature. I would like now to conclude by reading Shakespeare's sonnet number sixty, an extract from which is written in her commonplace-book. If not her favourite of all the sonnets, it must have been very close.

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil, all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight.
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels on beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow;
And yet to times of hope, my verse shall stand
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.