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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON, 19 NOVEMBER 2006
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

By Adrian Litvinoff

I was surprised, honoured and delighted by the invitation to join you today and propose the toast to the immortal memory of George Eliot. I am no George Eliot expert, or indeed scholar, although I am an enthusiast. She is, after all, Warwickshire’s other world-class writer, and it is tempting to think how much better known she might have been in her home county had Shakespeare been born in Stoke-on-Trent, say, rather than Stratford-upon-Avon.

My first encounter with George Eliot was while taking ‘A’ level English at school. I still recall my dawning surprise and admiration as I, an inexperienced seventeen-year-old, gradually realized the awful magnitude of Dorothea’s miscalculation in marrying Casaubon, and its consequences. In addition the portrayal of Casaubon’s great work of scholarship as a barrier to shield him from the world, rather than a means to engage with it, I saw as equally original and brave.

I am still in the course of reading the canon of George Eliot’s work for the first time, and fairly recently read Daniel Deronda, having seen it on television. Once more I found that courage and originality, as she dared to describe the corruption in high society in Victorian London, and to bear witness to its anti-Semitism at just the time that Benjamin Disraeli was in high office.

Most recently I have read Scenes of Clerical Life, prompted by the approaching anniversary celebrations, and there too is the same determination to speak honestly and openly about social ills. The portrayal of middle-class domestic violence in ‘Janet’s Repentance’ was remarkable at the time and is no less needful today.

That describes much of what George Eliot has meant and continues to mean to me. Now I should like to tell you what the Library and Information Service is doing in its efforts to acknowledge her greatness and to make the most of the important George Eliot Collection of documents and texts.

As you will know, we have a collection of some 60 original manuscripts, about half of which are by George Eliot herself, the others being by her relatives and close friends. These have now all been fully conserved. They now reside in the protective environment of the County Record Office, while a set of excellent facsimile surrogates is available for consultation at Nuneaton Library. This means that these documents are far more accessible than previously, while the originals are being looked after in the most appropriate way to safeguard them for the future. In addition the letters have been digitized and are viewable through the County Council website.

Second, the entire collection of about 2000 volumes, including early and rare editions of the novels, has been examined in detail, possibly for the first time. This is being done partly in order to put the whole catalogue on-line. That should be completed by the end of the year, meaning that for the first time anyone will be able to search the collection electronically as well as by coming to the Library. In the course of this exercise a few items have been identified for
urgent conservation, while the conservation needs of the whole collection are also being assessed and a conservation plan is being developed.

Until now the Collection has been used almost solely by scholars and researchers, and has been of little interest to the wider public. We should like that to change. We are improving the presentation of the collection in the library, bringing together lending and reference material for the first time. We are also advertising the collection in different ways and measuring its use.

Recently we have created an on-line learning module about George Eliot, aimed at Key Stage Two. This level is suitable for children and adults who know little about George Eliot but have expressed an interest. The module is hosted within ‘Windows on Warwickshire’, a site also supporting material about Shakespeare, Warwick Castle, and Compton Verney Art Gallery.

We are also beginning to consider options for the future presentation and promotion of George Eliot. And this brings me neatly to ‘Scenes Revisited’, the celebration of the 150th anniversary of publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. We regard this as an important opportunity to demonstrate that there is potentially a wider interest in George Eliot, both locally and further afield, if there is a coordinated effort to achieve this.

We are therefore delighted to be in partnership with the Fellowship, the Borough Council and the Heritage Forum, as well as other bodies, to develop this celebration. Let me tell you some of the activities that are planned in connection with ‘Scenes Revisited’.

First, as some of you already know, the Fellowship has generously agreed to commission an Anniversary Edition of *Scenes*, to be distributed free to reading groups during 2007. The Library service currently supports around 90 reading groups in Warwickshire, and we will be promoting this offer to them and distributing the books as required. We hope that this will create a great deal of interest in George Eliot, and that we can capture some of this through an on-line discussion.

There are many expert and informative speakers about George Eliot, and we hope to present some of these at public meetings in the Library and other venues, such as Compton Verney. The Borough Council is adding to its annual programme of George Eliot tours, encouraging more people to visit the key locations in *Scenes*, many of which are still visible today.

The Library Service has invested in a circulating collection of the works, and this will tour the county during 2007 (and beyond), supporting special events and ensuring that all parts of Warwickshire are able to share in the anniversary celebrations. Meanwhile the County Record Office will produce a touring exhibition to illustrate social conditions of the time described in *Scenes*, using the records compiled by church and secular officials from the Nuneaton area.

We are also in discussion with schools and colleges to engage their pupils and students. We hope they will use creative arts and media to produce their own responses to George Eliot and her work.

These ambitious plans are of course partly dependent on securing project funds, and a major task for the partnership is to complete and submit an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund, likely to be the major funding partner for the festival. This is well in hand.
I hope that on this basis you feel that the Library and Information Service, and other partners, are fully committed to improving the appreciation and understanding of George Eliot, as both a remarkable writer and a remarkable woman. It therefore gives me very great pleasure to ask you to raise your glass 'to the Immortal Memory'.