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George Eliot Birthday Luncheon, 25 November 2007 - The Toast to the Immortal Memory

Roger Simmonds

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am extremely grateful to you for inviting me here today to give this speech on George Eliot’s Birthday. It is a real pleasure and very flattering: I hope I can live up to expectations.

If you had told me a year ago that I would be standing before you all now as Project Officer for the 150th anniversary celebrations of George Eliot’s first work of fiction, I would have been surprised to say the least! For somebody who values literature as much as I do, who greatly admires the work of George Eliot, and who loves seeing people enjoy our culture and heritage, it has been a truly thrilling job to take on. I am aware also that many of the people I have been working with are volunteers and have not had the privilege to be paid for pursuing the activities they enjoy. In this sense too, I have been very fortunate to be in the position I am. Of course, soon I will have moved to new territory – I don’t know where yet – and can only hope that I will be lucky enough to move into a similar position. This one, however, will take some beating!

Before I talk about the festival, I would like to tell you a bit about how I got to know and enjoy George Eliot’s fiction, and also to tell you about a prophetic experience I had involving The Mill on the Floss which, I think, foreshadows my experiences with the festival.

I have not always been an ‘Eliotic’ person, if that is the correct term to use. Although I had completed a degree in English at Swansea, it was not until 2001 that I first read a book by George Eliot. I no doubt would have got to her sooner or later, but I always preferred twentieth-century writers to nineteenth-century ones – people like D. H. Lawrence and George Orwell – probably because I was at that stage of life where you value controversy over sensitivity, and strong judgements over sympathy. As a consequence, I had not read much that had been written before 1900. However, it was my girlfriend (now my wife) who insisted that I read George Eliot’s Middlemarch in the summer of 2001, describing with great relish its superb canvas of life, its panoramic vision of a buzzing Victorian town, its sense of the myriad interactions of people as they go about their ordinary lives, and its emphasis on the great value that all our good acts have no matter how small. It was, she said, her favourite novel, and this was saying something for somebody who had read more novels by the age of 16 than most people read in a lifetime. Real evidence of her precociousness was brought home to me on one occasion when she said that she did not discover until the age of about fourteen that ‘The Ring Cycle’ was an opera by Wagner - she had foolishly thought it referred to The Lord of the Rings! Of course, all teenagers should know their Wagner! (You can imagine that I have had an inferiority complex ever since.) Anyway, in this context you can see that her remarks on George Eliot were praise indeed, and a recommendation not to be ignored.

Sure enough, I absolutely loved Middlemarch and in many ways it converted me to the nineteenth-century novel. It seems braver to me than a lot of other English fiction, more like a Russian or German novel than an English one – eager to say something about society and
engage with some big ideas.

It was only a couple of years later that I found myself teaching *The Mill on the Floss* at the University of Nottingham whilst a PhD student there. This was to give me a hint of the challenge that I would be facing a few years later when attempting to attract new audiences to George Eliot with the ‘Scenes Revisited’ festival.

*The Mill on the Floss* was one of many novels on a first year course at the University introducing students to the English novel. Each novel had one tutorial devoted to it, so it was always a challenge to pack in as much as possible in the time allotted. Perhaps it was because we were near the end of the course – and the term – and the students were becoming fatigued with reading a new novel every week. In any case, on asking the students at the beginning of the class to turn to a particular passage in the novel, to my great horror I discovered that nobody in the class had brought the novel with them! I am sure that, had she been given the opportunity, George Eliot would have cast me in a somewhat ridiculous light, desperately trying to convince an indifferent bunch of teenagers of the nobility of great literature whilst admonishing them in a pompous but utterly ineffectual manner. In fact, since they evidently had not read the book and I had no intention of spoon-feeding them, I was indeed forced to send them away after a brief lecture conveying my teacherly indignation, so that – sadly – the students did not have their class on *The Mill on the Floss*. The sad thing about this was that the students themselves lost out on a great reading experience. It is also ironic that one of the outstanding features of the novel is its powerful commentary on the oppressive effects of denying people education. I hope that some of the students pick up the novel in later life. Little did I know, though, that this was a taste of future challenges! Encouraging people to experience the joys of reading and the powerful ways in which it can change your views of society and of life, is a very difficult task. I feel, however, looking at the numbers of people new to George Eliot coming to the festival’s events, that we have had some success in reaching out to people in this way. Moreover, the effect of the dramatic performances by George Eliot Community School and King Edward College on the students themselves, their peers, siblings, and parents, cannot be denied. I like to joke that if you want to show a teenager the value of something, all you need to do is get their ego involved in some way – and of course asking them to star in their own show is the perfect method for doing that. But seriously, it has been uplifting to see young people, amongst others, getting excited about George Eliot. I think that we often expect rather a lot from young people, and it is easy to forget that they work all day at school on so many different subjects only to go home to a pile of homework in the evenings and at weekends. It is sometimes quite reasonable that they should not want to spend their spare time immersed in more books, such is the exacting nature of their lives. Of course, a similar problem arises with working adults who often say to me that there is not enough time in the day to read, although they would love to find that time. I think that it would be very beneficial if we had a little more time in general to reflect on life through such activities as reading or producing works of art ourselves. The Council has of course received my proposal for a twenty-eight hour week and it is currently being given serious consideration! Joking apart, projects such as these set themselves very worthy but challenging targets and we are up against some real obstacles.

Of course, the organization of the festival was not without its difficulties. To give you a flavour of the kind of problems encountered, I might simply mention the phrase ‘risk assessments’.
Risk assessments reveal all kinds of potentially disastrous scenarios, and it may be that once a risk assessment of an event is completed, you may reasonably decide that the event is not worth putting on at all. Even the tickets represent a lethal hazard with their sharp edges; food and drink are completely out of the question with the number of allergies around nowadays; and rooms must be hermetically sealed to avoid the dissemination of harmful bacteria. The golden rule of all event organization is this: if at all possible, avoid organizing events.

Naturally, there have been personality clashes too, as there always are when ‘strong personalities’, as John has euphemistically called them, come together. Whispered threats in secluded corridors regarding the distribution of the festival programmes; attempts to sabotage one another’s events through ruthless subterfuge; the underhand manipulation of politically powerful Fellowship members; and secret plans laid for the hostage-taking of key speakers – all of which is in the natural course of things with a festival involving ‘strong personalities’, and I need to say no more about the matter.

I know that you will also want to know about any cock-ups that occurred during the festival. I am happy to say that these were few in number and small in significance. However, there may be a couple worth mentioning for your amusement. There was, for example, the unfortunate mistake of Waterstone’s in neglecting to have someone at the door to take ticket money! At least the error helped to make the event more accessible! At Brenda Evans’s talk at the new Camp Hill library, we arrived to find that the whole area was shrouded in darkness because of a power cut. It looked as if it might be a candlelit talk for a moment, but the gods were clearly on our side because the lights came on a few minutes before people began to arrive. Then there was the launch of the bus advertising campaign when the driver brought the bus along to the town hall apparently without the advert. When I asked the driver if the advert was on the other side of the bus, he told me not to bother looking because he knew that it was not there. I am sorry to say that I was not sufficiently sceptical of him, and discovered when it was too late that he was fibbing and simply could not be bothered to turn the bus around! Fortunately, we managed to re-arrange the photo opportunity for another time.

I know that I am not exactly an impartial observer of the festival, but I think I can say that it has been a real success. I know that our evaluation forms, which everyone has been very patient about filling out time and time again, have revealed that we have attracted a lot of new people to George Eliot and the area’s heritage sites. Several of the heritage sites taking part in the Heritage Open Days weekend attracted double the number of people they normally attract, and this was entirely due to the festival. About 2,000 people attended the events that weekend, whilst almost all of the other festival events played to full houses! More importantly, the responses have been extremely positive, both on the evaluation forms and in the verbal feedback we have personally received. It is incredibly rewarding to be told by someone that they thought an event a tremendous success and that they really enjoyed it. Helping to organize such enjoyable experiences for people has been a true pleasure for all of us involved. I personally got a lot of enjoyment from seeing the events myself as well as thinking up original ways of marketing them (I was especially proud of the George Eliot-themed beer and accompanying beer mats and pub quiz). I thought that Brenda Evans’s talk at Camp Hill told the story of George Eliot beautifully; Joan Bunn and Rose Selwyn’s coach tours were met, as ever, with a wonderful response (I should add that my mother-in-law particularly enjoyed the
tour); Andrew Davies seemed to make everyone laugh with his edgy and charismatic performance, amusingly ‘cocking’ several ‘snooks’ at some of the people he has worked with; and Kathryn Hughes entertained us hugely with the unusual story of George Eliot as a housekeeper and, surprisingly, Mrs Beeton as a very undomesticated goddess! These are of course just a few of the fantastic events that have been held over the last few months, and I can safely say that every one of them deserves praise. Unfortunately I do not have time here to speak of every one of them – there are simply too many!

I want to finish by paying tribute to a few people who have been absolutely crucial in ensuring the project’s success.

First of all, I should pay an official tribute to Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and the ‘Scenes Revisited’ Management Group, comprised of John Burton of the George Eliot Fellowship, Richard Drakeley of Warwickshire County Council, Janet Stubbs of Nuneaton and Bedworth Heritage Forum, Louise Essex of Warwickshire Libraries, Rose Selwyn of the Borough Council, and Catherine Nisbet and Erika Scotto of Nuneaton Museum & Art Gallery. The Borough Council’s work has of course been crucial in obtaining the necessary Heritage Lottery Funding and in supporting the project throughout, whilst the Partnership members have worked hard together to create a successful festival. We are also very grateful indeed for the financial support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, which brought the festival project into being.

I would like, however, to thank two members of the Management Group in particular. Rose Selwyn has been a total rock of support for me and a mine of information too for contacts. If you want to do anything in Nuneaton, whether it be organizing a fete for Polish immigrants or a teddy bear’s picnic, Rose can tell you whom to contact, how to go about it, and how she went about it herself in 1922. She has clearly had a huge impact on Nuneaton and the borough because she can’t walk down the street without bumping into someone she knows and has worked with in some way. This can of course be a problem, because when she goes out to lunch or on a work-related errand you never quite know when she will return! I do know, however, that the energy and effort which she has put into the festival have been enormous, and nobody can exaggerate Rose’s contribution to raising the profile of the author we are here today to honour.

I would also like to say a special thank you to John Burton who seems to me to be kind of human dynamo! I saw that my proposal of a twenty-eight hour week brought a ghostly pallor to his face just now – a truly horrific idea for a man who finds it hard to limit himself to 60 hours a week! Fortunately for him, in retirement he has the freedom to work much harder than anyone in employment.

John is a person who has committed himself to work tirelessly for George Eliot, and the borough’s local heritage. Words cannot adequately describe the effect he has had on local people’s lives, their understanding of local history and their awareness of George Eliot. His devotion to the festival, both at planning stage and in its delivery, has been tremendous. I calculated that he has been involved heavily in about a third of all of the events organized and has attended all events which he has been physically capable of attending – in other words, he has only not attended those events which would have entailed him being in two places at once. In a future age, it will no doubt be possible to be in two places at once, and such an innovation
would not be unsuited to John’s character. I am glad, however, for his wife’s sake, that he is as yet unable to perform such fantastical feats.

All in all, both Rose and John have been great colleagues to work with – and have a drink with too!

Of course, many more people, most of them volunteers, have helped to create the festival’s events, and these are too numerous to mention. However, I should make it clear that their contributions have really helped to make the festival come alive as a community’s celebration, and they are as important as the big names we have had the good fortune to attract.

We would not be sitting here today, however, had it not been for the decades of work put into establishing George Eliot as a local, national and international figure of importance by Kathleen and Bill Adams and you, the members of the George Eliot Fellowship. It may seem to all of you, on a day-to-day basis, that you do just a little, perhaps (you sometimes feel) not enough, and that what you do has not so very much significance. But were any of you to suggest this to me, I would have to remind you of the words of George Eliot herself regarding Dorothea in her famous conclusion to *Middlemarch*:

> Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

George Eliot, I believe, appreciated the notion of fighting for a good cause, so I conclude unashamedly with something of a ‘rallying cry’. It is worth remembering, I think, that without the Fellowship’s work over the years, fighting for recognition of George Eliot, she might have struggled to maintain any profile in the area. It is vital that we remind ourselves that modern society does not place a very great value on culture and heritage, and that the danger of even George Eliot, Nuneaton’s unique selling point (as they say in the world of marketing), fading into a distant memory is very real. So, as we come to give our gratitude to the person who has brought us all here today and who is the focus of all these celebrations, let us remember in doing so that we cannot be complacent about our heroine’s status. All too often, people will undervalue the worth of a figure who helps to foster in people a real pride in their area and its history, and who has produced some of the finest writing we have. We cannot, therefore, rest on our laurels. The Fellowship has achieved some great successes over the years, and I hope that it will continue to exert itself in promoting George Eliot in the area and beyond. I also hope that I have – in my brief period here at the Borough Council – helped to further your cause.

So let us toast the immortal memory of George Eliot, remembering in doing so both the work towards preserving that memory which we have behind us, and the work that lies ahead of us.

I give you, ladies and gentlemen, the immortal memory of George Eliot.