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## GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON, 24 NOVEMBER 2013 THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

By Sheila Woolf

First of all may I say what an enormous honour it is to be asked to speak on this very special occasion. When John asked me in January what I was doing on 24 November, I was obviously not quick enough to think of a reason to duck out of the responsibility! In fact I wondered he had asked several others more agile with their excuses before he got round to me.

John asked me to speak about 'What George Eliot means to me'. In consequence, my speech will not be an academic one – those who went to the annual conference yesterday will have returned with quite enough food for thought – but a very personal account of George Eliot's significance in my life.

It goes without saying that I was born in George Eliot hospital – or the College for the Poor, Chilvers Coton, in another age. So many people in this room, no doubt, can say the same. I grew up in Bedworth, surrounded by place-names inspired by characters from George Eliot's novels – how could a bookish child like me fail to want to read them? I remember the old library in Bedworth – what a treasure trove it seemed, with its wonderful, polished and creaky staircase leading to yet more riches on the first floor. It was here that I was allowed an adult reading card when I was just nine, as I had worked my way through the children's section by then.

You will guess at what was my first encounter with George Eliot: the marvellous tale of Maggie Tulliver. I'm sure I didn't reach to the heart of the novel at that age! But I was entranced by the character of Maggie, and the story of her misdeeds, especially the cutting of the hair. The brilliant detail of her hide-away in the attic at Griff, far from the adult world, was meat and drink to a child like me. Who could not empathize with her 'fretting out her ill-humours'?

When I was eleven – and I don't know how permission was granted from my parents for this – I was allowed to travel all the way in to Coventry by myself, and go to see George Eliot's school room – Nant Glyn – above Loveitts in Greyfriars Green. Heaven knows what the assistant in the estate agents thought that Saturday morning, when approached by a small girl asking to go up the rickety stairs. But up I went, and marvelled, all alone, at the large old wooden desk and the rows of books. How wonderful it would be to grow up to be a writer, I thought!

Like so many others of you here, I attended Nuneaton High School for Girls, travelling each day via Griff Hollows, or the Red Deeps and 'Shepperton' church – no bypass in those days. Our school carol services were always held at 'Milby' church, and more prosaically, the Wimpy Bar in Church Street, not far from Lawyer Dempster's house, was a very familiar teenage haunt!

And so to university, where I was lucky enough to be able to take a special paper in George Eliot, and where my great luck was to be able to come home in the vacations and make use of the fantastic George Eliot collection at Nuneaton library. What a fantastic resource! It was at this time – perhaps 1972? – that I first joined the George Eliot Fellowship; I remember going on a super trip to the Lakes, to Wordsworth's house, led of course by Kathleen Adams, and being delighted to travel along with a dear former teacher, Dorothy Edmands. What was

striking, though, was that in those days I was the youngest member by about 30 years, and so discontinued my membership. It is a great strength of today's Fellowship that John, Viv, and so many others are bringing a new, young generation to the works of George Eliot and to the Fellowship's activities, and I think it appropriate today that we show our appreciation of their efforts.

In my own teaching career in Coventry it was wonderful to be able to introduce young people to George Eliot, novels such as *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* providing perhaps the perfect introduction, before beginning to scale the giddy heights of *Middlemarch*. Students were, like me, delighted to discover that their school, King Henry VIII School in Coventry, had a special connection to George Eliot through a former headmaster, the Reverend Thomas Sheepshanks, with whom she had studied Greek and Latin. In fact during the final week before I retired, in 2007, I put together a George Eliot study day for Sixth Formers from a number of schools in Coventry, with lectures from Warwick University academics in the morning, followed by a visit to Arbury Hall in the afternoon ... neatly accompanied by boxfuls of free copies of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, of course, supplied free from the Fellowship!

As many of you know, I was lucky enough to be able to celebrate a significant birthday by being the first to stay at Astley Castle last year – a long-held ambition, deriving not just from familiarity with 'Knebley Abbey' itself via George Eliot, but also because of my discovery that her parents were married not long after my own great-great-great-grandparents in 'Knebley Church', both by the Reverend Ebdell – a discovery to set the spine tingling.

And here, begging your forgiveness for this autobiographical account, I come to *What GE Means to Me* ... for I am a Warwickshire lass to my core – when I am dead you may cut open my heart and find *Warwickshire* engraved upon it – proud to belong to the county which produced Shakespeare, Larkin, Drayton and Eliot, among so many others. Now living in what could well be the 'Little Treby' of *Felix Holt* and working as a guide at 'Transome Court', I am absolutely aware of the place of Warwickshire in the heart of George Eliot. Just as the rolling hills of Dorset were all-in-all to Hardy, the craggy fells of Yorkshire to the Brontës, the streets of London and the marshlands of Kent were to Dickens, so what some consider to be the unremarkable landscape of the Warwickshire countryside was the birthplace not just of George Eliot as a person but also as a writer. Yes, there are question-marks about her affection for the places and people she had to leave behind, and yes, one sees the amused irony she often employs in her descriptions of them. Yes, there are differences of critical approach towards her, as there are towards all writers, and she stands up to all of them. Today's birthday luncheon is not the appropriate time to investigate all that. But one only has to listen to the aunts or to Mrs Tulliver or Janet Dempster, or so many other characters to hear the language of North Warwickshire still freshly recalled by the author. Warwickshire, I believe, remained part of George Eliot's DNA.

One final point: I owe my life to George Eliot! Imagine a young girl and her friend, some time in the summer of 1941, deciding to go on a bike ride. 'Where shall we go?' says one. 'Where we always go – the Mill on the Floss' says the other – for such, then, was the local interpretation of Arbury Park. Note that at this time, soldiers of the 1st Battalion the Cambridgeshire Regiment were billeted in Arbury Park before leaving, for a hellish three and a half years, as it turned out, in the Far East. One of these young girls was my mother; one of the soldiers she met there was my father. Subsequently he was to return every Remembrance Sunday for 50 years to 'Paddiford Church', where the battalion had worshipped, to remember

his pals who didn't return, but also to give thanks for 'the girl at the mill on the floss'. So thank you, George Eliot, for bringing these two people together, because otherwise I would not have existed.

And so in proposing a toast to the immortal memory of George Eliot, a Warwickshire writer who means so much to us all, I would like to thank the George Eliot Fellowship and in particular its Council for the terrific work they do in continuing to bring others – in so many ways – to an appreciation of a wonderful writer. Future plans are extraordinary and exciting, and I congratulate them in enabling the immortal dead to live again in minds made better by *their* presence.

I ask you to raise your glasses to toast the immortal memory of George Eliot.