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Obituary 2: Gordon Haight

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OBITUARY

by Margaret Wolfitt

GORDON HAIGHT

In the spring of 1972 when I was making plans to take my one woman version of "The Mill on the Floss" to the Edinburgh Festival fringe I plucked up courage and wrote a letter to Gordon Haight asking his help with some programme notes. I had, of course, read and greatly admired his definitive biography of George Eliot, but I had never met him. Some weeks later I received a telephone call from him. He told me he was in London, he didn't know how he could help me but suggested that I might like to see him at his hotel the following day. I was both excited and very nervous at the prospect of meeting this eminent man. His kindness, humour and charm put me at my ease at once. We had a long talk and he showed a generous interest in what I was doing. He suggested that I might use an extract from the introduction to his edition of "The Mill on the Floss". On his return to the United States he wrote saying that he had been unable to find a copy for me in London, and that he had ordered one to be sent but meanwhile the article had been reprinted in "A Century of George Eliot Criticism". I was extremely grateful for his help and of course used an excerpt in the programme. I later sent him a copy of a notice I received in "The

Scotsman" which I thought might interest him and received a courteous reply.

Two years later my husband and I were to visit New York and I wrote again to Professor Haight expressing the hope that it might be possible to meet him during our stay. In reply we received a generous invitation to stay for the first weekend after our arrival. We accepted and he and his wife gave us a wonderful time at their home in Woodbridge, Connecticut. This then was the beginning of a friendship which I have valued very deeply over the years. Gordon and Mary Haight were always kind and generous not only to me but to my family. We stayed with them and they with us and above all we had great fun together.

Others have written of Gordon's great scholarship, his extraordinary achievements, not only as the biographer and editor of George Eliot's work but also of his writings on other authors and poets and of course as a teacher.

I once asked him, with some trepidation for his comments on an early draft of my biographical programme on George Eliot. I realized that I was taking a potentially dangerous course. It is known that Mary Ann Evans read "Aesop's Fables" as a child and in my programme I had suggested that she might have read one entitled "Brother and Sister". I quoted this story indicating that it was reminiscent of her relationship with her brother Isaac and that it could have influenced her in writing of Tom and Maggie in "The Mill on the Floss". Gordon's first reaction was one of irritation. He told me that George Eliot would never have read that particular edition and dismissed the idea. A few days later I had a call from him to say that he had been to the library and had discovered the date of the edition and that it was in fact possible for her to have seen a copy. I was deeply touched and humbled by this example of his integrity and generosity of spirit.

"He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again." I am honoured to have had his friendship and I shall miss him greatly.