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WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH-LAYING - June 18th 1988

Our Guest of Honour was JENNIFER UGLOW whose book GEORGE ELIOT was published in 1987 in the Virago Pioneers series. She gave the following Address:

In June 1856 George and Marian Lewes (for it would not yet be right to call her 'George Eliot') were staying in North Devon. While George was collecting specimens on the beach, Marian was preoccupied with work for the Westminster Review, her 'Belles Lettres' column and her famous article on W. H. Riehl, 'The Natural History of German Life', which, she wrote, 'I worked at considerably *a contretemps*, despairing of its ever being worth anything', But by this day, the 18th June, she was enjoying a splendid sense of freedom and a desire to turn to a different world, as she explains in her journal; 'When at last, by the 17th June both my articles were dispatched, I felt delightfully at liberty and determined to pay some attention to sea-weeds which I had never seen in such beauty as Ilfracombe.'

She describes, with a sense of excitement, and with typical attention to detail and to the processes of change and growth, the beautiful forms of algae in the rock pools, which were new to her, for she had previously explored only chalky or sandy shores. Now, having finished her work, she was at last able to look deeper, beyond the commonplace.

'I had not yet learned to look for the rarer Rhodospiraeae under the olive and green weeds at the surface. These tidepools made one quite in love with sea-weeds, in spite of the disagreeable impurity with which they are made to ask us from shop-windows "Call us not weeds", so I took up Landsborough's book and tried to get a little more light on their structure and history.'

But even while she had been tied to her article, seaside scrambles were interspersed with 'delicious inland walks'. Marian's favourite walk was across the hills to Lee with its spreading views of crouching tors, golden furze, cliffs, moors and sea. But almost more fascinating than the broad sweep of skyline was the enclosed lane leading down to the hamlet nestling in its deep valley, 'the great charm of this road, as of all Devonshire lanes, is the springs that you detect gushing in shady recesses covered with liverwort, with here and there waving tufts of fern and other broad leaved plants that love obscurity and moisture. Springs are sacred places for those who love and reverence Nature'.

This tiny passage is like a foretaste of her fiction, with its accuracy, sensitivity and awareness of living organisms clustered together, dependent on their habitat and, beyond that, on deeper, mysterious springs. Her novels too were to widen out from tales of 'unfashionable families' living, like the ferns in relative obscurity, and crying out, like the sea-weeds "Call us not weeds". In Ilfracombe she took pleasure in learning the names of each plant, of probing into the history of species, and examining their relationship within a wider pattern.

We tend to look back on great writers through the gates of death, scanning their achievement backwards, as it were, dominated by the impression created by major works. But today I should like to see George Eliot not as famous author, sybil or sage, but as these journals show her - a woman at a moment of balance, excited by discovery, full of curiosity, energy and personal happiness. She had already achieved an extraordinary amount, as translator, editor and critic but the writings of June (both the Riehl article and the personal memories) seem to promise something greater, richer, lying ahead, just out of sight.

As a girl of eighteen, ambitious, constrained, nursing her father in his final illness she had described herself thus, in a letter to Sara Hennell: 'Poor pebble as I am, left entangled among the

slimy weeds, I can yet hear from afar the rushing of the blessed torrent and rejoice that it is there to bathe and brighten other pebbles less unworthy of the polishing'.

The spring she so loved, beneath the Devon hedge, reminds us of the waters which flow - literally and metaphorically, 'sometimes 'sacred' and sometimes terrible - through all her novels. At Tenby, where the Lewes's moved on 26th June, the spring of her own hidden genius began to flow. The summer, she said, brought her to the brink of 'a new era in my life for it was then I began to write fiction'. Appropriately, in another moment of balance, between sleeping and waking, she gave a name to what was to be her first story, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton'.

It is in her enjoyment of these summer days of experiment and exploration, this time of new awakening, that I should like, with all of you here, to remember George Eliot today.

Reference: Journal extracts: The George Eliot Letters edited by
Gordon S.Haight, Vol. II pp. 244-6
Letter extracts: Vol. I p.274