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Jonathan Owry and Margaret Wolfit at the 1988 Birthday Luncheon

GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON - 20th. November 1988
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY by Margaret Wolfit

In May 1869 George Eliot received what she described as “a really noble letter from the American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe full of admiration of Silas Marner The Mill on the Floss and Adam Bede” and although they never met, there seems to have been some deep affinity of feeling between these two eminent women that drew them closely together in spite of diversity of intellectual tastes.

In reply to that first letter George Eliot wrote:- “Letters are necessarily narrow and fragmentary, and when one writes on wide subjects, are likely to create more misunderstanding than illumination. But I have little anxiety in writing to you, dear friend and fellow labourer; for you have had longer experience than I as a writer, and fuller experience as a woman, since you have born children and known a mother’s history from the beginning. I trust your quick and long taught mind as an interpreter little liable to mistake me .

When you say “We live in an orange grove, and are planting more and when I think you must have abundant family love to cheer you, it seems to me that you must have a paradise about you. But no list of circumstance will make a paradise. Nevertheless, I must believe that the joyous, tender humour of your books clings about your more immediate life, and makes some of that sunshine for yourself, which you have given to us.”

A few months later George Eliot had occasion to write again, this time in admiration of “Old Town Folks”, Harriet’s new book of short fireside stories, which had been sent to her.

"I think few of your many readers can have felt more interest than I have felt in that picture of an elder generation, for my interest has a double root; one is my love for our old fashioned provincial life which had its affinities with a contemporary life - even all across the Atlantic, and of which I have gathered glimpses in different phases, from my father and mother with their relatives; the other is my experimental acquaintance with some shades of Calvinistic orthodoxy. I think your way of presenting the religious convictions which are not your own except by indirect fellowship is a triumph of insight and true tolerance. A thorough comprehension of the mixed moral influence shed on society by dogmatic systems is rare even among writers, and one misses it altogether in English drawing room talk. I thank you for the gift (in every sense) of this book, which I can see has been a labour of love."

In the winter of 1872 Harriet wrote a letter to Marian.

"One thing brings you back to me. I am now in Florida in my little hut in the orange orchard, with the broad expanse of the blue St John's in front, and the waving of the live-oaks, with their long, gray mosses overhead, and the bright gold of oranges looking through dusky leaves around. It is like Sorrento - so like that I can dream of being there. And when I get here, I enter another like. The world recedes, I am out of it, it ceases to influence: its bustle and noise die away in the far distance, and here is no winter, an open air life - a quaint, rude, wild wilderness sort of life, both rude and rich; but when I am here I write more letters to friends than ever I do elsewhere. The mail comes only twice a week and then is the event of the day."

In the autumn of that same year Harriet wrote from Boston on reading "Middlemarch"

"Yesterday, we were both out of our senses with mingled pity and indignation at that dreadful stick of a Casaubon - and think of poor Dorothea dashing like a warm, sunny wave against so cold repulsive a rock! He is a little too dreadful for anything: there does not seem to be a drop of warm blood in him, and so, as it is his misfortune and not his fault to be cold blooded, one must not get angry with him. It is the scene in the garden, after the interview with the doctor, that rests on our mind at this present. There was such a man as he over in Boston, high in literary circles, but I fancy his wife wasn't like Dorothea and a vastly proper time they had of it, treating each other with mutual reverence, like two Chinese Mandarins. My love, what I miss in this story is just what we would have if you would come to our tumbledown jolly, improper, but joyous country - namely "jollitude". You write and live on so high a plane! It is all self abnegation. We want to get you over here, and into this house, where with closed doors, we sometimes make the rafters ring with fun and say anything and everything, no matter what, and wont be any properer than we's a mind to."

Marian never crossed the Atlantic but this friendship by correspondence endured until her death and seems to have been an outlet for both women in times of trouble with the assurance, always, of a sympathetic ear. Finally, two excerpts which illustrate the breadth of humanity apparent in both these great artists.

H.B.S. Orange blossom time Mandarin March 18th 1876

"It seems now but a little time since my brother Henry and I were young people together. He was my two years junior, and nearest companion out of seven brothers and three sisters. I taught him drawing and heard his Latin lessons, for you know a girl becomes mature and womanly long before a boy. I saw him through college, and helped him through the difficult love affair that gave him his wife; and then he and my husband had a real German, enthusiastic love for each other, which ended in making me a wife, Ah, in those days we never dreamed that he, or I or any of us were to be known in the world. All he seemed then was a boy full of fun, full of love, full of enthusiasm

for protecting abused and righting wronged people, which made him in those early days write editorials, and wear arms and swear himself a special policeman to protect the poor negroes in Cincinnati, where we then lived, when there were mobs instigated by the slave holders of Kentucky.

Then he married, and lived a missionary life in the new West, all with a joyousness, an enthusiasm, a chivalry, which made life bright and vigorous to us both. Then in time he was called to Brooklyn, just as the crisis of the great anti-slavery battle came on, and the fugitive Slave Law was passed. I was then in Maine and I well remember one snowy night his riding till midnight to see me, and then our talking, till near morning, what we could do to make headway against the horrid cruelties that were being practiced against the defenceless blacks. My husband was then away lecturing, and my heart was burning itself out in indignation and anguish. Henry told me then that he meant to fight that battle in New York; that he would have a church that would stand by him to resist the tyrannic dictation of Southern slaveholders. I said "I too have begun, to do something; I have begun a story, trying to set forth the sufferings and wrongs of the slaves." "That's right Hattie" he said, "finish it," and so came "Uncle Tom's cabin" and Plymouth Church became a stronghold where the slave always found refuge and a strong helper. One morning my brother found sitting on his doorstep poor old Paul Admonson, weeping; his two daughters, of sixteen and eighteen, had passed into the slave warehouse of Bruin & Hill and were to be sold. My brother took the man by the hand to a public meeting, told his story for him, and in an hour raised the two thousand dollars to redeem his children.....And now I am beginning to hear from you every month in "Harpers". It is as good as a letter. "Daniel Deronda" has succeeded in awaking in my somewhat worn out mind an interest. So many stories are tramping over one's mind in every modern magazine nowadays that one is macadamized - so to speak. It takes something unusual to make a sensation. This does excite and interest me, as I wait each number with eagerness."

October 29th 76. from *George Eliot*.

As to the Jewish element in "Deronda". I expected from first to last in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance and even repulsion that it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews, is - I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews; western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called "educated" making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. And I find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek. To my feeling, this deadness to the history which has prepared half our world for us, this inability to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as our own, lies very close to the worst kind of irreligion.

Sources "George Eliot" Letters & Journals" edited by Gordon S Haight. and Harriet Beecher Stowe's letters from "The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe compiled from her letters and Journals" by Charles Edward Stowe.