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## George Eliot in South Africa

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## Margaret Wolfit

### GEORGE ELIOT IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1992 I made my first visit to South Africa. I had always wanted to see for myself what life was like there and come to my own conclusions. It was an extraordinary time to visit. Mandela had been released from gaol and a referendum of the whites was announced while we were there. The scene was changing - everywhere people seemed aware of the evils of apartheid, and that things must and would change. My invitation to give readings and speak about George Eliot came directly from that first visit, I was asked to give a course at the 1993 Summer School at Cape Town University. It was a challenge I couldn't refuse. I'm not an academic and I didn't know what to expect. My course was scheduled for 9.15 a.m. so that it could inaugurate the second week of the Summer School. Here are a few excerpts from the diary I kept then.

#### **Saturday January 23rd, 93 Cape Town.**

Did a dummy run in the car to see the lay of the land. The University is in two parts. The Upper Campus with original buildings and imposing statue of Cecil Rhodes. There is a wonderful view of the Western Cape from the steps leading to the main buildings. A tunnel under Rhodes Drive, the main N2 Trunk Road, links the Upper and Middle campus. I am to give my course in the Education block which is a modern building and part of the middle campus. Found Lecture theatre 1 by walking down a couple of levels from the entrance. I felt excited but very nervous! A man sitting outside the Lecture theatre turned out to be Tony Saddington. We introduced ourselves - As there was a lecture in progress it was impossible to have a look. Drove around to get a better measure of parking facilities as like all Universities the layout is complicated.

#### **Monday D Day!**

Parked car in P3 as instructed with my red disc in a prominent position on dash board. Car Park pretty full even at 8.45 a.m. Met Tony Saddington and Librarian who was to introduce me. Felt a long way from home! It is a large lecture theatre and seemed full, mostly middle aged to elderly audience, predominantly female and one nun. No blacks or coloured which disappointed me as it is a multi-racial University and the summer school open to all races but I suppose the cost would preclude many. I was miked and introduced. Once I started I felt better. A very perceptive intelligent audience and wonderful on comedy - lots of laughs for the auctioneer in *Middlemarch*. Today was mainly on G. E.'s life. Finished rather before the hour and asked for questions. One woman said I didn't need a mike as I knew how to use my voice which was gratifying! Afterwards a number of people came up to talk. Apparently Newdigate is a well-known name in Knysna and Grahamstown - early settlers. I had coffee in the Staff room afterwards and met Penny Morrell who deals with the Extra-Mural activities. Everyone is very friendly. They are showing the Television *Silas Marner* at lunch time today. A letter from South African Broadcasting to ring Marilyn Holloway. Have arranged an interview for Friday.

#### **Tuesday**

Today worked on *The Mill on the Floss* decided to try without a mike for a short time, then

ask if everyone could hear. One woman said 'No' so I switched it on and will use it in future! Back projection on the screen was advertising sale of TEE shirts etc – glad it was turned off before I started. Think I may have made a mistake in not bringing slides! Ah well! Very responsive audience again they anticipate the humour. A woman came up before I started with a passage from a book by C. Heilbron (U.S.A) which I thought relevant so read it out. People start to move off near the hour mark to get to other lectures, it's a big building and there's a lot of walking. I had a talk in the Staff common room at coffee time with two black lecturers who are giving courses in Xhosa. One of them had read *The Mill on the Floss* at school and had used a quotation of Mr Tulliver's on education as an introduction to his thesis. He had enjoyed the book but found it too sad.

### Wednesday

Today was 'Parents and Children' - 'The Italian Connection'. Read from *Romola* and *Deronda* put in the context of parents and children. On reflection the *Romola* was too long ... I couldn't get through the whole of the *Deronda* passage ... However there was good applause at the end so felt it had gone reasonably well. *Romola* seems to be the novel people know least and I may have overdone the length! Paid a visit to the bank after the morning session and sat next to a young black student and asked him what he was studying. He told me he was in his third year studying Social services. I asked him how he planned to use his degree. He said 'child welfare'. I told him how appalled I had been at the townships outside Cape Town. He said it was frightening and that it would take a long time. As I left I wished him luck.

### Thursday

G. E. & G.H.L.: 'Woman's role in Victorian England'. There doesn't seem to have been a falling off of numbers, which is pleasing. One or two people came up to me afterwards. One grey-haired man said that I had answered questions he would have asked i.e. G.E. in relation to Science. He was amazed at G.E.'s knowledge of medicine in *Middlemarch* etc - that she clearly learnt from G.H.L.'s knowledge on the subject and I suppose sitting side by side in one room while he made experiments – She must have! A lady came to show me a copy of *Being and Doing – a selection of helpful thoughts* dated 1917, Simonstown. I had found a copy of this dated 1910 among my grandmother's possessions. I had been surprised to find a great number of Eliot quotations in it and had mentioned it as an illustration of how G.E. had overcome the stigma of living with Lewes all those years. Extraordinary to find a copy here. Chatted to one or two people in cafeteria and somebody said 'It's a really wonderful course' which really thrilled me!

### Friday

Last session. A number of people came up before I started to thank me for the course, which really made it seem worthwhile. I'm not an academic and was worried how people would react – however, I'm sure that there will be some who wanted a different approach! Another came up with a card of a windmill as a thank you from a group of them. I discussed Shakespeare and Eliot country today and admitted to my parentage, it seemed appropriate in the context ( I had been asked to mention it). Read the passage from *Adam Bede* - Hetty in prison. There was applause at the end. I have really felt that people here

have been starved of culture. Apartheid has been a dreadful thing for them in so many ways. They have felt their isolation acutely.

I left rather more time for questions and finished about five or six minutes after the hour. A number of people came up afterwards to say 'Thank You'. One man told me his mother had died giving birth to him - the first book his father gave him as a boy was *The Mill on the Floss*. He came from Grahamstown - a sad story. Another lady asked me to tea but as we are leaving tomorrow that won't be possible and another said 'Please come back and perhaps you could do some Shakespeare!' It's been a rewarding experience though I am sorry there weren't any blacks among the group. Tony Saddington came to say 'Goodbye' and 'Go Well', which was nice of him.

On the Friday after my last session I was interviewed by Marilyn Holloway of South African Broadcasting. As we arrived at the Studios the Television in the reception area was showing Cape Town's Opening of Parliament with F.W. de Klerk announcing the future General Election of one man one vote . . . An historic moment in South Africa's history.