

11-21-1999

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Hughes, Kathryn, "George Eliot Birthday Luncheon: The Toast to The Immortal Memory 1999" (1999). *The George Eliot Review*. 335. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/335>

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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON
21 November 1999
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY
by Kathryn Hughes

It is a tremendous honour to be talking to you today. When I first started work on my biography of George Eliot back in 1993 I never imagined that I would one day be celebrating her birthday with the people to whom her life and work mean so much, the members of the George Eliot Fellowship.

Of course, when I began my research all those years ago, I knew that I would be learning about one of the greatest literary artists of the nineteenth century. But what I hadn't anticipated was just how modern and relevant George Eliot's work would turn out to be to the way we live now, in the closing weeks of the twentieth century.

Only last week I saw an advertisement in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* which used Eliot's suggestion that 'the strongest principle of growth lies in human choice' as a way of plugging a particular brand of computer software. Banal and even tasteless though this hi-jacking of Eliot's moral authority might be, it does suggest how powerfully her work resonates in our own time. For while Eliot's fiction was written well over a century ago, its subjects and sensibilities strike me as absolutely modern. Indeed, in those eight sublime novels, which stretch from *Scenes of Clerical Life* to *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot deals with nothing less than the universal business of being human.

Take *Scenes of Clerical Life*, her first piece of fiction. Amos Barton is a man whom we have all met, a man who doesn't realize how much he loves his wife until it is almost too late. And then there's Caterina Sarti, a girl who can't help pursuing a man who is bad for her, even though a far kinder and more appropriate suitor is standing in the wings. And what could be more contemporary than the story of Janet Dempster, a woman struggling with both a violent husband and her own dependence on alcohol?

In her next book, *Adam Bede*, Eliot warns us about the dangers of retreating into fantasy as a way of avoiding the responsibilities of our everyday lives. In an age of celebrity-worship, when magazines like *Hello* and *OK!* crowd the newsstands, Hetty Sorrel's delusion that she will be able to transform her existence by marrying the young squire has never seemed more painfully real.

The Mill on the Floss, meanwhile, tackles that perennially difficult problem of girls' education. We might think that Maggie Tulliver's dilemma no longer exists. These days, thank heavens, clever girls receive exactly the same educational opportunities as their brothers. Indeed, they outstrip boys at GCSE and A Level, right up to university entrance. Yet something happens when it comes to all-important university finals, that make-or-break moment which determines whether one carries around the label of First, Second or Third class for the rest of one's life. Boys do both brilliantly and badly in their university exams, taking the majority of firsts and thirds. Girls, meanwhile, huddle together in the solid-but-uninspiring upper second category.

The reason for this, say educationalists, is that girls lack that capacity for intellectual risk which produces first-rate exam papers. Are they right? If so, should we change the way we evaluate university students so that girls get an equal chance to shine with boys? Then again, is it not patronizing to suggest that young women need special consideration if they are to excel? I don't know the answer to these questions, but they strike me as the same ones which the schoolmaster Mr Stelling wrestles with in *The Mill on the Floss* as he tries to rationalize why the intellectually undistinguished Tom Tulliver is constantly outstripped by his quick-witted younger sister.

'Mr Stelling,' ... [Maggie] said, that same evening, when they were in the drawing-room, 'couldn't I do Euclid, and all Tom's lessons, if you were to teach me instead of him?' 'No; you couldn't,' said Tom, indignantly. 'Girls can't do Euclid: can they, sir?' 'They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say,' said Mr Stelling. 'They've a great deal of superficial cleverness: but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow'. (*The Mill on The Floss*, Book Second, Chapter 1)

In her next novel, *Silas Marner*, Eliot tackles two topics which are central to the way we live now. The first, of course, is the changing shape of family life, and the issue of who is the best person to bring up a child – a natural but chaotic mother, a worthy would-be adoptive mother, or a middle-aged man who is no relation but who has actually done the hard work of raising the child as his own.

The book also deals with the corrupting effect of wealth. At the beginning of the story Silas has accumulated a small fortune, but lost his soul in the process. It is only when his pile of gold is taken from him, and substituted with a living, breathing baby that he regains his humanity. At a time when the national lottery and programmes like 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?' are dominating both the schedules and the headlines, I think we could do much worse than turn to Eliot for guidance about how to handle our most material cravings.

Felix Holt, too, offers an important warning. It might seem as if there is nothing for us to learn from a novel concerned with corruption during the General Election of 1832. But I'm talking to you at the end of a week in which there have been fresh revelations about the lengths to which the Labour leadership will go in order to keep a particular candidate out of the contest for London Mayor. And today's papers are splashed with a scandal concerning a former Conservative MP who is accused of lying under oath. Headlines like these should remind us not to take the democratic process for granted. We too easily assume that because we enjoy universal suffrage our political system cannot be manipulated by sectional interests. Indeed, we are so complacent that sometimes we don't even bother to turn out to vote. Reading *Felix Holt* reminds us that true democracy is a fragile privilege to be protected and preserved at all costs.

Towards the end of her career, in 1876, Eliot published *Daniel Deronda*. At first glance it isn't clear why the story of how one young Englishman came to learn and act upon his Jewish heritage should be of interest to gentile readers, either then or now. But Eliot wanted to set out a model of the particular kind of moral and national regeneration which she believed Britain

needed as it lurched towards the end of the century. The Jewish state which Deronda intends to build in Palestine will have none of the fierce exclusiveness associated with Zionism, but will incorporate instead a blend of 'separateness and communication'. A renewed connection with inherited spiritual and cultural values will in turn allow for open dialogue with other groups and nations.

More than any other writer of her time, Eliot understood the power of nationalism for both good and evil. She recognized its potential for regenerating a people and a culture, as well as its capacity to promote insularity, disagreement and even war. In the last ten years we have seen terrible devastation in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union as people split into tribal groupings. Indeed, this morning's headlines announce yet more suffering in Chechnya. And in Britain, too, we have hardly been immune from these tensions. Northern Ireland has seen decades of slaughter, Scotland and Wales years of resentment. Do the present constitutional developments, which recognize the distinct political and cultural identities of the Celtic fringes, represent an end to those conflicts, or simply the beginning of the break up of the United Kingdom? I don't know, of course, but I'm quite certain that every nuance and angle of the debate was anticipated by George Eliot as she sent Daniel Deronda away from a sluggish and enervated Britain to found a new Jewish state in the East.

Before Daniel Deronda, Eliot published *Middlemarch*. Is it the best novel in the English language? Is it, as Virginia Woolf said, the only real novel for grown ups? Yes, I think so. Indeed, I believe that *Middlemarch* is nothing less than a handbook for Life itself. Inside you will find guidelines on everything. How not to pick a husband, a horse or a career. Why you should never let your spending run away with you (if Rosamond were alive today, she would surely be in trouble with her credit card company). What happens when you try to outrun your past.

That makes *Middlemarch* sound preachy. It isn't, of course. In fact, it's the most hopeful book I know because it is about second chances. Dorothea gets another go at marriage, Fred finds the right career, Bulstrode learns that there is forgiveness. These are the kind of small but priceless pieces of good fortune which we need as much today as we ever did over a hundred years ago. And it is with that sense of the absolute and continuing relevance of her work that I ask you to join me in a toast to the immortal memory of George Eliot.