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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY

20 JUNE 2002

The Guest of Honour was Miss Margaret Wolfitt, a Vice President of the Fellowship, whose address took the form of 'A Letter to George Eliot'.

Dear George Eliot

You don't know me – but I have been a great admirer of yours for a long time now, since I was at school in fact. I must have been very young when I first had parts of your novels read to me. Later when I was at boarding school I studied *Silas Marner* for a literature exam – I can't recall my reaction to other authors at the time – but I know I wrote a letter home saying I thought George Eliot must be a wonderful person because my mother kept the letter.

After leaving school, I went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and subsequently became an actress, not surprising, coming from a theatrical background. A number of years later I spent a period working abroad and during that time was asked to give solo recitals of poetry and drama. It was whilst in Australia that I conceived the idea of writing a programme based on a female author. I explored a number of possibilities. Why did I choose you? I think, at the time, your work was rather neglected. You were sometimes thought of as long-winded, ponderous and humourless, but I felt a great sympathy with your humanity. I have to say that, at the time, I did not think of you as a writer of comedy, but I found wonderful passages of humour and humorous characterization which often surprised me and always delighted me. I often found myself laughing out loud.

I read your novels avidly, and finally decided that *The Mill On The Floss* seemed to be the most autobiographical and suitable for dramatization as a one-woman show for the theatre. So, I had the temerity to sit down and adapt it. It was quite an undertaking as you can imagine. To condense the novel to just under two hours – forced to miss out some people's favourite passages and even characters – and yet keep the story-line was no easy task. It took a long time. Having finished, and it has been altered over the years, I put it into a bottom drawer and tried to forget about it, a little frightened as to my next move. However, things developed and eventually it went into performance with, I am glad to say, a measure of success.

From those beginnings your life and work became something of a fascination and this, in turn, led me to evolve a biographical programme about you, played in the first person and using your own words. This brought me into contact with the renowned American Professor, Gordon Haight, whose biography of you, and edition of your letters and journals, has proved invaluable to students of your work.

With his friendship and advice, and a number of others who helped me on the way, I have taken these programmes all over this country, often to small venues that see little live theatre – to the Purcell Room and the Fortune Theatre in London, and to Scotland. I was invited to Harvard's Loeb Drama Centre in Massachusetts and have subsequently taken your work to the States many times; also to Kenya, South Africa, and Holland. It has been a wonderful experience.

This year is the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Unbelievably to me, it also happens to be the Centenary of my father Donald Wolfitt's birth. He was born three days before St George's Day and Shakespeare's birthday on 20 April. He was something of a legendary Shakespearean actor-manager who travelled the length and breadth of this country working tirelessly – with little financial reward – to give people outside London, the opportunity to see his plays and hear his magical words. I often think his courage inspired me to follow the course I have. It must be something to do with genes! I was brought up to love the beauty of Shakespeare's language and I have found it so interesting that you both came from the same county of Warwickshire – within a short distance of each other, the Heart of England.

Historically you both lived and worked when a Queen was on the throne of this country. Elizabeth and Victoria were two very different women, and you both reflected the custom of their times. Both of you were rebels, musical, with a love of the countryside and the simplicity of country people. Both of you were keen observers of the comedy and tragedy of the human condition. Although admired and revered by academics, neither of you had the opportunity of a university education and like Dick Whittington, though without a cat, you both turned your back on the provinces to seek fame and fortune in London.

Oh by the way, and before I forget, in case no one has told you up there, at the funeral of the Queen Mother a few months ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury quoted your words 'The Sweet Presence of a good diffused' in his address from the pulpit. How times have changed.

That thought brings me back to this great Abbey where twenty-two years ago in June 1980, 100 years after your death, a stone with your name inscribed was dedicated here, in Poets Corner, alongside many other great figures of English literature, who have inspired us with their words. For those of us who were fortunate enough to take part on that occasion, it was an impressive and moving experience. We are sorry it took so long to honour you in this way.

As your celebrity grew you were reticent when asked to support female causes – but in flouting convention as in your relationship with G. H. Lewes, in the breadth of your vision, in tackling controversial subjects, you exhibited a daring which opened the way for women writers coming after you.

Great writers – be they of prose, drama or poetry – give us an insight into the nature of mankind. We return again and again to their words – constantly finding new meanings, greater understanding and depth.

To conclude this letter, I would like to express my gratitude for all you have done to enrich my life over the years: your wonderful books, your hard work, your generosity of spirit – the opportunity you have given me to make new and interesting friends, both here and abroad.

Your writing is more widely known now, than it was, due to Radio, Film, Television and the Internet – new and exciting media communication not available in your lifetime – and to an expanding group of people, the George Eliot Fellowship who – in their several ways – strive in all things pertaining to you and your work. With our new British Library we are now able to keep your letters and artefacts here in this country. I like to hope that those of us who sought to further your work early on have made some small contribution to your increasing popularity.

You have often been a hard task to master. Working on your novels and performing them, has been intellectually challenging, emotionally demanding, physically tiring – sometimes a battle and sometimes lonely. But it has been worth it!

Thank you George Eliot.

From your admirer.

Margaret Wolfit.