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1985

## ANNUAL REPORT - 1984

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## ANNUAL REPORT – 1984

1984 was an exciting year because of the challenge of the George Eliot Statue. Since 1980 the Fellowship Council had felt we were a little in the doldrums. After the interesting years leading up to the centenary of George Eliot's death, and the thrill of finally unveiling the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone, everything seemed very flat. With no more big anniversaries until 2019, we might be forgiven for feeling that there was nothing much to do. But then, when the centre of Nuneaton was being pedestrianised with its attractive Victorian theme, and the Borough Council suggested making a site available for a statue, we rose to the bait and started work again with all our old vigour. So, with the sparkle back in our collective eye, the latter half of 1984 began to feel like the challenging late 1970's. However, we have learnt a few lessons since those days and have refrained from launching ourselves on some of the fund-raising things we did then – and from which we emerged somewhat exhausted! I recall, for instance, a supper in St. Mary's Guildhall in Coventry when Marlene Emery and I did a meal for 120 people, deciding at the end of it that, profitable though it had been, we must have been mad!

1984 began uneventfully enough with the Annual General Meeting at which we elected Kathleen Porter to succeed Hilda Webster as Vice Chairman; the other three officers were re-elected. We also elected Jonathan Ouvry, a great, great grandson of George Henry Lewes, as our new President. George Eliot's great, great nephew Tenniel Evans generously stood down in his favour and assumed the Vice-Presidency he had occupied

before becoming President seven years earlier. We are very pleased that we maintain this close contact with Tenniel.

Gabriel Woolf's fifteenth annual visit to Warwickshire with his popular readings was a fantastic success. We took a risk and booked the theatre at the University of Warwick's Arts Centre; this is very attractive and is part of a large complex with a marvellous air of theatre about it. It is also, however, expensive and much larger than anything we have performed in before. We attracted a large and enthusiastic audience; in fact, on the two nights he was in Warwickshire (for he presented his recital in Nuneaton as well) he played to 452 people an all-time record. We now have a whole new following, and are delighted with the risk we took. We are most grateful to Gabriel for all he does for us and for George Eliot.

Sadly, our next two events had to be cancelled because of lack of support. We were marking the centenary of the birth of another Midlands writer – Francis Brett Young; admittedly not in George Eliot's league but an attractive and interesting writer – but neither a talk about his life nor an outing to his native Worcestershire were sufficiently well supported to be able to take place. Indeed, the literary outing seems to have become a less than popular activity, for after the failure of the Francis Brett Young trip, a circular was sent to local members for ideas for future outings, but the response was so poor that we have now decided to abandon this annual event.

Our Patron was our Guest of Honour at the Nuneaton Wreath-laying on June 17th. It was very pleasant

to have him and his wife, the Hon. Mrs. FitzRoy Newdegate with us. Chilvers Coton Choir, who always lead our singing on this occasion, had another engagement about which we were unaware until we arrived in the George Eliot Memorial Gardens. However, one of the Churchwardens bravely started us off in the hymns and we managed quite well unaccompanied!

The Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying Guest of Honour was Steve Race who, though well-known and well-loved for his work in the world of music, is also a devoted admirer of George Eliot, and he has now become a good friend of the Fellowship. His excellent address in the Abbey is printed in the Review. It was nice to see our London members in the Abbey; and we had the usual very warm welcome from our friend, the Dean, Dr. Edward Carpenter. None of our actor Vice Presidents could be with us, so Kathleen Porter and I read passages from the novels. We didn't do too badly, but shall be much relieved if Gabriel, Tenniel or Margaret can come and make a more professional job of it in 1985!

On July 11th, a plaque was unveiled in Holy Trinity Church, Coventry, to mark George Eliot's nine-year association with the church during what has become known as her 'Holy War'. The plaque was instigated by the church (and not with the whole-hearted support of its parishioners) but the Fellowship gave its support and a donation, and we were glad to be represented at the service and to hear the very sympathetic views of the 20th century Holy Trinity – so different from its 19th century intransigence.

The George Eliot Memorial Lecture on October 13th

was excellent. Entitled 'George Eliot on Love and Knowledge', it was given by one of our members, Dr. Richard Freadman of the University of Western Australia. Apart from benefitting from his own love and knowledge of his subject, it was very nice to meet one of our most distant members and his charming wife, Diane.

Margaret Wolfit gave two performances of her one-woman show, 'The Mill on the Floss' on October 16th and 17th as her very generous gift to the Statue Appeal Fund. Over £500 was raised, about £100 of which resulted from a delicious buffet supper provided, as their gift to the Fund, by the home economics students at the North Warwickshire College of Technology and Art.

At the General Meeting in November (held to determine the 1985 subscription rate) Mr. Richard Yeomans of the University of Warwick gave us an illustrated lecture on Victorian Painting. The talk was informative and fascinating, and the collection of slides superb – a really excellent evening.

The George Eliot Birthday Luncheon on November 25th was, as always, a very happy occasion. Jonathan Ouvry was our Guest of Honour and showed us, from his Toast to the Immortal Memory, that there is more than a little of his great, great grandfather, G.H. Lewes in his capacity as a raconteur! Because of the presence of our new President, the toast list was slightly changed to include a toast to the Fellowship itself, and this was made, with his customary wit, by Colin Emery.

A small Christmas Party was held on December 14th at Dempster House Coffee Lounge. Ray Green showed a further selection of slides on the

countryside – a pleasant occupation on a cold wintry evening.

The Fellowship obtained during the year four envelopes addressed by George Eliot to her niece Emily Clarke. Sadly, Emily's executors had been instructed to destroy the letters which were once inside the envelopes; how much more interesting they would have been complete. However, one envelope has been given to the George Eliot Gallery at Nuneaton Museum and is a relic of the novelist's handwriting – if not of her thoughts on that occasion.

In the early months of 1984 we heard that the owner of Griff House Hotel was planning to separate that part which had been George Eliot's childhood home from the rest of the hotel complex, and to emphasise therein the George Eliot associations. However, the tragic death of both of his parents clearly took the heart out of his plans and we began to hear conflicting reports about a possible sale of the hotel. By early autumn, Griff House had been purchased by the Beefeater Steakhouse chain. Seriously alarmed at what might be about to happen there, the Chairman and I made contact with the Managing Director of Beefeater who put us in touch with the man responsible for the decor of the new restaurant. We subsequently met him at Griff and were much reassured by his plans. We were not concerned, of course, by the decor of the extension, but we had been very worried that the old part of the house might be irrevocably changed in a very unsuitable way. However, this part of the hotel is being used as the bar area and has been refurbished in a manner very reminiscent of a Victorian sitting room; indeed, when I compared what had been the Evans' sitting room (from a photograph in the Fellowship's

possession) with what it looks like now, there is a most surprising likeness between the two styles of furnishing. We have long since realised, of course, that George Eliot's Griff House was lost to us when the house was sold in 1972 and it is too late now to bemoan what might have become of it if it could have been kept in caring hands. However, bearing in mind the sad air of neglect that has hung over the old part of Griff during that time, the improvements now are very much to be welcomed. It is not perfection, but it is warm and clean and welcoming, and it has all been carried out with thought. Even the literary theme has been carried through the entire building by the introduction of over 1,000 books into the decor.

Sadly, there is no such good news about George Eliot's Coventry home at Foleshill. The house known as Bird Grove has had a chequered career for many years. Now in the hands of a West Indian church whose small congregation has insufficient funds to adequately maintain it, the building has deteriorated badly because of a leaking roof. A grant was available to repair the roof but was provisional on the rest of the structure being made good – an operation way out of the reach of the present owners. Their minister clearly hoped that the Fellowship would help him find the necessary £40,000 to repair the house, but even if we had that sort of money, the constant drain on the church's resources to continue to maintain it afterwards could only result in further help being needed in future years. All we could do was to offer our sympathy and to guide them into the direction of seeking help from the English Heritage who handle claims for financial assistance for listed buildings. What has happened since, we do not know. It was heart-breaking to see what had once been a very

beautiful and gracious house fall into such a sad state. So often, in the case of houses associated with George Eliot, they have come onto the market at a time when interest in her was less than it is now, and they have been sold to people who have felt no responsibility for the preservation of the building because of its literary connections. Now, too much needs doing, and it is too late.

While on the subject of George Eliot's homes, however, there is good news about two of them. Holly Lodge is now owned by a member of the Fellowship who is caring for it sympathetically, and 4, Cheyne Walk, where George Eliot lived for her last 18 days, is also being cared for lovingly by a member of the Fellowship. So, not all of her many homes have been lost, and for this, we must be grateful.

The Librarian of the Coventry and Warwickshire Collection wrote to the Fellowship as a result of finding in the Collection's records a letter dated 1929 which said that George Eliot's Coventry school, run by the Misses Franklin, had been situated not in Warwick Row but in Little Park Street when she was a pupil there. After research by the Chairman in a local Directory for the relevant year, it was established that the school's address was Warwick Row at the time George Eliot attended. The allusion to Little Park Street appears in a book about scenes in the novels written by S. Parkinson in 1888, and confusion may have arisen because of that; we have no way of knowing what Parkinson's source was.

The 15th Review was issued in 1984 rather later than planned because it was so beset by problems. The typing agency typed and re-typed the text, but even their third attempt was too full of errors. Then the



printer reshuffled some of the pages and we were left with a less than perfect copy. Our hopes for a more professional format were, therefore, somewhat dashed, but we hope for greater success with the 1985 issue. I wish to express my gratitude to my co-editor, Dr. Graham Handley, for his help and invaluable advice. His professional expertise makes my job so much easier, and I am sure the Review has benefitted a great deal from his appointment. We congratulate him, too, on his quite splendid Clarendon Edition of 'Daniel Deronda', published recently. His work on the Review is very small fry compared with his scholarly editing of a great novel, and how lucky we are to have his interest and assistance in our work.

Our membership dropped again in 1984, although by only nine on the 1983 total. We hit the high-spot in 1981 with a record total of 441, but that was a special time, so soon after the centenary. However, with a total of less than 400 now, we hope we shall not dwindle further; perhaps the Statue may bring us more members!

The Fellowship Council met eight times during the year - each time in members' homes. For this generous hospitality we are always grateful as it makes a business meeting much more pleasant and comfortable. All of the meetings were very well attended.

A letter went out to our London members during the year in the hope that we might be able to form a London Branch. There were several replies and most were positive and helpful. That nothing further has been done can be blamed on the George Eliot Statue. This has made so much extra work this year that I

have not yet risen above it with time enough to organise an inaugural meeting in London, but it has not been forgotten and will eventually take place.

The Fellowship has been telling Nuneaton for years that George Eliot could make the town a tourist attraction; during those years we found it difficult to convince anyone that people really do come to the town in search of the places she knew. But, at last, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council have realised the potential of the town and of Bedworth, too, and a Tourism Working Party meets regularly in the Council House to discuss the ways in which tourists can be attracted to the town. The Vice Chairman and I represent the Fellowship at these meetings and have been particularly pleased to see that the Borough Council now acknowledges the tremendous potentialities of the George Eliot Country. I must add, however, so that we shall not be thought to be hogging the limelight, that George Eliot is not considered the only attraction. The new pedestrianised town centre with its attractive Victorian theme, and the market are all part of what they feel the town has to offer.

During the year we had news that the grave of George Henry Lewes was becoming very overgrown and mossy. This horizontal memorial in Highgate cemetery is, of course, very vulnerable to the cemetery's undergrowth problems but we have asked the cemetery superintendent to arrange for the grave to be cleared, and for some attention to be given, also, to John Cross's grave nearby.

We parted company with one of our Vice Presidents at the end of 1984. Hallam Tennyson, who had done some good work with radio adaptations of George Eliot's novels during his years at the BBC, received

his Vice Presidency in 1970. However, since that time he had become a largely silent Vice President, and his failing health and his lack of sympathy with some of what we do has led him to resign what would have been a life-long position. We hope that his health will improve and that he will be able to enjoy his retirement.

I have given ten talks to various local societies during 1984 and taken three parties (two of them American) on tours of the George Eliot country. The latter are very tiring but also very rewarding as the places visited clearly add to what visitors already get from their reading of the novels.

George Eliot made a most prestigious "public appearance" during the autumn when Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks presented a biographical recital in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. as a climax to an American and Canadian tour. A very large audience received the performance with enthusiastic applause.

I end this report with the thanks which must always conclude the account of our activities because, without various people and organisations, much of our work would be far more difficult. Nuneaton and Bedworth Joint Arts Association, for instance, make the George Eliot Memorial Lecture possible with their regular financial help, and we are most grateful to the Borough Council for allowing us to present the lecture in the beautiful Council Chamber. Nuneaton Museum helps to promote interest in George Eliot on a regular basis amongst their visitors, and Nuneaton Library are always ready and willing to help us whenever we ask; they are a most useful venue for the distribution of tickets and they undertake this task year after year. We are pleased

to make regular contact with churches and schools in the town who take that little extra interest in the novelist, and also with the George Eliot Hospital who are clearly proud to bear her name. Our special thanks, too, to Dr. Stiles Ezell who looks after the mailing to our American and Canadian members – and all at his own expense. Finally, my own personal thanks to the Chairman, without whose special help I could not do so much, and to the Treasurer, and Vice Chairman, Mrs. Porter. Her additional job as Minutes Secretary has been invaluable to me since I lost a lot of the use in my right hand. Although I am now almost totally reliant on the typewriter, there are some things one cannot type, and the minutes are one of them.

Finally, my thanks to those members who support us as often as they can – and a plea to all our members within reach of Nuneaton and Coventry to help us build on the foundations we began to dig in 1930, and which have become strengthened immeasurably through the ensuing years. With so much behind us, we must keep on with our work, and we can only do this with the support of our loyal members.

KATHLEEN ADAMS

March 1985

THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP  
STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31st. DECEMBER 1984

Balance 1st. January 1984

Bank and Cash	562.85	
Anglia Building Society: No. 2 Account	1281.81	
High Income Bond	500.00	
High Income Bond (Flowers)	<u>250.00</u>	£2594.66

Income

Subscriptions		519.50
Donations		<u>96.47</u>

Profits

Readings:	Gabriel Woolf, 21st & 22nd March	275.16	
Meetings:	A.G.M. Coffee	4.25	
	General Meeting, Coffee & Collection	6.20	
	Memorial Lecture	7.00	
	Birthday Luncheon	9.10	
	Christmas Party	23.60	
Sales:	Books	<u>58.60</u>	383.91
Sales (not Profits)			
	Writing Paper	52.60	
	Bookmarks	36.52	
	George Eliot Post Cards	<u>5.82</u>	94.94
Study Group Fees (Repaid January, 1985)			19.50
Anglia Building Society Interest			<u>162.09</u>
			<u>£3871.07</u>

Expenditure

Postage (£357.04) & Stationery (£86.39)			443.43
Printing:	Review		360.15
Expenses:	Hospitality: Wreath Laying, Westminster Abbey	2.00	
	Birthday Luncheon	33.60	
	Gifts: for President, Retiring President and Guest Speakers	35.60	
	to Nuneaton Museum, G.E. Envelope	4.00	
	Hire of Rooms	<u>12.00</u>	87.20
Loss:	Proposed outing to Francis Brett Young Country		12.40
Subscriptions:	Victorian Studies Bulletin	5.00	
	The Bedworth Society	5.00	
	Friends of Highgate Cemetery	2.00	
	Nuneaton & Bedworth Joint Arts Association	<u>1.00</u>	0
Floral Tributes			<u>17.00</u>
			£933.18

Balance 31st. December 1984

Bank and Cash	743.99	
Anglia Building Society: No. 2 Account	1443.90	
High Income Bond	500.00	
High Income Bond (Flowers)	<u>250.00</u>	£2937.89
		<u>£3871.07</u>

I have audited the above Income & Expenditure Accounts in respect of the year to 31st. December 1984, and in my opinion they are in accordance with the books and records which reflect a true and correct financial position.

C. Emery Auditor