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ANNUAL REPORT 1988

The year began, as always, with the Annual General Meeting on March 25th. The four officers were re-elected and Daphne Paton was welcomed to the Fellowship Council. Joan Bunn was re-elected and both ladies have proved very supportive throughout the year. The business meeting was followed by a showing of slides of North Warwickshire then and now - a fascinating collection by John Burton, Chairman of the Bedworth Society, and to show our appreciation we made a donation to the Society's appeal fund to save the Pump House at the Nicholas Chamberlaine Almshouses in Bedworth.

The second event was almost unknown to me, since it was to be a Surprise Party to mark the end of my twentieth year as Fellowship Secretary. All I knew was that I had to be at a certain place at a certain time on a Saturday in March. I had imagined that we were to have a little get-together. To say that it was a Surprise Evening very much understated it! When I arrived I was utterly amazed to find a hall full of many familiar faces; amongst them some very special people, including Gabriel Woolf, Margaret Wolfit, Jonathan and Marjorie Ouvre who had all travelled up from London to entertain me. Joining them were John Letts, sculptor of the George Eliot statue, Ruth Harris who read to me, and Lord and Lady Daventry as well as many close friends. Beautiful gifts and flowers were given to me and we had a feast of words and music. My beloved George Eliot was joined by my equally beloved Edward Elgar, and I felt completely surrounded by goodwill and affection. My only regret was that I couldn't have it all over again and really enjoy it completely; as may be imagined, I was in a euphoric haze for much of the evening! But how very grateful I was for all the hard work put in by the organising sub-committee, and how amazed I was that it had been kept so secret, particularly as my husband was one of the organisers.

In April we had our annual visit by Gabriel Woolf to present his very successful programme of Readings in Nuneaton and Coventry. He had chosen as his theme 'The Warwickshire Pen' so George Eliot was joined by an interesting collection of other major and minor writers who were either born in Warwickshire or had made their homes there - from, inevitably, William Shakespeare to Angela Brazil and including a lovely piece of writing about the Coventry Watch Trade by our Chairman, Bill Adams. Gabriel had, as always, chosen well, and he entertained us with a splendid selection of material, beautifully read. He was subsequently booked to repeat 'The Warwickshire Pen' by The National Trust at Coughton Court near Alcester so George Eliot had an airing in a very beautiful setting. In Gabriel's hands (or voice!) she keeps making appearances all over the world; how fortunate we are in our Vice Presidents!

Gabriel joined us again at the end of April when he attended the first seminar of the Alliance of Literary Societies in Birmingham and read to a large gathering of other literary societies, proving to them how the uncommitted are drawn to a writer after hearing the works read aloud. The Fellowship has long been aware how many listeners turn to the printed word, having had their appetites whetted in this entertaining way. The seminar was very successful and from it, the Alliance has changed from a very informal organisation instigated by the George Eliot Fellowship fifteen years earlier and run very informally by me during that time, into a more formal and, hopefully, more effective organisation which will be able to do a valuable job in the world of literature. I was very relieved to hand over the secretary's job to someone else and I wish them every success in their future endeavours. Bill Adams has become our representative on the newly formed Alliance committee, and Gabriel Woolf has been elected President.

The Wreath-laying in Nuneaton was held on June 12th. and our Guest of Honour was John

Burton, Chairman of the Bedworth Society who gave a very thought-provoking Address, urging for some restraint on efforts to promote tourism. Getting tourists into the George Eliot Country at any price could cheapen what we have to offer, and his careful assessment of the situation appears in the 1989 review.

The following weekend we had our wreath-laying ceremony in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. Margaret Wolfit and Jonathan Ouvry read from George Eliot's writings and the occasion was made rather more special because of the presence of an unexpected but most welcome guest - Mrs. Mary Haight, whose husband, Gordon S.Haight, had unveiled the memorial stone eight years earlier. Our Guest of Honour was Jennifer Uglow whose book on George Eliot had been published a little earlier. Jennifer Uglow gave an excellent Address and then, most generously, invited Mrs. Haight to lay the wreath. Mrs. Haight was clearly very touched to take over this ceremony from Mrs. Uglow, and it added something rather special to the occasion.

Margaret Wolfit was in the process of preparing a new programme of George Eliot material to present to us in September in Nuneaton. Unfortunately, a breakdown in communication between ourselves and Miss Wolfit at a crucial point in publicising the event, and the disastrous effect of a prolonged postal strike in Warwickshire (where the postmen stayed out for longer than anywhere else in the country) made it impossible for us to get an audience. With a great sense of regret, the performance had to be cancelled. We were so sorry that Margaret had done so much work on our behalf, only to have to abandon the programme. What made it even more distressing for the Fellowship Council was that many people said to us after the cancellation that they had intended to come. It is a sad fact that when we start to organise a costly event we can never be sure in advance whether we are going to find sufficient support; in this event we might well have been able to go ahead if we had known that the support was there but had not been offered early enough. We would urge members and friends to let us know much earlier if we can count on them; it is so worrying going ahead with planning and organisation - all of it costing time and money - not being sure whether people will come or not. And when it also involves letting someone down who we respect as much as Margaret Wolfit, then the regret is even worse.

Graham Handley gave the George Eliot Memorial Lecture in October, taking as his subject 'George Eliot and Marriage'. We had a good audience in Nuneaton Council Chamber and a very good lecture - an edited version is in the 1989 Review.

Margaret Wolfit was our Guest of Honour at the Birthday Luncheon at the George Eliot Hotel on November 20th and we were delighted to welcome her and her husband. She gave a splendid Toast to the Immortal Memory and had chosen a theme that was particularly relevant to problems in the late twentieth century. Jonathan Ouvry, our President, presided and we were more than pleased that he and his wife, Marjorie, had been able to drive up from their London home to join us on this annual very happy occasion.

In early December we joined with the Bedworth Society and the Nuneaton Society in a Christmas Party at the old Free School building in Chilvers Coton. A great deal needs to be done to restore this interesting old building and doubts had been expressed about its suitability for a party in the depths of the winter, since it has no heating and hardly any lighting. However, warm candlelight and its sympathetic glow disguised a multitude of faults in the building and portable gas heaters kept at bay the cold and the damp. Kind friends had donated a superb supper and Bill and I did our bit to keep out the cold by providing what seemed like gallons of hot soup, all prepared on very primitive camping equipment. But we were crafty enough to serve the soup in our George Eliot

Country mugs and to suggest that people might like to buy theirs! We sold a few, so it was not an unsuccessful project, but neither of us felt much like soup for a few days after the party! The event raised some sorely needed funds towards the restoration of the premises.

The Study Group has met very successfully four times during the year. In March Ruth Harris led us through Adam Bede, and in August we discussed Silas Marner under her expert guidance. To add to our pleasure we were able to subsequently watch a video of the superb BBC film of the novel. Graham Handley came up from London to lead us through The Mill on the Floss in June, and he also led our discussion on Romola in October. Both Ruth and Graham have infectious enthusiasm for this type of seminar and we all achieve so much more than if we had read the books on our own. We are immensely grateful to them both for giving up their time to help us in our appreciation of the novels.

The Fellowship Council is involved in a very lengthy negotiation with the RSPCA and the City Council in Coventry to effect the removal of a memorial to George Eliot's dear friend Caroline Bray to a more public place than the garden wall of premises once occupied by the RSPCA in Coventry. It is hoped that these negotiations will eventually be successful but local government wheels grind exceedingly slow.

In February we were deeply saddened to hear of the death at his home in Vermont, USA, of a very good friend of the Fellowship, Dr. Stiles Ezell who had worked tirelessly for us - and at his own expense - for many years. We are delighted, however, that another American member, Harriet Williams, has offered to take over Dr. Ezell's work in maintaining contact with our valued members in the United States.

The Fellowship has been represented at two lectures for the medical staff at the George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton and we have been made most warmly welcome on each occasion. We gave the inaugural lecture and are to give the first one in 1989; we very much value this close association with the hospital. Carrying on the tradition of suggesting names for various departments at the hospital, we suggested Silas Marner for the Out-patients Department and this was accepted by the hospital.

Gabriel Woolf gave a lecture/Reading at the British Library during their Stefan Zweig series of events and the library allowed us to publicise the Fellowship during the evening of Gabriel's programme. We were pleased to subsequently enrol several new members. To help further recruitment, an attractive poster and a leaflet about the Fellowship have been produced and these will be going on show during 1989.

Our efforts to move the large stock of the souvenirs we produced for the growing tourist trade in the Borough have been somewhat frustrated by the apathy of local shopkeepers. However, the mugs and teatowels will keep - and despite slow sales, we hope to make a considerable profit in time! Our large stock of attractive postcards of the statue, however, have met with competition from a company who have added the statue to their supply of local views. Their picture is less attractive, but, unfortunately, it is cheaper.

Through the good offices of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, the rusting metal railings around the grave of George Eliot's brother Isaac and his family in Chilvers Coton Churchyard have been repaired. The grave of George Eliot's parents and her twin brothers in the same Churchyard became in urgent need of repair. One slate panel had become loose and it became clear that the large slate panel bearing Robert Evans' name needed to be replaced. It was badly damaged by enemy air attack in 1941 and had been repaired but the repair was unsightly and it was decided that restoration was essential. The Fellowship undertook to pay for the repair, despite it

being quite a costly undertaking and the work was begun at the end of the year.

George Eliot's own grave and also that of George Henry Lewes and John Cross in London's Highgate Cemetery have all been restored under the auspices of the London Branch in general and Dr. Beryl Gray, the Vice Chairman of the Branch, in particular. Beryl has sympathetically planted George Eliot's grave and it flowered most beautifully during the summer. It now appears on a postcard produced by the Friends of Highgate Cemetery.

Another lengthy project continues underway. The wood panelling from Coventry's now defunct Gulson Library - the panelling came originally from oak on the Arbury Estate - which was given to the Fellowship some time ago, is to be made into display cases by students at the Nicholas Chamberlaine Comprehensive School in Bedworth. Our plans for the cases, which are intended eventually to house the books of names of those who contributed to the Westminster Abbey Memorial and also the George Eliot statue, will reach fruition, we hope, during 1989.

The 1988 Review had a new format; for the first time, it was printed and looked so much more professional and attractive. Inevitably it was a great deal more expensive, but this is one of our contributions to scholarship and it is worthy of a better presentation. It achieved considerable approval from our members. I am most grateful to my fellow editor, Graham Handley, for his guidance, erudition and encouragement, during the preparation each year of our journal.

We have had cause for concern this year at the changing attitude towards George Eliot and the work of the Fellowship by one of our local papers. From being most supportive and helpful it has become somewhat destructive. We know that newspapers have to sell and that stirring up controversy probably sells a few extra copies, but while the Borough Council and the Fellowship are working so hard to promote the George Eliot Country, it seems sad that the local newspaper has to shoot down what it once supported.

The Fellowship was represented when Dr. Mary Archer unveiled the Rupert Brooke statue in Rugby in September. We were very gratified to hear, on that occasion, a public tribute to the Fellowship for their support in the campaign to erect the statue.

We have been saddened by the lack of progress in the London Branch which held so much promise at the time of its inauguration. We read of events held by very successful literary societies in London, so it cannot only be the immense size of the capital that makes it impossible to achieve support from our members there. If any London members have any ideas or helpful suggestions about revitalising the Branch we would be so pleased to have them. We don't want the branch to die.

I have continued to give talks about George Eliot to clubs and societies around Warwickshire and always hope that I have sown a few seeds which will grow and blossom into an interest in George Eliot and her novels. Tours of the George Eliot Country are also undertaken and one of the most successful during the year was a party of Americans led by Harriet Williams. Their enthusiasm was most rewarding.

Kathleen Porter and I have continued to represent the Fellowship at meetings of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council Tourism Working Party. We are quite delighted at the energy and enthusiasm of the Council's Forward planning and Development Officer, Nigel Smith, whose integrity in promoting the George Eliot Country and his commitment to George Eliot have been so invaluable to the Fellowship. He works tirelessly, keeps us in constant touch with all his projects and is an exceptionally nice person to work with.

A BBC Schools Education Service broadcast was based on Middlemarch for A Level students. It was devised by Gabriel Woolf and he was joined by actors and actresses in bringing to life passages

from the novel. I know from enquiries I have received during the year that many A Level students have had difficulty with this lengthy if brilliant novel, and I have been able to point them in the direction of various student aids. Gabriel's broadcast was one of these, and it has proved most useful. It is not overly academic, nor is it patronising, but it understands the difficulties, highlights the problems and warmly interprets the situations and the many characters in such a way that the young person must feel less 'bogged down' and able to take a fresher look at the complexities of the novel.

The Fellowship Council met 8 times during the year and is grateful for generous hospitality in the homes of the Council members. These are always very busy meetings but they are also pleasant and rewarding and well attended.

Membership increased during 1988. It had dropped a little in the previous year and so we were very pleased to have the numbers go back again to beyond 400. We ended the year with 157 annual members and 244 life members.

The Fellowship year would not have been so successful without the loyal support of the officers, the President and Vice presidents and our much respected Patron, the Viscount Daventry. Our supportive membership also deserve a vote of thanks and all those people in and around Nuneaton who help us in so many ways. Our grateful thanks to all of them. Our work is easier for the support we receive, and would be easier still if the support of members could be assured just that little earlier. We know you do support us, and we would be so pleased if you would ease our worries by telling us so as soon as we start work rather than towards the end of our efforts. Please will you do this for us? Many thanks!

KATHLEEN ADAMS

March 1989.