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ANNUAL REPORT 1990

The year opened, as it always does, with the least exciting event - the Annual General Meeting. All four officers were re-elected and we also re-elected for a further three year term our supportive and generous President Jonathan Ouvry.

The next event was much more exciting. In April Gabriel Woolf made his 21st annual visit to Warwickshire to present the ever popular programme of Readings from the novels. 'Enter the Aunts' proved to be one of the most popular he has ever done, and his own sense of humour and sensitivity of selection made the most of those wonderful aunts, the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss*. We had our largest audience ever - 436. What a splendid way of introducing a great number of people to George Eliot who had probably never read her but now undoubtedly will.

At the Annual General Meeting and Seminar of the Alliance of Literary Societies the following day, Gabriel, as their President, read again. This annual gathering of members from many literary societies holds plenty of promise and the Alliance is already proving to be a success. When the Fellowship founded the Alliance many years ago on an entirely informal basis of mutual help, it was not foreseen what a very friendly organisation it would eventually become, publishing its own newsletter entitled Chapter One. We wish the Alliance all possible success. Bill Adams continues to represent us on the Alliance Committee.

The Nuneaton Wreath-laying in June was the first part of our Diamond Jubilee Celebrations and we had hoped to have as our Guest of Honour our oldest member, both in membership and years. Mrs. Eva Beamish's father had been a founder member and his daughter had joined in 1934. Sadly, Mrs. Beamish died earlier in the year and her place was taken by another long-serving member, Mrs. Hilda Gunn, a past Vice Chairman and Council member for many years. She spoke about her early introduction to George Eliot by an enlightened Nuneaton school-teacher.

1990 was the tenth anniversary of the unveiling of the memorial stone in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey and we marked this milestone with as near as possible a repeat of the 1980 ceremony. The Dean of Westminster, the Very Revd. Michael Mayne, conducted our service and our Guest of Honour was his predecessor, the Revd. Dr. Edward Carpenter KCVO, who as Dean in 1980 had conducted the service then and had worked with us in the years before when we were planning the laying of the stone. We used the same readings from the Bible and the novels and Gabriel Woolf repeated his moving reading of 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible'. Margaret

Wolfit and Graham Handley read from *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Sad Fortunes of the Revd. Amos Barton* and Jonathan Ouvry from the Bible.

On September 8th we made a very successful visit to the Adam Bede Country. Literary outings had once been a part of our annual programme but lack of support in past years had led to them being dropped. However, a new generation of members has turned the tide and the Adam Bede trip to Wirksworth, Ellastone and Norbury was very well supported.

Dr. Rosemary Ashton gave the George Eliot Memorial Lecture on October 27th, speaking about 'George Eliot's "Husband": Writing the Life of George Henry Lewes'. Dr. Ashton has a warm and lively personality and her lecture was fascinating - amongst the very best in the series. It was very pleasant, on this occasion, to have Dr. Desmond Nuttall to give the vote of thanks. Dr. Nuttall is a great great grandson of G.H. Lewes and he brought with him his two daughters - and you may work out the number of greats they have!

The Review was published in late summer. Unfortunately, the cost for this issue proved to be far in excess of expectations owing to the very late arrival of the text of the Memorial Lecture. The lecture had not been edited to the required length, thus extending the issue by about 10 pages.

The Fellowship celebrated its Diamond Jubilee on November 9th having been founded in Nuneaton exactly 60 years earlier by the then editor of the Nuneaton Chronicle. We had a very happy party at the Abbey Grange Hotel with guests and greetings from many parts of the world. We heard about the early days of the Fellowship and, after an excellent supper, saw slides of Fellowship events. As part of our celebrations a whole page in the Nuneaton Evening Tribune was devoted to greetings to us from many organisations and businesses in the town with whom we deal, and the excellent Parks Department of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council created a flower bed displaying our Diamond Jubilee logo in small plants.

A George Eliot Victorian Festival was again staged by the Borough Council in November but it was rather less successful than the previous year. Two events were presented by the Fellowship and the first, Gabriel Woolf in 'An Evening with George Eliot' in the Parish Church, was perhaps the most successful in the Festival. Gabriel was at his best in this programme and was supported by Contrasts, a group of chamber musicians. The second event was an illustrated lecture 'Scenes of a Writer's Life' at Bedworth Arts Centre, but the publicity was scanty and the organisers had



Cutting the Diamond Jubilee Cake, November 9th 1990. *Left to right : Jonathan Ouvry (President), Marjorie Ouvry, Kathleen and Bill Adams and John Bunn (Treasurer).*
Photograph courtesy of Nuneaton Evening Tribune.

unfortunately arranged another literary evening on the same date (Dickens!) so that the audiences for both were small. But at ours we enrolled a few new members.

The Birthday Luncheon took place on November 25th with Ted Veasey, a local historian, proposing the Toast to the Immortal Memory and speaking about the Nuneaton George Eliot knew and wrote about in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. What might have been a very successful gathering was sadly marred by very poor service at the hotel.

We have had mixed publicity during the year. One effort which misfired was an advertisement in the Times Literary Supplement which raised barely a flicker of interest amongst its world-wide readership. However, an article about literary societies in the Daily Telegraph produced a number of enquiries most of which resulted in new members. We sent copies of the Review to all British University libraries, hoping that some would take up a similar subscription to those paid every year by a number of American Universities. Not one university replied - making us feel that the mailing must have become lost on the way! If it didn't, clearly the university libraries are all bursting with apathy when it comes to George Eliot. We hope it cannot mean that our Review is so lacking in worth-while scholarship that it was instantly discarded?

Our greatest support comes locally from primarily the Nuneaton Evening Tribune and the Nuneaton Evening Telegraph, and, most important of all, from BBC CWR, the new local radio station. While many of us can't take its 'music', its information services and its local cover are excellent. The friendly staff and presenters make a visit to CWR very pleasant and they are always eager to hear about George Eliot and the Fellowship, and both Gabriel Woolf and I have done several broadcasts from CWR. I also represented the Fellowship at the official launch of the station by Michael Checkland, the Director General of the BBC, at a dinner in St. Mary's Hall in Coventry (incidentally, the setting of Hetty Sorrel's trial in *Adam Bede*).

In the early part of 1990, BBC CWR presented a series entitled 'A Letter from George' which was a biographical programme based on an imaginary letter from George Eliot to John Cross and read beautifully by actress Hannah Gordon.

After many years of negotiation, the Fellowship finally managed in 1990 to get the Caroline Bray memorial removed from a garden wall at premises once occupied by the RSPCA to a more appropriate site. Mrs. Bray, George Eliot's dear Coventry friend, had been responsible for founding an animal protection society in the 19th

century, hence the position of the memorial which had once formed part of a horse trough in Coventry. The stone has been moved to a position against the west wall of the now derelict Non-conformist Chapel at the city's London Road Cemetery and very close to the graves of the Franklins and other members of families who would have been well known to both Caroline and Marian Evans. Caroline herself, her husband Charles and her sister Sara Hennell are all buried in another part of the large cemetery.

The George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton continues to consult us for names for their new wards and departments. The latest candidates were the Psychology Service and the G. and U. Clinic. They finally chose themselves the name of George Combe the phrenologist for the former (against our advice since the choice goes against the long-standing principle of giving names of characters from the novels - and George Combe is a very peripheral person in her own story). The choice of the name for the Clinic had to be a sensitive one and 'Shepperton' was suggested and accepted since there seemed no character with the right sort of background. On the site of the hospital a hospice has now been opened. We were asked for a suggestion for the naming of this and suggested Dorlcote, but they chose Mary Ann Evans - a very suitable name, of course, but one we had hoped to hang on to for the proposed central entrance block of the final phase of the hospital.

The Fellowship has, for a number of years, tried to get an answer from Coventry City Council about the lack of display of their George Eliot memorabilia at the Herbert Museum - indeed, the city's apparent total lack of interest in the novelist's close association with the city. We had failed to get any real interest shown in our questions or even a reply to most of our communications. Latterly, when this somewhat philistine City Council began to show some acknowledgement of the Arts in Coventry, I attacked the Director of Leisure Services with a powerful letter of protest, asking why, after nearly five years, we could never get the answer to a simple question of what were their intentions. It worked - and by return of post I had an apologetic reply and a promise to look into this state of affairs. Immediately, the Herbert Museum contacted me with a list of their remaining possessions and a friendly co-operation between the Museum and the Fellowship now exists. Even the officer for tourism in the city has been in touch and promises to include various George Eliot associations in a tour leaflet of the city centre. Coventry has often been criticised for its total neglect of its literary heritage. Now that George Eliot has been allowed to rise into their consciousness, albeit over 150 years after her residence in the city, perhaps one day they might acknowledge Philip Larkin who grew up and was educated in Coventry.

During the year we have been negotiating with the English Department of the University of Warwick in Coventry to stage a George Eliot Conference in 1992. We are most grateful for their support of the Fellowship in several ways and the arrangements for the Conference are now in the hands of our Dr. Graham Handley and their Dr. John Rignall. Professor Barbara Hardy has already been engaged as the principle lecturer.

The Fellowship Study Group has met regularly during the year, always in members' homes and in a growing atmosphere of warm friendship. Graham Handley and Ruth Harris have led us through George Eliot's novels and those of her contemporaries and Mrs. Jocelyn West-Burnham led our discussion of George Eliot's long narrative poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*. The latter led us to the discovery of eight songs based on the poem composed by Charles Villiers Stanford. Copies of these have been obtained from Newcastle University Library and we are most grateful for the help given to us by the Library.

Nuneaton came second in the regional finals of the 1990 Britain in Bloom competition and the Fellowship was one of the sponsors of the various floral displays created by the Parks Department. We sponsored, very appropriately, the flower bed in front of the memorial to George Eliot in the gardens named after her. The bed is close to the River Anker and, sadly, our descriptive plaque was uprooted by vandals and thrown into the river! But it was replaced and the public continued to be aware of the support we were giving to the town which so nobly and regularly supports us. Our warm congratulations to the Borough for doing so well - although we have long been aware of the excellence of their Parks Department.

We are still hoping for the formation of an American Branch of the Fellowship. We have many members in the United States and some are most enthusiastic in their support. Dr. Linda Robertson organised a George Eliot gathering at the December 1990 M.L.A. Conference in Chicago and plans are already under way for the 1991 one. Professor Michael Wolff and Mrs. Harriet Williams are giving much thought to a branch out there, although we are all aware of the problems which would arise because of the vast distances involved. Harriet Williams was elected a Vice President of the Fellowship as a token of our gratitude for all she does for the Fellowship in the States. She collects subscriptions, passes them on to us in one dollar cheque, thus saving much in high bank charges, she issues 3 out of 4 annual newsletters (and all at her own expense!) and she is constantly 'selling' the Fellowship over there.

Knowing of the possibility of American members meeting each other at the MLA Conferences, we decided that recognition would be much aided if our members had a badge. With this in mind we have produced our first Fellowship badge. We hope that most of our members will be proud to wear it!

During 1990 the Fellowship responded to a 'Give-a-Book' appeal by the library of a Brazilian University. Our first small donation was greatly added to by a very generous gift from a school in Wimbledon which had a large collection of classics no longer needed because of a change of status of the school. We were able to donate a further 130 volumes to the appeal and this large consignment was sent to the university on our behalf by the generous assistance of the Brazilian Embassy in London to whom we delivered the books. We have since received the thanks of the university involved.

The Fellowship was represented at a Join-a-Club Evening in Nuneaton and a Local History Day in Warwick. At both we manned a stall and sold our publications, displayed our aims and enrolled a few new members. This is a fairly minor way of getting publicity for our work but we feel that we must 'show the flag' on such occasions.

G.H. Lewes's grave has needed repair to its surrounding iron railings and the Fellowship has paid for this to be done.

The distinguished novelist, lecturer and critic, A.S. Byatt, C.B.E. who has been a member of the Fellowship for many years was elected as a Vice President during the year. We were delighted to hear that she had been awarded the C.B.E. and, later, the Booker Prize. Quite a year for Antonia!

Our very distinguished Patron, Lord Daventry, was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Warwickshire in 1990 and has been the Queen's representative on many royal occasions during the year - including the opening by the Princess Royal of the Mary Ann Evans Hospice!

Our 1990 membership increased to an overall total of 417, 14 more than the previous year, with 172 annual members and 245 life members, living in 18 different countries around the world. Each year we lose members but we always seem to make up all or most of this loss with new members. We are in a very healthy state and even though we seem unable, like most other literary societies, to attract a really young

membership, the 'oldies' we have give and maintain their support in a way that makes the increasing work-load of the Fellowship well worth-while.

In this work-load we are constantly encouraged by the support we receive from such places as Nuneaton Museum and Nuneaton Library. The Museum has been closed for extension and refurbishment for the whole of the year but during that time we have been in constant touch with its staff and they have consulted us all along the way as the display plans develop. Sadly, the curator, Ann Robson, a gifted and delightful young woman, died at the end of the year, so that she hasn't lived to see the completion of her work, but it will remain as a lasting memorial to her devotion to the museum at which she had worked for over five years.

The Library is very supportive and is used by us as an agency for tickets as is Nuneaton Bookshop whose owners, Don Jaques and Alan Farnell, keep a constant stock of George Eliot books, new and second hand, on their shelves.

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council's support never diminishes and we are delighted that we can work with them so closely. The support of the Fellowship Council is invaluable to me and I pay particular tribute to the treasurer, John Bunn and his wife Joan. I am a very fortunate secretary to have two people who not only work hard but do so much on their own initiative, thus saving me a great deal of work. Similarly, our Vice Chairman, Kathleen Porter, will use her initiative and she also doubles as Minutes Secretary, a fairly thankless task at busy Council meetings when there is so much to be discussed and the meeting goes on for hours! Without the help of the Chairman I could not hope to cope with the secretary's work; he has sometimes described himself as the Denis Thatcher of the George Eliot Fellowship! Our Council is not a passive one - everyone works for the promotion of George Eliot and the success of the Fellowship. With a loyal and stable membership to support us, how can we fail to grow?

KATHLEEN ADAMS
March 1991