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Annual Report

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ANNUAL REPORT
by Kathleen Adams

An uneventful Annual General Meeting in March began our year and was followed by a much more stimulating AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies in Birmingham on April 20th, when a party from the Fellowship attended and had the pleasure of meeting members of other literary societies with whom we could exchange ideas. The Alliance President, Gabriel Woolf, addressed the meeting and spoke with feeling about the need to educate our young people in the literature of the past - a sentiment echoed a few days later by the Prince of Wales.

On April 26th we attended the official opening of the newly extended and refurbished Nuneaton Museum, and our Chairman presented to the Mayor framed prints of two paintings of scenes from Adam Bede, the originals of which were commissioned by Queen Victoria and are today part of the Royal Collection. We are watching closely the final furnishing of the George Eliot Gallery, based on the Priory Drawing Room and containing models of George Eliot, G.H. Lewes and John Cross, and we hope to play a part in making the room look lived in rather than a static display.

Gabriel Woolf made his 22nd visit to Warwickshire in April to present ‘Tall, Dark and Handsome?’, his annual programme of George Eliot Readings. His excellent selection of material showed how unlike George Eliot’s heroes are to the stereotype in Victorian fiction, and a large audience clearly enjoyed the evenings at Nuneaton and Coventry. Thanks to the generosity of sponsors, we were able to easily afford the very high hire charge at the University of Warwick Arts Centre; we are so grateful to them, for without their help we could not continue there.

From June 14th to 16th Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council’s marketing Division staged ‘The George Eliot Experience’, planned to see what response there would be from local people and tourists to a weekend of events to honour George Eliot and to promote the Borough’s tourist potential. Gabriel Woolf presented a programme in Arbury Hall, in which he included many references to her childhood and youth in the area, a tour of the George Eliot Country was organised by the Fellowship, and our annual wreath-laying was incorporated in the festival. Dr. Joanne Shattock, Director of the Victorian Studies Centre at Leicester University, was our Guest of Honour on this occasion.

The annual wreath-laying in Westminster Abbey took place on June 22nd. Our Guest of Honour was our Chairman, Bill Adams, who had just completed twenty years in that office, an anniversary which had been marked earlier in the year when Viscount Daventry, our Patron, made a presentation to him.
We had a very successful literary outing to the Gaskell Country in September. We were guided around Knutsford (‘Cranford’) by Joan Leach of the Gaskell Society and later visited Tatton Park.

The Fellowship was represented at a Local History Day in Nuneaton in September and displayed our wares amongst many other local societies.

Mrs. Gaskell re-appeared at the George Eliot Memorial Lecture in October when Jennifer Uglow spoke about George Eliot and Mrs. Gaskell. This was the twentieth lecture in the series, and we feel we continue to maintain a high standard since Gordon S. Haight inaugurated the Memorial Lectures twenty years ago.

The Birthday Luncheon took place on November 24th at the George Eliot Hotel and the good meal and excellent service made up for all the shortcomings of the previous year. Gina Quant, Curator of Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery, proposed the Toast to the Immortal Memory. We were pleased to see again a small contingent from the London Branch of the Fellowship. The Branch has been unable to organise any events during the year and it is pleasing to see that, despite this, there is still this annual support at the Luncheon.

We were sad to receive bad news of ‘Bird Grove’, George Eliot’s Coventry home, during the year. The house has passed through many hands since Robert Evans’ death in 1849 and has not been maintained sufficiently well during the latter half of this century. The Caribbean church who owns it at present are finding its upkeep an intolerable burden, and negotiations as to its future are still going on. Because of the situation in the centre of industrial Coventry it would seem to have no future as a private house and, despite being a listed building, demolition seems inevitable. To save it and restore it would be an immensely expensive project, far beyond our means. No help is available from Coventry City Council, either. Saddened and dismayed though we are, we have to be realistic and accept that the house has deteriorated beyond help, but we have asked that whatever is eventually erected on the site will have some acknowledgement to George Eliot’s nine years there incorporated.

The 1991 Review was published during the summer and was, as always, well received by the members. This was the last issue of which I was joint editor. Pressure of work in the running of the Fellowship had made it imperative that something was off-loaded, although I am a little sad to see the magazine which I began over twenty years ago ‘leaving home’!

The Fellowship Study Group has met four times during the year under the stimulating leadership of Ruth Harris and Graham Handley, moving on from George Eliot to Dickens, Mrs. Oliphant, A.S. Byatt and the Brownings. We meet in members’ homes and are entertained most generously.
We have assisted in the preparation of an Arts Council Literary Gazetteer, to be published at some future date, by entertaining A.L. Barker, the writer who is responsible for the George Eliot Country and by introducing her to the various places associated with the novelist.

Gabriel Woolf has produced another cassette of readings of favourite passages and poems. The first cassette, produced ten years ago, was a huge success and is now on its last few copies, so we have high hopes for the second selection.

We maintain our contact with the growing George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton and have provided another name, this time for the Marketing Management Department - suggesting Blackwood House. As John Blackwood was George Eliot's 'Marketing Manager', so to speak, this seemed a very suitable choice and was accepted with pleasure by the hospital. Further names are at present under consideration for other departments.

After years of trying to get cabinets made to house the two books of names of donors to the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone and the Statue appeals, we have now been successful in finding a local cabinet-maker who is in the process of crafting the cases out of Arbury oak which once formed the panelling of the George Eliot alcove in Coventry's Gulson Library and which, after the library's demolition, was given to the Fellowship. Our present-day 'Adam Bede' is making a beautiful job of them, and we look forward to presenting them to the Borough and the Museum soon.

Bill Adams, our Chairman, represented the Fellowship on a visit to Roanne, Nuneaton's twin town in France, where he delivered an illustrated lecture in the Opera House there. Prepared to deliver it in French, he was persuaded to speak in English (but slowly!) for the benefit of the many people in the town who are trying to perfect their English. He was entertained most generously during a very pleasant visit with other societies from Nuneaton and Bedworth.

The Chairman and I were generously invited to Stanway in the Cotswolds to see some of the filming by the BBC of Adam Bede, and the Fellowship was frequently consulted during the filming. Although the film has not won universal applause from Fellowship members it is reassuring to know that, within the limitations of the medium of film, the director and producer were eager to do George Eliot's novel justice and to ask for help in recreating a story which was, inevitably, too long to be successfully transferred from the book to the film.

The Royal Theatre at Northampton also presented a stage version of the novel and, again, within the limits of the stage and a small company, did remarkably well.

We were delighted to welcome Harriet Williams again to the George Eliot Country in July. Harriet represents us in America, collects subscriptions and sends out newsletters, all at her own expense. She also organised a dinner for Fellowship members and George Eliot
admirers after the Modern Language Association of America’s conference in San Francisco in December. We elected two American Vice-Presidents in 1991; Harriet was one and Professor Michael Wolff the other.

The grave of G.H. Lewes in London’s Highgate Cemetery was repaired at the Fellowship’s expense during the year, but was unfortunately vandalised. However, further repairs have been carried out. George Eliot’s grave is cared for and tended regularly by Dr. Beryl Gray, Vice-Chairman of the London Branch, and we are very grateful for this attention.

The Fellowship was invited to the Town Criers’ Dinner in Nuneaton in November when I gave a reading from Adam Bede and presented a small edition of the George Eliot statue to the winning Town Crier in that day’s competition.

Holy Trinity Church in Coventry, which became a significant part of George Eliot’s ‘Holy War’, is having immense problems with a crumbling spire. The Fellowship sent a £50 donation to the appeal for its restoration.

I have continued to give talks about George Eliot to organisations around Warwickshire and have received enormous support for our programme of readings from some of the societies visited. So it spreads the word in more ways than one!

The Fellowship Council met eight times during the year and we have also been represented at meetings of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council’s Tourism Working Party. At the latter we are able to advise and supervise on tourism which uses George Eliot, inevitably, as its principal central focus.

We reported the death in last year’s Review of one of our Vice-Presidents, Edith Lenton, who had been our treasurer during much of the arduous time of fund-raising for the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone. A legacy from Edith to the Fellowship is intended to be used in her memory and to promote further local interest in George Eliot.

For many years the Fellowship has been banging its head against a wall of silence and apathy at Coventry’s Herbert Museum. I am happy to report that a warm contact has now been made with the Museum and George Eliot was featured in an exhibition there relating to the city’s past.

As always there are thanks to all those people and organisations who have made 1991 another fine year for the Fellowship, when our membership rose to 435. Only once before in our 61 years has this been exceeded!

March 1992