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ANNUAL REPORT

by Kathleen Adams

As I reach the end of my 25 years as Secretary of the Fellowship I inevitably look back to the beginning of my years of office and, as I prepared this report, to the first one I delivered 24 years ago. It covered half of a sheet of quarto paper. The events recorded were insignificant compared to our current programme but we did have Richard Church as our Guest of Honour at the Birthday Dinner in 1968. Our membership for that year had just reached 60, 7 of whom were life members.

1992 began, as always, with a quiet Annual General Meeting. The only thing of note that evening was the election of Dorothy Edmands as a Vice-President. Dorothy had completed 21 years on the Fellowship Council and had been devoted and supportive for all of that time.

The Parlour Performers, headed by Jonathan and Marjorie Ouvry, came to Nuneaton to help us raise funds in March. This time the funds were not for us; we were looking outward and supporting the Mayor's charity, Mencap, to whom we were able to donate £500.

A party of us attended the Annual General Meeting of the Alliance of Literary Societies on May 2nd in Birmingham. The Fellowship hosted the afternoon seminar and we gave a series of short talks on 'Building a Literary Society'. We discussed all aspects of our work and hoped that our experience would help those smaller societies still struggling to promote themselves and their author. Gabriel Woolf read for us and we were able to demonstrate what an asset he is to any literary society. As I sat back and listened to this list of our achievements, I felt a glow of pride in the Fellowship!

Gabriel Woolf made his 23rd visit to Warwickshire in the spring to present his annual programme of Readings, choosing this year the title: 'Shall We Join the Ladies?' Sadly, the Nuneaton audience was small, only 38 of 110 tickets sold. But, at the Arts Centre of the University of Warwick we broke all records with an audience of over 500, 134 of whom were students and had come on tickets provided by our generous sponsors. The evening was a huge success and we are immensely grateful to those sponsors who make it possible each year.

On May 14th we were able, at last, to hand over to Nuneaton Museum the display cabinets to hold the hand-made volumes of the names of those people all over the world who had contributed to the appeal for funds for the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone and the George Eliot statue. The cabinets were made by a local craftsman from Arbury oak which had been donated to Coventry's Gulson Library in

the 1920's.

The two wreath-layings took place in June. The first was in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey when I laid the Fellowship wreath. The second was in the George Eliot Memorial Garden in Nuneaton when our principal guest was Canon Michael Sadgrove, Vice-Provost and Precentor of Coventry Cathedral. This simple open-air ceremony was attended, as always, by the Mayor of Nuneaton, who laid a wreath on behalf of the Borough. We are constantly aware of the close interest in George Eliot and the Fellowship by the civic authority and the presence of the Mayor and Mayoress at many of our gatherings is most welcome.

The highlight of the year must have been the George Eliot Conference held at Arden House, University of Warwick, from July 10th - 12th. This was the first conference staged by the Fellowship and also by the University's Department of English. Both sides were delighted with the result. Arden House was more like a hotel than a university conference centre, the food was superb, the company excellent and the lectures fine. The 'star' of our weekend was Professor Barbara Hardy, who has also become a most distinguished Vice-President of the Fellowship this year. We held a tour of the George Eliot Country on the Saturday afternoon and this was much enjoyed despite a very wet afternoon. The whole conference exceeded our expectations and we are confident that another will be held at some time in the future. 80 people had attended, including members from America, Japan, Canada, Sweden and France. Our grateful thanks to Dr. John Rignall of the English Department who had largely organized the conference and whose administration added so much to the success of this first venture.

On a more personal note I would like to include the ceremony in Coventry Cathedral on July 16th when the University of Warwick admitted me to the Degree of Master of Arts for my George Eliot work. Apart from my deep pleasure at such an honour, I was also delighted to share the occasion with many George Eliot Fellowship friends, from Lord and Lady Daventry, through some of the Vice-Presidents to most of the Fellowship Council and, of course, with my family. I felt, on that special day, that I was also sharing the degree with my very supportive husband and the lady herself. She deserved an honorary M.A. much more than I do, but I know that such honours were not given to ladies in Victorian England. I would like to think that, in her Choir Invisible, she might have known it was happening. Certainly she has lived in my mind 'made better by [her] presence'.

We had two 'Half Hours with George Eliot' in the George Eliot Gallery at Nuneaton Museum in July and August at which short readings were given and a recital of music on her own piano by Michael Harris. We had a very tiny audience on both occasions and hope that, at any future recital, more support might be forthcoming from mem-

bers and public.

Our annual literary outing was to the Kilvert Country and Hay-on-Wye in September. Ron Watts of the Kilvert Society gave us an excellent guided tour, and Hay-on-Wye provided an opportunity to scurry round the many bookshops looking for bargains.

Margaret Wolfit visited us in September to present 'Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Who Was She?' at King Edward VI College. Again our potential Nuneaton audience deserted us; only 47 of the 110 tickets were sold. This diminishing local support is a worrying development and one we cannot understand. We have asked in the newsletter if any local member can make helpful suggestions about increasing support, but none has been made. But we do not give up and shall continue to promote George Eliot in Nuneaton, hoping that the missing members will come back to us!

Fortunately, we had a very good audience for the Memorial Lecture given by Ruth Harris on October 17th. She chose as her title 'George Eliot's Names' and gave us a fascinating insight into her subject with the warmth and infectious enthusiasm for which she is so well known.

The Birthday Luncheon on November 22nd was quite well supported and was successful, despite the present situation at the George Eliot Hotel. Peter Goodchild, producer of the BBC TV film of *Adam Bede* was our Guest of Honour, and he enthralled us with a most amusing account of the work that goes on behind the scenes of such an ambitious venture.

The London Branch of the Fellowship celebrated George Eliot's birthday on November 29th with a luncheon with an Italian theme — a report of this on page 14.

Kathleen Porter, our Vice-Chairman and Minutes Secretary, received the Behind the Scenes award from Nuneaton and Bedworth Joint Arts Association for her work for the Fellowship. The award was presented to her in the Mayor's Parlour at the Town Hall on December 1st.

The Fellowship Study Group has met four times during the year under the inspiring leadership of Ruth Harris and Graham Handley, studying Dickens, Edith Wharton, Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy. Recently we were able to open out the group to more members by meeting in Chilvers Coton Church lounge.

Our close co-operation with the Marketing Division of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council continues to our mutual benefit. The Chairman and I took two parties around the George Eliot Country during the summer and found all those who joined the tour most interested in all they saw. These were not just tourists having a

day out but real George Eliot devotees, many from a long way from Nuneaton. Some have since joined the Fellowship so these tours are well worth doing — if a bit tiring!

The 1992 *George Eliot Review* started a new life under the editorship of Drs. Graham Handley and Beryl Gray. The new format has been welcomed and we hope the *Review* will go out to more universities etc in the future, since it is clearly a worth-while contribution to George Eliot scholarship while still maintaining its local links.

We have continued to work closely with Nuneaton Museum and were able to help with the provision of Victorian ornaments for the mantel-piece in the 'Priory Drawing Room' there. We hope to continue to give help as it is needed.

Harriet Williams is still giving invaluable help in keeping us in close contact with our American members. She collects their subscriptions, mails their newsletters and, in the summer of 1992, arranged a very happy little gathering of California members to welcome Bill and me on our American tour. It was a very pleasant Toast to the Immortal Memory that evening in Long Beach. Another American enthusiast, Dr. Linda Robertson, has been appointed our liaison with the Modern Language Association of America and she lives in hope of one day getting a George Eliot session accepted at their annual conference each December.

A sad development in Nuneaton has been the diminishing interest in George Eliot by a few local schools which once supported us nobly. Schools have urgent priorities, we know, but it is disappointing that contact with the Fellowship is no longer one of them.

I have spoken to eight local societies about George Eliot during the year and all have shown great interest in her, some of them supporting the annual readings by sending large groups to the Arts Centre. We hope this trend will continue.

The Fellowship Council has met eight times during the year and all the meetings have been long and busy ones. The success of the Fellowship inevitably increases the workload so there is always a lot to discuss. We are most grateful for hospitality in members' homes and the excellent refreshments that accompany it!

1992 has been another very successful year for the Fellowship. We go on from strength to strength and I am delighted to report a record membership for 1992 — 205 annual members and 254 life members, making a total of 459, far above any previous total. When I look back to that 1968 report and see how pleased we were to have 60 members, I realise what a long way we have come. And I am sure this journey is far from complete.

March 1993



Speakers at the *George Eliot and the Heart of England* Conference held at Arden House, July 10-12 1992, which was organized by the George Eliot Fellowship and the English Department of the University of Warwick.

Seated: Professor Barbara Hardy. *Standing from left to right:* Dr William Baker; Dr John Rignall; Professor Rosemary Ashton; Dr Tom Winniffrith; Professor Hugh Witemeyer; Dr Beryl Gray; Mr Kevin Ashby; Dr A.G. van den Broek.

Papers given at this conference will be published by William Baker in *George Eliot — George Henry Lewes Studies* (English Department, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, 60115 U.S.A.)