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## Annual Report- 1993

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# ANNUAL REPORT

by Kathleen Adams

The George Eliot Review 25 (1994)

Published by The George Eliot Fellowship, <http://georgeeliot.org/>

The year's events began in a quite festive manner. Although the Annual General Meeting in March produced no special surprises, it was the 25th anniversary of my election as Fellowship Secretary so I provided cakes instead of the usual mundane biscuits and was presented with a lovely bouquet.

The AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies followed on April 24th and the Fellowship, as always, was well represented. The John Clare Society were our hosts and we saw some excellent slides of the John Clare Country.

Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks gave us two splendid evenings of readings a few days later in Nuneaton and Coventry. Entitled 'I Say, Garson!', it was an entertaining look at the Victorian abroad and it included passages from *Daniel Deronda*, *Romola* and *Middlemarch*, all beautifully read. How well these two work together. We are most grateful for help at Nuneaton from Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and at the University of Warwick Arts Centre in Coventry from our most generous sponsors whose financial help makes the Coventry performance possible. We are very fortunate to have so many good friends.

Graham Johnson, the distinguished musician and accompanist, was our principal guest at the Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying on June 19th and he gave us a very well researched address on George Eliot, the European. So well did he know his subject that he spoke without notes or text, thus depriving us of copy for the *Review*, much to our dismay. Even more to our dismay was the discovery later that we had a lady with us at the Abbey who could have taken it all down in shorthand! We must not allow ourselves to be caught out like that again.

John Tounsand, Unit General Manager of the George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton was our Guest of Honour at the Nuneaton Wreath-laying the following week and he spoke of the hospital's pride in having a sense of identity in their illustrious name. The Fellowship feels a similar pride in our long and close association with this important and growing hospital.

The literary outing almost did not take place because we had difficulty filling the coach. Literary outings had been abandoned some years earlier because of lack of interest but we had hoped that the period of time which had elapsed since the last series might have encouraged more participation. The visit to the D.H.Lawrence Country and Byron's Newstead Abbey was very successful and we are reluctant to abandon such events again so will persevere at least for a time.

Professor William Baker of Northern Illinois University gave the Memorial Lecture in October, taking as his subject 'George Eliot in the Letters of G.H.Lewes'. He is editing G.H.Lewes's letters for publication so the lecture gave us a taste of what we can look for-

ward to with anticipation. We expected a full house and had turned people away beforehand because all the free tickets had gone. Sadly, about thirty people failed to attend and it is clear that a *free* ticket gives some people the feeling that it does not matter if they stay away. Unfortunately, they disappointed many who had to stay away because they could not obtain a ticket. We now plan to make a small charge for tickets in the hope that this will avoid the same thing happening in future.

The highlight of the autumn programme was undoubtedly *The Gladness of the World: a Celebration of George Eliot in Words and Music* in Coventry Cathedral on November 27th. Most sensitively devised, scripted and read by Gabriel Woolf, he was accompanied by Canon Michael Sadgrove, St. Michael's Chamber Choir and Marjorie Bruce. Marjorie sang two of the *Spanish Gypsy Songs* (words by George Eliot and music by Charles Villiers Stanford) and, accompanied by the choir, sang the solo part in Paul Liddington Wright's new setting of 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible', George Eliot's moving and inspiring poem which clearly shows her own views on immortality. The setting was commissioned by the George Eliot Fellowship, using a legacy from a past Vice President, the late Edith Lenton, and a gift from a present Vice President, Dorothy Edmands. We now hope that this new and attractive setting may be published.

The following day, November 28th was far less successful. We had joined the Cathedral Concert with the Birthday Luncheon, hopefully to attract our far-flung members to a George Eliot Country weekend. There was not much response to the latter idea and perhaps this was just as well for the Birthday Luncheon was something of a disaster. The hotel which we have used for some years had been taken over and was under new management and their glowing promises of much higher standards had led us to expect a considerable improvement. Sadly, this was not to be; poor service, cool food and an uncaring attitude by the management almost destroyed this significant annual celebration. Pleasant company, however, and an excellent talk by our guest, John Burton, Chairman of the Bedworth Society, on the diaries of Alison Evans (George Eliot's great niece) saved the occasion. But the hotel, despite its close George Eliot associations, has lost us for we know that members would not be willing to give it another chance after the many hiccups in past years.

1993 heralded the first year of the George Eliot Fellowship Prize. This was a new venture on our part and was to encourage papers on the novelist's work or life. Despite very little press publicity (which we have come to expect, particularly from the national dailies who seem dismissive of much of what goes on of a cultural nature in the provinces) we had twelve entries, almost all of which were of a very high standard, giving our three judges, Dr. John Rignall, Dr. Beryl Gray and Dr. Tonny van den Broek, quite a hard time. The winner was Dr. Lesley Gordon for her essay 'Tito, Dionysus and Apollo: An Examination of Tito Melema in *Romola*'. The £50 prize is to be offered again in 1994, together with guaranteed publication in the *George Eliot Review* and two years' free membership of the Fellowship.

The *Review* was published in August. Issue no. 24 received some good response from

members and now goes into university libraries in the U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Germany and Poland. This was the last issue to be edited by Dr. Graham Handley who has been co-editor for many years and has done an excellent job for which we thank him very sincerely.

At the beginning of the year we heard rather better news of the future of Bird Grove, Foleshill, George Eliot's Coventry home. The threat of demolition has been removed and refurbishment as a training and enterprise centre for minority groups is planned with a sympathetic restoration of the building. So far no more news has been received.

Souvenirs of the George Eliot Country are an on-going project for the Fellowship, not only to stock local shops but to provide tourists etc. with something to remind them of George Eliot and Warwickshire. Two of the least successful have been teatowels and matching mugs and we are relieved that the last of these have been sold. We are now looking into more attractive replacements.

During the year interest in George Eliot in local schools seemed to be rapidly diminishing, although the George Eliot School was still with us. Milby Middle School, very enthusiastic under their previous Head Teacher, has now drifted away as the new head is no longer interested in keeping up this long and fruitful association with the Fellowship. We are working on this, however, and I hope to record more local co-operation with schools in my 1994 Report.

Because of the healthy state of our finances we have been able to help with two important projects in 1993. A contribution was made towards the cost of the complete restoration of George Eliot's beloved piano at Nuneaton Museum, and we also assisted Coventry City Libraries in their purchase of some significant copies of letters to George Eliot from her Coventry friend, Sara Hennell.

A George Eliot Exhibition was staged during the summer months at Chilvers Coton Centre in Nuneaton. Copies were made of our photographs and we hope an exhibition of these will be a permanent display at the Centre. We also supplied material for exhibition in Richmond, Surrey, Warrington and Buxton. We provided a print of George Eliot for permanent display in Roanne Hospital in France (Nuneaton's twin town).

Margaret Wolfit gave a George Eliot recital at a Summer School in Capetown and Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks took George Eliot to Jersey where they concentrated on the visit made there by her and G.H. Lewes in 1857 (although they were dismayed to find that Jersey seemed unaware of their distinguished resident during that time!). The Fellowship is fortunate that we have such gifted Vice Presidents who can take George Eliot abroad with such success.

Sessions of the Fellowship Study Group have continued with great success. Three gatherings during 1993 were led by Jennifer Smith, Ruth Harris and Graham Handley. Graham has now retired as tutor at the Study Group and, once more, we thank him for giving his time to us freely over a number of years.

With the completion of the final phase of the George Eliot Hospital the Fellowship Council had a guided tour in September. It is very warming to see the very high standard of patient care - not to mention the sight of all those well-loved names from George Eliot's novels which grace the wards and departments throughout.

We have donated a double portrait of Mary Ann Evans and George Eliot as well as copies of all the novels to the Mary Ann Evans Hospice on the same campus as the hospital and maintain contact with the hospice.

The Fellowship took a stand at the Local History Day at Rugby in October. These 'shop-windows' create a little local interest but 'little' seems to be the operative word. But it seems better to be seen than not.

Dr. Beryl Gray continues to care for George Eliot's grave in Highgate Cemetery and has planted it so that there is something blooming during the spring, summer and autumn. We are most grateful for this constant and time-consuming care.

A second edition of 500 copies of *Those Of Us Who Loved Her* by Kathleen Adams was published by the Fellowship in the autumn and continues to sell steadily.

Four newsletters were published during the year and we are gladdened to occasionally receive letters telling us how much these are enjoyed. It is important to keep in touch regularly with our members around the world and, hopefully, to make them feel they belong to a friendly organization.

The tours organized in the George Eliot Country by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council are increasing in popularity and we are delighted to meet enthusiastic tourists and to welcome some of them as members of the Fellowship. It is most gratifying to work so closely with the Council's Marketing and Tourism Division to our mutual benefit.

Harriet Williams continues to help us in the United States as our contact with American and some Canadian members. She does valuable work over there and we are so grateful to her for her enthusiasm. She visited us in August and was able to attend a Fellowship Council meeting. We are also grateful to Dr. Linda Robertson of Arkansas who involves herself with the annual

Modern Language Association of America Convention. She has tried without success to get a George Eliot session included but she, nevertheless, gets members and other George Eliot admirers at the Convention to a dinner where they can exchange views.

The fellowship Council has met 10 times during the year and we are most grateful for hospitality in the homes of its members.

Apart from the tours which the Chairman and I guided, I have spoken to seven clubs during the year. The list of bookings for 1994, however, will far exceed this figure.

Our membership for 1993 reached the highest total in our history with 223 annual members and 253 life members, making a total of 476 in 20 different countries. We are, undoubtedly in a state of continual growth. My thanks to all those who have worked with us, not least my husband, the Chairman, without whose support my job would be impossible.

*March 1994*