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Adams, Kathleen, "Annual Report 1996" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 301.
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ANNUAL REPORT 1996

by Kathleen Adams

When our year began with the Annual General Meeting we had the opportunity to accept our new Constitution. This enabled us to apply for and receive Charitable Status which we hope will be a useful situation for us in the future. At the meeting we were afraid that we were to lose a wonderful treasurer with no sign of a replacement but John Bunn agreed to stay on until the end of September while our search continued. Before that deadline Sally-Ann Pye offered her services and she has worked well and efficiently with us since, proving a helpful and enthusiastic member of Council. The retiring members of the Council were re-elected and David Adams was co-opted for the year. After the meeting slides associated with George Eliot places and events were shown.

The Fellowship has been extremely fortunate to be one of the legatees of the estate of the late Daphne Carrick, a life member of many years. Other legatees receiving a similar amount are the Brontë Society, the Gaskell Society, the National Trust, the Friends of Norwich Cathedral and, we believe, the Dickens Fellowship. The estate has to be finally settled but we have received, so far, the magnificent sum of £35,000. When the Chairman and I joined the Fellowship in 1965 the funds were never out of double figures - now we are well into five figures. What a golden opportunity this gives us to promote George Eliot even more. We wrote and asked the views of our President and Vice-Presidents on how the income from the investment of this large sum should be used and we had some most interesting replies, all of which were carefully considered. We hope to keep most of the legacy invested and only use the income so that there will always be a substantial sum to fall back upon for any major project.

The winner of the George Eliot Prize was announced in February. Phyllis Weliver received a cheque for £50 and two years' membership of the Fellowship as well as guaranteed publication of her paper in the 1996 *George Eliot Review*.

Several members attended the AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies in April. This was hosted by The Housman Society to mark the centenary of the publication of *A Shropshire Lad* and we heard some most interesting and professional talks about organizing their attractive Housman Festival. The ALS President, Gabriel Woolf, read from the series of poems and the Chairman of the Housman Society declared he had never heard them read better.

Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks presented 'The Story of Gwendolen' as the 1996 George Eliot Readings at the end of April. We were forced into a weekend programme by restrictions at Warwick Arts Centre but have decided not to do this again. Sunday at Warwick Arts is much more expensive and our audience was considerably down; we shall stick to weekdays in future. The recital was most attractively staged and we had a full house at Nuneaton. Undoubtedly the Council Chamber at the Town Hall is a very good and comfortable venue and is attracting considerable response. Subsequently Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks recorded an edited version of 'The Story of Gwendolen' onto a single cassette. This has sold in

smaller numbers than our other George Eliot cassettes but has been warmly acclaimed by those who have heard it.

Marjorie Bruce, wife of our President Jonathan Ouvry, and a professional singer, presented her 'George Eliot and Song', accompanied by Patricia Williams, in Nuneaton Museum in June. This was a delightful recital made more exciting by hearing the accompaniment on George Eliot's own Broadwood piano and by sitting in George Eliot's 'drawing room in the Priory' (reconstructed in the George Eliot Gallery at Nuneaton Museum in case anyone thinks that the Priory, long since demolished, has sprung to life again in North Bank, Regent's Park!).

The following day Marjorie was Guest of Honour at the Wreath-laying in the George Eliot Memorial Garden. The Garden has been substantially altered near to the George Eliot memorial and made a much more attractive setting for this annual ceremony. Afterwards the Mayor and the Fellowship entertained our guests to tea at the museum.

The Wreath-laying in Westminster Abbey proved to be something of a problem as only thirteen members accompanied us to the Abbey. Fortunately, others travelled with us and, although we had expected that most of them were going to London for the shops or the theatres, nearly all of them were with us in the Abbey for this annual moving tribute at the memorial stone. We were so grateful that they swelled our numbers as very few London members attend the only event in their area each year. Graham Handley was our Guest of Honour and we served tea for our guests, as always before the ceremony, in our President's boardroom in The Sanctuary.

A few of us attended a lecture on George Eliot's Humanism in Kenilworth in August. The lecture was delivered by Jim Herrick, Editor of the *New Humanist*, a member of the Fellowship, and aroused some lively discussion.

I was very honoured to be invited to unveil the George Eliot statue outside the main entrance of the hospital named after her. This was the fibreglass model of the statue in the centre of Nuneaton and was generously given by the sculptor, John Letts. We were very pleased that the hospital now has its own statue as well as the bust, also sculpted by John Letts, in the Cheverel Wing. We were entertained to lunch after the ceremony and Bill and I were particularly pleased to have our family with us on such a happy occasion.

A new agent was appointed to the Arbury Estate in 1995 and we were very dismayed when this 'new broom' decided to ban the Fellowship from visiting South Farm, George Eliot's birthplace, unless on a Borough Council organized tour of the George Eliot Country. For the previous thirty years, and probably longer, we had never been refused permission to view the exterior of this important landmark in George Eliot's life. However, after a conciliatory letter he relented and happy relations have once more prevailed.

Continuing the 'Shropshire Lad' theme, our literary outing in September was to the Housman associations in Bromsgrove and on to Ludlow where his ashes are buried. We had excellent

and friendly guides from the Housman Society and saw the poet's home, school and church in Bromsgrove. A most interesting outing very ably organized by Anna Craig to whom we extend our thanks.

The 1996 George Eliot Memorial Lecture was delivered in October by Professor Raymond Chapman on 'The Larger Meaning of your Voice' - a fascinating subject. The text is published in this issue of the *Review*.

Also in October Michael Harris delivered the annual lecture at the George Eliot Hospital. This is provided one year by the hospital and in the other by the Fellowship. Our 1996 contribution was probably one of the best as Michael entertained us with 'Beaks in Books - the Magistrate in Literature'. The hospital provided a very delicious supper afterwards.

Although Corley Village Hall was not our first choice for the George Eliot Birthday Luncheon it was, in fact, very satisfactory; the weather, however, was not! We began the proceedings at the George Eliot statue in Newdegate Square in a blizzard - which our President coped with magnificently. Then a quick dash to cars and the hazardous journey to Corley where the approach road to the hall was treacherous. Although everyone was concerned about the journey home, nothing spoiled the atmosphere at the lunch; indeed, it was almost like a 'blitz' spirit, with everyone determined to enjoy it. Rosemary Ashton gave us an excellent Toast to the Immortal Memory and afterwards signed copies of her recent highly acclaimed biography: *George Eliot: A Life*. When the event was over, those having long distances to travel had very unpleasant journeys home. We hope that we shall soon find a venue for the Birthday Luncheon where we can settle for some years.

After the refurbishment of Bird Grove, George Eliot's Coventry home at Foleshill, we tried very hard to get permission to see it. However, letters to the pastor of the West Indian church there remained unanswered and there was never any reply to his phone. In desperation we wrote to the Afro-Caribbean Business Centre, also at Bird Grove - and they don't answer letters, either. One can only assume that they don't welcome visitors and that the George Eliot connection means nothing to them.

An interesting letter turned up in a box of letters given to the Herbert Museum in Coventry. Previously unknown, it was from George Eliot to her Coventry friend, Cara Bray. A possible dating of the letter was attempted and the conclusions published in the 1996 *Review*. The *Guardian* newspaper featured the letter and the Secretary spoke about it on local radio and on the BBC radio programme 'Woman's Hour'.

The fellowship was also given a photocopy of a journal kept by George Eliot's Coventry friend, Sara Hennell, and later completed by George Eliot herself. This came with a copy of the *Coventry Herald* of 1919 marking the centenary of George Eliot's birth.

A Moroccan student contacted us during the year pleading for George Eliot's novels which were either unobtainable or too expensive in his native country. We built up a collection of the

novels and dispatched then to Morocco. No acknowledgement of their arrival was received so the student was asked again if he had received them. Still no reply. It is not uncommon for the Fellowship to provide assistance to students from whom nothing further is ever heard. We are not asking for gratitude; it is pleasant to help people studying George Eliot but it would be satisfying to have some acknowledgement of our help instead of silence. Perhaps this is a late twentieth-century failing.

Nuneaton Museum is in the process of applying for a lottery grant towards the total refurbishment of the George Eliot Gallery. A plan has been formulated which would make the gallery a very exciting concept, taking the visitor through George Eliot's life in various stages. To assist the Museum, the Fellowship has offered £10,000 of our legacy to support the application and we await developments.

We supported the Mary Evans Hospice Candlelight Appeal for funds to extend their work in the hospice as well as in the homes of their patients. The appeal was launched to all our members and, with a contribution from Fellowship funds, we were able to send a donation of £500.

Towards the end of the year we were negotiating with Nuneaton Library to have a larger and clearer directional sign to the George Eliot Collection there, also to include directions to Nuneaton Museum. A new larger notice is expected to be in place in the near future when the library foyer has been refurbished

One of the suggestions made for the use of a part of our legacy was to create an archive of Fellowship material at the University of Warwick. When approached, however they pleaded lack of space to house such an archive. Rather than let the matter slide the Secretary spent several weeks going through our considerable archive, cataloguing it and producing indexes which will make it much easier for any material requested by students etc. to be readily found and lent out where necessary. One index is kept at Nuneaton Library so that they can refer enquiries to the Fellowship that they cannot satisfy themselves. It was a very time-consuming exercise but well worth it.

In my last report I wrote about the frustration at not being able to get the Herbert Museum in Coventry to label the George Eliot exhibits in the 'Godiva City' Exhibition. I am pleased to report that, at long last, this has been completed. I think it is fair to say that, at last, Coventry may be waking up to its importance in the George Eliot story!

During the year the Chairman and Secretary have cleaned the Evans tomb in Chilvers Coton churchyard of the layers of moss that were obliterating the wording on the side commemorating George Eliot's father.

The BBC Television programme entitled 'Bookworm', a series on literary topics, has twice approached the Fellowship for masses of information about our activities for inclusion in one of the programmes. Two series have now passed and George Eliot has still failed to appear.

We were approached during the year with a request that we protest against a housing development at Astley (George Eliot's 'Knebley' in *Scenes of Clerical Life*). The Fellowship Council studied the plans and discussed it at some length but decided not to add to the protest as we could see no harm coming to those parts of Astley to which we take visitors on the George Eliot Country tour; indeed, the occupants might well swell the congregation at the church and provide much needed help with necessary restoration.

The Chairman and Secretary between them have spoken to twenty local societies in 1996, have guided tours of the George Eliot country for commercial touring companies and, with Anne Pavitt, Ann O'Callaghan and Joe Davies have guided tours organized by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council. All of these have been most successful and our many visitors, in excess of 400, have been full of praise for what we have shown them and of pleasure at the friendliness of the Fellowship and the representative of the Borough Council. Bill and I have also taken a few American members on George Eliot tours in our car and these have been particularly rewarding. Also organized by the indefatigable Rose Selwyn of the Borough Council Marketing Division was a very successful George Eliot Country tour for students at King Edward VI College who are studying *The Mill on the Floss* at A level. This was particularly valuable as it showed us what attracts the young student and what emphasizes to them the relationship between George Eliot's life and her novels. We commend Rose Selwyn for her continuing initiative in helping and interesting students in George Eliot's work.

The Fellowship Council has met ten times during the year, until June in members' homes and after that at Nuneaton Town Hall. The committee room we use at the Town Hall is pleasant and comfortable but we have only a restricted time there. It certainly concentrates the mind on the business in hand, although I plead to a certain sense of panic as the minutes tick by and the usual busy agenda is not close enough to the end. But I think it speaks for the amount we need to discuss every month that the two allotted hours never seem to be enough!

The Fellowship Study Group met three times in 1996 to discuss *Pride and Prejudice* under the leadership of Ruth Harris as well as Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger*, and *Daniel Deronda* with John Rignall. Each meeting has taken place in Chilvers Coton Church lounge in Nuneaton.

Several of us attended a splendid performance of *The Mill on the Floss* at the Loft Theatre in Leamington and were delighted with the performance. It is a very highly regarded amateur company but even so we had not expected it to come anywhere near the amazing performance given by the Shared Experience Theatre many of us had seen at Stratford upon Avon.

The 1996 *George Eliot Review* was published in August. This was No. 27; how it has changed since it began all those years ago when I reproduced a very amateurish version on the school duplicator. We are so lucky in our editors who do such a very good job. We are very grateful to them for their work, their discernment and the way they are making each successive issue better than the last. We should also record our gratitude to them for being two of the three judges of the essays submitted for the George Eliot Fellowship Prize. They and Dr Tonny van den Broek read the essays during a very busy professional life and give a great deal of thought

to their choice of the winner each year. Since its inception the prize had remained at £50 but was increased in 1996 to £100, two years' membership of the Fellowship and guaranteed publication in the *Review*.

The South of England Branch remains small but their enthusiasm is undimmed. Under the spirited leadership of Margaret Jennings they have had a successful year.

Another Literary lunch was held at The Georgian Hotel in Haslemere, an area George Eliot knew well when she lived at The Heights at Witley. We showed part of the collection of slides associated with people and places in George Eliot's life. Study Groups have been held on *Daniel Deronda* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The branch's Birthday Lunch was held on 1 December with Dr Graham Handley as Guest of Honour and this event was a great success. We send them all good wishes from the parent Fellowship and hope that their 1997 efforts will considerably enlarge their numbers. Congratulations to Margaret for all she does to promote George Eliot in the south.

As I am about to enter my thirtieth year in the Secretary's chair I looked back at my first Annual Report. It was six short paragraphs of news and events. The events themselves were not very exciting although we had the late Richard Church as our Guest of Honour at the Birthday Lunch. How far we have moved in the intervening years and what an enormous amount we have achieved. To list those achievements now would take another lengthy report - but one day another edition of *The Story of the George Eliot Fellowship* will be published and then we can look back and congratulate ourselves and the Fellowship!

I end, as always, with my personal thanks. First of all to the Chairman without whom my job would be impossible, to those members of the Fellowship Council who have undertaken jobs during the year, to those at the Town Hall who are so helpful, to the Curator and her staff at the Museum, to those Vice-Presidents who are always there when advice is needed and to our ever-supportive President. We make an excellent team.