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Annual Report 1998

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ANNUAL REPORT 1998

by Kathleen Adams

Every year I begin this report by saying what a busy year the Fellowship has had. Every year it seems to get busier; certainly the workload increases each year — which must be a measure of our success in reaching out in all directions, not only in the UK but abroad as well.

We begin each year in a fairly uneventful way with the Annual General Meeting, and 1998 was in the same mould, although we followed the business meeting with an excellent slide show by John Burton of the George Eliot Country in the past. John was elected to the Council at the AGM and has already proved his value to us by improving our display material and updating our collection of slides. One only has to ask John to do something in connection with pictures and they appear, proving the excellence of his work.

Our next event was much livelier than the AGM and hugely successful — the George Eliot Day on 9 May. This time the emphasis was on *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede* with papers by Joanne Shattock of the University of Leicester, Beryl Gray of Birkbeck College, London, and Vivienne Wood of the King Edward Sixth Form College in Nuneaton. The day ended with a slide show of places associated with both novels. We had capacity booking and enrolled new members. In the evening we presented a drama documentary by Robin Allan and three friends, entitled 'George Eliot: a Woman of Some Importance'. The actors were in Victorian dress, and slides accompanied the performance. It was extremely well done and warmly applauded. No fee was charged; the actors very generously gave the proceeds to our Millennium Project and these amounted to over £300.

To complete the George Eliot Weekend the first tour of the George Eliot Country took place the following day. Everyone, as always, thoroughly enjoyed the tour and voted it extremely good value for money.

Nineteen members attended the Annual General Meeting and Seminar of the Alliance of Literacy Societies in April. The day was hosted by the two Lewis Carroll Societies and there was even a little 'Alice' in attendance! This is an ideal opportunity for us to meet members from other literary societies.

The Chairman and I went with a small party from the Southern Branch in April to see a delightful performance of *Silas Marner* at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, Surrey, adapted by Geoffrey Beevers whose earlier adaptation of *Adam Bede* had been acclaimed by the critics and audiences alike. It was a lively experience and one we shall long remember.

Our Study Group hit problems in 1998. The first session, to have been given by Ruth Harris on *The Old Wives' Tale* by Arnold Bennett, was cancelled owing to Mrs Harris's illness. A further session of *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë to have been given in a dramatized form by students from Warwick University had to be abandoned at the last minute because one of the students was suddenly taken ill and into hospital only hours beforehand. But the group will continue into 1999 at least.

We had our usual two wreath-layings. The first, in May, had as our Guest of Honour Margaret Jennings, the Secretary of the Southern Branch. The service was accompanied, as always, by a gifted group of musicians, the Mercian Consort who, over the past years, have added greatly to the pleasure of this annual tribute to George Eliot. We are most grateful to them.

What has become known generally as the annual George Eliot Readings became much more in 1998 when Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks were accompanied by two musicians. Rowena Bass (harp) and Gabrielle Byam-Grounds (flute) took part in 'They Love the Noise it Makes', a programme devised by Gabriel Woolf about the Victorians and their music. This was a very ambitious programme but it worked wonderfully well and Gabriel Woolf is to be congratulated once again on the selection of his material, and for putting it together with the additional participants. The huge cost of presenting this prestigious programme in the theatre at the Arts Centre at Warwick University is only met with the very generous help of the sponsors who give nobly each year. Even with their help and the attraction of the presentation, our audience numbers were down, both at Warwick Arts and in the Town Hall at Nuneaton and despite massive and expensive advertising. The fact that our audience has stopped growing has worried the Fellowship Council and it was decided to do a survey to see if we could discover what the situation was. We have approximately 150 local members within reach of one venue or the other. A questionnaire was sent out to all local members although it was really only aimed at the 75 or so who never, or hardly ever attended this annual event. Nine people replied! Some said it was not the sort of programme they wanted to attend — even though they never had, so really had no basis on which to dismiss it! None suggested a preferred alternative, so we were left somewhat baffled and can only hope that the other sixty odd who did not let us know how they felt may perhaps try it out in the future. We do need ALL our local members, not just half of them.

After the performance in the Town Hall I was surprised and delighted to receive from the Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth, Councillor Richard Chattaway, a delightful gift of a Coalport figurine of an Edwardian lady in acknowledgement of my thirty years as Secretary of the Fellowship and thanking me for promoting Nuneaton during that time. I hadn't fully realized that, in promoting George Eliot, I was also promoting her native Nuneaton but it was so touching to have my work acknowledged so warmly and generously. I was also given a framed certificate to the same effect. I left the Town Hall that evening in a quite euphoric state, feeling very fortunate to work for a town which is so appreciative. I was also rather amazed that my husband, the Chairman, had managed to keep a secret so well.

On 6 June the Chairman, Treasurer and I manned a stall at the 'Lives and Times' Day in Coventry's War Memorial Park. We displayed our wares, answered a few queries and decided it is perhaps worth-while to 'show the flag' on these occasions.

Lord (Roy) Hattersley was our Guest Speaker at the wreath-laying in Westminster Abbey on 20 June and spoke most warmly about George Eliot's books which he admires greatly. This is such a lovely occasion — to be in Westminster Abbey when the hordes of tourists have moved out and we can experience the silence and peace of this great church. Sadly, this was our last Saturday visit. The Dean, Dr Wesley Kerr, has changed things at the Abbey and we can now only have a 6.00 p.m. service on a week-day. Reorganizing this event has caused many prob-

lems. We had hoped to have advice on their availability on a weekday visit from our 150 local members. A questionnaire to them elicited only eleven replies this time. They do rather like to keep us in the dark.

In July a few of us attended a concert by the North Warwickshire Chamber Orchestra to hear the premiere of four short pieces by a local composer, Peter Lawrance, entitled 'George Eliot Miniatures' based on characters and events in the novels. They were delightful and we hope more members will be able to hear them.

Our literary outing in 1998 was to Ledbury where we were met by Linda Hart from the Friends of the Dymock Poets who gave us a fascinating tour of the area which had been so much loved by six poets who had made their homes there in the early years of the century.

The George Eliot Memorial Lecture was given on 17 October by Professor Henry Alley of the University of Oregon in the USA. He spoke on 'George Eliot and the Art of Healing' although he expanded this subject beyond our expectations.

The 1998 George Eliot Birthday Luncheon was held on the actual birthday. With this in mind we invited her great great nephew, Tenniel Evans, as our Guest Speaker. He spoke warmly of his — and her — family. Being descended from her brother Isaac who disowned her while she lived with G. H. Lewes, Tenniel feels the family do not deserve her. Once more the luncheon was held in the Raveloe Restaurant at the George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton where we had an excellent carvery and attentive service from the staff. Before the luncheon, our President, Jonathan Ouvry, placed a green and white chaplet at the statue in the hospital grounds.

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council staged a Victorian Festival in December and invited Gabriel Woolf to present a programme to be aimed at people less familiar with George Eliot's work. Indeed, there were a lot of new faces at his presentation in the Town Hall entitled 'The Funny Side of George Eliot', and there was lots of laughter as Gabriel proved in his own inimitable way that George Eliot really has a sense of humour. Those of us who love her books never doubted it, of course.

The Chairman and I represented the Fellowship at the dinner held after the Town Crier's contest in Nuneaton at the end of November and presented the trophy (a miniature of the George Eliot statue) to the winner, the Town Crier of Whitby. When George Eliot was on holiday with Lewes and the Burne-Joneses in Whitby in 1870, she could never have imagined that one day, 128 years later, a small statuette of her would travel to Whitby as the trophy of a Town Crier!

The Fellowship continues to assist the impecunious Victorian Centre in the University of Perm in Russia with gifts of books. A copy of *Daniel Deronda* was sent, back numbers of the *George Eliot Review* (and we now send a free copy each year on publication), *George Eliot Country* and Rosemary Ashton's *George Eliot: A Life*, all of which they greatly appreciate where there is such a dearth of academic books. We have sent a set of prints of the George Eliot Country for the Centre's walls and were warmly thanked for those. Our contact at Perm is Professor Boris Proskurnin and we were delighted to meet him in October when he came to Nuneaton and we gave him the usual George Eliot Country tour, much to his great pleasure. We shall keep in touch with him and have promised to send anything else they might need.

During the year the Fellowship paid for the restoration of the tomb of Emma Gwyther (thought to be the original of Milly Barton in 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton') in Chilvers Coton Churchyard. Previously enveloped in a yew tree, when the tree was cut back the tomb was revealed to be in a very poor state. We have not replaced the urns on top of the tomb but the fabric of the tomb itself is now much strengthened with new stone at each corner. After the restoration the Chairman and I took a bucket of hot water and a brush to the churchyard and gave the tomb a wash and brush up. We wonder if there are any survivors of the Gwyther family.

A film company has spent much of the year making a film of George Eliot's life. They have referred to us in all its stages and we anticipate that it will be a welcome addition to George Eliot material when it is completed.

With 2000 rapidly approaching, the Fellowship Council have been discussing what we might do as our Millennium Project. Initially we planned a new bust of George Eliot for the Memorial Garden and we hoped that the Borough Council would provide the plinth on which the bust would stand as they had done so for the statue in Newdegate Square. Unfortunately, the idea was not popular with the Borough Council and it was clear that no financial help would be available. Indeed, one of the councillors asked why they should pay for something to commemorate 'someone who no one reads and who couldn't wait to get out of the town'! The same ill-informed gentleman, who has since been reported as saying that all the buildings associated with George Eliot have been knocked down, was Mayor of Nuneaton at one time and received our hospitality at several events. Did nothing at all rub off on him? He was, however, alone in his views, but, even so, it was clear that such an ambitious project as the bust was going to be beyond us without the Council's help. We therefore rethought our Millennium Project and decided to have an all-the-year-round-garden placed around the hospital's statue of George Eliot, and to have the area around the original memorial in the garden which bears her name refurbished with more suitable surroundings created for it. Not only will these enhance memorials to George Eliot, they will give more pleasure to all those who pass by.

In the autumn the Chairman and I went to the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre (once the Free School attended by Isaac Evans and mentioned in *Scenes of Clerical Life*) to present to the Centre framed portraits of the Victorian Royal Family to hang in the Victorian schoolroom there. They were gratefully received and we stayed on to watch late-twentieth-century children become late-nineteenth-century children in the schoolroom and to take part in a lesson with the rigid discipline of 100 years ago. The children responded wonderfully and said they much preferred sitting in lines of single desks facing the teacher. Current educationalists, please note!

During the year we received the final payment in settlement of the legacy from a late member, Daphne Carrick. The bequest finally totalled £44, 808. 31, a sum which was beyond our wildest dreams when the Fellowship re-formed after the war in 1946, and with which we can do so much to honour George Eliot.

The Chairman and I represented the Fellowship at a George Eliot Conference in Manchester in May. Apart from doing very well with a sales table, it was a good opportunity to meet potential future Memorial lecturers.

For many years we have been selling booklets, bookmarks, cassettes, postcards etc. on our sales tables — but frequently offering our wares to the same customers. It was decided, therefore, to look into a new range of George Eliot souvenirs. These will not necessarily be fund-raisers but new ways of taking the name of the author and her novels beyond Nuneaton and Warwickshire. A sub-committee was formed of the Secretary, Chairman, Treasurer, John Burton and also Rose Selwyn of the Borough Council's Marketing Division whose expertise in marketing would be useful to us. We met to discuss new souvenirs and hope our ideas will be on sales tables in 1999.

One of our members gave us a portrait of George Eliot painted by her late husband and this was given to the Borough Council and will hang in the Town Hall. When we receive gifts of this nature, it reminds us again how unfortunate we are not to have premises of our own where such gifts could be displayed.

The *George Eliot Review*, issue no. 29 was published in August to even greater acclaim than in previous years. The balance of academic papers and articles of local interest seems to work well in a Fellowship with such a mixed membership and we are immensely grateful to the two editors, Dr Beryl Gray and Dr John Rignall for all the work they put into it, particularly when they are also heavily committed to their academic work.

Together with Dr Tonny van den Broek, Drs Gray and Rignall also judge the papers submitted for the George Eliot Fellowship's annual essay prize: another task to be slotted into their busy professional lives for which we remain extremely grateful. The 1998 Prize was awarded to Dr David Malcolm in the University of Gdansk in Poland.

While the Chairman and I were on holiday in Tenby in Wales in July we sought and thought we had found 2 Bridge Street where George Eliot and Lewes stayed in June and July 1856. I took lots of photographs and, when we came home, contacted the curator of Tenby Museum for more information about the property. He was almost as enthusiastic as I was until, after more research, he discovered that there were two properties called 2 Bridge Street at that time. He then passed on his enthusiasm to the present owners of both houses, who were to retrieve their deeds in an effort to clarify the situation. We still await some news.

The death occurred in 1998 of Edward Carpenter who had been Dean of Westminster Abbey when we were negotiating the memorial stone in Poets' Corner. Edward had been so welcoming, so friendly and helpful and was a great literary man himself. Our President, Jonathan Ouvry, represented us at the funeral in the Abbey which was packed with the many people who had revered Edward in his lifetime and mourned for his loss.

A party of Japanese members and friends came to Nuneaton in September and we took them on a tour of the George Eliot Country. They loved what they saw and took many memories (and photographs!) back with them to Japan.

We were very dismayed, but not entirely surprised when Margaret Jennings finally decided that the Southern Branch, of which she and we had such high hopes, had proved to be no longer viable. She had received so little support for the excellent events she had organized and was working on a nucleus of about half a dozen regulars. We fully understood that the branch

was no longer viable. At the Birthday Luncheon Margaret was given a token as a mark of our gratitude to her for all the hard work she had put in. I think we have to recognize, finally, that London and the south of England is a very wide area and distances keep more people away than lack of interest. We hope that is the reason, of course.

29 Warwick Row, Coventry, once the premises of the school run by the Misses Mary and Rebecca Franklin which Mary Ann Evans attended between 1832 and 1836, has been in the process of refurbishment in the latter part of 1998. The owners take a keen interest in the George Eliot connection and are eager to perpetuate it. They have already been supplied with details of the connection which are reproduced on a leaflet ready to hand to anyone who sees the plaque above the front door and wants to know more.

On reading about Cara Bray in the 1998 *Review* and of the memorial to her as part of a horse trough in the first half of this century, one of our London members suggested that the memorial, now languishing in London Road Cemetery in Coventry, might go to the city's Herbert Museum. We managed to fire the museum with enough enthusiasm to locate the memorial and to begin to decide where it might eventually end up; at present it is thought that it might be reunited with its original horse trough and become a flower tub in the gardens adjoining 29 Warwick Row. A tentative idea from a member which might soon become yet another memorial with a George Eliot association.

Towards the end of 1998 the Fellowship began an association with Coventry University who run a Learning in Later Life initiative for the over-50s. Sally Poulson is already running classes in association with the university and she, the Chairman, Rose Selwyn (representing Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council) and I are already in negotiations for running courses on George Eliot for the over-50s.

During the year I have spoken about George Eliot's life to ten local groups or societies, including one that was far from local — at Stragglethorpe Hall in Lincolnshire, the house used as Stone Court in the BBC TV film of *Middlemarch*. Ruth Harris also gives talks locally on George Eliot and the novels, and the Chairman, too, speaks to local groups — sometimes as himself, sometimes as my understudy. He and I have guided four private George Eliot Country tours this year as well as two of those organized by the Borough Council. These last are also guided by Ann O'Callaghan and Joe Davies, and Joan Bunn and John Burton have also joined the team. These Borough Council tours are immensely successful. They are organized by Rose Selwyn whose own lively personality gets each tour off to a cheerful start and this happy atmosphere lasts until we all disembark later in the day. We are so grateful to Rose for all she does, for she does it all so willingly and with such enthusiasm. Indeed, we owe a debt of real gratitude to the Borough Council for their support, and to the officers who give us their help so readily. I doubt if any other literary society in the UK has such an excellent relationship with its local authority — and how we appreciate and value it.

We continue to receive many inquiries from children doing a George Eliot project, from students begging help with theses, and from people who think they are related to George Eliot. These last are dealt with by the Chairman who has taken on the Evans family tree as his own particular speciality. In fact, many of the inquiries turn out to have little or no foundation, but,

with a family name as well known as Evans, the inquiries are sure to continue from those hopefuls who would like to bask in some reflected glory.

The BBC World Service has sought our aid in 1998 as they prepare a series on *Silas Marner* for people in the Far East for whom English is a second language. John Burton and I have taken part in one episode as have Rosalind Shanks and Gabriel Woolf, the latter having spoken and read in two episodes.

The Fellowship Council met nine times during the year. These are always very busy meetings with lots to discuss and are well attended.

Another vital statistic in any society is the membership. In 1998 we had 257 annual members and 243 life members, making a total of 600, a slight drop of eighteen on the all-time record of 618 last year. The big increase on previous years is, of course, the new branch in Japan. We now have members in the USA, Canada, Japan, France, India, Germany, Israel, Australia, Norway, Poland, New Zealand, Austria, Mexico and Korea, as well as all parts of the UK.

Finally, but no less important, I record my thanks to what I like to call 'the team' — those members of the Fellowship Council who assist me; to my Chairman/husband who keeps my head above water when the volume of work is overwhelming and who supports me in so many ways; and to our treasurer who has handled so much money during the year and a PhD thesis at the same time.