


2001

George Eliot Birthday Luncheon, 19 November 2000 The Toast to The Immortal Memory

Kathleen Adams

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Adams, Kathleen, "George Eliot Birthday Luncheon, 19 November 2000 The Toast to The Immortal Memory" (2001). *The George Eliot Review*. 391.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/391>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON, 19 NOVEMBER 2000 THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

by Kathleen Adams

Hon. Secretary of the Fellowship (1968 -)

Now I am in my thirty-second year as Secretary of the Fellowship, Bill and I can look back over those years and realize what an immense change they have made to our lives. When we joined the tiny Fellowship in 1965 we could have had no idea what was in store for us – the interesting things that have happened to us, the lovely people (some of them quite famous!) we have met, the friends we have made and the places we have been to, all because of that wonderful lady we are celebrating today.

My first contact with George Eliot was when, as a child, I accompanied my mother to the Gulson Library in Coventry. I can actually remember opening a copy of a George Eliot novel in a dark binding and such small print that I wondered how any grown-up person could ever have the patience to read all those tiny words on so many pages. I was into Winnie the Pooh at the time! Wasn't it odd that I looked into a George Eliot novel? I was something of a menace in the library as, while I waited for my mother to choose her books, I went along the library shelves pushing all the books as far back as they would go – the librarians must have cursed me!

My second contact with George Eliot came later when I was entrusted, still quite young, on alternate Saturday mornings to take my parents' mortgage payment (about eleven shillings a week, I think it was in those far-off days – the equivalent now of about 55p.) to an estate agent in Warwick Row in Coventry. Each time I passed number 29 I looked up at a plaque on the end wall which told me that a certain George Eliot had been to school there in the 1830s.

My third contact was not a particularly welcome one. At grammar school I was required to read *Silas Marner*. I am still convinced that this was chosen because it was short. I didn't like it, finding I was not able to relate to the characters therein. I now recall Virginia Woolf's remark that George Eliot was a writer for grown up people and yet I have heard many times during the last thirty years from elderly people who read George Eliot and loved her when they were only about ten years of age.

Not liking George Eliot then seems strange to me now as I recall that I coped with Sir Walter Scott rather better – *Ivanhoe*, *Quentin Durward*, and *The Talisman*. I don't think I could cope with them now. We even had to study Kinglake's *Eothen* for School Certificate – with not a word of conversation in it. I have recently bought a copy of *Eothen* and promise myself I will one day try it again. It was very hard going but I remind myself that, at that age, I had only just moved on from Angela Brazil to Dornford Yates for my reading for pleasure.

Then, after all these off-putting events, in 1965 I watched *Silas Marner* on BBC Television. I don't think it was nearly as successful as the later Ben Kingsley version which many of us



Kathleen Adams at the Birthday Luncheon, 19 November 2000.

regard as an absolute gem, but I enjoyed it. I then recalled the plaque in Warwick Row and remembered that George Eliot had been at school in my home town. I have always been fascinated by the lives of writers – indeed, an earlier passion for the Brontës was aroused after I saw Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon in *Wuthering Heights* at the cinema. I then read the book only to find there was a lot more in Emily Brontë's novel than I had found on the screen. But now my interest was aroused in George Eliot herself – particularly in that part of her life spent in Coventry. I borrowed a biography from the library – and I was hooked. What an amazing lady and what a fascinating life – so unusual for her times, of course. Her lifestyle today would be quite acceptable – almost the norm in early twenty-first-century society.

Some of you will have heard how I found the Fellowship. Being so fascinated by her as a woman I went to the local studies library – then housed in the Revd. Franklin's old Cow Lane Baptist Chapel – and discovered there was a George Eliot Fellowship in Nuneaton. I phoned Stan Dickens, then the Secretary, and found that the next event would be the Annual General Meeting. At the last moment I was unable to attend so Bill came to Nuneaton in my place, expecting to sit at the back of a large meeting and then report to me what the George Eliot Fellowship did. To his surprise, there were eight ladies plus Stan Dickens and Alderman Reg Hadden in the library and they greeted Bill as though he had crossed oceans to be with them instead of from Coventry eight miles away. When he came home he had been elected to the Fellowship Council – and he wasn't particularly interested in George Eliot at that stage. I am happy to say his interest has grown enormously in the intervening years.

So small was the Fellowship in those early days (in 1967 a total membership of twenty-six) that I soon found myself on the Council, too, and in 1968 succeeded Bill as Secretary. We were so tiny and in no state to attract a larger membership for we had so little to offer. However, I had a baptism of fire the following year when we celebrated the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's birth with a week of festivities in Nuneaton. Despite our lack of experience and expertise the festival attracted many people to the town – many thousands passed through the museum to see the special display which had been opened at the beginning of the week by Gabriel Woolf who was reading *Middlemarch* on 'Book at Bedtime' on BBC radio. He seemed reasonably suitable to open the museum exhibition. How very suitable we could not have guessed for Gabriel's contact with the BBC opened so many doors to us that we had not even realized were there. From then on we grew and grew. By 1970 we had 129 members and many of them were not in Nuneaton – my word, that WAS progress.

What happened after that is all chronicled in the book we are launching today. The first edition was published twenty years ago and in the research I did I began to develop a great sympathy for Francis Cross, our founder, with his struggles to get George Eliot recognized in her native town. His task was much harder than ours and how dispirited he must have felt. At least the 1970s Fellowship Council had something new and positive on which to build and I am confident that we have built very successfully and that our structure will last many more years to come – provided we can find some new and younger blood to follow on from us 'oldies'.

There have been, during those years, some wonderful and rewarding as well as some funny

experiences. We inaugurated the Memorial Lecture with a series of excellent speakers. We have had the George Eliot Readings every year since 1970 when a tiny audience heard Gabriel Woolf for the first time in Nuneaton. I'm not sure what his fee was then but in 1973 our records show that we charged only 3/6d (17p) for tickets and his fee was only £35. The first George Eliot Country Tour was held in 1969 and the BBC turned up at Arbury to find out more about it. The interviewer pushed the microphone into my face and said 'Start talking'. I opened my mouth but am not sure what came out – I was so startled. Gabriel, who had joined that tour for local colour for the life of George Eliot which the BBC had commissioned him to do for Radio 4 to mark the anniversary, told me that the interviewer was most unprofessional; he should, at least, have asked questions to which I could reply.

I was asked to provide an information sheet about George Eliot for visitors to Nuneaton. This eventually grew into the *Brief Biography* and when I went to Nuneaton Library to collect the copies, Mr Barlow, the then librarian, gave me 10 copies for myself. This, he said, was the usual custom for the author – the author – that was ME! My word, that was a heady moment.

With the *Brief Biography*, *George Eliot Country* and, later, *The Little Sister*, we now had material to furnish a sales table. On one occasion at the Purcell Room in London, a lady picked up a copy of the *Brief Biography* and said 'By Kathleen Adams, whoever she might be'. The author was also the saleslady – but said nothing! But the remark has become a family saying – 'Kathleen Adams, whoever she might be'. I contributed to a phone-in broadcast many years ago in which Marghanita Laski was on the panel. When I was announced, Miss Laski said in her unmistakable plummy tone 'Oh, I know Mrs Adams' – and the family don't let me forget that, either! The same broadcast was picked up by our nephew working in his garden miles from anywhere on the Pennine Way and he announced to the empty Pennine air – that's my Auntie Kath! Such is the fame of appearing on the media.

Then the wonderful occasions – like Westminster Abbey in 1980 and the many visits to the Abbey for negotiations with the Receiver General and the Dean. The events which we held in 1980 to mark the centenary of George Eliot's death went on for three weeks and I was helped enormously by the then treasurer Ann Reader. How we worked – and Ann was handling many thousands of pounds as well as nursing a very sick husband. She and I wondered afterwards how we had managed to do it all and joked about when we would manage to fit in our nervous breakdown!

The Abbey Ceremony in June 1980 was the highlight of my George Eliot career when about 700 George Eliot admirers came from all over the world to join in this tribute. As we were leaving the Abbey that afternoon musician Steve Race said to me 'Not many people can say they had a hand in making a change in Westminster Abbey'. Dear Steve, he admired George Eliot enormously and once said to me 'You and I have a great capacity for hero-worship'. Is that why I became hooked on a lady of whose books, all those years ago, I had read only one – and one that I found did nothing for me? I hasten to add that, of course, the situation has now completely changed and I love all the novels, particularly my great favourite, *Daniel Deronda*.

Another great occasion was when in 1992 Warwick University awarded me an Honorary Master of Arts Degree to mark my twenty-five years as Fellowship Secretary. I can still hardly believe that it happened. I was to have shared the ceremony in Coventry Cathedral with Evelyn Glennie (as well, of course, as with hundreds of Warwick University graduates) but she was unable to attend so I had the exciting moment all to myself. However, a splendid lunch was given by the university afterwards for family and friends and at this we were joined by the afternoon's honorary graduand, Lenny Henry, who was there with his wife Dawn French. This was the first time I had seen a serious Lenny Henry. When we spoke at the lunch he was clearly even more nervous than I had been at the morning ceremony.

Since I became Secretary I have read, I think, every word that George Eliot wrote – the novels, the essays, the letters. I am now the proud possessor of all nine volumes of the *Letters*. I bought the first five volumes many years ago and bought a lovely glass fronted bookcase to house them safely. I had paid more for the five volumes than for the bookcase! I now have George Eliot's *Journals* in that excellent edition by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston – both Fellowship members – and *G. H. Lewes's Letters* edited by William Baker – he, too, is a Fellowship member. Over the years I have amassed a huge collection of books about George Eliot – some better than others – but they date back to the very first biography by Mathilde Blind which, in its first edition, I bought for 1s/6d (about 7p). Now we have John Rignall's very impressive *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* – a real must for anyone delving into any part of George Eliot's life and works. Only last week I was able to buy a very unusual little book – not one by or about George Eliot but a small volume given to her in February 1868 by Johnnie Cross's sister Elizabeth. It is a collection of Elizabeth's poems published in the year before her death in 1869. Entitled *An Old Story and Other Poems* it is inscribed 'To Mrs Lewes, with love and reverence, from Elizabeth D. Cross'. To possess a book which has been held in the same hands that penned all those wonderful novels felt worth the price I paid for it. Such can be one's devotion to George Eliot!

George Eliot has changed many people's lives and she has certainly changed Bill's and mine. We have met some very interesting people and have been invited to many stimulating occasions in the past thirty-two years. We both owe a great debt of gratitude to George Eliot and to the George Eliot Fellowship – for the works of a great, if not the greatest, Victorian writer and for the very many friends we have made through the Fellowship. I feel particularly blessed that I can share my enthusiasm not only with my very supportive husband but with my family as well. She has become very much part of our everyday lives. Indeed, once, long ago, someone asked my young daughter what she thought about George Eliot and she replied 'I don't know, really, because she lives with us'. I think that says it all!

When I watched *Silas Marner* on television thirty-five years ago we could have had no idea that this was to be the start of a new and unbelievably rewarding life in so many ways.

It is with great pride, therefore, and enormous pleasure that I ask you to stand and join with me on this 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Fellowship, in a Toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot.