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ANNUAL REPORT 2000

by Kathleen Adams

2000, the Millennium Year, proved to be a mixture of success and some disappointment. The Fellowship Council planned many extra events for so auspicious a year; some were very successful, others were not. Indeed, many of us felt that the excitement of the Millennium had faded by the end of January!

The year began for us with the sad news of the death of our Patron, Viscount Daventry. Several members attended his funeral service at Astley ('Knebley') Church and we were also represented at the Memorial Service later in St Mary's Church in Warwick. Viscount Daventry had been our Patron for many years, taking over after the death of his mother, our first Patron. The Fellowship is to give something to Astley Church in his memory (as we did to Chilvers Coton ('Shepperton') Church after the death of his mother); we are still waiting for his family and the church to decide what form the gift should take.

Since his death, we were delighted to have our invitation to become Patron accepted warmly by the present Viscountess Daventry, wife of the 4th Viscount who is very interested in the association of George Eliot with her home at Arbury.

At the Annual General Meeting in March we were unable to find a replacement for Sally Poulson, our treasurer, who was to move away from Warwickshire. Sally carried on for some time, for which we were most grateful, until we were able to recruit Mrs Sophie Pavier from the Finance Section of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council. After the business meeting we were pleased to welcome Mrs Maureen Jupp, Canon's Verger at Westminster Abbey, who spoke to us about Poets' Corner.

'The Loves of George Eliot' was this year's presentation by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks on 6 and 7 April. For the first time we held the reading at the newly refurbished Assembly Room at the Royal Pump Rooms at Leamington Spa. The performance was very well attended; the only hiccup was a failure of the newly appointed sound system. However, we hope this will never happen again as the Assembly Room is notorious for poor acoustics. There was a very much smaller audience for the Nuneaton performance which was sad in George Eliot's home town as it was most sensitively devised and presented.

The George Eliot Day on 13 May had *Middlemarch* as its theme and some excellent papers were presented. This time the Borough's Catering Department provided a much better lunch than in previous years and this was an added bonus. Numbers were quite a bit down on previous years but enough people attended to make the event profitable. In the evening Rose Selwyn, the Borough's indefatigable Tourism Officer, had arranged an entertaining evening at St. Nicolas ('Milby') Church with the Atherstone Chorale together with a dramatic presentation by students from the Sixth Form College based on George Eliot's life and *The Mill on the Floss*, written and directed by Vivienne Wood.

Drs Beryl Gray and Tonny van den Broek organized a delightful evening of ‘Undying Music’ at Forest School, Snaresbrook, London on 20 May. Seven Warwickshire members went down by car, two came from Norfolk, several London members attended and five of our Vice Presidents – all helped to swell the audience. The concert was sponsored by the Fellowship and we are most grateful to Tonny and Beryl for all the hard work they put into it.

‘George Eliot Remembered’, a concert at Bedworth Civic Hall might have been retitled ‘George Eliot Forgotten’ – so sparse was the audience. However, in mitigation, one has to recall that the concert clashed with the international football match between England and Germany. George Eliot could not compete with that! However, those of us who attended agreed that the highlight of the evening was to hear Marjorie Bruce, wife of our President, sing some of Stanford’s songs from ‘The Spanish Gypsy’.

The annual wreath-laying in Nuneaton was held on the new paving surrounding the memorial in the George Eliot Memorial Garden. The paving was one of the Fellowship’s two Millennium projects and it has made such a difference to the ceremony, giving our audience/congregation somewhere comfortable to stand. Our Guest of Honour was Viscount Daventry whose family gave the memorial to the garden nearly fifty years ago, and he was accompanied by his wife, our new Patron.

21 June was the twentieth anniversary of the unveiling of the memorial stone in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey and we were able to make our annual visit there on the exact day – a rather special pilgrimage. Before the ceremony we were able to have tea in the beautiful and historic Jerusalem Chamber in the Abbey. Jonathan Ouvry, our President, laid our wreath on the memorial stone and Margaret Wolfit and Gabriel Woolf repeated the readings they had given at the unveiling of the stone. It was quite a moving occasion and those of us who had been at the unveiling found it hard to believe that twenty years had passed since the culmination of all our hard work to raise funds for the stone which was unveiled by the late Gordon S. Haight.

Our second Millennium project came to fruition on 9 July when Serena Evans, a great- great-niece of George Eliot, opened the garden around the statue in the grounds of the George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton. Serena gave a delightful account of how it felt to be a small girl in a family that owned the great novelist. Three benches were dedicated in the garden – one by Norman Painting OBE in memory of his Nuneaton family, one by the Japanese members and the third to the Edmands family who had given very generous support to the Fellowship for very many years. After the opening the hospital entertained us to lunch. We are so grateful to all those who gave to the Millennium Projects Fund and especially to our Japanese members who gave the outstanding sum of £2,000.

Another extra event for the Millennium Year was a visit in September from ‘Definitely Divas’, hot-foot from a very successful visit to the Edinburgh Fringe. They gave a delightful performance with the theme of food and included ‘Lunch at the Cooked Goose’ which had been so well received in Edinburgh. The Divas include Marjorie Bruce and four professional colleagues and their concert was so successful that we raised over £440 for the Mary Ann Evans Hospice.

The twenty-ninth Memorial Lecture was delivered by Professor Barbara Hardy, a very distinguished George Eliot scholar and one of our Vice Presidents. She spoke about *Middlemarch* to a large audience who had the added bonus of being able to hear every word – thanks to the sound system which has been so badly needed for a long long time.

We had a double celebration in November – George Eliot's birthday, and the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the Fellowship in 1930. Jonathan Ouvry gave us a beautiful birthday cake which concluded an excellent meal at the Raveloe Restaurant in the George Eliot Hospital. I was asked to propose the Toast to the Immortal Memory and as it was such a significant anniversary we launched *A Community of Interest: The Story of the George Eliot Fellowship 1930-2000*. This has sold less well than we originally hoped, particularly as it is on sale at only £2.50 to UK members and £3.50 to overseas members, including postage and packing. The book has been subsidized from Fellowship funds and we hope its sale will continue steadily. The Birthday Luncheon was very well attended and we even had a waiting list – almost unknown!

On the subject of books, Oxford University Press published *The Oxford Reader's Guide to George Eliot* in the autumn. It was edited by Dr John Rignall, one of our Vice Presidents who is also joint editor of the *George Eliot Review*, with contributions from many distinguished George Eliot scholars. It is an excellent publication, beautifully presented and full of so much information for anyone interested in George Eliot. At £40 (£32 to members) it is expensive but it is expected to be available in paperback in due course.

Walks around the George Eliot associations in Nuneaton and two slide shows were staged by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council. Enough people joined the walks for these to be viable but the slide shows were extremely poorly attended. This was a pity for John Burton's many varied slides are so well worth seeing.

Three sessions of the Study Group were held in 2000 – on *Jane Eyre* led by Sally Poulson, on *The Old Wives Tale* by Ruth Harris and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Jennifer Smith. We are most grateful to Hilary Mountney who allows us to use the comfortable lounge at Aldersgate.

Four tours of the George Eliot Country took place during the summer. These are very successful and we are most grateful to Rose Selwyn who does so much to make them run smoothly and whose bright and cheerful personality endears her to our passengers.

We have complained for many years that the Guildhall of St Mary in Coventry has done very little to mark George Eliot's association with it; she set Hetty Sorrel's trial in the hall (*Adam Bede*), and describes it clearly. At long last Coventry City Council have seen the light and have installed audio tapes describing the trial – not in the most obvious of places but it is a large step in the right direction. An explanatory panel complete with the passage about the trial is also to be installed where visitors to the hall can see what George Eliot is describing. If we nag long and hard enough, things do get done – eventually.

This has certainly been true of our negotiations with the National Portrait Gallery in London. For a very long time the caption accompanying the Durade portrait of George Eliot has borne incorrect information – including describing John Cross as her *American* husband. Many letters and very many phone calls to the Nineteenth Century Gallery's curator were left unanswered until, at long last, just before Christmas, he wrote to say that the new caption (with our suggested wording) had been installed. I was so thrilled after all our efforts that I sent him a Christmas card!

In June Sally Poulson, Ruth Harris and Joe Davies manned a stall at the Lives and Times weekend in Coventry. This is not a very rewarding occupation but at least it shows the flag. We are very grateful to them for giving up a Saturday on our behalf and to John Burton for erecting our display panels – a must when one is on show.

The George Eliot Review was published in July – a larger and fuller journal and one which attracted many compliments. Packing it to send all over the world is a long and arduous job and I am most grateful for the massive help given by Ruth Harris and Sally Poulson, also to those who wrote hundreds of customs declarations for the USA and Japanese packages. This is an annual job that I dread; indeed, Bill and I would be inundated without the ready help of those who assist us. This is a good moment to record thanks to Joan Bunn who sends the Review to subscribers in overseas universities; to Helen Mills who sends out leaflets about the George Eliot Fellowship Prize twice a year to over 130 university English departments; and to Anne Pavitt, our Membership Secretary, who collects subscriptions and has also been the recipient of the Gift Aid forms which will help our finances. Linda Robertson in America collects the American subscriptions and issues three newsletters a year to our members in the USA. With heavy bank charges on overseas cheques this saves us a great deal of money each year and the same service is offered in Japan when about 130 subscriptions reach us from Professor Uchida and Miss Yamamoto without any loss to our rather greedy banking system. British banks take £8.00 from every cheque presented from overseas – almost all of an annual subscription!

The house in which George Eliot and G. H. Lewes stayed in 1856 in Tenby in Pembrokeshire and where she had the first ideas for 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' has been identified and a plaque is to be placed there this year. In the autumn of 2000 it was decided that the Fellowship should contribute £100 to the cost of the plaque and that has now been done.

With some financial assistance from the Evans family, we had the lettering on the family grave of Isaac Evans in Chilvers Coton Churchyard replaced. Anne Pavitt has done a lot of work on the grave as it had become severely overgrown and her gardening expertise has been used to very good effect. Dr Beryl Gray continues to look after George Eliot's grave in Highgate Cemetery and we are most grateful to both of them for the work they have done.

On 3 May Jonathan Ouvry was invited to open the building at Coventry University which has been named after George Eliot and the Fellowship subsequently gave a framed copy of the

Durade portrait of her to be placed next to the plaque describing George Eliot and her local associations.

Coventry University was home to a George Eliot Summer School in July. Organized by 'Learning in Later Life,' the event was addressed by Dr Tom Winnifrieth, Dr John Rignall, Vivienne Wood, Ruth Harris and myself with considerable help from Sally Poulson, John Burton, and Rose Selwyn who arranged a tour of the George Eliot Country. The theme of the summer school was *Scenes of Clerical Life* and the tour added a great deal to the papers the students had heard. Not a very large attendance but everyone had a wonderful time and excellent food.

The George Eliot Fellowship Prize for 2000 was increased to £250 and was won by Rebecca MacKay of Binghamton University in New York. As well as her prize she was guaranteed publication in the *George Eliot Review* and received membership of the Fellowship for two years. We always hope that this will continue after the two years are up.

I continue to give talks about George Eliot to local organizations, as does Ruth Harris and we always find that our audience is fascinated by her life. Bill and I also manned a stall in the Drapers' Hall in Coventry in September as part of the Heritage Weekend. As always, a little interest was shown but we really need more on offer on our sales table to catch the eye of passers by, and at present our stock is very limited. We hope to stock more George Eliot souvenirs in due course to liven up our rather tired and static collection.

We are in constant contact with Nuneaton Library and Nuneaton Museum, also on occasions with Coventry and Warwickshire Promotions. We have been losing close contact with local schools whose interest seems to have faded. Maybe this is partly due to the workloads in schools these days and not necessarily due to a lack of interest in George Eliot and the important part she has to play in local affairs through the work of the Fellowship and the Borough Council.

The Fellowship Council met ten times during the year. These are extremely busy meetings with so much to discuss and decide on behalf of all our members world-wide. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are an international organization with over 600 members in seventeen different countries and not simply a local society devoted to a local lady; she is as international as we are.

Finally, my thanks to all those who help us during the year, but particularly to two rather special people. To Rose Selwyn who does so much in her post as Borough Tourism Officer to help spread the word nation-wide and for the constant help and encouragement she gives me. Secondly, to our Chairman, my husband. With increasing years and decreasing mobility, I know that I could not cope with the growing workload of the Fellowship without his constant and readily given help. Without him, you would have had to have found a new Secretary some time ago and I would not now be completing thirty-three years in the post!