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The George Eliot Centenary of 1919

Margaret Harris

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The George Eliot centenary of 1919 was recognized as an opportunity to commemorate her connection with the parts of Warwickshire where she was born and spent her early life. While her association with Coventry and Nuneaton had been noted during her lifetime and in obituaries, and emphasized again when *George Eliot's Life as related in her letters and journals, arranged and edited by her husband J. W. Cross* was published in 1885, there were some inhibitions about too enthusiastically claiming an agnostic libertine as a local celebrity. Both Nuneaton and Coventry chose to celebrate the centenary, and reconstruction of these celebrations provides particular insight into the reputation of George Eliot immediately after the First World War.

The move to acknowledge George Eliot in the places where she spent her early life, and to identify her with the area, can be seen as part of a more general interest in literary tourism and regionalism going back into the eighteenth century and intensifying early in the twentieth. The classic centre was not far to seek, in Stratford-upon-Avon sixteen miles to the south of Coventry. Or think of Scott’s Abbotsford, open to visitors from 1833; or of the Brontës: Haworth had visitors from the 1850s; or of ‘Hardy’s Wessex’, already in being by 1919, with the author himself as curator and guide. The possibility that George Eliot might achieve similar recognition was canvassed at the time of the centenary: ‘George Eliot was one of the greatest of our territorial novelists, perhaps the greatest of all . . . not excepting the amazing chronicles of the works and days of Wessex. She shows us the Mercia that was, that still is in many ways, as a complete community’. Somehow ‘George Eliot’s Mercia’ has never taken on.

Already in 1919 there was some history of attempts to popularize the George Eliot country as a tourist resort: for example, in 1914 a Nuneaton newspaper, the *Midland Counties Tribune*, had produced in conjunction with the London and North Western Railway Company a booklet which ‘was placed in the reading room of every Atlantic liner, on the great American expresses, and in the libraries of the chief American cities.’ The timing may not have been propitious: war apart, it seems there was a lack of local support: ‘Cold water was thrown everywhere, and the chance killed of making Nuneaton into a Stratford-on-Avon’.

Leaving aside such competition, George Eliot’s centenary provided an occasion to construct a cultural heritage around the celebrated writer, at once establishing her credentials as a native of the locality, and invoking connotations of the pastoral world of which she wrote. Tim Dolin
points out that George Eliot’s fictional project was to present ‘a society in transition to industrial modernity.’ That transition was in painful process in Warwickshire in 1919. The coincidence of the Nuneaton centenary celebrations with celebrations of the end of the Great War underscores the social and cultural redefinition in train in the wake of the war. While there was rejoicing at the peace, it brought accompanying problems, manifesting in Coventry and Nuneaton in such issues as reintegration of returned soldiers into the workforce and conditions of employment, accompanied by some civil disturbance (such as riots in Coventry during the peace celebrations in July 1919).6

Planning for the George Eliot celebrations was under way early in 1919, though it is unclear why Coventry and nearby Nuneaton had separate events.7 The common aim was to provide some kind of permanent memorial to George Eliot: perhaps a statue, or a memorial library.8 It is notable that whoever instigated the festivities it was not John Cross.

George Eliot’s widower appears to have been alerted to the proposed Nuneaton celebrations by Gertrude Lewes (the widow of George Henry Lewes’s eldest son). He commented:

I have always felt in regard to the Brontes that these processions &c were not what these distinguished writers would have chosen for themselves if they could have been consulted. I think they would have preferred that their memory should be best preserved by their own works as indeed it will be.9

By 16 March 1919, Cross was responding to the organizers of the Coventry event who were evidently inviting him to be a member of their committee, by asking for information about its constitution. When this was provided, he declined to participate, on the grounds that ‘the programme for the Celebrations seems to have been completed without any reference outside the locality – as you say in your letter “The Celebration will be local”’.10 By now nearly eighty years old, Cross held out against repeated invitations to attend, suggesting that as he had not participated in Nuneaton (where it seems he had not been invited at all) he should take no part in Coventry, declining even to send a message to be read at the opening reception there.11

George Eliot’s relationship with Coventry and environs

Mary Ann Evans, not yet George Eliot, lived in the vicinity of Arbury, near Nuneaton, where she was born, until she was over thirty, attending school, then managing her father’s household both on the Newdigate estate and when he retired, in Coventry. While agriculture was the basis of the family’s livelihood, the principal industry in Nuneaton was textile manufacture, and there was extensive coal mining in the surrounding countryside. After Robert Evans’s death in 1849, she travelled on the Continent, then returned to Coventry, where her main residence was with her friends Cara and Charles Bray until her final move to London in 1851. Coventry at this time was a major manufacturing centre, particularly for ribbon weaving, the source of Bray’s fortune (he was also the owner of the radical newspaper, the *Coventry Herald and Observer*).

George Eliot visited Coventry occasionally after her move to London in 1851, but these visits ceased once she took up with Lewes. Nonetheless, there was local interest in the career of ‘George Eliot’ despite Isaac’s proscription of his errant sister. George Eliot maintained
communication with some of the women of the family, and younger relations made contact with her. 12

So much for the life. In her work, the early fiction at least was closely identified with the Midlands countryside, the rural world of her childhood. Leslie Stephen’s judgement, worked out in his obituary in the Cornhill (February 1881), his Dictionary of National Biography entry (1888), and his English Men of Letters volume (1902), was decisive. He valued the charm of the novels down to Silas Marner, which in his view was integrally related to evocative reminiscence of pastoral settings. He maintained that George Eliot was a lesser artist in later works where she wrote of what she had not experienced firsthand; and implied that her fiction effectively transcribed her life (to some extent this view has resulted in the life being read from the novels). Stephen’s opinions became pervasive assumptions, at least to the mid-twentieth century when F. R. Leavis argued for the maturity of the later works against the charm of the earlier – an argument that was in fact well begun in 1919 by Stephen’s daughter, Virginia Woolf, as we shall see.

It should be recalled that the use of Warwickshire settings was a factor in the identification of Marian Evans Lewes with ‘George Eliot’. This is a whole other story, beginning when the lists of ‘real names’ of places and people in Scenes of Clerical Life were circulated on publication in 1857, and climaxing when one Joseph Liggins of Attleborough claimed authorship of the tales. His claims to be George Eliot intensified with the publication of Adam Bede in 1859, and were part of the complex of circumstances that caused the real George Eliot to ‘come out’. But as the secret was being shared with some close friends, Sara Rennell reported ‘Mr. Evans of Griff has been heard to say, after reading Adam Bede – “No one but his Sister could write the book”’. 13

There is a considerable literature in this topographical and local history mode, beginning with the engagingly-titled George Eliot in Derbyshire. A volume of gossip about passages and people in the novels of George Eliot (1876), by Guy Roslyn. 14 The basic impulse is an interest in identification, finding the original, to demonstrate the authenticity of the environment described in the novels, augmented by a desire to establish community with a vanishing past. Paradoxically, this impulse parallels one of George Eliot’s preoccupations, exemplified in a reflection on Gwendolen Harleth, ‘A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land.’ 15 But for all the importance of a sense of belonging to a place, a persistent concern for Eliot was the relation of past and present, as she constantly speculated about ‘what it means to look backwards to a purportedly simpler rural or semi-rural life.’ 16 The ruminations of Theophrastus Such in ‘Looking Backward’ are exemplary (‘Perhaps this England of my affections is half visionary – a dream in which things are connected according to my well-fed, lazy mood’), and provide a caution to those engaged in re-creating the past presented in fiction. 17

Particular examples of the genre appeared for the centenary. In both Nuneaton and Coventry, papers produced special George Eliot supplements. The Nuneaton-based Midland Counties Tribune declared ‘Our illustrations deal with the outstanding incidents in the books which George Eliot wrote while under the influence of inspiration aroused on her native soil of Nuneaton, whose everyday life at that period filled her thoughts with many moving events’. 18
There were images of Griff Hollows (the ‘Red Deeps’); Lawyer Dempster’s House in Church Street, Nuneaton; South Farm, Arbury; Coton (Shepperton) and Nuneaton (Milby) Churches, and so on.

The Coventry Herald similarly included an eight-page souvenir supplement on 7-8 November 1919. It was produced with an eye to the future: ‘Some day perhaps Coventry will have greater justice done it in having provided the people, the atmosphere, and the sympathy which so powerfully combined to develop in George Eliot, at the most forming part of her life, those gifts of writing which have made for the pleasure of millions.’ It also constituted both a substantial archive, with an emphasis on George Eliot’s formative years, and a document of record of the celebrations. Four pages are given to an account of ‘Famous Novelist’s Association with Coventry’, which goes down to 1859 and Liggins, incorporating local reminiscences of her.

A complementary piece is based on material supplied by members of the family of the Misses Franklin whose school George Eliot attended in 1832-5. While some of this is tenuous in its application to George Eliot, it was timely to fold it into the record, given that nearly forty years had passed since her death in 1880, with the recollections in question going back another forty years. The supplement also included some unpublished letters to Sara Hennell, and an itemised list of the exhibition of memorabilia.
But it is important to bear in mind that even in her early adult years the Warwickshire world Marian Evans knew was not purely rural. The fiction is remembered for the ‘idyllic picture’, but Cross goes on to quote the introduction to *Felix Holt* where the coach moves ‘from one phase of English life to another’, juxtaposing fields and towns with the scars of industry. Nostalgia as so often distorts actuality. Industry is a presence in the fiction from the Paddiford weavers in ‘Janet’s Repentance’ on, often presented as the dark side of idyll (Lantern Yard, Stonyshire): Mayor Vincy is a Middlemarch manufacturer, after all.

William Cobbett’s snapshot in 1820 conveniently characterizes Coventry at the time of George Eliot’s birth:

> Coventry … is a City containing about twenty thousand souls, and the business of which is, principally, Watch-making and Ribbon-weaving. It is in the County of Warwick, and is within a few miles of the centre of England. The land all around it, for many many miles, is very rich indeed … and yet, good God! What a miserable race of human beings! What a ragged, squalid, woe-worn assemblage of creatures!24

By mid-century, Coventry was even more emphatically a manufacturing town, though it experienced a depression in the 1860s. By 1919, much had changed. Coventry was now a seat of heavy manufacture: the cycle industry had begun there in the late 1860s and boomed with the cycling vogue of late 1890s. But it was overtaken by the motor industry, after Daimler set up a factory in an old cotton mill in 1896. Ordnance works moved into the area in the early twentieth century. Similarly, Nuneaton had become more industrialized.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of George Eliot’s reputation in her birthplace was her appropriation for commercial purposes: a George Eliot motor cycle was made in 1898, joining ‘The Renowned “George Eliot” Cycle’. Among my favourites is a report not from Coventry but from Gainsborough, the St Oggs of *The Mill on the Floss*, where Charles S. Olcott was assured that a former grist-mill was ‘the very mill that George Eliot describes’, about 1910 operating (in a way that might have gratified Mrs Tulliver) as ‘The Floss Steam Laundry’.24 In 1919, Hanson’s, ‘The Music Centre of Coventry’, advertised ‘It is a certainty that when George Eliot was in Coventry she must have often passed before our windows, just as you may do today, and made many purchases from us.’25 Such appropriations, however clumsy, are engaging (and there are of course now numerous examples of institutions and places named with reference to George Eliot and her works).

**How was the centenary celebrated?**

The emphases of the events in Nuneaton and Coventry were different, partly because of the time of the year each took place. Both had lectures and concerts, but the Nuneaton celebration in late July included spectacular outdoor events – a pageant and a procession – in which many people participated while many more watched. The Coventry event, at the time of George Eliot’s birthday in November, had a more serious cast, with a large exhibition of memorabilia, a musical recital with readings from her works, many lectures, and a dramatized version of *Adam Bede* (performed in Nuneaton).
The Nuneaton celebrations were built around a ‘GREAT FOUR DAYS’ PROGRAM’, beginning with a luncheon in the Newdegate Arms Hotel. The town was decked out: the decorations put up for the peace celebrations the previous week did double duty, with some enhancement. The interior of Borough Council Chamber, used as a reception room, was festooned with delphinia and laurels. A special porch was erected outside the Council Chamber, draped in black and white and hung with medallions with the names of the novels.

The celebrations did not lack an ideological agenda. One of the early events was the ‘GREAT CHILDREN’S FESTIVAL IN RIVERSLEY PARK, When the Lord Bishop of Birmingham and others will speak on “The Inspiration of Great Citizens.” The Nuneaton Town Band will be in attendance. Admission free.’ The co-option of George Eliot as a ‘Great Citizen’ in an address by an Anglican prelate – to 4,000 children! – gives me pause (bear in mind that this is a woman denied burial in Westminster Abbey). Further instruction was provided by lectures. The New Woman novelist, Madam Sarah Grand, author of *The Heavenly Twins*, was scheduled to speak on ‘George Eliot – The Woman and Her Work’, but cancelled owing to illness. A lesser figure, critic and editor R. Brimley Johnson, did deliver a public lecture on ‘Some Aspects of George Eliot’, his status reflected in the relative charges for admission: only one shilling for Johnson compared to two shillings and sixpence for Sarah Grand.

Other activities included musical competitions, in which there were very few entrants and the standard was not high: some bracing comments from the adjudicator were reported. It was
October before the results of the literary competitions were announced: prizes were awarded for the Open Essay (‘What appeals to one most in the works of George Eliot’), Local Essay (‘Why Nuneaton should celebrate the Centenary’), and Junior Essay (‘Why I am proud of Nuneaton’). More frivolously, there was a costume ball in which 53 people participated, prizes being awarded for the best costumes from the George Eliot period or representing characters from the works.

The centrepiece was undoubtedly the ‘George Eliot Pastoral Play’ performed ‘on a natural stage in Arbury Park … interpreted by TWO THOUSAND LOCAL PERFORMERS’. It was written by Charles A. Farmer, with A. F. Cross, proprietor and editor of the Nuneaton Observer, a prime mover in organizing the celebrations. The interest generated by the pageant was sufficient to warrant additional performances being added to the two originally scheduled.

There was some criticism, mainly to do with the uneven standards of preparation and performance and the logistics of conveying performers to and from Arbury. But on the whole the pageant was recognized as a substantial achievement: ‘The tableaux were simply splendid, and the characters excellent.’ The ‘natural stage-setting, and … the simple but beautiful designs of the costumes of the children … harmonised, and even strengthened one another, in a manner which could not have been possible in a closed room.’

The pageant lends itself to interpretation – or over-interpretation. The setting was privileged, in the grounds of Arbury Hall (the Cheverel Manor of Scenes of Clerical Life): it was sylvan, with just two plumes of smoke in the distance to remind the audience of their industrialized environment. It melded classical tropes (a prologue by one Amyntas), with fairytale (magic weavers, in a neat allusion to a traditional local occupation, and spinning fairies – ‘Spin, spin, life at the wheel’). But industry was incorporated, and there was international outreach: other 1919 centenaries than George Eliot’s were acknowledged, including those of the Scottish James Watt, inventor of the steam engine, the American authors James Russell Lowell and Walt Whitman, and the muscular Christian English author Charles Kingsley.

The centre of the community in the pageant is the Rainbow Inn (‘Merry, merry at the Rainbow’). Tableaux from George Eliot’s novels were interspersed (Dinah preaching, Maggie and the gypsies, and so on). It is notable that the later novels were not dwelt on: such works as Felix Holt, Daniel Deronda, Middlemarch, and Theophrastus Such were represented simply by children wearing dresses with the titles on them (p. 29). George Eliot herself manifested in the finale:

And thus to genius is our tribute paid.
Now on this spot your flowers and laurels lay.
Behold, George Eliot who inspired our play. (p. 33)

Finally, there was ‘The Beautiful and Unique George Eliot Century [sic] STREET PAGEANT And Battle of Wild Flowers’. This was basically the pageant in motion, travelling a long route to give ‘free and splendid views’, with the battle taking place in Abbey Street – flowers to be thrown only at the George Eliot parts of the procession. This aspect of proceedings had occasioned anticipatory conjecture: ‘O. N. inquires “the sort of flowers which have to be used in the battle of flowers in Abbey-street during George Eliot Week?” Any sort of flowers except
An interesting feature of the procession, however, was that it amplified the pageant with representations of local and topical significance. There was a ‘unit symbolical of the Victorian era’ called ‘Nuneaton at War’, which involved the Red Cross and the St John Ambulance Corps, and ranged back to the Crimean War, with Florence Nightingale; ‘Nuneaton in Peace’ invoked industry in the form of miners flanking a huge lump of coal (over thirteen hundredweight). The whole was rounded off with a return to allegory, the pageant’s Mistress Past and Master Present being joined by Father Time and ‘1920’.

In every respect, the pageant can be seen to conform to the concepts formulated by Louis Napoleon Parker in his Sherborne Pageant of 1905. This revived form of the English pageant was nationalistic and nostalgic, presenting ideals of Englishness based in a version of pastoral. Mick Wallis’s description of the inter-war British historical pageant fits the Nuneaton pageant exactly:

It is strictly episodic; predominantly amateur; aims to unite and memorialise a community around a sense of local history; connects the consolidated local with the national, the warmth of ordinary folk to the majesty of high persons and events; avoids recent conflict; mixes historical document with romantic fantasy; incorporates masque elements as special episodes and processions as a matter of course; involves hundreds or thousands of performers, frequently representing local institutions; delivers the pleasures of spectacle, fetish, copiousness and variety.

This highlight most explicitly meshes the George Eliot centenary celebrations with a more widespread phenomenon.

There do not appear to have been souvenirs of the pageant, as was customary elsewhere. Nor did the customary handsome profit eventuate. The ‘Home Topics’ columnist in the Midland Counties Tribune as usual had a lot to say: ‘Artistically, the celebrations were a great success, but financially it is doubtful.’ He wasn’t wrong to be concerned on that score. When the Nuneaton Borough Council met on 17 November 1919, dissatisfaction was expressed with Mr Farmer’s behaviour. Council was being presented with unexpected bills, and Farmer was tardy in finalizing the accounts (‘the Mayor said Mr. Farmre [sic] had never worked [with?] the committees, but had done everything off his own bat, and was treasurer and everything else’).

The Coventry celebrations later in the year were of a different cast: the November weather required indoor events, which were arranged over a more extended period, and generally privileged instruction over entertainment. The joint honorary secretaries were men of local consequence: the Librarian, E. A. Savage (with responsibility for general oversight and the historical exhibition), and F. W. Humberstone (headmaster of Bablake School and author of works on local history and antiquities, who had particular responsibility for the social events and lectures). The celebrations were launched by a civic reception at St Mary’s Hall on Tuesday 4 November: Labour had just triumphed in Coventry municipal elections, and nationwide. The Mayor in his welcome declared: “we are fortunate in Warwickshire to have produced the finest man writer who ever lived, Shakespeare, and one of the foremost women writers of the day.”
Messages were sent by many literary luminaries, like Frederic Harrison (1821-1923), now advanced in years and conscious of his authority as someone who actually knew George Eliot; and the younger but ageing Mary Augusta Ward (1851-1920). An indefatigable columnist complained: the great writers of the day should have been brought together: ‘Where were the Rudyard Kiplings, the Hall Caines, and the Marie Corellis?’

The opening reception was followed by an address from the Rector of Bedworth, Frederic Evans – Isaac’s son – who concentrated on family lore about George Eliot’s childhood. Unsurprisingly, he dwelt on her happy relationship with her brother, and gave a diplomatic account of her bookish tastes. ‘Beyond a general quickness and ability and power of observation there does not seem to have been anything in her childhood to excite suspicion of her having in her the makings of a great woman.’ He went on: ‘One rather imaginative biographer says that she became “dairy woman as well [as housekeeper for her father], and that her right hand being longer than her left, was accounted for by her labours in crushing the curd.” Whereas my father’s account was that “she could never be persuaded to touch a cheese, and never made a pound of butter in her life.” Isaac’s authority can hardly be gainsaid.

There were numerous lectures, including His Honour Judge Parry on ‘The Humour of George Eliot’, Mr C. A. Vince of Birmingham on ‘English Life and Character in George Eliot’s Works’, and Miss Mary Deakin on ‘The Women of George Eliot’. A substantial musical and literary entertainment took place at St Mary’s Hall. Readings from the novels were presented by the Reverend Bowen Armstrong (‘a commanding presence and a speaking voice of great flexibility’), who read the description of Mr Jerome’s garden from ‘Janet’s Repentance’; from Adam Bede a description of Hetty, ‘that pathetic but live dialogue between Hetty and Dinah’, and the Harvest supper; and the scene in which Maggie refuses to marry Stephen. (This selection incidentally reinforces the evidence of the low esteem accorded the later writings provided by the pageant.)

There had been considerable research put into the musical part of the program. The opening item was March and Rondo by Edward Simms, jnr, organist of Coventry Cathedral who taught George Eliot music at one time. Other items included the duet from Auber’s Masaniello (sung in The Mill on the Floss, Book 6, chapter 7), and a duet from Haydn’s The Creation (disliked by Philip Wakem). Beethoven’s piano solo ‘Favourite Andante in F’ was played from Sara Hennell’s copy of the music.

The exhibition was substantial, a serious attempt to collect and curate material relating to George Eliot’s life and works that was realistically assessed: ‘The materials brought together by the Exhibition will not provide a new life of George Eliot – her Warwickshire life – but they ought to be the means of valuable additions to what has already been written.’ Robert Evans’s diaries were the major exhibit, together with portraits of George Eliot, her father and brother Isaac, George Eliot letters lent by various people, and other association items, including the statuette of Christ after Thorwaldsen that George Eliot kept in front of her while translating Strauss. Material relating to the Bray and Hennell families was included, together with many photographs provided by members of the Coventry Photographic Society.

The sober cast of the celebrations overall was leavened by six performances of Adam Bede by the Nuneaton Shakespearean and Dramatic Society at the Hippodrome, directed by Mr Edward
A. Shute, who had produced a different version of the play (also in Nuneaton) in 1890.48 Two members of the 1890 cast performed in 1919, Shute himself as Adam, and Mr W. J. B. Haynes (‘as the debonair young squire, “Arthur Donnithorne” … took his part well, and was perfectly free and natural’ – no mean feat nearly thirty years on). The adaptation omitted the last book of the novel: ‘The trial of Hetty is depicted, and we also show her death in the arms of “Adam Bede.” It quite leaves the way clear for anyone to finish the story in his mind, or as it actually finishes in the book. The note struck at the end of the play is that of “forgiveness.”’49 Shute’s account of his adaptation is a useful reminder that in some degree all the centenary activities involved reconstruction of George Eliot.

What notice was taken elsewhere?

In the national press, the marriage of a granddaughter of Dickens to an army major in November attracted more attention than the George Eliot centenary. The Times gave reasonable coverage, but the London papers generally did not make much either the Coventry events or the actual centenary of her birth on 22 November. In Birmingham, closer to Coventry, more notice was paid, but the valuation in the Evening Despatch was indicative of the state of George Eliot’s critical stocks: her reputation depends on the charm of the rural settings, and ‘comparatively few among the present generation read the works of this great Victorian novelist.’50 This estimate was reiterated in literary assessments like those of W. L. Courtney (‘George Eliot has, I fear, no message for the twentieth century’) and Sydney Waterlow, who described her work as plodding and ungenerous.51

The most notable tribute was Virginia Woolf’s essay in the Times Literary Supplement – published anonymously, of course, and acknowledged only with the assembly of her essays in The Common Reader in 1925.52 This essay is best-known for the much-quoted description, now an orthodoxy, of Middlemarch as ‘the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people.’53 In Woolf’s analysis, ‘the mist of recollection gradually withdraws’ and ‘the world of fields and farms no longer contents her’: a contention that resonates in the context of the essay in which Woolf herself invokes memories, hers of her father, and her father’s of George Eliot. Woolf deliberately writes back to Leslie Stephen, and her claim for the maturity of Middlemarch disputes his valuation of the charm of the early fiction. Though she was a minority in 1919, time has vindicated the younger novelist’s judgement.

A permanent memorial?

But what of the aim in Nuneaton and Coventry to produce a permanent memorial to George Eliot? The Midland Counties Tribune columnnist was already apprehensive as the Coventry celebrations were getting under way, lamenting that despite the Nuneaton celebrations in July, ‘nothing of a permanent nature in the way of a memorial has yet so much as been decided upon’. He described the exhibition, lamenting that Coventry never had the associations with George Eliot that can be claimed by Nuneaton, admitting however that Nuneaton’s celebrations were ‘revels, admirable in their way, but of no enduring value’, and finally showing his hand: ‘If the centenary celebration fails to provide a statue of spacious proportions it may be accounted a failure.’54 He was to be disappointed, since the commemorative gesture decided on was a George Eliot Alcove for the Gulson Reference Room in the Coventry Library.
PROGRAMME OF
MUSIC AND LECTURES
St. Mary's Hall, Coventry.

Tuesday, 4th Nov.
Music and Literary Entertainment.

[Programme of Pieces referred to by George Eliot, with others of local interest and contemporaneou
with the period covered by her novels; also readings from George Eliot's Works.]

ARTISTES.
Reader  -  Rev. BOWEN ARMSTRONG.
Soprano -  Miss FRANCES PETTY.
Baritone -  Mr. FRANK HEWSON.
Solo Pianoforte - Mrs. STEARNS & Miss HEWSON.
Tenor  -  Mr. WALTER WHITE.
Special  -  Mr. ARTHUR L. BILL.
Accompanist  -  Miss PROLES.

Tuesday, 11th Nov.
The Humour of George Eliot.
Lecture by His Hon. JUDGE PARRY.

Tuesday, 18th Nov.
English Life & Character in George Eliot's Works. Lecture by C. A. VINCE, Esq., M.A.

Tuesday, 25th Nov.
The Women of George Eliot.
Lecture by Miss MARY DEAKIN, M.A.,
(Author of "The Early Life of George Eliot.")

DOORS OPEN AT 7-30 p.m.; PROCEEDINGS BEGIN AT 8 p.m.

MUSICAL and LITERARY ENTERTAINMENT: Reserved and Numbered Seats, 3s. 0d. incl. tax, Unreserved - - 1s. 8d. incl. tax.

LECTURES: Reserved Seats for Course of THREE Lectures 5s. 0d.
Unreserved  - - - - - - - - - - 2s. 6d.
Reserved Seats for Single Lecture  - - 2s. 0d.
Unreserved  - - - - - - - - - - 1s. 0d.

Tickets are obtainable at the Golson (Central) and Branch Libraries; from Mr. WARD, Bookseller, Broadgate; and from the
Hon. Secretary, Mr. F. W. HUMBERSTONE, 5, Chester St., Coventry.

C. A. GEY & SON, CENTRAL PRINTERS, WORKS, BRONSDALE, COVENTRY.
It was reported that 'the committee adopted this scheme, after considering several others, because it is simple, useful and fitting to the purpose in view.'\textsuperscript{55} The plan was to provide 'a glazed oak bookcase and panelling, an exhibition case and recess for a portrait, with a stained glass window in four panels, and a suitable inscription', at an estimated cost of £180.\textsuperscript{56} But the alcove was not opened until 1927, the 1919 appeal having raised enough only for the memorial window: 'a floral design, into which are worked scrolls containing the titles of some of her stories and books, centred on the brief inscription GEORGE ELIOT: MDCCCXIX – MDCCCLXXX.'\textsuperscript{57} The funds had to be supplemented by the Public Library Committee, with Sir Francis Newdegate donating the oak for the shelves. Much of the material displayed had been exhibited in 1919, but new items were added, such as a copy of Thomas à Kempis, inscribed by George Eliot to Sara Hennell, and other items from the provenance of Charles Lee Lewes, including the knee writing board made by Elma Stuart. This library was destroyed by enemy action in 1941, though the artefacts survived and are in the Coventry Central Library.

The much-anticipated statue of George Eliot was finally erected in Nuneaton in 1986, as a result of the efforts of the George Eliot Fellowship. The centenary of her death in 1980 was marked by the setting of a memorial stone in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey, where a wreath has been laid annually – just one of the events regularly conducted by the Fellowship.\textsuperscript{26} In Nuneaton, celebration of the sesqui-centenary of the publication of \textit{Scenes of Clerical Life} in 2007, effectively also a celebration of the birth of George Eliot (as a \textit{nom de plume}), was grounded in knowledge and enthusiasm for the author. John Cross’s protestation in 1919 that the memory of writers is ‘best preserved by their own works’ was (no doubt unconsciously) heeded, with a George Eliot Fellowship Anniversary Edition of \textit{Scenes} published by Wordsworth Classics, and activities centred on various approaches to that text (a dramatic production by George Eliot School, a short story competition on the theme ‘\textit{Scenes of Clerical Life} 2007’, walks and coach tours to places in the \textit{Scenes}, and so on). George Eliot lives for another century.

\begin{center}
\textbf{GEORGE ELIOT CENTENARY, NOVEMBER 1919.}

\underline{ADMIT BEARER TO LECTURE(S) on George Eliot}
In ST. MARY’S HALL, on TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11
Lectures begin at 8 p.m. \quad Doors open at 7:30 p.m.
THIS TICKET MUST BE PRODUCED.
\end{center}

\textit{The illustrations in this article are from a bound volume entitled George Eliot 1818-1819. The Centenary Celebration at Coventry. They are reproduced by kind permission of Coventry City Library. The introduction to the volume states that 'The record was collected, mounted and arranged by Mr Joseph Sidwell, deputy librarian of Coventry Public Libraries'. It is dated June 1920, and signed by F. W. Humberstone and Ernest A. Savage, Joint Honorary Secretaries. (Picture research by John Burton.)}
Notes


2 See Watson, pp. 176-200. Hardy collaborated actively in the production of a number of works dealing with the settings of his writings, notably Hermann Lea's iconographic *Thomas Hardy's Wessex* (1913, an expansion of a work of 1906), which was published uniform with Macmillan's 1912 Wessex Edition of Hardy's works.


4 'Home Topics' column, *Midland Counties Tribune*, 25 July 1919, p. 4. The following week, 'Home Topics' returned to the fray with suggestions for holding George Eliot festivities every few years, and for a museum in Riversley Park, which in fact came to pass decades later (1 August, p. 4; with a further sally on 8 August). The pamphlet was 'George Eliot's Country' (London: McCorquodale, 1914) – reprised by road rather than rail in 'George Eliot Country: A day drive in the North Midlands' (English Tourist Board, 1978).


7 The Nuneaton celebrations were announced in the *Times* on 5 March 1919, p. 5, with a further reference on 12 April 1919, p. 9, and some coverage of the celebrations on 24, 25 and 26 July 1919. There was consideration given to a combined celebration: J. W. Cross referred to the possibility in a letter to Ernest A. Savage, Librarian of the Gulson Library in Coventry and joint secretary to the George Eliot Centenary Committee, 19 March 1919, citing an item in the *Coventry Herald*, 7 February 1919 (Coventry Central Library).

8 There was already an obelisk in the grounds of Arbury Hall, erected by Sir Francis Newdigate-Newdegate: hardly in the public eye, but evidence that George Eliot enjoyed some local fame. The obelisk was moved into the George Eliot Memorial Garden set up in Nuneaton in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations. Other possibilities considered included the purchase of 'The Elms' in Nuneaton (formerly Miss Wallington's school, which George Eliot attended 1828-32) to be turned into a museum (*Times*, 2 August 1919, p. 2). Incidentally, the idea of a memorial library goes back at least to 1896: there is reference to it in a letter to Cross from George Eliot's nephew, Rev Frederic Evans (1842-1927) of Bedworth (12 March 1896: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library). The clergyman may have revived the idea in an unsuccessful suggestion that the war memorial at Bedworth should take the form of a George Eliot library (*Times*, 12 February 1919, p. 7).

J. W. Cross to E. A. Savage, 19 March 1919 (Coventry Central Library).

Cross to Savage, 30 October 1919, reiterated his doubts about 'the desirability of having these celebrations at all – particularly after the experience of the Bronte & Kingsley centenaries', with more of the same on 14 November (Coventry Central Library).

For example, Robert Evans of Nottingham (1832-1911, son of George Eliot's half-brother, Robert Evans (1802-64)) corresponded with her from the 1860s: see The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press and London: Oxford University Press, 1954-78), iv. 130 etc. At George Eliot's death, Coventry (particularly in the persons of Charles and Cara Bray and Sara Hennell) was quick to amplify the public record of her early years; again, when Cross's Life was published in 1885, Mrs John Cash (née Mary Sibree) provided reminiscences which were incorporated in the second edition.

George Eliot Letters, iii. 98; see also ii. 459-60. A list of identifications of characters and places in Scenes of Clerical Life, said to date from 1857, is included in Charles S. Olcott, George Eliot: Scenes and People in her Novels (1910; London: Cassell, 1911), p. 14n.

Others include S. Parkinson, Scenes from the George Eliot Country (Leeds: Richard Jackson, 1888); L. G. Seguin, Scenes and Characters from the Works of George Eliot: A Series of Illustrations by Various Artists (London: Alexander Strahan, 1888); William Sharp, Literary Geography (London: Offices of Pall Mall Publications, 1904), with a chapter on 'The Country of George Eliot', pp. 74-86; and Olcott. See also Watson, who places the vogue for 'literary countries' from the late 1880s to the 1920s (p. 169).


Dolin, p. 237.

Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879; Cabinet edn, Edinburgh: Blackwood, [1880]), p. 42.

Tribune Pictorial (supplement to Midland Counties Tribune), 18 July 1919, p. 1.

Coventry Herald, 7-8 November 1919, Supplement, p. 4.

Biographical accounts dwelling on George Eliot's rural origins and her formative years tend to play down the scandal of her union with Lewes and to some extent also her loss of faith. There is a good example of such editing of the record in the build-up to the festivities, when the Midland Counties Tribune, 18 July 1919, p. 4, included a substantial 'Nutshell Biography' of George Eliot, in which the point is made that 'she
invariably approaches Christianity in a most friendly spirit', and says no more of the union with Lewes than that it was 'much-discussed'. Olcott (esp. pp. 205-7) similarly took pains to assert the exemplariness and reciprocity of this relationship.

21 George Eliot's Life as related in her letters and journals, arranged and edited by her husband J. W. Cross, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1885), i.7.

22 Frederick Smith, Coventry Six Hundred Years of Municipal Life (London: Corporation of the City of Coventry in association with the Coventry Evening Telegraph, 1945), pp. 201-2, quoting Cobbett's Political Register, 25 March 1820.


24 Olcott, p. 77. George Eliot was remembered in another way later in the twentieth century. Smith comments of the election of the first woman Mayor of Coventry, Alderman Alice Arnold, in 1937: 'It is fitting that women should play a part in the local government of a city whose history has been marked by a succession of notable women, from the days of Lady Godiva to the days of the scarcely less famous George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), who spent the most formative years of her life in Coventry and depicted its scenes and people in her books.' (p. 184).

25 Coventry Herald, 7-8 November 1919, p. 3.


27 Summaries of Bishop Blofeld's address to the children, and of his address at the opening lunch, are given in the Midland Counties Tribune, 25 July 1919, p. 2.

28 Midland Counties Tribune, 1 August 1919, p. 4.


32 Midland Counties Tribune, 1 August 1919, p. 4.

33 Charles A. Farmer, The George Eliot Centenary Pastoral Play (Nuneaton: Centenary Offices, 1919), p. 20. I am most grateful to Mrs Kathleen Adams for providing me with a photocopy of this fragile item from her personal collection of George Eliot material, as well as for taking great pains to answer my questions about other aspects of the 1919 Centenary.

34 "Potted" Correspondence', Midland Counties Tribune, 18 July 1919, p. 6.


36 See Robert Withington, English Pageantry: An Historical Outline, 2 vols (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 1918, 1926), ii. 197 ff.


38 George Eliot postcards were advertised in the Nuneaton Observer, 25 July 1919, p. 17, but this is the only such reference I have found.

39 1 August 1919, p. 4.

40 Midland Counties Tribune, 21 November 1919, p. 6.

41 Coventry Herald, 7-8 November 1919, p. 10. In addition to newspapers (including the Times, 4 November, p. 9, and brief reports on 22 and 24 November), I have drawn on material in the Coventry Central Library.

42 With reference to the Nuneaton events, but with application also to Coventry: Midland Counties Tribune, 8 August 1919, p. 4.

43 Coventry Herald, 7-8 November 1919, p. 10. The 'imaginative biographer' was Mathilde Blind: 'she once pointed out to a friend at Foleshill that one of [her hands] was broader across than the other, saying, with some pride, that it was due to the quantity of butter and cheese she had made during her housekeeping days at Griff' (George Eliot [London: W. H. Allen, 1883], p. 20). Although Olcott had quashed the whimsy on the basis of correspondence with the Reverend Frederic (pp. 59-61), Gordon Haight repeats it in George Eliot: A Biography (London: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 28.

44 Coventry Herald, 7-8 November 1919, p. 10.


46 Supplement to Coventry Herald, 7-8 November 1919, p. 6.

47 The significance of photography in nineteenth-century literary culture is the subject of Helen Groth's Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia (Oxford University Press, 2003), which stresses the authenticity of photography, its 'power to provide the first truly comprehensive and accessible historical record' (p. 50). Such works as Olcott provide a photographic record with the implication that in it some views or buildings are captured before the march of progress erases them.


49 Midland Counties Tribune, 21 November 1919, p. 3. This candid reviewer did not spare
the opening night glitches.

22 November 1919, p. 2.

Respectively Daily Telegraph, 19 November 1919, p. 14, and Athenaeum 21 November 1919. A George Eliot Centenary number of The Bookman was less censorious. Other London observances included centenary lectures staged for instance by the Positivist Society.


7 November 1919, p. 2.

Coventry Herald, 14-15 November 1919, p. 11.

Midland Counties Tribune, 14 November 1919, p. 2.


There are numerous annual events of course including the memorial lecture, Nuneaton wreath-laying, etc. For the history of the Fellowship, see Kathleen Adams, A Community of Interest: The Story of the George Eliot Fellowship 1930-2000 (Nuneaton: The George Eliot Fellowship, 2000).