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Kathleen Adams: A Tribute

All but 50 years we knew each other. And I think George Eliot owes Kathleen Adams a lot. This is common knowledge – for where would the Fellowship be without her tireless efforts. Westminster Abbey, the Nuneaton statue, membership numbers: these are all well known. But that small terrace house in Stepping Stones Road, Coventry, visited by so many important figures, represents for me the championing of the ordinary folk and their appreciation of George Eliot's work. I remember an American academic being disappointed at the Newsletter Kathleen prepared so diligently, and how it was not on the intellectual level he would have appreciated. He grinned resignedly : 'It was always asking me to choose between Coronation Chicken and Steak and Kidney, some months ahead.' But Kathleen knew that most members liked essays on the Dogs of Middlemarch rather than ones on semi-idiotic post-deconstructionalism in *Theophrastus Such*. And it was this aspect that brought us together. I have always favoured the emotional response to literature, feeling that to close a book and not turn to writing a dozen closely reasoned pages of criticism, but instead, saying 'wow', was a perfectly valid response. She knew I read the novels on BBC radio and we thought live readings might be a valid tribute to interest the members. We have done 47 years of them. In various venues. Kathleen arranged these meticulously, down to the last thermos of coffee in the intervals. She found venues in Nuneaton, in Coventry, even the Warwick Arts Centre for a couple of golden years and Arbury Hall. Always well attended and seemingly enjoyed. Arbury Hall was for me also the great moment of her introducing me to Gordon Haight – my idea of the next best thing to meeting Mary Anne herself – the man who single handed, over thirty years devotion and nine volumes of letters, and the biography, had brought George Eliot back to centre stage where she belonged. He had just returned from a holiday in Europe, with his (possibly, I thought, long-suffering) wife (30 years devoted to another woman). I shook hands with them both and said that I felt sure they had been to Portugal, and that it was his wife's choice. Why so? Because it was the only country in Europe George Eliot never visited. His wife laughed but his totemic expression never altered. There was a pause before he said in unmistakably put-down tones, dry as ash, 'Lewes's Uncle was in Portugal. (Pause) He was in the wine trade'. Squashed. Unforgettable, in its awful way.

Somehow in that small house, with even smaller rooms, Kathleen managed to accommodate Rosalind and me when Rosalind joined me to give a huge extra dimension to the readings, and on one occasion Kathleen found two audiences, on consecutive evenings, to listen to our version of Gwendolen's story from *Deronda*, in *three* acts, with two intervals. A full evening. We stretched the faithful to bursting point alright. The little house boasted two toilets, one outside, (fully plumbed I hasten to add) and that one facing a dark-flowered Clematis called Daniel Deronda. Yes George Eliot was central to Kathleen's life, and made it, through her work, a richer life than one could suppose possible in such modest surroundings. If I seem to dwell on the narrowness of the physical room, forgive the standpoint of one of 6ft 2, with a tendency to claustrophobia. She was a generous hostess, and woe betide if one praised the coconut pyramids: they would be made without fail for the next 20 years visits, even when one was talking diets. I used to think that perhaps other performers might have liked a chance to offer readings now and then, and occasionally one was shoe-horned in, but not many would commit to the research, compiling and editing, printing and rehearsing, for one night only, so my conscience is fairly quieted. Anyway, I'll be moving over soon enough. And poor Kathleen is at last at rest, beside her beloved and devoted Bill. The Fellowship is

immensely lucky to have someone like John Burton to have taken over and carried the flag into the 21st century with all its computer-dominated communication. One day soon we will have a visitor centre, as a result of his immense efforts, in the grounds of Griff. The final memory of Kathleen is of her arranging for me to see Griff House during its last days of private ownership, and letting me go, alone, up to the loft, and commune with the very worm-eaten shelves of George Eliot's childhood. That too was unforgettable. But in the right way. Thank you Kathleen.

Gabriel Woolf