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Will Adams

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Living with George Eliot: A Tribute to my Parents

It was a strange but much-appreciated honour to be asked to address the annual George Eliot Fellowship lunch in 2016. It was strange because I'd attended many such events long ago – fewer more recently – and had always sat with the 'rank and file' on the lower tables while Mum and Dad, officers and distinguished guests occupied the top table. So, when on Sunday 20 November, I rose to speak, I was quite miffed to find that there was no top table! All very egalitarian, but it left me wandering up and down the floor as I imparted my ramblings!

As everyone was aware, Dad had been the special guest at the Nuneaton wreath-laying ceremony in June. He had been delighted to be asked, and spent a splendid afternoon being fussed over and meeting friends old and new. Then that night the aortic aneurism that had been a ticking time-bomb for eight years finally gave way, and by Tuesday he had died. Just as he would have wanted it – he would have had no patience with a long or debilitating illness. And how would he have been able to look after Mum?

Mum was, of course, distraught. She had relied on him for so long, and they had been constant companions through 67 years of marriage. Her immobility, and inability to look after herself, meant that she had to be hurriedly moved from their home of 63 years into nursing care. But it was only to be a temporary move, as Mum clearly no longer wanted to be here without her beloved Bill. Despite the care she received and the visits from friends and family, exactly two months later she too passed away. We were so thankful that her suffering hadn't been longer.

So here I was, at the 'virtual top table', without them – a strange sensation. If they had been there, I probably wouldn't have been. But it was not a time for mourning. It was a time to celebrate the achievements of two remarkable people. They had taken the Fellowship from a handful of local diehard enthusiasts to an internationally recognized literary society. They had managed to get George Eliot into Westminster Abbey, to erect a statue in her native Nuneaton, to organize countless events, and be instrumental in the founding of the Alliance of Literary Societies.

At the outset they had cannily made me and my wife Tricia Life Members of the Fellowship. This ensured that we have been kept involved and informed for almost 50 years, even when we were busy elsewhere. It is difficult for a child to appreciate and feel pride in the achievements of a parent – it's usually the other way round – and when you're busy at university, then getting married, getting children, a job, a mortgage, it's easy to overlook your parents' parallel life – you can't see the wood for the trees. But now I can stand back and fully appreciate what they did together.

Life Membership also meant that it was a given that I would attend all Fellowship events when I was still living at home, especially the annual dinners. I have the fondest memories of events at various venues long ago, especially the Larry Grayson Lounge of the George Eliot Hotel, a wonderful juxtaposition that would certainly have found its way into one of the novels! One of the highlights was the Chilvers Coton handbell ringers, who entertained the guests after the meal. 'My Grandfather's Clock' was a favourite, and I get misty-eyed now recalling the members gradually joining in with the words sotto voce. An utterly timeless moment.

How did it all start? I can't remember the day when Mum and Dad brought this woman into the house – a plain-looking, unassuming woman with a long face but kindly, sympathetic eyes. But soon Miss Evans was a constant presence. Mum in particular had a lot in common with her. Both had received little encouragement educationally. Mum was an only child and I don't think her parents had any real notion of the possibilities in life. She was always conscious of this lack of an academic background and her hitherto narrow experience of the world; some perhaps found her aloof, but it was a shyness born out of a unjustified sense of not being quite up to the job. But what she may have lacked academically, she more than made up for in her matchless organizational skills and her ability to make things happen and encourage others to join her in making them happen.

When Miss Evans moved to Coventry and met the Brays, a new, wide world of radicalism and free-thinking was opened up to her. Likewise, when Mum and Dad met Gabriel Woolf, it opened a gateway to a previously inaccessible literary and theatrical world. The significance of the association between them, and its effect on the development of the Fellowship, should not be underestimated.

Dad was the rock on which Mum was able to build her life with the woman who was to become George Eliot, just as G. H. Lewes had been the rock on which Eliot built her literary career. Dad encouraged her and joined with her in everything she did. Mum died exactly two months after Dad; George Eliot died two years after Lewes.

One final bit of rambling. In all my years of living with George Eliot, I never thought of her as a man (yes, I know she wasn't...). But in my mind's eye she was never a man called George whose surname was Eliot. The name was a single word – 'Georgeliot' – a kind of label, an identifier for Miss Evans the novelist. At school I had a good friend called Andrew Stevenson. Since we were all known by our surnames, he became 'Steve'. Never Andrew. But not 'Steve' as in someone whose name was Stephen. 'Steve' was the label that represented that particular, unique person. And so it seems to me with 'Georgeliot' – almost a 'brand', and never in my mind's eye a man christened George.

But I digress. Not long after Mum and Dad died we received a brochure from the Crematorium offering us a variety of very expensive memorials, from plaques to trees. Not for a moment did we consider such a thing. Mum and Dad have their own unique memorial, not carved in stone but represented by the continuing success of the Fellowship under its present Chairman, Committee and enthusiastic supporters around the world. And if and when the 'Adams Room' at the proposed Visitor Centre at Griff comes to fruition, then that will be the ultimate, everlasting memorial to two very ordinary people who spent their lives together doing quite extraordinary things.

Will Adams