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In Memoriam, Kathleen Adams (1929-2016)

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IN MEMORIAM
Kathleen Adams (1929–2016)



The sheer number of years, forty, that Kathleen Adams was Secretary of the George Eliot Fellowship, is extraordinary, but that number does not do justice to the prodigious amount of time, energy and dedication that she devoted to the job.

Like many others, Kathleen came to George Eliot via her life rather than her works. As a grammar school girl from Barrs Hill in Coventry she had heard about Eliot; as an adult she learned details of her extraordinary life. That took her to the novels and then a commitment to tell people about them which was to dominate her life.

Bill Adams attended a meeting, actually the AGM, of the Fellowship in Nuneaton and went home as a committee member. Kathleen soon joined him and in 1968 she took over as Honorary Secretary. At this distance we don't know whether the existing committee resented or welcomed the newcomers from Coventry. Possibly a bit of both. The Fellowship they took on had about 30 members and met for an annual dinner, wreath-laying and lecture. Indeed, in the 1950s it had invited a young Barbara Hardy to lecture, and it had worked with Nuneaton Borough Council to establish the Memorial Gardens. But by the late 1960s it needed ideas, enthusiasm, leadership and new members, and for the next 35 years Kathleen and Bill supplied them all.

It is worth reminding ourselves that in all her work, her writing, her letters to academics all over the world Kathleen used only her typewriter, the phone and the post. In the 1970s so did we all but as word processors and computers took over the world of communications, Kathleen refused every offer made to furnish her with a computer and printer; her only concession to modernity was an electric typewriter. I don't ever remember visiting their house and not seeing a little pile of letters in the hall waiting for Bill to take to the post box. But by the end of her time as Secretary this became a hindrance, not to Kathleen but to those she addressed, since letters required a written answer if there was no email address to reply to! She was often frustrated by a lack of written responses from busy academics, but didn't acknowledge that it was of her own making.

But that was a long way ahead. From 1968 onwards she took the Fellowship into a remarkable period of growth, starting with the 150th anniversary in 1969 with a week of celebrations including a wreath-laying, a civic service and an exhibition in the Museum which attracted 6,000 visitors. There were talks, George Eliot Tours, films and coffee evenings. Two events were attended by Gordon Haight and his wife, and Kathleen made friends with Gabriel Woolf which was to be productive for the next 48 years. Gabriel's own appreciation of Kathleen appears elsewhere in this *Review*. The first of his programmes of readings was to take place in March 1970; his performances have delighted audiences every year, sometimes twice a year, since.

Kathleen saw the necessity for increasing our membership, and for making the Fellowship less parochial. Richard Church, Hallam Tennyson and Gabriel Woolf became vice-presidents in 1969. She successfully contacted and enticed into membership various descendants of the Evans and the Lewes families, one by-product of which was the placing of some Evans papers with the Museum and Library, now mostly at the County Record Office and available online. She was a formidable advocate and in the early 1970s she persuaded Coventry's Herbert Museum and Art Gallery that much of their Eliot collection, then kept in store, would be better displayed in Nuneaton. For over 30 years Nuneaton Museum reaped the benefit and had Eliot's writing desk, gloves, the miniature of Robert Evans and various other artefacts, including her piano on display. Indeed, summer Sunday afternoon recitals on the piano were a feature at Nuneaton Museum – something modern curators would respond to with a fit of the vapours.

For many years the Fellowship produced new ideas for celebrating George Eliot and a long line of actors, performers and academics found their way to Nuneaton and Kathleen found ways of persuading people to come and hear them. It was one of her great achievements that the Fellowship has been able to appeal to interested general readers and enthusiasts, especially in the Midlands, as well as to many serious academics who have been pleased to be associated with it. That many American academics have been, and remain, members is an additional tribute to Kathleen. She was adept at adding little personal notes to some members when she and Bill were packing and sending Newsletters or Reviews and she took the word Fellowship seriously, even if some of her written and spoken comments could be a bit judgmental or dismissive.

The success of the 150th anniversary events emboldened her, and the next thirty years were fruitful in many ways. In 1970 the first *Review* appeared, though it was initially called the *Fellowship Review* and was a bit parochial. But it involved a prodigious amount of work by Kathleen. Readers may recall what we did before photo-copiers and cheap inkjet printers.

It involved a wax-like sheet which was then typed on to produce a skin to be placed on a large Gestetner machine (electric version if you were lucky) and copious amounts of thick gungy ink. Kathleen took the production of 30-40 page foolscap editions in her stride. The centenary edition in 1980 was 60 pages and they were all typed, printed, collated, packed and despatched by Kathleen and Bill. At the time Kathleen was a school secretary (always the most efficient people in any school) and so was allowed to use the Gestetner machine – out of school hours as she was always keen to emphasize!

To take one year as an example. The 1979 edition of 36 pages (they all had covers drawn by their son Will) had sixteen articles. Kathleen's annual report took five pages and she wrote three other articles taking thirteen pages. Bill then wrote a two page summary of someone else's lecture. It was amazing that they managed to do so much. Son Will described it, in his comments at Kathleen's funeral, as 'the family business'. One can see why! By the mid-1980s Graham Handley brought his professional academic skills to the joint editorship and subsequently Beryl Gray, John Rignall and Michael Davis have made it a highly respected academic Journal, still free to all our members, and soon to be available to the world online. But it all started with Kathleen, her typewriter and her vision.

Kathleen was also a popular speaker who developed a precise and clipped talk about George Eliot which she gave to clubs and societies all over the region. She spoke well, used a dry humour to good effect and is still remembered by audiences I address. She sent regular detailed press releases to local papers at a time when they were still widely read and she helped to build up a strong public profile for the Fellowship. During the 1970s membership grew steadily both here and abroad, and much of the forward thinking was towards the centenary of Eliot's death in 1980. By the early 1970s Kathleen had broached the subject of a memorial with the Westminster Abbey authorities, now more amenable than their predecessors. Plans were made, money raised, designs commissioned and the stone was unveiled in Poets' Corner on 21 June 1980, with a congregation of 700, by Gordon Haight, who had also delivered in 1972 the inaugural George Eliot Memorial Lecture in Nuneaton. Between the two events there was a falling out, I suspect due more to Haight's humourless petulance than Kathleen's insensitivity, but Haight certainly accepted the invitation to unveil the memorial stone. Well, who wouldn't? There were three weeks of events around the June event, packed with activities, lectures, readings, visits; and people from all over the world attended. Kathleen herself said 'there was a great feeling of achievement and satisfaction' in 'demonstrating our love and admiration of this great Victorian novelist'.

The year was packed with other events both in Nuneaton and London, and the organizing, booking, coping with the problems attending all these things was done by Kathleen. There were coach trips, a conference at Leicester, a plaque was unveiled in Wirksworth to Eliot's aunt Elizabeth, the Dinah Morris of *Adam Bede*. Then in November the Fellowship celebrated its own 50th birthday with another series of meals and events. At this time Kathleen was supported by Tenniel Evans as President. Later, Jonathan Ouvry offered strong support to her, as he still does to me. By the end of the centenary year we had 433 members. It was to rise to 600 at the time of Andrew Davis's adaptation of *Middlemarch* and now still hovers around the 400.

Kathleen also undertook to provide easily accessible information about George Eliot. She wrote a *Brief Guide to George Eliot* which sold well and was often reprinted; this was followed by *The Little Sister*, a less successful booklet for older children. In 1980 she

produced *Those Of Us Who Loved Her – The Men in George Eliot's Life*. In many respects the book was an overview of what others had told us about the men, but she and Bill made interesting discoveries about Charles Bray and his extra-marital escapades in Coventry at the time Mary Ann was living there.

In 2002 she was responsible for the text in the *Pitkin Guide to George Eliot*, a job she did with great skill. For many years the Fellowship had close links with Warwick University and Kathleen was awarded an honorary degree by the University, an honour she particularly cherished. She deserved national recognition for all that she had done.

From 1984 there was excitement at the prospect of erecting a statue to George Eliot. The local authority was amenable to the idea of a statue and so an appeal was launched, Steve Race and others helped with performances to raise money, John Letts was commissioned and the statue was unveiled, to huge media attention and a large crowd, by our president Jonathan Ouvry, who discovered from Kathleen's press release that he was invited because the Duchess of Kent and Princess Alexandra had turned down the invitation! It was typical of that occasional insensitivity that Kathleen displayed without realizing that she was doing it. Jonathan read out the press release with some delight at the 30th anniversary of the unveiling in 2016.

None of this admirable dedication would have been possible without the support of Bill, and Kathleen was always generous in her thanks to him. He had a wider view of the world which acted to keep Kathleen grounded. They were both thankful for their long and happy marriage and during Kathleen's declining years it was a revelation to see the loving care which Bill gave to his wife. Without that support, Kathleen saw no reason to live, and we were not very surprised when she joined her beloved Bill nine weeks after he died. They were a lesson to us all. Within the family, their son Will was a constant support. Their daughter died at a tragically early age but both acknowledged that the constant demands of the Fellowship helped them to survive that period. Their grandchildren recalled at her funeral how she always planned ahead on their behalf. And so, at family visits to the panto, when children's names were called out, or birthdays read out, theirs were often included because Kathleen had arranged it so. She used the same principle at Fellowship Birthday Luncheons. I was always impressed by the number of messages from absent friends. I should have known better. They were there because Kathleen had asked for them well in advance.

That the Fellowship exists at all is due entirely to them, but especially to Kathleen for her commitment and her organizing skills. But it extends beyond the Fellowship to the wider world, succinctly put by Rosemary Ashton, who said: 'Kathleen and Bill have done more than anyone else to promote and foster the reputation of George Eliot in the last half century.'

John Burton