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OBITUARY

by Kathleen Adams

GORDON S. HAIGHT

Died December 28th 1985

Admirers of George Eliot owe an immense debt to Gordon S. Haight for his work on George Eliot, her life and her works. No-one studying the Nuneaton-born novelist can afford to miss the nine volumes of her letters which came out over a period of 24 years, edited by Haight, and yet it was almost by chance that he became so involved that the letters grew into a life's work. In 1933 he joined Yale University where he had graduated ten years earlier. That same year he became interested in the collection of George Eliot letters at Yale and set himself a 'holiday task' of going over them with care - the 'holiday task' grew into over 50 years' work and provided the literary world

with not only the nine volumes of letters but a most readable and authoritative Biography, published in 1968. Rebecca West, the novelist and critic, described it as 'a triumph of scholarship'. Haight also published 'George Eliot and John Chapman', an annotated selection of the letters in one volume, and several editions of the novels. He was also the general editor of the Clarendon edition of George Eliot's novels, a series which began with his own edition of 'The Mill on the Floss'.

Dr. Haight was born in 1901 in Muskegon, Michigan, and after graduating at Yale taught in two schools before returning to Yale, a university with which he remained until his death, for after retirement in 1969 he became Emily Sanford Professor Emeritus, and he continued with his scholarly work on George Eliot until the end.

During his long researches into George Eliot's early life, it was inevitable that Haight should centre his study on Nuneaton and Coventry. Mrs. Dorothy Dodds, the Fellowship's local historian, helped him a great deal with research into the family in Nuneaton, her schooldays and the places associated with George Eliot's life and early writings. Haight was invited to become one of the first Vice Presidents of the Fellowship and he remained in this position until 1974 when as a result of a disagreement with the Fellowship (a strange incident which still puzzles some of us) he resigned, and our close contact with him was lost. However, when we were considering whom to invite to unveil the Memorial Stone in Westminster Abbey which would mark the centenary of George Eliot's death, it was clear that there was no-one more suitable than Gordon S. Haight. He accepted the invitation with great pleasure and the rift between us was healed in the warmest possible way. His fine speech on June 21st 1980 caught the spirit of the occasion as well as its dignity and we were extremely happy to have him and his wife Mary with us on such a great occasion. That he so warmly welcomed the placing of the stone in Poets' Corner helped in no small measure when we were sometimes attacked for putting a memorial in a

church like Westminster Abbey, a pillar of the establishment, to a lady who had deliberately cut herself off from the established church in a long period of religious doubt. We felt we were backed by the authority of a lifetime of scholarship; had it been an unacceptable idea to those who knew most about her, he would have been the first to tell us.

Dr. Haight was a mixture of warmth, charm and irascibility, and many scholars have felt the sharp edge of his tongue when he felt he could not give his approval. I once showed him a small brass box which had come to me from a member of the Lewes family, and told him that it had been George Eliot's. "You can't prove it", he said, and Mary Haight followed this with a laughing "Gordon is a great debunker!" He did not approve of the recently erected statue, although his disapproval reached us secondhand!

If he did not particularly value our work as a literary society, he nevertheless contributed to it by attending the 1969 celebrations of the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's birth, and by delivering the first George Eliot Memorial Lecture in October 1972. He took as his subject The True Heroine of Middlemarch, who, to the surprise of many of his listeners, turned out to be Mary Garth.

The Fellowship was represented at the Memorial Service to Gordon S. Haight in Yale's Dwight Chapel by one of our American members, Professor Michael Wolff, as well as by Margaret Wolfit, whose own personal obituary of her friend follows this one. The Victorian Gothic building with its vivid stained glass was crowded with admirers of a great scholar, and two eulogies were given, one by John Hersey, the author who had been a schoolboy under Haight in the late 1920's, and the other by Eugene M. Waith, an Emeritus Professor of English at Yale. The honour of the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone Dedication was mentioned during the service, and a link between the two events came when 'O may I join the Choir Invisible' was included in the Yale service as it had been at the Abbey. Emphasis was placed on Haight's own high

standards and the wit and humour underlying his sometimes difficult and intimidating manner, as well as the generosity and hospitality of both Dr. Haight and Mrs. Haight. The service was simple and moving and recalled the astonishing energy of the man who did so much to restore George Eliot to her rightful place in English literature after a period of some neglect. Haight's work, in this respect, is almost unique, and will live on while there is so much interest in George Eliot as a writer and as a woman.