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ANNUAL REPORT 1987

Before I began this, my 20th. annual Report, I looked back to my first and found, to my amusement, that it was a mere half quarto page! During that year we had visited the Arnold Bennett Country, seen the play of 'Wuthering Heights', and our Guest of Honour at the Dinner was the writer, Richard Church, a kinsman of George Eliot. Our total membership was 60.

1987 was inevitably a quieter year than 1986 - can it really be more than two years since we unveiled the Statue? At the AGM in March it seemed almost inevitable that we should be accepting the resignation of Ann Reader who had been our treasurer for ten busy years culminating in the Statue appeal. A very young 79 year old, she felt it was time to hand on the purse strings to someone younger and her meticulous books were taken over by Brenda Evans who quickly proved what an asset she is with her enthusiasm for new projects and introducing George Eliot to new groups of people. By the end of the year Ann had become the first winner of the Nuneaton and Bedworth Joint Arts Association's Behind-the-Scenes Award - a fitting climax to her ten years of service to the Fellowship, to George Eliot, and in the Statue Appeal, to Nuneaton itself. Joan Bunn has joined the Fellowship Council and has become an able and very supportive member. She replaced Ken Hayward who had been a Council member for a number of years and who had worked hard for us on many occasions, notably with 'begging bowls' and raffle tickets!

Gabriel Woolf's 18th. annual visit to Warwickshire was a tremendous success. We have come to rely on his wonderfully popular visit to help to fill our coffers; thanks to the generosity of a number of sponsors, his performance at the University of Warwick Arts Centre is seemingly assured for some time to come. It is a wonderfully prestigious place to play, and this and the evening in Nuneaton continues to be a highlight of our year. 'Tea and Sprouts', the 1987 programme, was, as always, a carefully selected and beautifully read anthology of literature with an unusual theme. Gabriel has been a very good friend of the Fellowship since we first met him 19 years ago.

The Parlour Performers made a return visit in May. Jonathan Ouvry, our President, and his wife Marjorie, together with their friends, gave us a superb evening of Victorian songs, and their visit raised a considerable sum towards the cost of the second plaque on the plinth of the statue - this time an informative one about George Eliot's life. No-one now has any excuse for not knowing the identity of the lady who sits in Newdegate Square. (No, madam, it is not Enid Blyton!) The fund for the plaque was completed by a most generous donation from Ann Reader. Her meticulous attention to detail clearly wouldn't allow her to pass on to the new treasurer a fund which was not neatly and successfully concluded. Ann is now a Vice President of the Fellowship - a lasting thank you for all her work.

At the Nuneaton Wreath-laying in June our Guest of Honour was Douglas Tribe, the newly appointed Head of George Eliot School. We had hoped that this would increase the involvement of the school with the Fellowship but, sadly, this has not happened. However, it continues to send two representatives to the Wreath-laying and perhaps schools are too busy to do more.

The Westminster Abbey Wreathlaying was voted the best yet. Jonathan Ouvry read a passage from Scenes of Clerical Life and John Kane, a member who lives in George Eliot's own Holly Lodge at Wandsworth, laid the wreath. In his strong actor's voice he gave a splendid Address on George Eliot and adulation. This was followed (amazingly, since these things are not planned but left to the choice of the reader) by Gabriel Woolf reading an entry from G. H. Lewes's diary in which he described some admirer touching George Eliot at the Westminster Abbey wedding of Lionel Tennyson, and with the beginning of Romola which began Gabriel's own 'love affair' with George Eliot.

In June, as our contribution to Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council's tourism drive we produced two attractive souvenirs for the anticipated tourists. A teatowel and a matching mug in an attractive warm brown were designed by Jenny Quy, a member of the Council. This was a venture which caused us some anxiety because of the size of the capital outlay but we received two generous gifts from two local sponsors - Abbey Hosiery Mills Ltd and Beefeater Steakhouses, and a large order from the Borough Council which ensured that a considerable part of the outlay came back to our funds quickly. Since we were using these funds in a new and slightly risky way we were very pleased that it did not take long to break even. Future sales will make us a profit, so the venture has proved a piece of good business. Both items have been popular with those who bought them, as have the 3000 postcard views of the new statue but, on the whole, response from local shopkeepers has been rather apathetic. The Chamber of Trade who had always encouraged us to put George Eliot Country souvenirs on the market, in fact did nothing to actively support the project once it was under way, and their members appear not to have been encouraged to stock the goods we provided. In view of this, we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that our funds cannot be risked on re-ordering when the present stocks are exhausted, nor do we feel we can branch out on further merchandise - something we had hoped to do if there had been a show of interest by local shopkeepers. It seems that only a very few wish to offer souvenirs to those tourists who are now being encouraged to visit the George Eliot Country. This is sad, since the tourists can only find the shops, not the Fellowship, on a day visit.

The Fellowship became involved with protests against the demolition of the Free School buildings in Chilvers Coton, a campaign initiated by the Bedworth Society.

Once again we called on the support of our friends in the Alliance of Literary Societies and many of them wrote to the Borough Council. I gather that the volume of mail rather astonished the Chief Executive of the Council. I am sure that these letters helped to save the buildings, but the largest amount of credit must go to John Burton of the Bedworth Society and to Beryl Kerby of the newly formed Nuneaton Society. John's enthusiasm, expertise and tireless devotion to the cause had to be seen to be believed, and we are full of admiration for his boundless energy. A Chilvers Coton Centre Trust is in process of being formed to restore the Free School and to find a viable future use for it. The Fellowship is represented on the Trust.

The same redoubtable John Burton took a party of our members on a guided tour of the Bedworth Town Trail in September. This little town between Nuneaton and Coventry, once so often dismissed as nothing more than a place you passed through from one to the other, now has a distinct and attractive identity of its own and those of us who hardly knew it at all were delighted to learn more of its history. No doubt the young Mary Ann Evans knew it a great deal better than most of us who benefitted from John Burton's comprehensive tour!

The Study Group restarted in September with a reading of Middlemarch and a discussion led, with his usual erudition and enthusiasm, by Graham Handley. In November he led us again in a discussion of Scenes of Clerical Life. We are very grateful to him for the journey he makes from London each time to meet us in this pleasant and informal delve into the novels.

Dr. Beryl Gray, the Vice Chairman of our London Branch, and an authority on George Eliot, gave the 1987 George Eliot Memorial Lecture in October. Entitled The Seduction of Maggie Tulliver it dealt with the subject of George Eliot and music (on which Dr. Gray is shortly to publish a book) and music was played during the evening, a very attractive addition to an interesting lecture.

The Birthday Luncheon took place on November 22nd. the actual birthday, and in celebration of this once-every-eight-years coincidence, one of our members gave us a superb birthday cake to add to the festivities of this particular happy annual event. Ina Taylor was our Guest of Honour; she will soon be publishing a new biography of George Eliot and in her toast to the Immortal Memory she spoke about George Eliot's friendship with Georgiana Burne-Jones. Before the Luncheon we met at the statue and Jonathan Ouvry laid a wreath at its foot. The Mayor of Nuneaton, who proposed the Toast to 'Milby' was Councillor Bill Olnor, a good friend of the Fellowship and a staunch supporter of the George Eliot Country. It was particularly nice to have him and his wife with us during their busy year of office. We also had some warm messages of greeting from overseas members as well as from other absent friends.

Also on the Birthday the London Branch met to celebrate. It was clearly a very successful occasion, no doubt due to the hard work of Michael Forrest, the Branch secretary and his wife, Suzanne, as well as of Beryl Gray. Music was a feature of the evening and, after an excellent supper at St. Philip's Church, Kensington, members were entertained by songs from the international tenor, Julian Pike - all of which were known and loved by George Eliot. How she would have enjoyed this kind of salon dinner party. It has not been an easy beginning for the London Branch but the officers are enthusiastic and are clearly presenting events of quality to honour George Eliot. One of these was a visit to Highgate Cemetery in October, led by Beryl Gray whose own particular enthusiasm had been responsible for the refurbishing of the three graves there - George Eliot's, Lewes's and John Cross's and for the planting of the novelist's own grave with some of her favourite flowers. The parent organisation sends the Branch warmest greetings and good wishes for their future activities.

The 18th. issue of the Review was published in August and has received more praise than any preceeding issue. I am most grateful for the help of my joint editor, Graham Handley, whose assistance with the selection of academic papers is invaluable and undoubtedly adds to the quality of our annual magazine. It was such a tiny publication when it first began, very home-spun and offering nothing to scholarship, but now goes into many university libraries.

Again offering nothing to scholarship but flying the flag locally, we have manned a stall on three occasions in the town - two on shopping nights and one at the Carnival Gala. Our tourist souvenirs were launched on the first occasion, a so-called Caribbean Evening in June, but it might well have been a Siberian Evening for the winds that nearly froze us to our postions! Trade was poor but this can be partially blamed on the appalling weather conditions. Trade was not much better at the Christmas Victorian Shopping Night but we could hardly be left out of such a period piece. It is growing clearer, I think, that those Nuneatonians who admire George Eliot and love her books have already found us - they are not going to be discovered on a late night shopping event. But, at least, the populace know we exist!

The Fellowship was represented at a recital of harp music and readings from George Eliot at Arbury Hall - what a superb setting, particularly for passages that described the room we were in. We even managed to enrol new members on this very pleasant evening, and we were most warmly welcomed by our host and hostess, Lord and Lady Daventry who continue to take an interest in the Fellowship of which he is Patron.

The fine oak from the Arbury Estate which was used in the George Eliot Alcove of the old Gulson Library in Coventry was passed on to the Fellowship prior to the

demolition of the building. The wood has been stored for us but is now in the hands of the Nicholas Chamberlaine School at Bedworth whose Design and Technology Department is in the process of making us display cases for the two books of names of contributors to the Westminster Abbey stone and to the Statue. It has been a long haul to get anyone to undertake this task and we are most grateful to the school for coming to our aid.

We had a visit early in the year from a Yugoslav Professor of English who had written a study of George Eliot in her native tongue, a copy of which she presented to Nuneaton Library. We gave her a comprehensive tour of the George Eliot Country and hoped that she might become our first Yugoslav member but nothing further was heard from her when she returned home; she was introduced to us by the British Council. One of our most enthusiastic overseas members, however, visited us in July, from her home in West Germany. Mara Mauermann had portrayed George Eliot at a most remarkable gathering of a vast number of women in a festival based on Judy Chicago's Artwork 'The Dinner Party'. This huge presentation of ceramic and other materials in celebration of many famous women was touring the world and George Eliot was, of course, one of the women. Mara showed us slides of the exhibit and explained them to us.

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council mounted a beautiful display during the summer at the Royal Show based on The Mill on the Floss. The mill and its surroundings had been most lovingly recreated and won a very deserved award. 6000 leaflets were distributed at the Royal Show in which the Fellowship received a mention and we hoped there might be a follow-up from these, but no subsequent enquiries arrived. However, it was good publicity both for us and for the novel, and those who saw the exhibit will not soon forget it.

We have had minor battles with both the British Tourist Authority and the Heart of England Tourist Board during the year about the merits of the George Eliot Country as a tourist attraction. No-one emerges from these as a winner and we continue to strive to convince those who point tourists in the direction of worth-while places to visit. However, we are much encouraged by the Borough Council whose own work in promoting the area is much valued by the Fellowship and we work closely with their Development and Forward Planning Officer, Nigel Smith, whose hard work and enthusiasm could hardly be improved. Kathleen Porter and I continue to represent the Fellowship on the Borough Council's Tourism Working Party.

To help the tourist in Coventry a new plaque has been placed on the front of 29, Warwick Row, the site of the school attended by George Eliot from 1832 to 1835. We are still awaiting news of the replanting of the acacia tree outside 29. A plaque has also

been placed on the house in Northgate Street, Devizes, the one time home of Dr. Robert Brabant where George Eliot spent a holiday in 1843. The Fellowship was represented at the unveiling of a plaque on the home of Rupert Brooke's mother in Bilton Road, Rugby. Our support of the Rupert Brooke Centenary celebrations was given a public acknowledgement at the unveiling. We were also represented at the official opening of Phase II of the George Eliot Hospital and were given a fascinating tour of this splendid new hospital complex. It gave us an opportunity to see the new wards for which we had suggested the names of Bob Jakin and Dolly Winthrop. Continuing this pattern of giving names to various parts of the hospital, 'Silas Marner' was recently suggested for the Out-Patients' Department.

During 1987 the Fellowship Council met 8 times, always in the homes of its members and we are particularly grateful for this hospitality which makes a busy business meeting into such a pleasurable occasion.

After the excitement of the year of the statue was over, it was inevitable that our membership figures should drop a little; they did so after the year of the centenary. However membership is still at a very healthy level with 239 life members and 156 annual ones in 21 Countries, making a total of 395-28 less than in 1986.

As always I close my annual report with warm thanks to all those who have been of so much help during the year. To Nuneaton Library, and to Ann Robson, the new curator of Nuneaton Museum. To the staff of Nuneaton Bookshop who are supportive and helpful and keep a constant supply of George Eliot novels on their shelves. To Miss Craig who makes our visits to King Edward VI College smooth and trouble free, and to Nuneaton and Bedworth Joint Arts Association which makes us an annual grant towards the cost of the Memorial Lecture. And especially to the Officers and Council who give their labour and their support willingly. My first twenty years as Fellowship Secretary have been filled with so much pleasure - in working with fellow enthusiasts, in going to so many interesting places and meeting such interesting and nice people. I look back onto my appointment twenty years ago and wonder where the time has gone, but it has been time well and most enjoyably and rewardingly spent.

KATHLEEN ADAMS

March 1988