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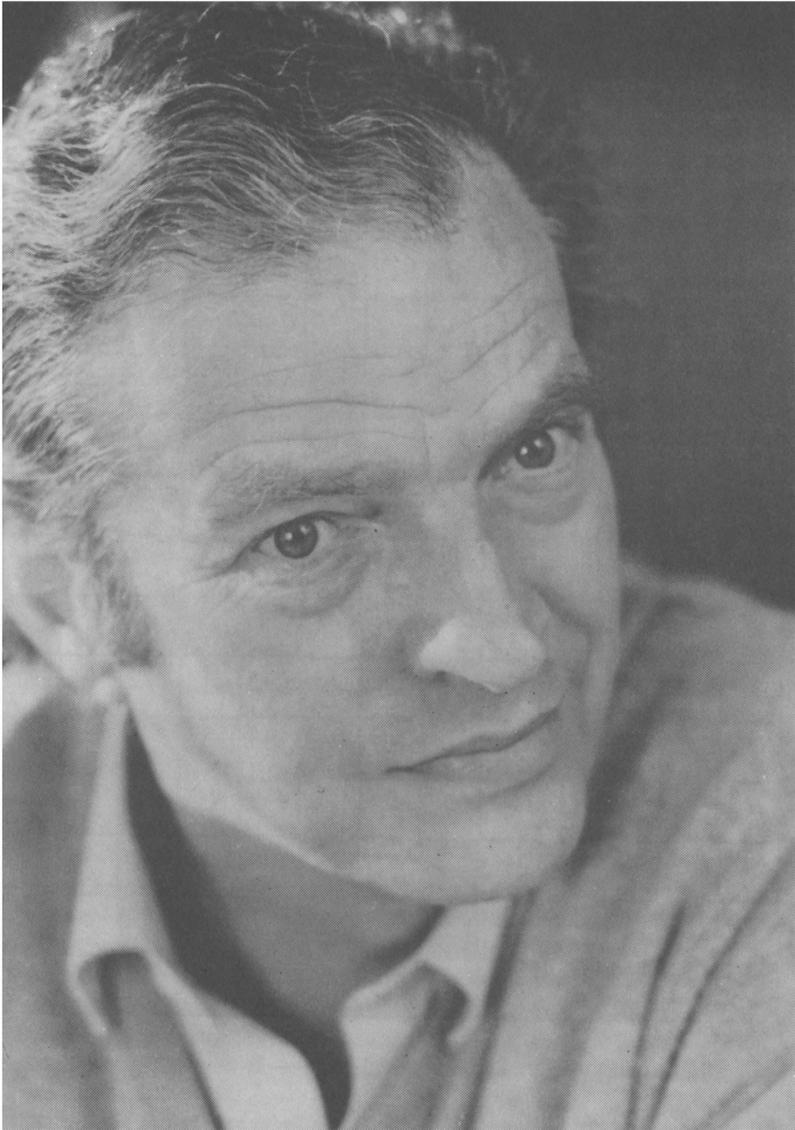


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GABRIEL WOOLF

HOW, TWENTY YEARS AGO, THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP FOUND GABRIEL WOOLF

Starting a new friendship is often a very chancey business and none more so than the friendship which developed between The George Eliot Fellowship and one of its staunchest supporters, Gabriel Woolf. Gabriel's recent 20th visit to Warwickshire to present his annual programme of Readings has reminded us how much of a fluke our finding him really was.

In 1969 the Fellowship planned to mark the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's birth with a week of celebrations in Nuneaton. We were then a very small society with a very inexperienced committee but, nothing daunted, we hoped to put the George Eliot Country on the literary map. Looking back after twenty years it is clear that our celebrations had a distinctly homespun look about them, and yet they were all immensely successful. One of the major events of the week was to be the opening of a special exhibition of George Eliot memorabilia in Nuneaton Museum, hopefully by an eminent person. The week was fast approaching and no-one had been found to perform the opening. It seemed that a golden opportunity to make this particular mark was going to be lost.

One evening, quite late, the Fellowship secretary was taking a bath and was listening to the radio. Into the steamy atmosphere floated a beautiful voice reading, in the BBC Radio series 'A Book at Bedtime', Middlemarch. I cannot now believe that I had not earlier heard other episodes of the serialised reading; it was, after all, in an unprecedented 45 episodes, and I was in the first flush of my long term of office and up to my eyebrows in George Eliot's anniversary. Perhaps my desperation had now reached such a state that I decided there and then to invite this actor with a wonderful voice to open our exhibition. After all, I thought to myself, although this is just a job of work to an actor he must have some feeling for the novel if he can read it so well and so sensitively. He may know little or nothing of its author. So desperate was I that this seemed not very significant. He would have to do! I was clutching at the proverbial straw, and the straw turned out to be Gabriel Woolf.

In response to my invitation, Gabriel Woolf phoned me from London to accept with great pleasure. I was astonished to discover that not only did he love Middlemarch he also loved George Eliot and knew a great deal about her. Indeed, he had been commissioned by the BBC to write a radio portrait of her to mark the same 150th anniversary. The actor who 'would do' was an authority on the novelist and a devotee beyond our wildest hopes. We could not have chosen anyone more suitable for the occasion for, when he performed the opening ceremony in June 1969, he told his audience how he had fallen in love with George Eliot at first paragraph. To get some local colour for his radio portrait he stayed in the area for a few days and the friendship was sealed.

Gabriel Woolf studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art where he was awarded the Gold Medal. He has worked in all areas of the profession - films, television, theatre, but he is best known to millions of radio listeners for readings, narration and for playing many diverse parts in radio drama. Nowadays he is well known for his work in recitals, from Broadstairs to the Black Hills, Reading to Rotterdam, Newcastle to New Brunswick. What makes this recital work so special is that many of his programmes are of his own devising and that they benefit from three important elements: meticulous research into the lives and works of artists he loves, a theatrical knowledge of what is entertaining, and an ability to communicate the results to the audience that is second to none. And there is so much variety in the subjects he weaves a programme around, from George Eliot to Jerome K. Jerome, Chopin to Vivaldi, Thomas Hood to Tennyson, from Country Matters to World War One, from Charles Dickens to Dylan Thomas, Robert Browning to A.E. Housman, Saki to Henry James, and from Boccaccio to Clara Schumann, the latter with his wife, opera singer Felicity Lott.

How very fortunate the Fellowship was to have quite accidentally invited to the George Eliot Country an actor with such sensitivity in his selection of material to read, such a very beautiful voice in which to read it, and the warmth to offer and sustain a friendship which has been of inestimable value to us. He has been an annual visitor with a new programme every year since 1969. Each visit has been a great success in every way and an account of the 20th. programme in the series follows

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K.A.