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## **SIXTY LITERARY YEARS: THE FOUNDATION OF THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP**

**November 9th 1930**

*by Kathleen Adams*

When the George Eliot Fellowship was born sixty years ago, the infant had emerged after a labour of some 25 years. A.F. Cross, its founder, had been editor of Nuneaton newspapers since 1895. For much of that time he had been campaigning for a memorial to George Eliot in her native town, but had met with apathy at every turn. For two weeks during the summer of 1930, Mr. Cross handed over the Editorial chair of the Nuneaton Chronicle to a Cambridge undergraduate, to give the young man an opportunity to gain an inside knowledge of newspaper production. His young understudy managed to extract columns of unpaid contributions from such distinguished literary men of the day as George Bernard Shaw by asking of them a pertinent question, "Should Nuneaton erect a memorial to George Eliot? If so, what form should it take?" Most of the writers he approached expressed astonishment that a worthy memorial was not already in existence. Mr. Cross's reaction to this successful journalistic experiment was to determine that Nuneaton's apathy should be allowed to continue no longer. After 25 years of battering his editorial head against a brick wall, he decided that he would now climb over it - and take with him as many Nuneatonians as he could find with the slightest glimmer of interest in their local novelist. He was certain that corporate action was now more important than individual effort, and that the formation of a literary society - Fellowship was his own personal choice of title, since its meaning seemed to him to be most suited to admirers of a woman who still had a message for present and future generations - was the answer. In the columns of his paper, he suggested that such a Fellowship should be formed.

At about the same time, some correspondence arose in the London Press about George Eliot's work, and when mention was made that there was the possibility of a George Eliot Society being formed, letters began to arrive at the Nuneaton Chronicle from readers all over England who were eager for more information. Cross needed no more encouragement, and a preliminary meeting was held in the Council Chamber in Nuneaton in October 1930. At this point, the mists descend. The first minute book of the Fellowship's activities has disappeared without trace, so that it has been found impossible to accurately reconstruct those early days. From a newspaper report, it

appears that the idea of a Fellowship was accepted, and plans were laid for a dinner to be held on George Eliot's birthday, November 22nd, at the now vanished Newdegate Arms. A subscription of 5/- (25p) per annum was agreed. From the same newspaper, it is interesting to see what else one could have for 5/- a year; a gas fire could be hired for a year from the Nuneaton Gas Co.; for 5/6 (27½p) a half-day excursion could be made by L.M.S. railway to London (for 11/- (55p) you could go for the whole day!). A pair of Bedford Cord breeches (lined) could be purchased for 10/6 (52½p), a solid oak bedroom suite for 10½ guineas (£11.02) or a lounge suite for £9.19.6. For 1/- (5p) you could sit in the circle at the New Palace Cinema and see "Synthetic Sin", the story of "A Girl who tried to be bad - but couldn't". If you were a bit short of money, you could sit in the pit for only 6d (2½p), and you could buy the newspaper, all 10 pages of it for 2d (less than 1p).

It appears that after the October exploratory meeting, another was called to inaugurate officially the Society, and at that meeting Miss Elizabeth S. Haldane, LL.D., was elected as the first President. In the secretary's report the following year, the date of the foundation of the George Eliot Fellowship is given as November 9th, 1930. And since with the absence of our early records we have no other guideline to follow, this must be regarded as our date of birth. The proudest moment of all, however, for Francis Cross, must have been on November 22nd, when the first Birthday Supper was held. Sir Francis A.N. Newdegate, G.C.M.G. (grandfather of our patron) presided, and the distinguished company included civic guests from Nuneaton, Coventry and Lichfield. Schools, churches and libraries were represented, and many of the guests were prominent residents of the town which George Eliot had known and written about with such keen observation 80 years earlier. The principal guest was Mr. J. Lewis May, author of George Eliot: a Study (Cassell, 1930), and it was he who proposed the toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot. There were toasts to "Kindred Societies", to "Warwickshire Literature", to "The Chairman", to "The Fellowship", "The President" (Miss Haldane was unable to be present), "The Borough of Nuneaton" and "The Visitors". Each toast had a speech of response, so it is clear that, in those early days, people were happy to sit and listen to speeches for quite a long time. There were no less than 14 during the evening! They also enjoyed an excellent meal. There was soup, then boiled halibut with lobster sauce, veal cutlets milanaise, roast duck with apple sauce, baked and boiled potatoes and Brussels sprouts, ginger pudding and custard or Coupe Jacques, cheese, celery and biscuits followed by coffee. And all for 10/- (50p) with the annual membership thrown in!

A Birmingham Gazette photograph of a part of the dining room shows that the company must have been a large one. It is an evocative photograph showing potted palms, stiff collars, 'Marcel waves' and 'ear phones', the last two being ladies' hairstyles which are unlikely to be remembered by anyone under 60.

Mr. Cross must have gone home that night feeling very well satisfied by the success of the "christening" of his new baby. Earlier in the year he had described himself in the Nuneaton Chronicle as "one engaged for so many years in the apparently sterile task of trying to arouse local enthusiasm in the work of George Eliot". At long last, his faith had been vindicated, and a certain amount of local enthusiasm had been demonstrated.

Now sixty years later, the Fellowship is thriving. It survived a number of years when interest was not very pronounced, even locally, and it survived the six years of war when such societies were temporarily disbanded. Now it has over 400 members in more than twenty different countries around the world. Local support has never been greater and the enthusiasm of the members is constant. A.F. Cross, its founder, would have been delighted to know that his efforts were not in vain.