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ANNUAL REPORT 1989

1989 has been another full, rewarding and successful year for the Fellowship. The work involved in running the Fellowship on a day to day basis has much increased over the years and this in itself must be a measure of our growth and success for, surely, success breeds more work - and that is as it should be.

At the Annual General Meeting in March, which began our year, three of the four officers were re-elected. John Bunn succeeded Brenda Evans as treasurer - Brenda had been bowed down by school work during her period of office, but the burden of holding our purse strings has been successfully shouldered by John, and Brenda was co-opted to the Council and continues to serve us well and enthusiastically.

In April Gabriel Woolf made his twentieth visit to Warwickshire with his ever popular recital. We chose his title - 'With Great Pleasure' - so that the programme could be chosen by him in exactly that way. After working for and with us for twenty years we felt he should be given a free rein in his selection, knowing that his beloved George Eliot would feature largely - as she did. We are immensely grateful to Gabriel for his constant support, his gift of interpretation, and his friendship, as well as an annual way of refilling our coffers. For the first time for some years we had more than a full house at Nuneaton and this was particularly pleasing.

Our good friends, The Parlour Performers, led by our very supportive President, Jonathan Ouvry, and his wife Marjorie, came to present another of their wonderfully entertaining programmes in May. This concert raised a substantial sum and enabled us to order the third and final plaque for the plinth of the George Eliot statue. As well as thoroughly enjoying their visit, the Parlour Performers helped us to reach the finale of one of our largest projects.

The Nuneaton Wreath-laying took place on June 18th with Beryl Kerby, Chairman of the Nuneaton Society, as the principal guest. The following Saturday we went to Westminster Abbey for the annual Wreath-laying there and in Poet's Corner our Guest of Honour was Rosemary Ashton.

In September we resurrected an old tradition - one which I felt very doubtful about, as I considered we had rather done it to death! But how wrong I was, for the tour of the George Eliot Country which I led and the visit to Arbury Hall which Bill and I guided were a great success and very well supported. The public were invited and we enrolled a few new members.

Our very successful Study Group has completed two series of reading all George Eliot's novels, but none of the Group's members wanted to stop, so we are now reading novels by other authors and comparing them with similar ones by George Eliot. We began this third series of meetings with 'Far From the Madding Crowd' by Thomas Hardy and compared it with 'Adam Bede', led in our discussion by Graham Handley. We are also meeting in members' homes and this has added a great deal to the warmth of the occasion - and the comfort! We are most grateful for this generous hospitality.

The George Eliot Birthday Luncheon on November 19th had as its Guest of Honour Gabriel Woolf and this was another occasion when we could thank him for twenty years of collaboration with us. We presented him with a miniature of the bust of George Eliot which he had unveiled in the George Eliot Hospital some years earlier. Gabriel was a bit under the weather on this occasion as he had a bad throat and was clearly worried about his voice lasting, but it was strong enough to give an excellent Toast to the Immortal Memory, a precis of which appears in this Review. The following day he spoke to the West Midlands Federation of Women's Institutes at a luncheon at Castle Bromwich. I was invited to accompany him and it was fascinating to hear him introducing George Eliot in his own inimitable way to a large gathering of ladies who clearly knew little about the author but were perceptibly warming to this story of her life, illustrated by many of her own words. Quite a few new readers there, I am sure!

November 19th marked the beginning of the Victorian George Eliot Festival organised by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and it was to be a very busy and successful week. There were some events which did not include George Eliot, but most of them did, with the greatest emphasis being on November 22nd when, to mark the 170th anniversary of her birth, a wreath was placed at the George Eliot statue by Margaret Wolfitt. We also saw, for the first time, the final plaque

which lists George Eliot's novels. Much deliberation had gone on by a sub-committee of the Fellowship Council about the content of the list of her works but it was decided that we could only list the novels; there would simply not be room to include the essays, for instance, or the poems etc.

Before the Wreath-laying at mid-day a party of Officers and Council members had been to the Town Hall to have coffee with the Mayor and to present to the Civic Collection in the Mayor's Parlour a miniature of the statue. This was gratefully accepted by the Mayor and is now on display to the many civic visitors to the Parlour.

During the evening of the Birthday we went to Arbury Hall where, in the unique and splendid setting of the Saloon, Margaret Wolfit presented her biographical programme about the novelist. Looking uncannily like her subject in make-up and Victorian dress, she held her audience enthralled as we heard about the life which had begun so near to where we were gathered, and it all seemed so much more emotive in that wonderful setting. Never had George Eliot's 'petrified lacework' (Mr. Gilfil's Love Story) looked more striking, lit from within and standing out against the dark night outside the beautiful bow window. Before the performance, Lord and Lady Daventry welcomed our guests in the drawing room where a huge log fire burned, and afterwards we all had a buffet supper in the dining room. We are most grateful to Lord and Lady Daventry for letting us celebrate the anniversary in their home; it was a very successful and memorable evening.

The following day Gabriel Woolf was back with us again to join Atherstone Choral Society and the North Warwickshire Concert Band in a Celebration of George Eliot in Words and Music at Bedworth Civic Hall. This was another splendid occasion and we were gratified to see many familiar faces amongst the very large audience as well as a vast number of unfamiliar ones. We eavesdropped on many conversations during the interval and were delighted to hear how people were enjoying this introduction to George Eliot's life and her love of music and how they appreciated the way in which Gabriel was telling the story. No lecture this, but a warm and loving comment on a lady whose work and words he spreads around the world.

There were three lovely chamber music concerts, one in each of the churches George Eliot knew well and wrote about in 'Scenes of Clerical Life' - 'Milby', 'Shepperton' and 'Knebley'. The only criticism of these was that the music was interrupted for readings by an actor who declaimed George Eliot's words but clearly failed to understand them - or has Gabriel thoroughly spoiled us all with his far superior and much more sensitive approach?

The Victorian George Eliot Festival concluded with the Memorial Lecture in the Town Hall, delivered by Lord Briggs and entitled 'Novelists and Things: George Eliot in a Victorian Perspective'. This was an interesting lecture and was very well supported. With the massive publicity of the Festival, people had come from many parts of the country to attend and we had a full house, although, fortunately, some of the ticket holders failed to arrive and we were able to accommodate, at the last minute, a number of people without tickets, some of whom had travelled from London in the hope of getting in! Would that all Memorial Lectures were as well attended!

The Festival included Victorian Schooldays in Chilvers Coton Centre (the old Free School building recently saved from demolition and now in process of restoration), an exhibition of George Eliot memorabilia in Nuneaton Library (this in place of the Museum which is closed and undergoing massive refurbishment and extension) and, would you believe, a visit from Her Majesty Queen Victoria and her eldest son, Edward, Prince of Wales - to be honest, only their look-alikes, of course, but I nevertheless found it a trifle disconcerting to be introduced to the Queen and Empress; does one curtsy to a convincing look-alike or merely shake an actress by the hand? I'm still uncertain.

Before leaving the Festival, acknowledgement must be made to the tremendous amount of work put in to it by the Borough Council's Forward Planning and Development Officer, Nigel Smith. Nigel worked so hard on all angles of the Festival but his work on the George Eliot part of it deserves immense praise. To include the novelist in the Festival could have been done by merely scratching the surface of her life and work, but Nigel did so much more than this. He read the Haight Biography, he spent many of his lunch hours in the library reading George Eliot's letters and he read 'Scenes of Clerical Life'; his integrity has to be acknowledged, as well as our pleasure in the fact

that, while doing all this research, George Eliot reached out and hooked him just as she has done for so many more of us. Nigel was, therefore, particularly pleased when we made him an honorary Life Member of the Fellowship to show our appreciation of all he had done to encourage Nuneaton to celebrate so faithfully their famous daughter.

Work was completed during the year on the Evans family tomb in Chilvers Coton Churchyard. The slate tablet commemorating Robert Evans which had been damaged during the war and inexpertly repaired was replaced by an exact replica. It was an expensive project but well worth doing and we were helped financially by Chilvers Coton Church and, generously, by several members of the Evans family.

At the beginning of the year an appeal was made to our many life members for donations to help our funds. As we pointed out, many of them had paid a very small subscription many years ago, long before inflation had made the rate totally unrealistic and they were now being heavily subsidised out of Fellowship funds. The members responded magnificently and we were most grateful to them for their understanding and their help.

George Eliot's grave in Highgate Cemetery, refurbished and replanted by Dr. Beryl Gray, Vice Chairman of the London Branch, flowered very prettily during the spring and early summer and London members were urged to go and see it while it was looking its best. We are very grateful to Dr. Gray for all her work on the grave.

George Eliot Country, our booklet on the places in and around Nuneaton known and written about in the novels by George Eliot was rewritten for an up-to-date edition which was published during the year. It is selling well.

A new bookmark was produced in leather also during 1989, a picture of the statue replacing that of George Eliot's head in the original version. It, too, is selling well. Our other souvenirs, the teatowels and mugs, continue to sell, albeit slowly, and are held as tourist souvenirs by a small number of shops in the borough.

Pupils at Nicholas Chamberlaine School in Bedworth are working on the display cases for our books bearing the names of those who contributed to the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone and to the statue, and it is hoped that they may be completed for the reopening of Nuneaton Museum later in the year. They are being made from oak from the Arbury estate which was originally used in the George Eliot alcove in the old Gulson Library in Coventry.

Two books which we had awaited impatiently were published during the year. Beryl Gray's 'George Eliot and Music' was worth waiting for; sadly, Ina Taylor's 'George Eliot: a Woman of Contradictions' proved to be a great disappointment, being based on hearsay, half truths and distortions, but our dismay at the book to whose author the Fellowship had given much assistance during the research period, was voiced in a review in our own Review.

We produced a poster and an attractive membership leaflet in 1989, both long overdue and both now attracting interest and also new members.

Our association with the George Eliot Hospital continues, giving us great pleasure, and in 1989 we provided the lecturer for the annual lecture at the hospital's George Eliot Centre, their own medical education centre. Ruth Harris gave the lecture and it was, as always with Ruth, excellent.

The 20th edition of the Review was published during the summer. It was not quite the 'bumper' issue I had anticipated, partly owing to a long spell of illness on my part, but nevertheless it attracted some very complimentary comments from our members. We are still seeking the perfect printer, although our new format looks much more professional and we are modestly proud for it to be seen in university libraries here and abroad.

We are members of the reformed Alliance of Literary Societies, Bill Adams being our representative on the Alliance committee. At the 1989 AGM, Gabriel Woolf was elected as the first President of the Alliance.

Our 'lady in America', Harriet Williams, who is the contact between the American members and the parent organisation, came to England

in the autumn and the Fellowship Council met her and her friends over lunch at Griff House. We wish we could meet some of our other American members so that they might become faces to us instead of names on an index card.

We are still battling with the Museum in Coventry to try to persuade them to reinstate their small display which once marked George Eliot's important association with the city. Dr. Beryl Gray has also joined the attack but, sadly, we are met with apathy every step of the way. The Museum's attitude to their small collection, indeed to George Eliot herself, is nothing short of a disgrace.

John Bunn continues to represent us on the Chilvers Coton Centre Trust so we get up-to-date reports on the progress of the Centre to which the Fellowship made a donation at the end of 1989. Similarly, Kathleen Porter and I represent the Fellowship at the Borough Council's Tourism Working Party meetings, all of which are interesting and encouraging.

The Fellowship Council met nine times during the year and most members attended every meeting. They are very busy meetings and seem to get busier as we deal with the ever increasing work-load of the expanding Fellowship. I am most grateful to those Council members who help me so enthusiastically and so readily. It is a good Council which works hard and is aware of its responsibility to a membership in 20 different countries.

Our membership increased in 1989. We consistently hover around the 400 mark and last year we passed it by 3. We had 239 life members and 164 annual members. If we were to grow much bigger I fear we would lose the personal touch that our members seem to value. We want to grow, of course, but not so much that we begin to resemble a business rather than a Fellowship.

Finally, my Annual report would be incomplete without the grateful thanks I like to include to all those who have helped and served the Fellowship during the year. The Council have been thanked already, but I must add some more to the treasurer whose efficiency makes life easier for me, to Graham Handley, my co-editor on the Review, who deals so competently with the academic papers submitted and guides

me in other ways during the year, to the Library and Museum who are so supportive to our work, to the Borough Council who now work with us so closely and supportively, to Lord Daventry, our much respected Patron for his continuing interest, to our splendid and generous President, Jonathan Ouvry, and, last but not least, to my husband, Bill Adams, our Chairman, without whose help and support I don't think I could do this job!

KATHLEEN ADAMS
March 1990

DESIGN ON FRONT COVER:

To mark the Diamond Jubilee of the George Eliot Fellowship the design by Jenny Quy on the front cover was submitted to Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council Parks Department and is to be executed in flowers in a public flower bed in Coton Road, Nuneaton during the summer of 1990.

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Contributions are invited for the 1991 issue. They may be on any subject relating to George Eliot's work, life, family or friends. They should be up to 1500 words in length and it is preferred that footnotes are used only sparingly. Contributions must be typed (double spacing) and should reach the Editors not later than February 28th 1991.

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