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Wreath-Laying in The George Eliot Memorial Gardens, Nuneaton on June 17th 1990

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**WREATH-LAYING IN THE
GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDENS, NUNEATON
on June 17th 1990**

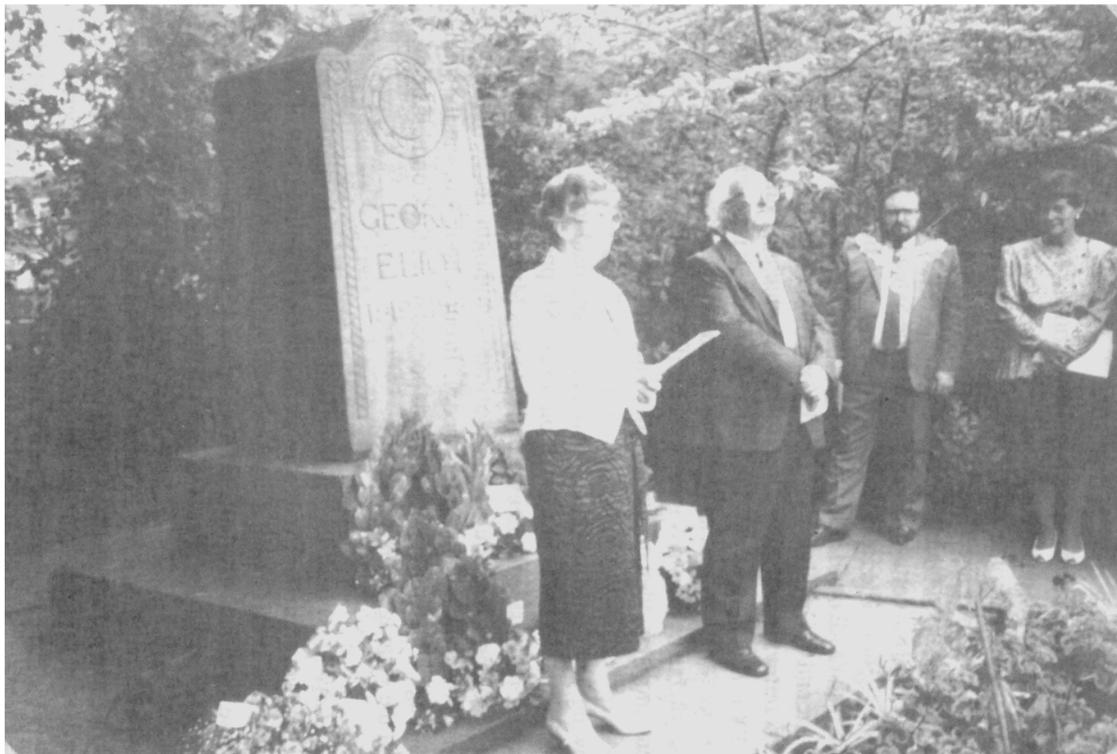
***WHEN THE GUEST OF HONOUR WAS MRS. HILDA GUNN,
A PAST VICE-CHAIRMAN OF THE FELLOWSHIP.***

Mrs. Gunn laid the Fellowship's wreath and gave the following address:

I count it a great honour to be here to pay tribute to George Eliot and especially as it is shortly to be the Diamond Jubilee of the Fellowship, founded by the late Francis Cross in 1930.

I cannot claim to be the oldest member, either in years or in length of membership, but my first introduction to George Eliot the novelist goes back even more than sixty years. As a jubilee is not only a time of rejoicing but of looking back, I would like to share with you some of my recollections.

In October 1927 I began to attend Chilvers Coton Church of England School for girls, formerly known as the Free School and now the headquarters of the Nuneaton Society. There I had the good fortune to be taught by two ladies who were interested in literature in general but George Eliot in particular. One was the headmistress, Miss Florence Towe, and the other Miss Dorothy Greenwood who later married the youngest son of Canon Dodds, Vicar of Chilvers Coton. She was later the authoress of the first booklet about the George Eliot Countryside. Miss Towe read to us the story of Maggie and Tom from *The Mill on the Floss*. She had an entertaining way of reading and I listened with rapt attention. So much so that I went home and looked in our bookcase and there I found *The Mill on the Floss*. There was also *Silas Marner*, *Adam Bede*, *Scenes of Clerical Life* with pictures, and *Romola*. It was with a sense of one upmanship that I told Miss Towe and the rest of the class that we had *The Mill on the Floss* at home and I had been reading it. I fancied that she was impressed. Miss Towe offered to take anyone who was interested to see the house where George Eliot had lived. About five of us set out to walk through Griff Hollows. There were rocks on one side and overhanging trees on the other and even a handrail on the footpath. It was so steep that the narrow road was paved with stone setts. In the bottom of Griff Hollows was the canal, lined on both sides with trees on the arm which joined the Coventry Canal, Miss Towe told us that this was Red Deep, the meeting place of Maggie with Philip Wakem. We passed the end of Gipsy Lane where Maggie had



Hilda Gunn with Chairman Bill Adams at the Wreath-laying in the George Eliot Memorial Gardens, Nuneaton. June 17th. 1990

run away to the gipsies and we could see a couple of caravans on the grass verge, the horses tethered nearby.

At Griff House we inspected the deep and mysterious Round Pond, then to view the house, but only from the outside, of course. We saw the windows of the attic where Maggie went when overcome with misery. The house was still a farm, the farmer living opposite in Griff Lane. I remember seeing a large pan of cream in the dairy. We walked in the garden which, Miss Towe said, George Eliot had described in her novels and we saw the cottage which had been the dame school attended for a short time by George Eliot. The following Sunday, dressed in our Sunday best, my father took us to see 'the Mill on the Floss' - along Hilltop, down Griff Hollows, past Griff House. At the end of Griff Lane was South Lodge and the entrance to Arbury. Inside Arbury Park our way was alongside a little canal which my father said went all the way to Oxford. At length we saw the Mill on the Floss. It is generally supposed now that this is not the building George Eliot described and that the novel was set in Gainsborough, but no-one in Nuneaton in the 1920's would have believed that. We saw the enormous wooden mill wheel, even then silent and moss-covered.

The following year, in Miss Greenwood's class, she read to us *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Everything there was in front of our eyes. Shepperton Church and vicarage were opposite, just inside the churchyard gate was Millie Barton's grave. Rumour had it that, if you ran round the grave three times at midnight, the devil would appear but I knew no-one who had tested this theory. In our school, too, was the little upper window through which the school-mistress peeped to see the Countess being driven away from the vicarage (*Amos Barton*).

Mr. Gilfil's Love Story described Arbury Hall but, in those days, it was not open to the public. However, in our front room we had two oil paintings, one of Arbury Hall and the other of Coton Church so I knew what Arbury Hall looked like. Later the Conservative Association had a rally there and bus loads of people went - more to see the sights than hear the speakers.

We studied George Eliot's life in Miss Greenwood's class, her early life in great detail. We went to see her school, The Elms, in Vicarage Street, to inspect the Evans family graves and to see the outside staircase to the gallery at 'Shepperton' church. One afternoon a girl came running into school clutching a half-crown, given to her by some Americans in search of the Evans grave. She was duly rewarded in spite of there being no Mary Ann buried there. For some days afterwards my friend and I took

to loitering in the lane, waiting for some rich Americans to waylay us, but, alas, none appeared.

Of George Eliot's life in London we were told very little apart from the fact that she became the editor of the Westminster Review, wrote her novels and became Mrs. Cross.

In 1930 I left Coton School to attend Nuneaton High School for Girls, and although we were made familiar with Mrs. Gaskell, Jane Austen and the Brontes, George Eliot was never mentioned. However, by the time I had reached the Fifth Form I had read all the George Eliot novels we had at home, except *Romola*. When we were asked to write a review of a novel I seized on *The Mill on the Floss*. Asked to give my idea of the plot, I wrote a summary of the novel covering 29 sides in my exercise book.

I count myself extremely fortunate to have known so many buildings and places in Nuneaton which George Eliot would have known, including the College of the Poor, Caldwell Hall, the flour mill, the Newdigate Arms, the thatched tudor cottages by Coton Churchyard gate and Dempster House. All these have been swept away in the path of progress.

I make no apology for a very personal and simple tribute to George Eliot and I am proud to lay the Fellowship wreath to honour our celebrated townswoman and novelist.

The quotation for the Fellowship wreath read:

I have no antagonism towards any religious belief, but a strong outflow of sympathy if there were not reasons against my following such an inclination, I should go to church or chapel constantly for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies

from a letter George Eliot wrote to John Cross, 1873.