

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1996

Late-Victorian Plans for a George Eliot Memorial Library

Kathleen Adams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Adams, Kathleen, "Late-Victorian Plans for a George Eliot Memorial Library" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 285.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/285>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

LATE-VICTORIAN PLANS FOR A GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LIBRARY

by Kathleen Adams

On 5 March 1896 a paragraph appeared in the *Daily News* from a correspondent who wrote:

Will you allow me through your columns to appeal to the countless admirers of one of England's greatest teachers and of the world's most perfect artists? That portion of 'Leafy Warwickshire' in the midst of which little Marian Evans drew her first inspiration, literally beneath some of the very oaks which formed part of the classic Forest of Arden, has of late years proved to be a teeming storehouse of mineral wealth, and a large and vastly increasing industrial population at the present moment is solely dependent for its supply of public literature upon a few mouldy books, shockingly housed in a small tenement somewhat approximating to a three-and-sixpenny cottage. Almost every yard of Milby (Nuneaton), Shepperton (Chilvers Coton), Paddiford (Stockingford), Cheverel Chaise [sic] (Arbury) is classic ground for the scores of English and American pilgrims who annually visit the neighbourhood to view the novelist's birthplace (South Farm), the Red Lion (Bull Hotel) ... and those other interesting spots referred to in the writer's earliest success, 'Scenes of Clerical Life' A really fitting memorial is proposed in the shape of a much needed public library to correspond, in a humbler fashion, with the Memorial Theatre ... [at] Stratford on Avon. This scheme has been heartily adopted by the newly elected Urban Council ... and alternative plans for a suitable building are under consideration.

The piece went on to appeal for funds from George Eliot's admirers to be sent to the Clerk to the Council and to Mr A. F. Cross, editor of the *Nuneaton Observer* and, thirty-four years later, the founder of the George Eliot Fellowship.

One of those who saw the appeal was George Eliot's widower, John Cross, and he wrote to her nephew, Canon Frederic Evans at Bedworth Rectory three days later:

Queen Anne's Mansions, St. James's Park, S.W.

My dear Evans,

It is a long time since I have seen or heard anything of you. My particular object in writing to you today is to ask if you know anything about the promoters of the proposal in the paragraph enclosed from the *Daily News* of the 5th. inst? It is curious that one of them bears my name, Mr A. F. Cross of the *Nuneaton Observer*. I never however heard of him before but no doubt you living in the neighbourhood will know, or will easily be able to

find out, all about him I daresay the affair is quite genuine but one has to be a little on one's guard against self advertising people – especially when they are connected with a local press!

I hope ... that you and Mrs Evans are enjoying life at your charming Rectory of Bedworth of which I have always a most pleasant recollection. The years slip away – I suppose it must be 15 years since I was there.

Canon Evans wrote back the following day (clearly the post was more reliable in those far off days) to confirm that the appeal was going ahead but that 'a poor affair would be worse than nothing'. Cross wrote again to ask:

Do you think that what you know of Nuneaton and the people connected with the scheme that a library there will be a good kind of memorial? If further information induces you to think well of it I shall be very ready to co-operate when the Council has come to a definite settlement about the scheme.

Cross's queries rather give the impression that a library in Nuneaton might be like casting pearls before swine!

The appeal had gone out to daily papers, local papers and to fifty newspapers in the USA. The *New York Recorder* reported:

The Warwickshire admirers of the genius of George Eliot are endeavouring to establish in Nuneaton a 'George Eliot Free Library' as a permanent and appropriate memorial of the greatest woman novelist of the century, whose genius soars like a snow-capped mountain over the twopenny-half-penny 'hill-toppers' of today, about whose productions so much fuss is made. It is hoped that admirers of George Eliot's works in all parts of the world will help in raising the funds for this projected memorial. Perhaps they will be moved to do so when they learn that at present the only memorial of the brilliant writer in that 'leafy Warwickshire' from which she drew her first inspiration is a steam fire engine which bears her name! The excellent people of Nuneaton no doubt meant well in thus 'honoring' their famous townswoman but the engine is more suggestive of quenching than fanning the fire of praise with which her name must always be associated.

When the library was eventually opened by Mr Francis A. Newdegate MP on 30 June 1899 a very long description of the ceremony was included in the local press but nowhere is George Eliot mentioned. Mr A. F. Cross is not listed amongst the dignitaries present and one wonders whether the proposed appeal for funds for a George Eliot Memorial Library failed. But did the mention of the steam fire engine prick a few local consciences and urge the Urban District Council to open their own Free Library, even if they did not add George Eliot's name to the building?