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ANNUAL REPORT 1995

by Kathleen Adams

I would like to begin this report with something exciting to say but Annual General Meetings, with which our year inevitably begins, are never exciting events. In 1995 it all went smoothly – the only change being the retirement of Kathleen Porter as Vice-Chairman and the appointment of Joan Bunn in her place. After the business meeting John Smith, Curator of Stamford Museum, who had closely followed the filming of the TV *Middlemarch* in the town, showed us his collection of slides and entertained us with an interesting commentary. Middlemarchmania had not quite died.

In March we heard of the death of Dorothy Edmands who, for very many years, had been one of our most supportive and generous members of the Fellowship Council. We continue to miss her very much.

Also in March we were present at the planting of another tree in memory of George Eliot in the George Eliot Memorial Garden and were pleased to see the refurbishment of the garden which placed a stronger emphasis on the memorial itself. The Borough Council's Leisure and Amenities Department do a fine job and, during the summer, created a model of George Eliot in flowers and tiny plants on the platform at Nuneaton's busy railway station. A splendid idea but, sadly, the model's face left a lot to be desired, but perhaps one can't have everything.

June was an exceptionally busy month, beginning with the Nuneaton Wreath-laying in the George Eliot Memorial Garden on 11th. In the past thirty years we have had only a mere handful of wet afternoons for the ceremony – and the 1995 afternoon was one of them. Just as we were about to begin the heavens opened, but we carried on and it was the usual pleasant occasion. Fortunately, the Mercian Consort, who accompany our singing and entertain us with their music before the service, were under a large tree. Our Guest of Honour in 1995 was Richard Thompson, estate manager at Arbury and, therefore, a natural successor to George Eliot's father, about whom he spoke. Tea was served afterwards to our guests at Nuneaton Museum.

Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks presented 'The Female Shakespeare, So To Speak' at Nuneaton Town Hall and Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, on 13th. and 14th. of June. We had a full house at Nuneaton and a very good audience at Warwick Arts and were delighted with the two performances, the first half with plenty of humour and the second more poignant as it dealt with the deaths of G. H. Lewes and of George Eliot herself. We are very grateful for all the assistance we receive from Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council for the performance there, and for the generosity of our many sponsors who make the Warwick Arts evening possible. Rosalind Shanks has now worked, most successfully, with Gabriel Woolf for many years and to show our appreciation of her part in these lovely annual events the Fellowship Council made her an honorary Life Member.

We were expecting Robert Hardy as our principal guest at Westminster Abbey on 17 June but filming prevented him from being with us. At the last moment Rosalind Shanks stood in for him and gave a most attractive address. We were so grateful to her for so generously coming to our help. Jonathan Ouvry, Tenniel Evans and Beryl Gray read at the ceremony.

Several members attended the National Portrait Gallery on 9 July to hear a delightful recital by Marjorie Bruce (Marjorie Ouvry, wife of our President) entitled 'George Eliot and Song'. Accompanied by Patricia Williams, Marjorie sang songs loved by George Eliot and also included six of the Charles Villiers Stanford songs from George Eliot's 'The Spanish Gypsy'.

From 14-16 July we had a most successful conference at the University of Warwick in Coventry. Entitled 'George Eliot and Europe', it had been organized by Dr John Rignall with his usual efficiency and it attracted some excellent speakers from the UK, the USA, Australia and Germany. Arden House, the university's very attractive conference centre was the venue and, as at the last conference, the food was superb. The Fellowship organized and financed a tour of the George Eliot Country on the Saturday afternoon and this was much enjoyed by all those taking part. During the conference we used, for the first time, a lovely Japanese oak lectern which we had commissioned from a local craftsman in memory of Dorothy Edmands. Incorporated in the lectern was a piece of Arbury oak which came from the panelling in the George Eliot alcove in Coventry's one-time Gulson Library.

During the year we received from the estate of a late member a print of a most attractive chalk drawing of George Eliot. It is an earlier study for the later and famous Frederic Burton portrait of 1865 and is one of the most appealing pictures we have of her. Every attempt to discover the whereabouts of the original study have so far failed.

Our annual literary outing was to Stamford (more TV Middlemarch!) and to Burghley House, both popular venues enjoyed by all who went.

Dr John Rignall delivered the George Eliot Memorial Lecture in October, taking as his subject 'George Eliot and the Furniture of the House of Fiction', a most unusual subject. Many of us had not previously considered how different writers wrote about the familiar objects which play their part in the lives of all of us, and especially of the characters in their novels.

The George Eliot Birthday Luncheon had as its Guest of Honour Dr Beryl Gray who gave us a most interesting Toast to the Immortal Memory. The meal on that occasion was very good but St George's Hall proved to be even more of a problem in 1995 than it had been in 1994. We shall not be using it again. However, the occasion had its pluses as there was a small party at the lunch from the South of England Branch and it was lovely to have them with us. Sadly, our President, Jonathan Ouvry, was ill and he and his wife were unable to attend. We missed them both but the Chairman took over and presided with his usual aplomb.

The Study Group, now made up fairly regularly of 24 members, met three times during the year, firstly with Dr John Rignall who led us in a discussion on Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*, then Ruth Harris on Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and, finally, John again with M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. These Study Group sessions are very popular and happy occasions. Each time two members provide coffee and biscuits and the discussion goes back and forth with vigour.

Events organized in London during the year proved disappointing in attendance. Professor Raymond Chapman gave a lecture 'So the World Gets On' at Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute in June but the small audience contained very few Fellowship members. A similar lecture there by Dr Derek Miller, planned for October had to be cancelled for lack of support. A lecture at the National Portrait Gallery in December, held by the Gallery itself and delivered by John Cooper, Head of Education there, was more successfully attended and from the reports received it is clear that those who missed it missed a real treasure, for Mr Cooper showed the Gallery's collection of George Eliot portraits and those of her circle.

With so little response to the events which Elizabeth Gundrey had organized it is not surprising that she became very disheartened and by the end of the year she had understandably withdrawn her services as London Events Organizer. Sadly, she is not to renew her membership of the Fellowship. We are most grateful for the work she did on our behalf but it seems to prove conclusively that events in London will not be well supported by members there.

The South of England Branch, however, is quite another story. Small though it is, it is flourishing under the leadership of Margaret Jennings. They have held four Study Groups during the year and launched what they hope will be a series of Literary Lunches. The first was on 11 June when Gabriel Woolf entertained them with his 'George Eliot and Humour'; they could have gone on listening for hours. Some of them attended a lecture at Guildford Institute when one of our members, Dr Röder-Bolton spoke on 'George Eliot in Weimar'. The same group came up to Stratford upon Avon to see the Shared Experience production of *The Mill on the Floss*. This splendidly innovative production was seen by many local members and it received high acclaim.

The Branch celebrated the George Eliot Birthday with a lunch at The Georgian in Haslemere when the Guest of Honour was Professor Rosemary Ashton. We wish them well with future events and hope that some London members who could not attend events in the capital may venture further south and support this small but enthusiastic branch.

The year up here in Warwickshire ended on a very pleasant note as we invited Ruth Harris and Dr John Rignall to be Vice-Presidents. Both accepted with pleasure. Both of them have done so much for George Eliot and the Fellowship and we are delighted to add them to our list of distinguished Vice-Presidents.

This time last year I was bemoaning the fact that the George Eliot items in the Godiva City exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry bore no identification. I can hardly believe that, a year later, and after much prodding by the Fellowship, the situation remains the same.

I also checked back on my report of twenty years ago and found that we were in the early stages of negotiating the Westminster Abbey memorial stone, were celebrating the centenary of the publication of *Daniel Deronda* and congratulating ourselves on a membership figure of only half what we have today. Now we are looking forward to another celebration of *Daniel Deronda* by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks, and also BBC Television. How things have progressed in that twenty year period. Which is a good moment to say that the 1995 membership reached an all time high of 505 with members in about 20 countries around the world.

The 1995 George Eliot Fellowship Prize for a paper on George Eliot's life or works was won by Karen Hottle for 'Thou Shalt Not Read: Maggie's arrested development in *The Mill on the Floss*'.

During the year we have been discussing in Council and negotiating charitable status for the Fellowship. This has meant changing our constitution ready for acceptance by the 1996 AGM and subsequently by the Charity Commissioners. We are particularly grateful to John Bunn who has done most of the donkey work for us and we hope his efforts will eventually help us to be recognized as a charity with all its subsequent advantages.

During 1995 a Class 92 locomotive was built for pulling freight through the Channel Tunnel and it was given the name of George Eliot. Since it is based at Folkestone, we may not see it in the Midlands very often unless it is on its way to Crewe for regular maintenance, but we have been supplied with a few excellent pictures of the locomotive.

Coventry City Council Tourism Department have produced a very good George Eliot Trail leaflet for the city centre and the Fellowship was represented at its launch in April.

During the year we have increased our sales goods by reordering a more attractive tea-towel and also by finding a studio who could reproduce the excellent cassettes of George Eliot readings by Gabriel Woolf.

The twenty-sixth issue of the *George Eliot Review* was published in August to some acclaim. We are most fortunate to have Drs Beryl Gray and John Rignall as joint editors for a periodical which is finding its place well amongst literary magazines and which goes into university libraries in the UK, the USA, Germany, and Poland.

The Fellowship Council met nine times during the year, always in members' houses with generous refreshments. A warm room and good coffee makes a business meeting much more of a pleasure and we are grateful for this hospitality.

The Chairman and Secretary of the Fellowship have, between them, given twenty talks to societies in the Midlands and have conducted, with the help of Anne Pavitt, nine tours of the George Eliot Country. Most of the tours are organized by Rose Selwyn, the Borough Council's Tourism Officer and her enthusiasm and hard work have made an immense difference to the number of people coming to the George Eliot Country each summer. She is so easy to work with and we are very fortunate to have her. Her colleague at the Town Hall, Gordon Mercer, is someone else who deserves our thanks for he is frequently our messenger when goods need taking from the Town Hall to Coventry. Our liaison with Nuneaton Museum continues in a very warm way and we consider ourselves fortunate to have so good a working relationship with the Borough Council, something which I believe is not always achieved by other literary societies.

Bill Adams, our Chairman, took over as acting secretary of the Alliance of Literary Societies during the year. The Alliance had fallen into something of a trough and he is now working hard to rejuvenate it so that it may become what it was always intended to be, an effective rallying point for literary societies around Britain. I may remind you that the Alliance was started by the Fellowship Secretary in 1973 so we are naturally eager that it shall grow successfully once more. Gabriel Woolf is now its President.

Finally, our thanks to Harriet Williams, our representative in the USA, who collects American subscriptions and keeps in touch with American members, to Linda K. Robertson in Arkansas who helps to arrange the annual dinner for members after the MLA Conference in December, to Beryl Gray who cares for George Eliot's grave in Highgate Cemetery and to the members of the Fellowship Council who help in various tasks during the year. But most of all, thanks to the Chairman without whose constant support the level of administration of the Fellowship affairs could not continue. The Treasurer too, has been the most efficient holder of the office we have ever had and our dismay when he announced his forthcoming retirement can be imagined.

The George Eliot Fellowship is a strong ship sailing calmly on international waters – thanks to an excellent crew.