IN MEMORIAM, Bill Adams (1923-2016)

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With the passing of Bill Adams at the age of 92 we have truly reached the end of an era. Bill had a close association with the George Eliot Fellowship for fifty years and only two days before his death on 21 June he had laid a wreath in Nuneaton, as the Fellowship’s guest of honour, and after his speech enjoyed chatting at the museum tea room with guests and members, some of whom he had known for decades.

Bill was in his forties when he drove from Coventry one evening to a meeting of the Fellowship in Nuneaton Library. The group had been founded in 1930 by a local newspaper editor in Nuneaton, the cultured, poetry-writing A. F. Cross. During the war meetings were suspended but there were sparks of life in the 1950s when the Fellowship worked towards creating the Memorial Gardens, held annual dinners and in 1958 invited Barbara Hardy to deliver a lecture in Nuneaton. In 1967 there were fewer than 30 members. The meeting Bill attended was the AGM and he ended the evening as a committee member. Within a year Kathleen had joined Bill, taking over as secretary in 1968, and everything changed.

They proceeded to breathe life into a moribund body and completely changed the way the Fellowship worked; in so doing they helped to strengthen the post-war reassessment of George Eliot initiated by Leavis and cemented by Haight. Indeed, Rosemary Ashton says that Bill and Kathleen ‘have done more than anyone else to promote and foster the reputation of
George Eliot in the last half century.

Bill was born in November 1923. He was very proud of his Coventry roots, which were deep, an ancestor being a printer and publisher historian who knew and exchanged polite insults with Charles Bray. He attended King Henry VIII Grammar School in Coventry and his time there overlapped with Philip Larkin, a year older than Bill, but of whom Bill disapproved – Bill thought Philip a bit of an unsavoury character! He saw service in Europe during the war before taking up the profession of tax officer, where he met, and in 1949 married, Kathleen, six years his junior. When children arrived Kathleen left the tax office but later returned to work as a school secretary. From 1970, early editions of the George Eliot Fellowship Review were compiled, typed and printed on the school office Gestetner machine.

Bill was an assiduous researcher into local history, a keen archaeologist, known and respected by staff in Coventry library and museum services. He was a guide at Coventry cathedral for many years, though he had no pronounced religious views. His initial interest was in the historical aspects of George Eliot’s Coventry years, whilst Kathleen was fascinated by George Eliot’s unconventional life long before she came to love her novels.

For forty years Kathleen was secretary. It was she who contacted the press, and sometime harangued them; it was her signature at the end of so many letters, Newsletters and documents; but for over twenty of those years Bill was chairman, and for all forty he was a constant encouragement and support to her, from helping with research, visiting George Eliot sites, travelling the country in search of anything George Eliot related, driving her to the hundreds of venues where she gave her concise and polished lectures on George Eliot. They were a completely devoted couple for 67 years and in recent years Bill has looked after his bedbound Kathleen with love and gentle consideration. As I write this I am reminded of the way G. H. Lewes put his own life on hold at times for the woman he loved so deeply.

The achievements of Bill and Kathleen were extraordinary. They very quickly made their mark with a series of ambitious celebrations in 1969 to celebrate the 150th anniversary. We are mindful of what they did as we contemplate the 200th anniversary in 2019. On so many occasions we come up with what seems like a new and interesting approach, only to discover that Kathleen and Bill did something similar twenty, thirty or forty years ago!

They were both modest, completely unshowy, but they achieved wonders. It occurred to them after 1969 that there ought to be an umbrella group for literary societies. Bill wrote a letter to The Times and by 1973 they were setting up and running The Alliance of Literary Societies which now has 125 member societies.

After a century it was Bill and Kathleen who put in motion the scheme to have a memorial to George Eliot in Westminster Abbey. The money was raised, mason employed, quotations chosen and the unveiling was by the entirely appropriate Gordon Haight in 1980 and the Fellowship has laid wreaths there ever since.

Where sixty years earlier A. F. Cross had signally failed to raise either money or enthusiasm in Nuneaton for a statue, Bill and Kathleen just decided to do it. John Letts agreed to produce the sculpture, an appeal was launched and it was unveiled in March 1986 by our president, then as now, Jonathan Ouvry.

A regular pattern of events was established, since enlarged, but still adhered to as a framework – the Annual Lecture, Birthday Luncheon, Nuneaton wreath-laying, annual readings by Gabriel Woolf, Margaret Wolfit and Rosalind Shanks. The Review became more sophisticated as Graham Handley became joint editor, succeeded eventually by Beryl Gray and
John Rignall. An essay prize was established and in all these events Bill was a key person. Kathleen acknowledged him every year in her annual report with sentences like ‘Not least my husband without whose support…’ or ‘without the help of the Chairman I could not….he has sometimes described himself as the Denis Thatcher of the GEF!’

That is to underestimate Bill. He was as responsible for what happened as Kathleen was, and he was a serious man, concerned for accuracy and truth, and for the good name of the Fellowship. In many ways this was their greatest achievement. They were able to go about the business of popularizing George Eliot, especially in the Midlands, whilst at the same time keeping the respect and admiration of a vast range of academic scholars. It is a difficult line to maintain but they managed it, and perhaps taught their successors to manage it too.

George Eliot threw a lifeline to them at a time during these busy years before they retired when their daughter died. A tragedy for any family, but they both said in later years that having to continue with the Fellowship business helped them to survive that difficult and painful time. Bill especially would have been a constant support, a rock, for Kathleen, and for William, their son.

They were always willing to put themselves out for anyone with a query to pursue, or a book to write. It is staggering how many prefaces, introductions or acknowledgements in books on George Eliot published between 1970 and 2005 (and they are legion) have a sentence or two thanking Bill and Kathleen for their help, especially in showing writers around the George Eliot sites in Coventry, Nuneaton and North Warwickshire.

In conversation with Bill in later years, he would say, as would Kathleen, that George Eliot had changed their lives; that they had met so many interesting people through her and that they had much to thank her for. What they didn’t say, and probably didn’t realize, was that the two of them changed our lives too. Their love for each other, their love for their family and their love for George Eliot sustained them throughout a long marriage. It was somehow entirely appropriate that Bill’s last act, apart from tending to Kathleen’s needs when he got home that night, was to have laid the wreath to George Eliot on behalf of the Fellowship, surrounded by members and friends who loved and respected him. It was also appropriate that the quotation on the chaplet laid by Bill was from Felix Holt, chapter 27:

‘So our lives glide on: the river ends we don’t know where, and the sea begins, and then there is no more jumping ashore.’

John Burton