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Annual Report 1999

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ANNUAL REPORT 1999
by Kathleen Adams

During 1999 we were unusually busy in planning the extra events to take place in 2000. Before I began this report I had spent a few weeks updating the Story of the George Eliot Fellowship which had been published for our fiftieth anniversary in 1980 and now needed a further 20 busy years added. So, as I began the report of activities for 1999 I had many other years buzzing around in my head. However, 1999 is now clear of those seventy years, and I am happy to begin with the news that 1999 was another profitable year for the Fellowship. Its business was emphasized for me when comparing it to the happenings in the early days of the Fellowship, when a small number of enthusiasts were struggling to keep afloat and to engender a glimmer of interest in George Eliot. That glimmer burst into flames many years ago and, nationally and internationally at least, shows no signs of going out. I wish could feel as confident about the local embers.

We began the year with an uneventful Annual General Meeting which was followed by an interesting and illuminating talk by Peter Lawrence, a local composer, about his ‘George Eliot Miniatures’, four delightful pieces which we hope to hear again in 2000.

Gabriel Woolf made his thirtieth visit to Warwickshire and, with Rosalind Shanks, presented ‘A Celebration of George Eliot’ at Nuneaton and Warwick Arts Centre. There was a second...

In August 1999 the Fellowship Council financed the pump of this waterfall at the Mary Ann Evans Hospice in Nuneaton to mark the Golden Weddings of the Chairman and Secretary of the Fellowship and of Council member Ted Bates and his wife Phyllis, both couples shown on the left of the photograph. Also included, left to right, are Michael Harris, Anne Pavitt (Vice Chairman), Joan Bunn, Ruth Harris (Vice President) and Daphne Paton.
celebration involved as this was a special anniversary for the actor, much of whose professional life has been bound up with George Eliot and whose sensitive interpretation of her work has enriched our annual diary since 1969. To show our appreciation of his work with us, we presented him with a copy of the recently published *Journals of George Eliot*, edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston. Despite the special nature of this performance bookings were worryingly low so I had to write again to local members and this second letter produced a very good response. Warwick Arts Centre theatre audience was, however, disappointing; even ticket holders failed to turn up. We were very glad that, because of rising costs there, we had already decided not to present the programme there again. The Chairman and I spent some time in the following months inspecting smaller theatres in south Warwickshire, not too far away from Warwick University, but found none suitable until we tried the refurbished Assembly Rooms in the Royal Pump Rooms at Leamington. They are so delightfully decorated that we had no hesitation in booking there – at several hundred pounds less than Warwick Arts!

The George Eliot Day in May on *Silas Marner* and *Adam Bede* was very successful. Held in Nuneaton Town Hall we had much more space and a higher attendance. Papers were delivered by Ruth Harris, Vivienne Wood and Tony van den Brock and we showed the BBC TV film of *Silas Marner* to conclude the day.

Colonel Christopher Hendy, Administrator at Arbury Hall (George Eliot’s ‘Cheverel Manor’ in *Scenes of Clerical Life*) was our Guest of Honour at the Nuneaton wreath-laying in June and we had, as always, the Mercian Consort to play for us before, during, and after the service.

On 23 June we had our first mid-week wreath-laying in Westminster Abbey. Changes at Westminster Abbey since the arrival of Dean Wesley Carr meant that the only time available to us on a Saturday was after the four o’clock Evensong, thus cutting very short the time for members to shop or attend a theatre matinee during the afternoon. We were seriously concerned about the viability of a coach on a weekday but, with the help of friends, we managed to fill the coach. To our surprise, despite the day, we had the largest congregation yet in the Abbey since the unveiling of the stone in 1980. Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was our Guest of Honour and he spoke most warmly about George Eliot, a very favourite author of his. For the first time we had the use of the beautiful Jerusalem Chamber in the Abbey where we could give tea to our distinguished guests. This facility may be available for a limited number of members to attend the pre-wreath-laying tea in 2000.

The Fellowship made a donation of £100 to the appeal for funds for the Bedworth Parsonage Project and a similar amount was given to the Mary Ann Evans Hospice to mark the Golden Weddings of Kathleen and Bill Adams and also Phyllis and Ted Bates. This sum was used to provide the machinery to drive a small waterfall in the pretty gardens at the hospice.

Donations to the Millennium Projects Appeal continued to come in during the year including a most generous one of £1500 from our branch in Japan. Since then the Japanese members have sent a further £500.

A George Eliot Summer School took place at Coventry University in September. Jointly organized by the University, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and the Fellowship, it
was very successful although with a small attendance. Initiated by the University’s Learning in Later Life (known as Lille), it would have been better supported by earlier publicity but was very well received by those who attended. Papers was delivered by myself, Vivienne Wood, John Rignall and Sally Poulson. There was friendly company and very good food!

The George Eliot Memorial Lecture was delivered in October by Dr Josie Billington and this appears in other pages of the *Review*. At the Birthday Luncheon in November, Dr Kathryn Hughes proposed the Toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot. Dr Hughes is the author of a recent biography of George Eliot. Again, for the luncheon, we used the Raveloe Restaurant at the George Eliot Hospital; at last, in a town not famed for its restaurants, we had found a venue which suits us well and where we are made to feel welcome – with good service and good food.

During the year we were offered a letter from George Eliot to the Revd Francis Watts at the time of her greatest religious doubts. Thanks to a generous anonymous donation we were able to purchase this for £450, and we presented it to Nuneaton Museum.

We have been battling with the National Portrait Gallery for a long time about the incorrect labelling of the D’Albert Durade portrait of George Eliot in their nineteenth-century gallery. She is described as being deeply evangelical (which description relates only to her youth) and as having an American husband in John Cross. They promise to change it – but don’t. The battle continues.

Three members stoically held a stall at Coventry’s Lives and Times Day on 5 June. These occasions never seem worth the effort involved by a small number of volunteers and yet we feel we ought to be ‘showing the flag’ in these public displays.

The George Eliot Fellowship Prize was not awarded because only one entry was received. This may have resulted because a second mailing to all UK university English departments did not go out owing a staff problem at Warwick University.

We are still planning to diversify our souvenirs to attract more visitors to the George Eliot Country, hoping to interest more local shopkeepers whose apathy so far has not helped tourism in the borough. The extra items did not materialize in 1999 but we hope they will be available for the 2000 season.

A video of George Eliot’s life has been in course of production by a private film company for some time. Complete except for necessary amendments, a copy was seen by two separate groups from the Fellowship Council. While much of the filming was nicely done, there were some glaring errors and misconceptions which we pointed out to the company and which we hope will be corrected for the final production. It was very interesting to find that the criticisms levelled at the film were almost identical from both groups.

Another cause for concern was the production of the Nuneaton Official Guide published by the Borough Council. Many sections were headed ‘George Eliot Country’ but not one reference was made throughout the Guide to the lady herself or her local associations. A letter of protest was sent to the Town Hall and a sincere apology received. The Guide had been produced in a great hurry and no one had noticed the absence of George Eliot!
We were delighted during the year to welcome several Japanese members to the area and the Chairman and I took one party of them on a tour of the George Eliot Country. They went home with happy memories of our friendship and with lots of photographs.

We always attend the Annual General Meeting of the Alliance of Literary Societies in Birmingham. The Alliance has been researching Public Liability Insurance for societies like ours and, under their guidance, the Fellowship has taken out this insurance with an annual premium of £35 for cover of £2,000,000 for events such as we hold. In these days of so much litigation, we hope there will never be an occasion when we might be sued for something untoward happening at any of our functions, but we are now well covered.

We became aware during the year of the poor state of the grave of Isaac Evans, George Eliot’s brother, and his family in Chilvers Coton Churchyard. One of our Council members undertook the daunting task of clearing the waist high weeds and undergrowth and is keeping an eye on future growth. She reported the bad state of the lettering and we have commissioned a stone mason to refurbish the lettering in the Spring of 2000. We are most grateful to Anne Pavitt for alerting us to this and for the work she has done on the grave.

Actress Anne Downie is writing a play about George Eliot’s life which, it is hoped, will be presented at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh in 2000. During 1999 she came to Nuneaton for important research and she was helped by the Fellowship and Rose Selwyn, the borough’s Tourism Officer. We look forward to hearing more about the production.

The Deputy Editor of Spotlight, a German magazine for English-speaking Germans, also came to the George Eliot Country to research an article about George Eliot and the George Eliot Country for her readers. The finished piece was most attractively presented and will perhaps encourage more German visitors to Eliot’s Warwickshire.

After many years of effort to see the interior of George Eliot’s Coventry home at Foleshill, on a day in June when we had a German member staying with us, the Chairman and I took her to see the house. The caretaker was in the garden and invited us in. It was fascinating to see the house even though much altered and to imagine her on the unchanged and elegant staircase. It is hoped to arrange another visit at some time for more of our members, particularly as we discovered that they have rooms for hire. That’s one way of being sure of getting inside!

Now that our membership has so much increased, the despatching of the George Eliot Review in the summer has become an enormous job and takes many hours of work. To add to our problems, the Japanese copies have to have a customs declaration on the envelope. An additional chore to write 160 of these but the Chairman and I were most grateful for assistance in the writing by members of the Council, and the packing by Joan Bunn and Ruth Harris.

The World Service of the BBC presented two programmes during the year in which the Fellowship was involved – one on George Eliot’s life and another on Silas Marner. John Burton, John Rignall and I were interviewed and Rose Selwyn took their journalist on a George Eliot Country tour. As well as enriching the knowledge of students and others overseas, this is a very useful tourism exercise.
Work is progressing on our two Millennium Projects although the refurbishment of the area surrounding the memorial in the George Eliot Memorial Garden was still only in the planning stage. However, work at the hospital on the garden around the statue was far enough in advance for us to make our donation of £5000 so that it could go ahead.

We also donated £80 to the Royal National Institute for the Blind’s Talking Book Service. We know that most of George Eliot’s books appear in this service and we felt it was a very worthwhile cause.

We were sad to hear at the end of the year of the death of sculptor John Skelton who created the memorial stone in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey. John had been ill for a long time. We consider ourselves very fortunate to have had his great artistic skills to provide us with a memorial that will outlive all of us.

We have felt great concern throughout the year about the decreasing support locally for the events we organize. Indeed, a few members have spoken about their discontent with the programme we have. I have, of course, written to local members asking for their advice on what they would prefer to have in place of those events that are of some long standing. Despite the dissatisfaction expressed, no one replied! It takes a great deal of work to organize our programme – as much for ten as for 100, and we are quite at a loss to know what to do next. Why, for instance, do people join the Fellowship if they feel no loyalty to it or need to support its work? The national and the international side of our work is deeply rewarding but the local aspect is very worrying. This is not intended as a grumble against the non-attenders, but a sincere wish to find out what they would like and how we can give it to them. I don’t mind how hard and long I work for George Eliot and the Fellowship but would so welcome the feeling that, locally, it is really worth doing. And only the members can supply that.

Even so, our membership keeps growing and had reached 609 by the end of the year. This is rewarding.

The Fellowship Council has met ten times during the year at the Town Hall. These are very busy meetings held in a friendly atmosphere and we get a lot done. But, for George Eliot and her growing army of admirers, there is a lot to do. We have been pleased to have younger members of the Council in Sally Poulson and Vivienne Wood and we much appreciate their ideas for attracting younger members to the Fellowship. We expect these to develop as time goes by. Youth is what we are rather short of!

Finally, no report would be complete without the usual round of thanks for the help and support I receive in my job as Fellowship secretary. The biggest thanks must go to Rose Selwyn, Tourism Officer for the borough whose enthusiasm for promoting George Eliot is so valuable to us. Her energy, her expertise and her warm friendship to the Fellowship is an asset few literary societies, if any, receive – and she is young! I am grateful, too, to those Council members who have helped me during the year but most of all to the Chairman. Without him, this job would be quite impossible to cope with. When I am tied to my desk he is there to help in so many ways. I am so glad I married him fifty years ago!