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## Annual Report 2001

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## ANNUAL REPORT 2001

By Kathleen Adams

Looking back thirty years to my report for 1971 I found that I had written 'It is most rewarding to be able to report a successful and stimulating year'. Thirty years later I can say the same – despite having drawn in our horns after the less than successful Millennium year.

At the Annual General Meeting in March we thought we were to lose our new treasurer, Sophie Pavier, but she found she was able to continue for a further year, much to our relief. Ted Bates retired from the Council after many years' service owing to ill health. I was sad to have to report his death six months later. The Fellowship was represented at his funeral and memorial service. Miss Susan Healey took Ted's place on the Council and Mary Somerville and Vivienne Wood were co-opted for the year. The Chairman's Address was particularly concerned at the falling off of local support for the Fellowship and its activities and he spoke of his fears for the future of the Fellowship if no one was willing to take office when he and I are no longer able to continue our work. The Address was included in the April newsletter but seems to have had little or no effect. I am sure we are not alone amongst similar societies in being in this situation.

On 4 and 5 April Gabriel Woolf, on his thirty-second visit and accompanied by Rosalind Shanks, presented 'Victorian Voices', a programme marking the 100th anniversary of the end of the Victorian era. Strenuous efforts were made to raise an audience in Leamington and in Nuneaton and we succeeded in an acceptable audience in both places. It is a pity we have to push so hard to get some of the members to support such an attractive event but we simply don't know what else to do. We cannot remain complacent, sitting back and hoping for support at the last minute for it would be most embarrassing to invite actors or speakers for only a handful of loyal supporters. In the event we made a loss for the first time in thirty-two years so had to decide, a little reluctantly, to restrict the 2002 programme to Nuneaton only.

The George Eliot Day on 19 May was very successful. Entitled 'From Milby to Florence', it covered *Scenes of Clerical Life* ('Milby') and *Romola*. Ruth Harris and Vivienne Wood with Dr Andrew Brown, editor of the Clarendon edition of *Romola*, gave excellent papers and we showed slides of Florence and the *Romola* connections. We had very good food and very good company. It is an opportunity to meet members from further afield as well as to welcome new faces. The following day the first George Eliot Country tour took place with a coach-load of friendly and enthusiastic passengers.

We had a lovely sunny day for the Nuneaton Wreath-laying on 10 June. Lynda Carnes, Chairman of the Bedworth Society was our special guest and, much to our pleasurable surprise, resurrected the custom of handing out sprigs of rosemary. This was the custom many years ago and we liked it so much it is to be incorporated in the ceremony each year in future. For the first time we had readings instead of hymns – a welcome change as long as we do not have to stand too long! After the service we invited everyone for tea and biscuits at the Museum.

The Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying on 20 June was less successful. The Abbey opens to the public on Wednesday evening and we had the many distractions of people walking about around us; one girl even came and stood at the front before walking away. Little respect was shown for our service so we have decided to change the day of this visit to avoid the onlookers. Dr A. G. van den Broek was our Guest of Honour but was unable to join us for tea in Cheyneygates, the room allocated to us. It is not a particularly pleasant room at the top of a steep flight of stairs so we decided to change the tea venue as well. Our visits to Westminster Abbey are not as easy as they once were but we shall not be deterred from our annual tribute, although we are no longer allowed to do our own catering there. More expense but less work so there are plusses as well as minusses.

During the year a set of letters between George Eliot and her friend Jane Senior was offered for sale and was initially to be purchased by Yale University for their Beinecke Library. Although we regret that so much George Eliot material went to Yale so long ago, we are appreciative of the wonderful work done on the letters etc. by the late Gordon S. Haight and the Fellowship Council were in favour of the purchase. However, a stop was put onto the sale to allow bids from British buyers to prevent the material leaving the country and eventually the British Library was able to match Yale's bid and secured them. Unfortunately, our approval of Yale was severely criticised by some of our Vice Presidents and this caused us some concern. Our approval was voiced in good faith and no one had expressed an opinion until we had done so. Because of this, we now send our Council Minutes to all our Vice Presidents and will let them know if we have occasion to discuss such a controversial issue again. All the Vice Presidents are automatically members of the Council but do not attend Council meetings, apart from Ruth Harris who's wise voice we welcome at almost every meeting.

A very successful literary outing was organized, with her usual care, by Anna Craig, and visited the John Clare Country. They were met at Helpston by members of the Clare Society and had a guided walk. Visits to Oundle and Rockingham Castle were included in the trip which took place on 29 September.

We had a rare treat on 25 September when a rehearsed reading was presented in Earlsdon Library in Coventry of George Eliot's play 'Armgarth'. A large audience thoroughly enjoyed the performance – and the refreshments which followed, and all of this was free.

As always, we were invited to the lecture at the George Eliot Hospital in October to hear a paper on 'Leadership and Literature', which was followed by the usual excellent supper. We share these lectures with the hospital and the Fellowship will provide the lecture for 2002.

The George Eliot Memorial Lecture on 27 October was delivered by Dr Rosalind Miles who once lived at Corley Hall (George Eliot's 'Hall Farm' in *Adam Bede* although it is less the house than the very distinctive gateposts that are described in the novel). The lecture, entitled 'George Eliot: the Woman and the Writer' was most entertaining and was much enjoyed by a large audience in the Council Chamber of Nuneaton Town Hall.

The George Eliot Birthday Luncheon is always a very happy occasion and this was certainly true of the one held on 25 November in the Raveloe Restaurant at the George Eliot Hospital. The meal is always very good and the service is excellent. Canon Edward Pogmore, Chaplain to the hospital, was our Guest of Honour to propose the Toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot. Neither The Mayor nor the Deputy Mayor was able to be with us so the Toast to 'Milby' was made by Councillor Robert Hicks, an ex-Mayor and Fellowship member. It was particularly good!

These were our events for the members but the Fellowship Council is very active on their behalf behind the scenes throughout the year. I had been banging my head against the unresponsive wall of the National Portrait Gallery for years to beg them to change a very incorrect caption alongside the Durade portrait of George Eliot in which she was described as evangelical and having an American husband. The first was in her youth and John Cross was very much an Englishman. Finally, they wrote to say it had been changed.

We have used Fellowship funds to have the Buchanan tomb repaired in 'Milby' churchyard. 'Lawyer Dempster's' tablet had fallen off the end and was in danger of being moved away by any disrespectful passer-by. It is now safely secured. George Eliot's own grave is maintained by Vice President Dr Beryl Gray and Isaac Evans' grave in Chilvers Colon Churchyard by Anne Pavitt. We are most grateful for this help; neglected graves look so very sad. Jonathan Ouvry, our President, has had the grave in Highgate Cemetery of his great-great grandfather, G. H. Lewes, fully repaired and levelled.

The Chairman and I represent the Fellowship at meetings of the Heritage Forum in Nuneaton. While we own no buildings that we can open to the public during the Heritage weekend in September each year, we give our support to those who have, and our final George Eliot Country tour is arranged to take place that same weekend so that visitors can see the places associated with her.

John Burton and I have been working since June 2000 on a new Pitkin Guide to George Eliot. The work involved in producing what is a fairly short but beautifully illustrated book seemed a simple task when it was first decided the Fellowship should finance it. How wrong I was! However, it will eventually be published in the summer of 2002 and I am sure it will have been worth it. At this point, I wish to record my grateful thanks to John Burton for all the work he has done in providing the illustrations, helping me with the proofs and providing many of the picture captions. I could not have done this without him. His photographic work is well known for its excellence but he has been so pleasant to work with and so helpful.

A third edition of *Those Of Us Who Loved Her* was published during the year and is still selling well. Through John Burton's good offices we have also stocked some very good George Eliot souvenirs – notepaper, notelets, greetings cards and local view postcards – to add to our somewhat limited sales table. All have been going well.

Our efforts to start new branches have not been very successful. The South East branch failed

even after the strenuous efforts of Margaret Jennings, both London branches could not get sufficient support to keep them alive, and a Yorkshire member tried hard to establish a branch there. After massive publicity he received one reply. However, our Japanese branch is thriving with 150 members and they hold a conference each November. The total membership of the Fellowship in 2001 amounted to 609 - 353 annual members and 256 life members. Our highest total yet was 618 in 1997, but 609 is very satisfactory. One member is only nine years of age!

One of our American members won the 2001 George Eliot Fellowship Prize. We had fourteen entries from various parts of the world. We are very grateful to Drs John Rignall, Beryl Gray and Tonny Van den Broek for judging the entries.

We began a new venture in 2001 – offering a prize for young people in local schools – either for an essay or a George Eliot project. Despite circulating all the schools in and around Nuneaton, we had only one entry. We were very disappointed and have inevitably abandoned the project.

The 2001 *George Eliot Review* was particularly good and we had many complimentary comments upon it. Again, our warm thanks to John Rignall and Beryl Gray as well as to the newly formed editorial board. We now send out 600 copies of the *Review* and I am most grateful to Joan Bunn who deals with the copies which go to universities and other outside bodies, and to those members of the Council who help with the mammoth task of packing the copies to members. It is a tiring and time consuming job and a huge sigh of relief goes up as the last boxful goes to the Post Office.

The Mary Ann Evans Hospice in Nuneaton had a flower festival in September. Some of the displays had George Eliot themes and the one which represented her baptism was sponsored by the Fellowship, 2001 was the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the hospice and an appeal for funds was made. Rather than stage an event and have to sell tickets it was decided to make the appeal for donations to the UK members and to our delight and surprise, £1008 was raised in this way – far more than any event would have done.

We missed out on a Victorian Conference early in 2001, despite having been involved in initial discussions. Maybe it is because we are too far from London where it all happens that the George Eliot Fellowship gets overlooked. But a pity as some of our members would have liked to attend if they knew it was to happen.

Two sessions of the Study Group were held in 2001 but attendances are decreasing so maybe this has had its day.

Four tours of the George Eliot Country were held during the summer with spectacular success. I am sure this is largely due to the friendly expertise of the guides, all of whom are supplied by the Fellowship, and to the boundless enthusiasm of Nuneaton's Tourism Officer, Rose Selwyn, to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude. She does so much for George Eliot

and we reap the benefit. Over the past thirty-two years I have regularly given talks about George Eliot to local organizations and this has undoubtedly raised awareness of her books and her interesting life. However, arthritis has now prevented me from doing these talks and I am grateful to Anne Pavitt who has taken over, and to Ruth Harris who also speaks about George Eliot, as well as about other writers. I have found it very rewarding and am sorry that my health no longer allows me to pass on my own enthusiasm for the lady.

We heard late in the year that the long-awaited film of *Daniel Deronda* is to happen. Will it have the same impact as *Middlemarch* did nine years ago and will our membership shoot up again as a result? We shall wait and see!

The world was shocked at the devastation caused by the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September. I tried to contact all our New York members and had a reply from all but one of them – all safe. We assume that the one who did not reply has been relocated and did not receive my letter.

I always conclude my annual report with my thanks to all those who have made this somewhat overwhelming job as Secretary of such a successful Fellowship a little easier. Specifically to all those Council members who do a particular job and those who help when needed, to Rose Selwyn, to John Burton, to Linda Robertson who collects the USA subscriptions and issues the newsletters there and finally, the Chairman without whom I could not do the job at all. Neither of us is getting any younger and both of us suffering the disadvantages of getting older. But we love the work and will carry on until we can no longer cope with it – or even until we join the Choir Invisible!