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WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDENS, NUNEATON 10 JUNE 2001

The Guest of Honour was Lynda Carnes, Chairman of the Bedworth Society. She gave the following Address:

Wherefore we come to lay this laurel wreath –
Humbly, in reparation for the past,
Proudly, in honour of thy worth,
With Reverence, as believing still
In beauty, truth and love.

George Eliot, or Mary Ann Evans as she was known when she lived here in Nuneaton, died on 22 December 1880. She was buried in Highgate Cemetery, on 29 December, in unconsecrated ground in a grave adjoining that of George Henry Lewes. The coffin was loaded with loving tributes in the shape of lilies, camellias, and other beautiful white flowers with here and there a small bouquet of violets.

Earlier there had been a Unitarian funeral service in the chapel conducted by the Rev. Doctor Sadler and attended by the chief mourners: Mr J. W. Cross, Mr Isaac Evans, Mr C. L. Lewes, Mr W. Cross, Mr Albert Druce, Mr W. H. Hall, Mr F. Otter, and the Rev. F. R. Evans, Bedworth’s own Canon Evans, Rector of Bedworth 1876 to 1927. They were accompanied by a host of other eminent and distinguished Victorians. Phrases borrowed from Rev. Doctor Sadler’s funeral address are pertinent today, for

We are gathered together today not only to perform an office of reverent affection, but also as representatives of a vast company from far and near, who are present with us in spirit, and sympathize with every tribute of respect and honour which is paid to the earthly part and the memory of a greatly-gifted woman ...

or: ‘We are in no need now to ask who is, or shall be the greatest. Her place amongst the greatest of the living and the dead in the walks of literature is beyond question. She is one of few, the immortal names that were not born to die …’; and again:

How patiently she toiled to render her work in all its details as little imperfect as might be. How green she kept the remembrance of all those companions to whom she owed a moulding and elevating influence, especially in her old home and of him who was its head, her father...

Her father, Robert Evans, agent for the Arbury Estate, kept diaries, a few of which form part of the George Eliot collection in Nuneaton. He paid many visits to Bedworth, to collect rents for the Nicholas Chamberlaine Trust, to report on the state of property – particularly on cottages in Collycroft – to meet with Henry Bellairs and to visit the Almshouses. I would like to think that sometimes Mary Ann went with him and that she knew Bedworth, for she certainly must have passed through it many times on her way to Coventry.
One day I hope to see a copy of the article once written in the British Weekly by the Rev. G. Mannington, who is quoted in Aubry Mann's book about the Old Meeting Church in Bedworth as follows: 'Mary Ann Evans, or George Eliot, was quite a familiar figure in the streets of Bedworth and was known by several older inhabitants in my time. For example, one of them told me that in her early days, she occasionally attended the services of the Old Meeting Conventicle – a substantial and capacious building, hidden away, as such edifices were in the days when to be a con-conformist involved heavy penalties, in a quiet spot, remote from the main thoroughfares. And, my informant said, while there was no lack of devoutness in her bearing, the most marked characteristic of it was the evident intenseness of her mental concentration. This was manifest during the delivery of the sermon, the preacher at that time being a man of considerable intellectual power and eloquence – he is referred to in Scenes of Clerical Life.' Aubry Mann goes on to say that if this is true, then the preacher referred to must have been Rev. Thomas Dix, minister at the Old Meeting 1812-44.

George Eliot scholars may be scornful of this reference, and consider it fanciful, merely 'cashing in' on her local connections or in the same vein as the 'Queen Elizabeth I slept here' syndrome. Something which I hope they would not deny, is that after attending the funeral her nephew, Rev. Frederic Rawlins Evans, made a collection of obituaries and appreciations of her work. A slim volume, photocopied from the originals, with dates and sources written on them in his own recognizable handwriting, forms part of the George Eliot Collection in Nuneaton Library, available for all to see. The originals, one hopes, are filed away for safe keeping elsewhere.

Browsing in bookshops and libraries is always a great pleasure, particularly for any librarian like myself when 'off duty' – for twenty-first century librarianship certainly leaves little time for such pleasures whilst 'on duty'! It is such a privilege to have access to the collection in Nuneaton Library, but at the same time a cause of some concern that the conditions there are far from perfect, not the least that of the harmful effects of exposure to strong sunlight on pages and bindings of many rare and original volumes. Whilst browsing through the collection I became intrigued with several other volumes of newspaper cuttings. Some of these concern the origins of our ceremony here today.

Wreath layings began back in 1934, within a few years of the founding of the George Eliot Fellowship. In the early days wreath layings took place on the anniversary of our local novelist's birthday in November. This same memorial around which we gather today was then in Arbury Park, sited 'within a stone’s throw of South Farm', her birthplace. Councillor Sam Deeming, the grandfather of one of our Bedworth Society members, was Mayor of Nuneaton at the time. He placed 'a magnificent chaplet of laurel, adorned with eleven bronze and yellow chrysanthemums six on one side and five on the other, representing one for every letter of the great writer's name on the steps of the memorial'. He was presented with a George Eliot Dictionary, as a thank you gift, although in responding he said he had not read many of George Eliot's works, but assured the assembled company he would try to do so in the future!

Throughout the thirties, the wreath layings at Arbury continued. Newspaper reports were full of flowery praise. From 1936: 'The ceremony was witnessed by a distinguished company, members of which had assembled at Griff House, and shortly before 11 o’clock a long line of
cars began the pilgrimage to the memorial in the adjoining park. With the trees shedding their autumn foliage and the sun breaking through the fog, the drive will be well remembered'. According to the report, amongst those present was Mr Robert Winser, a member of the Evans family and grandson of Canon F. R. Evans. Two weeks ago I spoke to Robert on the telephone. He laughed as I read the report, and said he would have been a boy of fifteen at the time, and couldn’t remember a thing about any of it. In fact he couldn’t even remember being there!

In 1938, the company once again assembled at Griff House, but then on reaching South Farm walked in processional formation to the memorial. A choir of schoolchildren sang ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men’ and ‘He Who Would Valiant Be’ and on returning to South Farm many of the members inspected the room in which George Eliot was born.

After the war, in 1947, the newly reformed Fellowship hired two buses for the visit to Arbury Park. A halt was still made at Griff House, where Mrs Travers Melly kindly pointed out items of interest associated with the novelist and on the return journey a visit was paid to Coton Church, where the parish registers containing the entry of the novelist’s baptism and other entries of the Evans family were shown and explained by Mrs Dorothy Dodds.

Next year, 2002, will see the 50th Anniversary of the opening of these George Eliot Memorial Gardens, and the moving of the obelisk from Arbury to this very spot. This event, I am sure, will be commemorated by the George Eliot Fellowship and the Borough Council in some appropriate way. But still, even in 1952, the wreath laying took place in November on the anniversary of George Eliot’s birth.

It was only in 1955, the Silver Jubilee year of the George Eliot Fellowship, that George Eliot was given an ‘official birthday’ in June and that, in theory, saw the end of this by now traditional open air ceremony taking place in inclement weather.

And so today, and once again, ‘we come to lay this laurel wreath’. The verse with which I started was penned by Mr A. H. Moore, Secretary of the Fellowship, and was recited by the composer at the 1936 wreath laying. And I, for one, still come humbly, proudly and with reverence. It has been a great honour to be here, to lay the George Eliot Fellowship Wreath, and to represent the Bedworth Society in this the Society’s twentieth year.

I’d like to end by bringing an early tradition back to this year’s ceremony. Sprigs of rosemary – for remembrance – were once worn in their buttonholes by all attending a wreath laying. Please join with me in this further act of remembrance of George Eliot, Mary Ann Evans, ‘Nuneaton’s most illustrious daughter’.