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ANNUAL REPORT 2003

By Kathleen Adams

The Fellowship year always begins with the Annual General Meeting and in 2003 we amended our Constitution to exclude our Vice Presidents from the management team. This was because the Charity Commission rule that all members of the Fellowship Council are automatically trustees of the charity, and are unable to receive any payment from the Fellowship. This meant that we could not pay any of them for lectures, readings etc – an unacceptable situation. All the Vice Presidents were happy with this decision and we still keep them closely in touch with our affairs through the Minutes of the Council's meetings. Another feature of the AGM was the Chairman's wish to stand down at the 2004 AGM when he would have reached the age of eighty, but as no one seems willing to take over from him, he is still going on and it seems that the Fellowship Council don't want to part with him anyway.

After the business meeting Michael Harris gave us a very amusing talk on 'Beaks in Books'; there are some very funny magistrates in fiction.

The Alliance of Literary Societies, to which the Fellowship is affiliated, held its AGM in Swansea in April with the Dylan Thomas Society as hosts. Dylan Thomas's daughter Aeronwy was with us as President of the Society and it was an added pleasure to meet her and hear about her childhood in that strange family. 2003 was the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the ALS and a presentation was made to me as its founder in 1973; it has grown a lot in those thirty years. The Chairman and I represented the Fellowship and were pleased to meet two other Fellowship members there; we are always sorry not to see more as it is so interesting to meet members of many other literary societies as well as to take part in the various activities organized for us by the host society.

Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks made their annual visit on 10 April with yet another theme for this ever popular programme of readings. This year it was based on 'Workaday World' – fascinating material beautifully presented and with a capacity audience.

The George Eliot Day on 10 May was entitled '*Daniel Deronda* on Page and Film' and the film part was to have been a talk by the producer of the BBC TV film Louis Marks. Unfortunately, Louis Marks was prevented from coming. The entire afternoon had been allocated to this coverage of the TV adaptation seen the previous November but, rather than cancel the Day, our good friends Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks again came to our rescue. Gabriel put together a programme of readings from the novel and also compared scenes in the film with George Eliot's version. Again a lovely and interesting presentation and one for which we felt most grateful. I am sure no other literary society has such a wonderful asset as these two gifted actors who do so much for us and, even more importantly, for George Eliot.

There was a very pleasant addition to our Nuneaton wreath-laying in June when Dr Linda Robertson who collects our USA subscriptions and sends out the newsletters there was with us for the first time and laid flowers on behalf of the American members. Viscountess Daventry,

our Patron, and John Burton read; these readings have much improved the relevance of the ceremony since we stopped having hymns. Several local organizations joined us as always to lay wreaths in tribute and the Mayor and Mayoress also joined us with their wreath from the borough.

The Westminster Abbey wreath-laying on 19 June was less successful and very worrying as it was far less well supported than in past years. Only thirty-five passengers on the coach from Warwickshire, of whom only eighteen were Fellowship members, causing a loss on the cost of the coach. Very few London or southern members joined us for tea and the Abbey service where Dr Beryl Gray, one of the two editors of the George Eliot Review, laid our wreath. Because the Abbey visit was advertised at the same time as the literary outing it meant that anyone attending both was having to pay £50 (£100 for a couple) and I feel sure that the literary outing was chosen rather than Westminster Abbey. As the one is an important annual tribute to George Eliot and the other had no George Eliot connection I felt that this was very unfortunate. We have also been criticized for not welcoming people to the tea at Westminster School. I am particularly sorry about this as I know from personal experience how unpleasant it is to arrive at an event and to have no one speak to you. This is something we plan to rectify in future. We thought we are a friendly organization but this proves we are not nearly as friendly as we thought.

The literary outing in September was to the Inspector Morse country in and around Oxford. It was meticulously organized by Helen Mills but was less than successful because the coach broke down on the way and the guides from the Inspector Morse Society had little sense of timing; neither failing could be rectified by Helen and I don't know how she managed to keep her cool. I am sure I would not have been so calm. I know what a tremendous amount of organization goes into these trips and it would be so galling to see it all going awry through no fault of Helen's.

The 32nd Memorial Lecture was delivered on 4 October by Dr Pam Hirsch of Newnham College, Cambridge and was centred on claims to the authority of George Eliot. The story of Joseph Liggins who, while not claiming to be George Eliot, allowed people to think he was, made an interesting narrative.

Rosalind Shanks was our Guest of Honour who proposed the Toast to the Immortal Memory at the Birthday Luncheon on 23 November. The meal was very good in the Raveloe Restaurant at the George Eliot Hospital and we also raised a glass to our Chairman, Bill Adams, and shared his eightieth birthday cake.

During the year the Secretary and Chairman attended meetings about the 'Windows on Warwickshire' website by Warwickshire County Council and contributed to the section on George Eliot, also meetings of the Heritage Forum in Nuneaton and the George Eliot Working Group in which the Fellowship, Nuneaton Library and Museum and Art Gallery, Coventry City Libraries and the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, together with Rose Selwyn, Nuneaton's Tourism Officer, and John Burton whose knowledge and expertise on all heritage matters are invaluable. The Adamses also manned a stall during the Heritage weekend in September with help from Vice President Ruth Harris, and again Bill manned another stall at

Bablake School in Coventry with assistance from Joe Davies. These stalls keep the flag flying and some sales are made but we compete with many other societies and often don't feel we make an enormous impact on the public who attend.

The 2003 George Eliot Prize for an essay on some aspect of George Eliot's life and works was won by Dr George Christian of Austin, Texas. For the 2004 prize 13 entries were received during 2003, an increase on the previous year. Our grateful thanks to the three judges for their work. A party of students came to the George Eliot Country from Utah in the USA in May and were given a tour guided by Joan Bunn and Rose Selwyn. They had been to other literary sites but said none had made them as welcome as in the George Eliot Country – a feather in our cap!

The *George Eliot Review* was issued in August and was very well received. The two editors, Drs Beryl Gray and John Rignall, put a lot of time and work into the *Review* and we are so grateful to them and to the Editorial Board. I am also very grateful to those Council members who spend a lot of time helping Bill and me to pack 600 copies to go out world-wide.

Work continued during the year on the Fellowship website which, it is hoped, will be up and running very soon.

We have had less contact with the George Eliot Hospital during 2003. I could obtain no information about the annual lecture there. It was the turn of the hospital to provide a speaker but several letters have gone unanswered. We hope very much that these have not come to an end as they have been so successful and have provided a very welcome link with the hospital. They did ask for names for the renal dialysis unit and a day unit. 'Lucy Deane' was accepted for the dialysis unit and they chose 'Tenby' for the day unit. The unit has a seaside theme and although 'Tenby' (where George Eliot first dreamed of her first story, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton') seemed to us to be a bit tenuous, they welcomed the idea warmly.

During the year we have contributed sums of money to various causes, perhaps the most significant being a donation towards the purchase of a six-volume edition of *George Eliot: Family History* by Nuneaton Library, a valuable source of information for students. We have purchased a large number of a very attractive, membership leaflet to replace the black and white one which had lasted for many years but which was dull and unimaginative by comparison with the new one which was beautifully designed in colour by John Burton.

The Fellowship Council met ten times during the year, almost all of the meetings very well attended. In the one and a half hours we are allowed in the Town Hall a multitude of matters are discussed in a friendly and co-operative manner.

Fellowship membership for 2003 dropped by twenty-nine, largely because thirty of our Japanese members did not renew. Members come and go and the lost ones are often replaced by new ones during the year, although this did not happen last year. We have hovered around the 600 mark for six years and hope to get back to that excellent figure in 2004. Despite our encouraging numbers (and many literary societies fall far below this total) there is still cause for concern about less local support for our events. We have almost 160 members in the Warwickshire area but only a small proportion of these attend our events. I have tried very

many times to encourage them to support us but perhaps their interest does not go beyond reading the newsletter and the *Review*. It is so worrying but I think I must accept that there is no point in trying to get them to come to things we organize. It clearly worries me more than it does them!

Finally, as always, my sincere thanks to those Council members who help me in many ways. To Joan Bunn, Vice Chairman, who deals with subscribers to the *George Eliot Review* and with the Gift Aid Scheme, to Jill Bridgewater, our very efficient treasurer, to John Burton who seems to be able to do anything we ask him and does it beautifully whether it be design or photographs, to Rose Selwyn our indefatigable Borough Council Tourism Officer, but most of all to our Chairman. The work he does for the Fellowship, and not only in support for me, but for all he does at home to allow me time to carry this ever-growing workload. The arthritis which makes life less than easy makes me fear that I may not now be giving of my best to either the Fellowship or George Eliot. No one seems to want to replace me after these thirty-six years and I do love the work, but I hope the Fellowship Council will not be afraid to boot me out as soon as they think I am falling down on the job.