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CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE FELLOWSHIP, 11 MARCH 2006

My Address at the AGM is usually concerned with our plans and hopes for the future but perhaps on this rather special day I may be allowed a glance at the past.

Last week I chaired a Council meeting for the last time; my first one was on 6 March 1971 – 35 years ago. When I succeeded Stan Dickens as Chairman in 1971 it was just two years after the remarkable success of the Fellowship's efforts to Commemorate the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's birth in 1969. That event became the foundation for our optimistic growth in the 1970s which in turn enabled us to undertake what were, for us, immense tasks; in 1980 the Westminster Abbey Memorial Stone and attendant celebration, and in 1986, the statue of George Eliot here in Nuneaton. The museum recorded over 6,000 visitors to the George Eliot exhibition in 1969; from this we knew that there was widespread public interest; our own membership increased enormously as the years went by. In the 1990s our events were still well supported, but often the same faces would appear in the audience and we seemed to reach a point from which it seemed difficult to climb higher.

A new effort is now required, and in the next few years there will be tremendous opportunities to renew our growth. In 2007 it will be just 150 years since George Eliot's first fiction was published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine – Scenes of Clerical Life*. In 1858 the identity of George Eliot was revealed; in 1859 *Adam Bede* was published and in 1860 *The Mill on the Floss* appeared, followed in 1861 by *Silas Marner*.

In fact, in most years from 2007 until 2013 there will be reasons to celebrate a 150th anniversary. We shall have the benefit of a first class website for which we owe your new Chairman, John Burton, a huge debt of gratitude. We have plenty of funds thanks to the enormous and unexpected legacy from Mrs Daphne Carrick which is invested and continues to grow.

All we really need are some fresh troops in the front line to join those stalwarts who will be soldiering on! Even I will be back in the rest area behind the line, ready to help as much as I can.

I would like to pay tribute to all those members of the Council who over the years have given time and energy to the George Eliot Fellowship under my chairmanship – and, finally, to a truly inspirational Secretary who is probably unique in any society of this kind, who has worked for us all tirelessly throughout – and indeed is still typing away even in 2006.

Finally, to the present Council I say thank you for another successful year in 2005/6. The Secretary will be listing their achievements in her Report. Please give them your continued support in the coming year.

Bill Adams, retiring Chairman