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ANNUAL REPORT 2005

By Kathleen Adams

Our year began uneventfully with the AGM held for the first time at the Heritage Centre with the added advantage of easy and free parking and the opportunity to provide refreshments. There were no changes to the Fellowship Council or to the officers. The Lord Mayor of Coventry, Councillor John Gazey, had suggested that there should be a literary lunch in Coventry to celebrate George Eliot and this took place on 16 April. We had worked with the Mayor's secretary in making all the arrangements but the first disappointment was that, on arrival at the splendid St Mary's Guildhall, the promised tables for lunch were not there. The Lord Mayor's secretary had gone on selling tickets way beyond the capacity of the hall and so there was no room for us to be seated at tables for lunch. The rather mediocre lunch had to be eaten while sitting in the rows of chairs and this was less than comfortable. However, the highlight of the literary lunch was undoubtedly the readings given by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks which included the trial of Hetty Sorrel from *Adam Bede*. George Eliot set the trial unmistakably in St Mary's Hall and to have it read to us in those memorable surroundings was particularly moving. The large audience enjoyed this contribution to the occasion and the less than successful lunch arrangements were happily excluded from their minds as they left the hall in a warm glow raised by these two splendid readers.

The George Eliot Day was a little different at Nuneaton Town Hall in May as we decided to widen the theme by calling it 'The Warwickshire Pen'. We had a fascinating look at Shakespeare and his Warwickshire Background, with slides, by Roger Pringle, Director of the Shakespeare Centre at Stratford upon Avon. Gabriel Woolf gave us his Rupert Brooke programme which told us a lot about his life and his poetry, Professor James Booth of the Philip Larkin Society gave us a paper on Larkin's poetry and the day closed with an excellent slide show of George Eliot's Warwickshire by John Burton with an easy and attractive narration which added a great deal to the presentation. With nearly fifty people attending and with an excellent buffet lunch it was all an enormous success.

The Nuneaton wreath-laying took place on 12 June with John Letts, sculptor of the George Eliot statue in the centre of Nuneaton, as our special guest. His wonderful statue had been knocked off its plinth by a brewery lorry delivering, ironically, to the Felix Holt pub! By the time John spoke to us the statue had been awaiting a new plinth for months but she was eventually restored to her rightful place by the end of the year.

The Westminster Abbey annual wreath-laying took place on 30 June. Sally Brown, Senior Curator of Literary Manuscripts (including, of course, much material relating to George Eliot) at the British Library was our guest speaker and, by our not having the dreaded microphones in Poets' Corner, was heard by the quite large congregation. We took the usual coach from Warwickshire but only a very few of our members joined us. Fortunately, quite a number of others booked on the coach so it was not a loss to our funds. The journey to the Abbey has worsened each year. The Chairman and I went by car and were in a long traffic jam for miles into Westminster and I understand that the coach was similarly affected. The Mayor of London's congestion charge to enter central London seemed only to push the congestion

further outwards! We had great difficulty later getting out of London. It was a miserable journey both ways and I was particularly glad when the Council decided to drop the annual visit to the Abbey and to make the journey every five years. This seemed a good decision just after we had made our twenty-fifth visit. The arrangements with the Abbey are always difficult and the work involved in organizing the visit seemed hardly worth the small number of members who attend. After the horrendous journey there and back I announced to the Chairman that I would NEVER go to London again!

The annual visit by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks was transferred from the spring to late summer as Gabriel had already been to Nuneaton in May. On 8 September they presented 'Other Parts Played by...' and concentrated on the minor characters in the novels – and proved to us how much care George Eliot gave to these 'other parts'. There was a much smaller audience than usual, the result of our publicity being overshadowed by the Heritage Open Days advertised at the same time. It was a great pity as it was a particularly good programme.

The thirty-fourth Memorial Lecture was given on 15 October in Nuneaton Town Hall by Dr John Rignall. It was entitled 'George Eliot and Weimar: An Affinity with what the world calls "dull places"'. John is a Vice President of the Fellowship, Reader in the Department of English at Warwick University, one of the two editors of the *George Eliot Review*, one of the judges for the Prize Essay each year, and editor of the remarkably fine publication *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*. So he was particularly well qualified to speak to us about George Eliot's love of Germany and her visits there with G. H. Lewes. It was a most interesting lecture and told many of us a lot we did not know.

On 24 October the annual George Eliot Hospital Lecture was our responsibility and John Burton gave us a fascinating insight, with slides, into the poverty and illnesses suffered by the weavers in George Eliot's Nuneaton. I could have listened even longer to this moving and poignant presentation. Many of our local members attended (despite the cancellation of the excellent supper previously supplied by the hospital who are now unable to afford such a luxury, being very much in debt) but very very few of the hospital medical or administrative staff. We were sure that they would have been caught by the title as it was very much in their field of practice but apparently not. We feel, sadly, that the hospital has lost some of its enthusiasm for George Eliot. They did not attend the wreath-laying in June – the first time for very many years – and the lack of interest makes us feel that the lecture may have no future. The 2006 lecture will be their responsibility so we wait to see if there is any response. Something seems badly awry in the administrative side of the hospital as they now no longer even answer letters.

For the last time we held the Birthday Luncheon in the Raveloe Restaurant at the George Eliot Hospital. They can no longer accommodate us so we have been faced with the task of finding somewhere else for 2006. However, our 'swan song' was very successful. We had a very good meal, excellent service and an interesting Toast to the Immortal Memory by Michael Harris. This is always such a happy occasion and the fifty or so people who attended very much enjoyed it.

Each year, of course, we have the increasingly difficult task of finding special guests for our events. Not many people have published recently on George Eliot, there has been no TV

adaptation of her novels (and even if there had been, it is always difficult to book the actors whose lives are so unpredictable). Some of these choices are no longer in my hands. Increasing lack of mobility makes my job as Secretary more difficult. My many pleas to be relieved of the job by someone younger and fitter than I have fallen on deaf ears but I am pleased that some members of the Council have begun to help me with the many tasks the position entails. This has come as a great relief to me and I feel now that I may be able to carry on serving the Fellowship a bit longer after my present thirty-eight years. Perhaps I will make forty years at least, particularly with the ever present help and support from my husband.

The Fellowship Study Group has been revitalized by Mrs Brenda Evans very successfully. It is still being held in the comfort of the lounge at 'Aldersgate' and is much enjoyed by those who discuss the book they have been reading.

No one has been available to attend the AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies which we founded in 1973; it has been a great pity as it offers our members an opportunity to meet the members of other literary societies. However, one Council member has offered to be our representative and this may encourage other members to attend what is always a most entertaining weekend.

The George Eliot Fellowship Prize for 2005 was won by Ceri Hunter who was pleased also to become a member of the Fellowship as well as to receive the £250 prize. We hope Ceri may stay with us; some prize-winners do but most do not maintain their membership after the two free years given with the prize. Congratulations and a warm welcome to Ceri.

It is inevitable that our numbers will vary as members get older but the annual renewals still provide considerable work for Sheila Haswell, our most efficient Membership Secretary. Despite the decline in Fellowship members in the UK we still have a flourishing branch in Japan (120 members) and seventy members in the United States. Our 2005 membership dropped to 539; it has slowly diminished year by year since the highpoint of 618 in 1997. We are most grateful for the work done on our behalf in America by Dr Linda Robertson who collects subscriptions and issues our newsletter to US members. The Japanese Branch holds an annual conference at which many papers are presented.

A lot of work goes on behind the scenes. The Fellowship Council met ten times during the year and most meetings were very well attended. We had been very concerned at the lack of any acknowledgement of George Eliot at the refurbished Griff House and we offered them a copy of the Durade portrait for the entrance hall. This was presented by the Chairman, Vice Chairman and myself and we were accompanied by an American travel writer, Susan Spano of the Los Angeles Times. She attracted press interest and subsequently wrote a long article for her readers which we hope will encourage them to visit the George Eliot Country.

We were represented at a History Fair at Coventry Transport Museum by Council members and again by the Chairman at another History Fair in Coventry. Unfortunately he had no one to assist him on that day and found it very difficult to unload our goods on his own. We shall have to rethink this particular event if we are invited to take part again.

Council members formed two working parties to pack the *Review* – a huge job when over 500

copies are sent out and a large number of US and Japanese packs have to include a customs declaration. Council members again helped with this long and tedious job.

Dr Beryl Gray continues to care for George Eliot's grave in Highgate Cemetery. During the year an American visitor (not a member) complained that the grave looked neglected. He and some friends 'tidied' the grave and in so doing destroyed plants that were to grow and flower in the following spring as well as small rose bushes. Keeping the grave in good repair and planted throughout the year is an important job and Dr Gray asked if anyone could help her. She was delighted to have an offer of help from Rosalind Shanks and between them some progress is being made. We are so grateful for Dr Gray's work over many years.

Dr Gray and Dr John Rignall work very hard for us throughout the year in editing the *George Eliot Review*. This is a mammoth task which they have done willingly and expertly for some years and the *Review* now has an excellent reputation, not least among the number of universities, many in the USA, who pay to receive it. These copies are invoiced annually by Joan Bunn and she also sends out each issue – another job I am very grateful to pass on to her. Joan also deals with the Gift Aid claim each year. She quietly works away in the background and we are very appreciative of her continued support.

Other helpers among the Council members are Helen Mills who sends out the prize leaflet twice a year to about 130 University English departments. She and Daphne Paton make up lovely little flower arrangements for the tables at the Birthday Luncheon. Jill Bridgewater continues her splendid work as our treasurer and keeps us up to date monthly on our financial state. Our finances is one of the reasons why we are so anxious that the Fellowship should survive if no one is willing to take on the Secretary's job. Our constitution demands that, should the Fellowship close down, these funds must be passed on to similar charities. So much money devoted to the promotion of George Eliot and in her honour must not be lost. Indeed, the Fellowship must not be lost and this is an ongoing worry for the officers and the Council.

Very warm thanks must go to John Burton whose work for George Eliot is a very great asset to the Fellowship. He represents us on various organizations in the Borough and so is able to keep us up to date on everything that might affect us. He has done a vast amount of work in collecting material for our website. It has taken a long time to come to fruition but will clearly be a most valuable acquisition for us and we hope very much that it will show considerable interest amongst George Eliot admirers and may well increase our membership. Is there also a budding Secretary out there somewhere...?

Rose Selwyn, the Borough's Tourism Officer, works very hard to promote George Eliot near and far, despite the rather low interest shown by Nuneaton and Bedworth Councillors. The latter need a lot of persuading that they have a very wonderful writer to celebrate and to put Nuneaton on the literary map.

Although I am no longer able to speak to local organizations about George Eliot I am pleased that Bill Adams and Anne Pavitt continue to do so with great success. Ruth Harris also includes George Eliot amongst her range of literary talks.

This is the last annual report I shall make with Bill as our Chairman. After thirty-five years of

considerable work on behalf of the Fellowship apart from chairing meetings and events, he feels he must stand down in favour of someone younger. My own gratitude to him is immense because without his ever willing support I certainly could not have gone on as Secretary for thirty-eight years. I have been very very fortunate to have had such a wonderful husband for fifty-seven years and I know that George Eliot would have understood this as she had the same loving support from G. H. Lewes.

Although this is a report of the 2005 activities and we are now involved with the 2006 programme, we are already looking ahead to 2007, the 150th anniversary of the publication of George Eliot's first stories, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Despite our anxieties about the Fellowship, there is still much to do and to look forward to.