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## Annual Report 2007

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## ANNUAL REPORT 2007

By Kathleen Adams

This has not been the easiest report to write, possibly being my last one. My first report forty years ago was so short – a mere half page – but, in those days the tiny Fellowship was doing very little so it was not difficult to write it. Little did I know I would still be doing it forty years later and with an extremely busy Fellowship involved.

Our year began, as always, with the Annual General Meeting. Susan Healey succeeded Bill Adams as Vice Chairman and Bill took her place on the Council for one year. After the business meeting John Burton told us what 2007 was going to involve as the 150th anniversary of the publication of George Eliot's first fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*; it all sounded very exciting. This was followed by a most interesting talk by Canon Edward Pogmore who described the differences between the clerical scenes of George Eliot's day and those of the twenty-first century. What differences, indeed! We had hoped to publish this in the 2007 Review but, sadly, there was not enough space.

The George Eliot Day, organized by Ruth Harris, was extremely successful. Entitled 'Beginnings' it covered the early writings and, as an extra delight, included some dramatization by students of the Sixth Form College, directed by Vivienne Wood. A pleasant occasion, good food and good company.

We had extra wreath-layers in the George Eliot Memorial Garden in June when our Guest of Honour was Revd Don Jones, Vicar of St Nicolas ('Milby') Church. A special guest was one of our American members, Dr Rebecca Mitchell from the University of Texas, who laid flowers on behalf of the American members. After the ceremony we were served tea by the ladies of 'Milby' Church. Dr Mitchell was so impressed; to have an English afternoon tea for the first time and in a church whose *Scenes of Clerical Life* name she knew but had never visited before. It gave her great pleasure, and us, too, to have her with us on one of our special occasions.

We have often wished we could make a tangible gesture of thanks to the very many people who had worked for us and with us over many years. At the invitation of our delightful Patron, the Viscountess Daventry, we held an evening party at Arbury Hall at which thirty-nine people were present, including some of our Vice Presidents, our President and his wife, all of the Council and some past officers, as well as other people who had helped us in many different ways. An excellent buffet supper was provided in the wonderful dining room but the highlight of the evening was in the saloon where Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks presented a reading from 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story'. It was quite magical to hear passages from the story read so beautifully in the very setting described by George Eliot who was clearly so familiar with the gothicized house. We know that Lord and Lady Daventry were thrilled by the presentation in their own lovely home. Indeed, it was an exciting and unforgettable experience.

The following evening Gabriel and Rosalind presented fuller readings from the three *Scenes* in Chilvers Coton ('Shepperton') Church. Sadly, with the acoustics of such a high building and a less than successful sound system the programme was not heard too clearly. This was something we could not overcome but are very sorry that it happened as this was our final

contribution to the 'Scenes Revisited' Festival, although more was to follow in the town.

A lovely part of the Festival were two flower festivals in 'Milby' and 'Knebley' churches with a George Eliot and *Scenes* theme which Gabriel and Rosalind were able to see in between the two programmes.

Dr Graham Handley continued the *Scenes* theme with the Memorial Lecture when he spoke about 'Scenes and After' – where George Eliot moved on after her first fiction was published, setting Nuneaton ('Milby') firmly on the literary map.

The year ended with the George Eliot Birthday Luncheon at the Royal Court Hotel on the outskirts of Coventry. Not as large an audience as we had hoped as the hotel will not take us again unless we can raise our numbers considerably. Although we had pleaded for more support it was not forthcoming so the Fellowship Council will have a problem on their hands for a venue for the 2008 luncheon. However, on this occasion, we had a very good lunch and an excellent speaker in Dr Roger Simmonds who was Project Officer for the 'Scenes Revisited' Festival and had worked closely with John Burton and Tourism Officer Rose Selwyn to make the Festival so successful. Both Roger and John were presented with gifts in acknowledgement of their work and another was sent afterwards to Rose Selwyn. Rose has been so very supportive of the Fellowship in her post at Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and, as I know personally, very much outside it as well. Since I became so disabled and unwell, her support and friendship have been very much appreciated.

There have been, as always, lots of things going on behind the scenes (excuse the pun). We have been concerned for many years about the state of the grave of Isaac Evans and his family in Chilvers Coton Churchyard. A self-set holly tree had been a thorn in the side (pardon the pun again!) of two members who had volunteered to care for the grave, Anne Pavitt and Ann O'Callaghan, and it became clear that some professional help was needed, particularly as the iron railings around the grave had rusted and fallen away in places. An appeal fund was opened for the cost of restoration and a local company invited to design a new set of railings. The designer has proved a bit slow in responding to our wishes but there is every hope that a complete restoration will be accomplished in 2008. The holly tree has now been removed.

Dr Beryl Gray and Rosalind Shanks have cared for George Eliot's and G. H. Lewes's graves in Highgate Cemetery for some years but it has become difficult to undertake, particularly for Dr Gray, so we have been negotiating with a grave tending service to take over. They say they are honoured to be asked to look after the burial places of two such distinguished literary figures.

During this busy year we have not only been thinking about ourselves. In the summer we donated £1,000 towards the repairs to the fabric of Astley Church. We also purchased from the artist a lovely watercolour of Chilvers Coton Church and subsequently presented it to the Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth for display in the Town Hall. Part of the painting was used as the cover illustration of our own publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* – but see Mr Burton's report in this issue for more of that immensely successful venture.

During the year, an organization specializing in the publication and business management of

literary and academic journals approached the Fellowship with a proposal to publish and manage the *George Eliot Review*. After due discussion, the offer was declined for the foreseeable future.

We attended a meeting called by the Landmark Trust who are eager to restore Astley Castle ('Knebley Abbey') and we offered our support for the project. We are also represented at meetings of the Friends of the Warwickshire County Record Office (of which the Fellowship is a member) and have found the meetings interesting and the Friends very friendly!

*The George Eliot Review* was published in August and was very well received. Drs Gray and Rignall are warmly thanked for the amount of work involved in editing our Journal. They now receive a fee from us for the time spent in producing such an excellent publication.

There were thirteen entries for the 2007 George Eliot Fellowship Prize of £250 and the winner was Melissa Raines who has been enrolled as a member for two years. The number of entries remains comparatively small but if we were inundated with essays this would be a huge workload for the judges. We are grateful to Dr Beryl Gray, Dr John Rignall, and Dr Antonie van den Broek for their work in judging. The winning essay is published each year in the *Review*. From 2008 the prize is increased to £500.

Mrs Brenda Evans continues to run the Study Group and this has proved most successful and popular for those members who attend regularly to discuss a variety of books, and not necessarily those of George Eliot. We are very grateful to Brenda for the work she does on our behalf.

I am sorry to report that our membership numbers continue to fall. Until 2002 we had been in the 600s for several years but since then have dropped each year until in 2007 we reached 513. We had hoped that the 'Scenes Revisited' Festival might have increased our membership. Indeed, we did attract some new members but we lost more than we had gained. I don't know what we can do to improve this situation and we don't understand why our numbers have dropped when we feel we have so much to offer. Our branch in Japan continues to hold an annual conference in November when members renew their subscriptions and this remains fairly steady at around 137. A message of greeting is sent from the parent body here to the conference and this seems to be much appreciated. We still have about seventy members in the USA but with such wide distances between them there is not opportunity for them to meet each other.

This final report gives me my last opportunity to say a warm thank you to all those members who have helped me throughout my last difficult year. I very much appreciate the help I have each year in packing hundreds of *Reviews* that are sent out each summer. Particular thanks to Joan Bunn who deals with subscribers to the *Review* (universities, libraries, etc) and to Helen Mills who sends out Prize leaflets to well over 100 university English departments twice a year. Joan Bunn also deals most efficiently with the Gift Aid scheme which produces an extra income each year for us. Thanks, too, to Ruth Harris who has organized two George Eliot Days most successfully, and especially to our very efficient and hard-working treasurer, Jill Bridgewater; her work has increased in 2007 with the Scenes Festival. She is most supportive and I know will continue to be so to my successor. I am very grateful, too, to Helen Mills who

relieved me of the job of keeping the Fellowship scrapbooks up to date. She has made a spectacular effort in relation to the *Scenes* celebrations, having produced a very special album for 2007 and had it professionally bound, a wonderful record of the year. The scrapbooks which I have kept for very many years have each been passed to Nuneaton Library who bind them for their George Eliot collection and have photocopies available for the public to study. Helen's 2007 album is too beautiful to give away so it will remain part of the Fellowship archive. The Fellowship owes a warm debt of gratitude to Dr Linda Robertson in the USA. She collects the American subscriptions and distributes our newsletter, a very useful contribution to our work over there. She is an enthusiastic member and a friend.

I cannot thank John Burton enough for all the work he has done this past year in relation to the Festival. I could not have done a fraction of what he has done if it had been left to the Secretary to organize. He is full of energy and enthusiasm and never flaps about anything. He is an excellent Chairman; long may he continue. Finally, my thanks to my husband, Bill, who, for the past forty years has been a tremendous support, and even more so in the later years as my health has deteriorated. When we married almost fifty-nine years ago, he took me 'for better or worse'. I am sorry the 'worse' bit came to be! Being disabled makes life rather difficult but my life would be much less happy without his help and encouragement.

I find it hard to believe that I have been in the Secretary's chair for forty years. They have been fascinating, interesting and rewarding years in the service of the Fellowship and of George Eliot herself. She has changed our lives and Bill and I would miss her terribly if we had not agreed to look after the Fellowship archive for as long as we can. We have met many lovely people, many interesting ones and even a few really famous ones. We are inevitably going to miss all this and our quiet lives will become even quieter, but not many people have the opportunity to do what we have done since we joined the Fellowship in 1965. We feel very blessed!