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Jonathan Ouvry

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CELEBRATION FOR KATHLEEN AND BILL ADAMS

On 6 May 2008 officers and members of the Fellowship gathered at Arbury Hall, at the kind invitation of Lady Daventry, for a buffet lunch to mark Kathleen Adams's retirement from the post of Secretary that she has held with such distinction for forty years. Arbury Hall on a beautiful Spring day was a splendid setting for this celebration of Kathleen's and Bill's long and invaluable service to the Fellowship. Lunch was served in the great dining room at Arbury, where Lady Daventry welcomed the guests and John Burton, as Chairman, acted as master of ceremonies. Toasts were drunk; Kathleen was presented with a bouquet of flowers by her granddaughter Becky Adams and with a cheque for £1,000 from members of the Fellowship; and the President of the Fellowship, Jonathan Ouvry, and Gabriel Woolf, a long-standing Vice-President, paid the following eloquent tributes:

Address by Jonathan Ouvry

I'm ashamed to say that I didn't know of the existence of the George Eliot Fellowship until 1980, which was of course the great year of the stone-laying in Westminster Abbey. I can't remember how it came to be known that one of George Henry Lewes's great-great-grandsons just happened, conveniently, to have an office next door to the Abbey, but then I suppose that that is one of the many secrets of Kathleen's success in her role as Secretary of the Fellowship – she was very good at finding out useful connections and unlikely information in the highways and byways of George Eliotdom. I also can't remember whether it was Kathleen or I who suggested that I should have a pre- (or was it post-?) stone-laying gathering in the boardroom, but it turned out to be a wonderful occasion, to be repeated over nearly twenty years on the annual wreath-laying days before my retirement ended my ability to lay on tea parties at the Sanctuary.

For Marjorie and me that was the start of a friendship with Kathleen and Bill that has lasted so far for twenty-eight years, has enhanced enormously our knowledge of and love for the work of George Eliot, introduced us to many lovely and interesting people involved with the Fellowship, including all of you here today (and I should say in parentheses here that it is a tremendous pleasure, and privilege, to be here in this amazing room again so soon after the last occasion) and involved us in so many interesting and unusual events and occasions during the course of those twenty-eight years. (I should say, again in parentheses, that one of the outcomes of reading George Eliot is that it does equip one to deal in very long sentences, not infrequently incorporating equally long parenthetical interpolations!)

In 1984, which for me was far from the doom-laden year of George Orwell, since that was the year when Marjorie and I were married and moved into the house where we still live, I was surprised to be asked by Kathleen whether I would like to become President of the Fellowship in succession to Tenniel Evans, on the grounds merely of direct descent from George Henry Lewes. Of course I was delighted to accept the honour, thinking that there would perhaps be a three year term of office, but here I still am, twenty-four years later. No short-termism in the George Eliot Fellowship!

I'm afraid I've been something of an absentee President, but have much enjoyed taking part in so many events organized by Kathleen, including successive wreath-layings and reading in the dubious acoustics of Westminster Abbey, Birthday Luncheons, singing in concerts and so forth, nearly always with Marjorie, who has among other things contributed her beautiful singing over the years.

The influence of the Fellowship, through Kathleen's work, is felt nationally and internationally in the fields both of scholarship and of entertainment. By a remarkable coincidence the year 1968, when Kathleen became Secretary, was also the year of publication of Gordon Haight's biography, and it seems to me that that was the year when George Eliot began really to come back into prominence after a long time of comparatively shadowy existence. Haight's biography was the first of a long list of subsequent biographies whose authors had help and encouragement from Kathleen, and of course Kathleen is herself a published author in the George Eliot field, and the recipient of an Honorary Master of Arts degree from Warwick University in recognition of her deep knowledge and achievement.

Kathleen is indeed the fountain of all knowledge about the areas of Nuneaton and Coventry in which George Eliot was born and brought up and thus a great help to the local tourist industry in an area known on the road signs as 'George Eliot Country'. Part of the local profile raising has included the Fellowship's commissioning and fund-raising for the statue in Nuneaton, and I treasure a local press cutting recording that as the Duchess of Kent found herself unable to unveil the statue this would be done by a nonentity from London!

It's no exaggeration to say that Kathleen has 'lived' George Eliot in a single-minded and most devoted way. How lucky we have been, and George Eliot has been, to have such a champion. And how lucky Kathleen has been, and we have been, that Bill has always been there, supporting everything that Kathleen has done, and filling the role of Chairman to perfection, always speaking without a script and with wise and humane things to say.

Of course no one can go on for ever – it's amazing that Kathleen was able to continue for as long as she did with her health problems, and she must be so pleased such excellent volunteers have come forward to take her place and Bill's, and to carry on all their good work, and it's very good to know that Kathleen will continue to care for the archive.

Thank you Kathleen, and thank you Bill.



Address by Gabriel Woolf

It's always a pleasure and a privilege to be here, and it's a privilege and a pleasure to be asked to say something about the Adamsons, coupled with the future of the Fellowship.

I've known Kathleen and Bill longer than George Eliot was writing novels. From when, as far as I can remember, The George Eliot Billiardrooms was the chief feature of Nuneaton – and it felt as if we were the only three people, apart from Gordon Haight, who read her.

The Fellowship, you'll remember, was composed, then, of people from around here who, in the main thought Isaac was a splendid Evans and *The Mill on the Floss* was to be kept on a high shelf. Kathleen changed all that, four-handedly. Four-handedly, because Bill was always there, patient and supportive – the expert on historical Coventry, doomed forever to be listening to us going on about the Japanese branch or other horticultural matters.

I can remember that it was exactly forty years ago that Kathleen took the chance of inviting an actor – an actor – to open the tiny new exhibition at Nuneaton Museum. She took a risk that I even liked George Eliot and hadn't only been given *Middlemarch* to read on radio, as a boring job. There were only a few of us about and it took around five minutes to see the exhibits. But it was a start.

It was a start because that was the week that Kathleen and Bill had arranged to commemorate the 150th anniversary of George Eliot's birth. For me it is always memorable as the time when we were invited to Griff. Griff was for the last time leaving private hands, for sale, and the couple who were leaving gave us tea, and let me go up to the attic. Up to her attic. Empty, whitewashed, silent, the worm-eaten beams, I could almost hear the young Mary Anne, sitting on the floor crying there. That week many people joined the Fellowship. Kathleen and Bill had launched it.

And the annual readings began and, while they aren't world-moving they are a unique strand of our Fellowship – a living part, that other societies don't have, perhaps. And that was only one way in which Kathleen took the Fellowship forward. Annual lectures, the birthday lunch, 'but I ordered the pâté', the Westminster wreath-laying, were all her ideas, and not only ideas – her work load.

She did practically everything herself. Committees in my experience are of two kinds, the thoroughly democratic, who debate everything at length and with heat and, when it comes to a decision, look at the floor, until someone suggests a sub-committee to report back.

Or there is benign dictatorship, which sounds terrible but gets things done. What you need is some selfless person with vision, enthusiasm, energy and dedication (and there aren't a lot of those about) and a few admiring people to make the tea and eat the biscuits, and nod at appropriate moments. Those are the winning societies every time. I've seen it and it works. I've now offended everyone who worked on every committee for forty years and 'I feel all the better for it'. It has to be central to your life and then the rewards are in seeing the success, in enjoying the events themselves, in meeting people you wouldn't otherwise meet and spreading the word. Literary evangelicalism.

A high point of the Fellowship under Kathleen was getting Gordon Haight to visit us. Fascinating for Kathleen – he was the nearest thing to talking to George Eliot around. And fascinating for me. I remember it was outside these very walls that I set eyes on him and his wife just back from a holiday in Portugal. Tall, distinguished, the man who had devoted thirty years to her letters, wow. And I was introduced to them. 'I think I know why you went to Portugal for your holidays', I quipped. 'I think it was your wife's idea, because it was the only country in Europe George Eliot never visited.' She laughed. He was looking at me, nothing moved, cold blue eyes. Then he said 'Lewes's uncle was in Portugal. He was in the wine trade.' He was nicer later.

Forty annual readings we did. I remember the heady days of hundreds filling the theatre in the Warwick Arts Centre – where are the readings of yesteryear? They were sponsored by nice people who paid a small amount each year for the privilege of being allowed to stay away, and didn't mind being named and shamed on the programme as sponsors. A good idea: maybe it could be revived? I concentrate on these because these were the times Kathleen and Bill and I were most directly involved, and I remember their generous hospitality, and especially the coconut pyramids. Those were the days when I was eating. Then I would have a year off, to think up a new title for next year, but Kathleen would move on to give talks, organize visits, tours, the lecture, the dinner, 'the puddings were better last year', get speakers, get people to replace speakers fallen by the wayside, the newsletters, the *Review*. And her main back-up was always Bill. She was the driving force, but he was behind the wheel, and now behind her chair, and Kathleen is the driven force. She deserves our thanks, and receives our thanks, for giving herself to making such a huge success of the Fellowship, giving herself body and soul for forty years, and her soul is intact, and we won't talk about the body.

She has always had the task of satisfying those who saw George Eliot as a peg to hang their post-deconstructional theories upon, and those who wanted to know if Marian's mother really did keep gin in the teapot. Not easy.

She planned and fulfilled many memorials to the lady, including the stone in Westminster Abbey. And the statue in Nuneaton, with the Abbey one being marginally safer from reversing lorries.

And so to the future of the Fellowship, in a world where so many children in England don't speak English, let alone read it. I have to remind myself that my grandfather came over at the age of twelve, knowing no English too, and my father finished up reading Dickens from one end of the bookshelf to the other and starting again, and he was a bit like the little Jew in the old joke who saves and saves till he can buy a suit in Saville Row, looks at himself in the mirror in it, and starts crying. 'Something wrong with the fit sir?' asks the shopman, 'No I'm just thinking vat a pity it is ve lost India.' Maybe we'll have Monty Panesar bursing into tears one day and saying, 'Or vvat a pity we lost *to* India ...'.

And the grandchildren of Polish plumbers will be writing pluperfect constructionalist essays on 'Vy Ladislaw is the greatest character in English fiction, even if he couldn't fix a washer on a tap.'

And we owe it all as a possibility to Kathleen and Bill for having kept everything going and building such a fine Fellowship. They should be proud. So will you please raise your glasses to ...