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2011

## Annual Report 2010

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## Annual Report 2010

By John Burton

It is pleasing to report another successful year for the Fellowship, albeit with the occasional blip where we were perhaps over-ambitious in our plans: we had to cancel two of our George Eliot Country Tours. We lost a few members, either as a result of age and infirmity or the increase in our subscription rates, but we also gained new ones, and made many new contacts as a result of our activities through the year.

I start with thanks to the Fellowship Council, strengthened at the AGM with new members; I am glad to report that our Council meetings are interesting, lively and full of suggestions for furthering the aims of the Fellowship. New Council members Elaine Peake, Pam Weight and Juliet Hopper are making great contributions and the rest of the Council, Joan Bunn, Jill Bridgewater, May Green, Viv Wood, Susan Healey and I are delighted that our meetings are so productive, and that there is a willingness to try new ideas and ways of reaching new audiences.

My second vote of thanks goes to our Vice-Presidents and President, who unfailingly give support and encouragement in all our activities. I know that you would wish me to thank especially John Rignall and Beryl Gray for the marvellous work they do in editing the *Review*, and to express my gratitude to the Annual Essay Prize panel of judges. Rosemary Ashton, Giles Foster, Kathryn Hughes and Gabriel Woolf have all supported us as speakers in the last year and we are greatly indebted to them that in their busy professional lives they nevertheless find time to travel to Nuneaton and present sparkling performances for our members and guests.

The theme for the year was *The Mill on the Floss* and we arranged a rich variety of *Mill*-related activities for our members. We are also attracting an increasing number of non-members to our events, and since they pay more than members we are always glad to see them! The George Eliot Weekend in May was well attended and enjoyed by all. The Saturday included four papers, by Dr Marilyn Orr from Laurentian University, Ontario on *The Mill on the Floss and the 1860s*; Brenda Maddox then described how she researched and produced her latest book on George Eliot, published in 2009; after a buffet lunch at Bedworth Civic Hall we heard from Dr Melissa Raines from the University of Liverpool on '*Strains of Solemn Music*' in *The Mill on the Floss*; and the day ended with a fascinating combination of personal and critical analysis of *Middlemarch* by Rebecca Mead, a staff writer on *The New Yorker*.

Although it is strictly speaking more relevant to next year's *Review*, I include it here for obvious reasons, but Rebecca Mead subsequently wrote an article for *The New Yorker* which was published in February 2011. It detailed her experience at the George Eliot Day and told of the importance of *Middlemarch* in her life. Within hours of publication we received emails from America telling us about it, and then a letter sent from Canada from someone I taught with in Coventry 44 years ago, addressed simply to me, c/o Griff House, Nuneaton, England!

The following day we ran another of our George Eliot Country Tours, but this time in a 1929 vintage Midland Red open sided charabanc. The weather was perfect, Arbury was marvellous as it was bathed in English sunshine, and we had a superb outdoor buffet in the grounds of Astley Book Farm, firm friends of the Fellowship and now one of the country's leading second

hand book shops, with an excellent selection of George Eliot material.

In June we held the Nuneaton wreath-laying at the obelisk in the Memorial Gardens and on this occasion we invited King Edward College student (now reading Theology at Cambridge) Rosie Brown, who had played the part of Dinah Morris in the college production of *Adam Bede* the previous November, to lay our wreath and to say a few words, which she did with great confidence and charm. Eleven groups were represented and wreaths were laid by them all.

In July the Fellowship held a wreath-laying ceremony in Westminster Abbey. From 1980 until 2005 we had made an annual trip to London, but then had decided to make it a five-yearly event. However, it turned out to be a very popular event in 2010 and the coach was fully booked. We arrived early in London and visited Highgate Cemetery to see George Eliot's grave, something many of our members had not done before. We think now that we will make the Abbey wreath-laying a biennial event and try to link it with aspects of George Eliot's life in London. It is also a good opportunity for us to meet some of our London based members at the Abbey service. In 2010 the guest of honour was Professor Kathryn Hughes, who delivered a fascinating and interesting speech to an appreciative congregation of members.

The Fellowship Council has been seeking ways of introducing more people to George Eliot and in 2010 we introduced two free walks during which people were told more about George Eliot. The idea arose from a suggestion from the then Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth, Tom Wilson, who asked me to arrange some Heritage Walks as part of his Mayor's activities. One was a walk around George Eliot's Nuneaton, which included some of the places which appear in *Janet's Repentance*, as well as the usual landmarks in the town and in Chilvers Coton. This was so successful that we repeated it later in the summer, each time with about twenty-five participants. The second walk was designed to tell walkers more about *The Mill on the Floss*. It started and finished at Griff House, included the 'brown canal' and Red Deeps, and several readings at points along the walk. This walk was done four times, again with about twenty-five participants each time. Copies of the book were available for those who wanted to learn more!

In September, and as part of Heritage Weekend, we organized another George Eliot Country Tour, having had to cancel earlier ones through lack of support. But it is making us look again at the way we arrange and market the tours, which have remained largely unaltered for over a decade.

In October we held the annual lecture at Bedworth Civic Hall and Professor Rosemary Ashton gave a scintillating lecture on *The Mill on the Floss and the Difficulties of Relationships*. During the following weeks we offered slide shows and gave talks about *The Mill on the Floss* to several groups in Warwickshire. In mid-October we were delighted to welcome Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks who gave us their inspired readings from *The Mill* in Chilvers Coton Parish Church. We held the event during the afternoon, which enabled some members to attend who do not like going out at night, and it certainly improved the attendance figures. It also meant that Gabriel and Rosalind very generously returned to London via Coventry and performed a mini-version for Kathleen and Bill Adams in their own home, as they had been unable to travel to Nuneaton. Kathleen and Bill wish to be remembered to all our members who recall their devoted service to the Fellowship over forty years. I speak to them regularly and visit occasionally to update them on our activities.

As another event to celebrate *The Mill on the Floss* we arranged a literary trip to Gainsborough, following, by coach rather than train, the steps of George Eliot and G. H. Lewes when they visited the town in 1858 in search of a suitable setting for a Mill which had to be susceptible to the possibility of serious flooding. We had coffee in a pub next to the tributary of the River Idle and a tour of Gainsborough Old Hall, where we read the section of the novel where Maggie helps to look after a stall at the bazaar. Sadly, the busy inland port which enabled Tom Tulliver to prosper is now bereft of shipping, and the agricultural industry which once sustained the town has disappeared.

The Fellowship was pleased once again to support the conference in London, held at the Senate House, with a full day of papers on *The Mill on the Floss* organized by Barbara Hardy and Louise Lee. I now travel down by train with a case loaded with books and George Eliot souvenirs and take a stall at the back of the lecture hall. This year I was able to include large posters of our student production, which was about to take place. It is always good to meet some of our London based members and I am invited to say a few words about the Fellowship. Most years we gain a few new members at this event and we make a contribution towards the refreshments at the end of the day.

Also in November the Fellowship worked with King Edward Sixth Form College in Nuneaton and supported their production of Vivienne Wood's adaptation of *The Mill on the Floss*. We think this sort of co-operation between a literary society and a college is rare, if not unique, and we are very proud of it since it helps to make students in Nuneaton aware of the work of George Eliot in a way they will never forget. As young performers they are nearer in age to Maggie and Tom, Hettie, Arthur and Adam than any of us are, and it is a delight to see them working on the production with such pleasure and diligence. Simon Winterman, Head of Performing Arts at the college, is an inspiring director and the performance sold out twice at Bedworth Art Centre, and again at Nuneaton Art Centre to audiences full of young people. In earlier years we had gained grants for this work but in 2010 the Fellowship supported the project entirely from its own resources. We also produced a DVD of the production and published Viv's script; both are still available.

Finally, in November we held the annual Birthday Lunch at Weston Hall in Bulkington (one of several possible places for Raveloe), where our guest of honour was Simon Winterman. He spoke eloquently of his work with students on their productions of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* and of his pleasure in working with the Fellowship in such a creative way. The toast to Milby was given by the Mayor, Don Navarro, who spoke with delight of his reading George Eliot when he was growing up in the West Indies.

Throughout the year I receive a constant variety of emails from all over the world about George Eliot. Most of those are now forwarded to the Council members who use email. This keeps the Council very much in touch with what is happening, helps us all to take on the different aspects of the Secretariat, and enables us to share out the tasks of running the Fellowship, so that we all take pleasure in the tasks rather than being burdened by them!