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Chairman's Annual Report 2012

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CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT 2012

By John Burton

The year began in March with an introduction to *Romola* for the Nuneaton George Eliot Study Group which was attended by nearly forty local members. This was followed up by more in depth sessions on *Romola* at Bedworth Almshouses after Easter. These sessions were aimed at those going to Florence in November, to walk in Romola's footsteps. Numbers were constant throughout the sessions and we ended the ten sessions by watching the 1924 silent film version of the book. The study notes for these sessions will be made available to members worldwide on the website.

Following the AGM that same weekend, Vivienne Wood and Simon Winterman gave a presentation on their Geneva trip. The invitation to address the students of Geneva University had been arranged by Dr Valerie Fehlbaum, one of our speakers at the George Eliot study day in May. Following Vivienne and Simon's successful stage adaptations of *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*, Dr Fehlbaum had invited them to talk to her students about adapting George Eliot for the stage.

The expanded weekend in May, concentrating on George Eliot's European interest was very successful. We heard papers from Dr John Rignall on 'George Eliot and Europe', Professor Ken Newton on 'George Eliot and the Ethical', and Dr Valerie Fehlbaum on 'George Eliot and Geneva', finishing with a performance of the playwright Vanessa Oakes's 'The Oracle of the Tap Rooms', about Joseph Liggins, the man who had claimed to be George Eliot. The monologue was performed by Jon Morris and directed by Mark Evans. Vanessa is a much valued member of the George Eliot Fellowship and has since been awarded an Arts Council grant to write another play about George Eliot.

The following day was the George Eliot Country Tour. A 1920s style charabanc omnibus driving through Nuneaton certainly turned heads as did some of the participants who had sportingly dressed in 1920s costume for the occasion. The weather was good, the buffet lunch delightful, and Arbury, Astley and Griff their usual captivating selves.

The Nuneaton wreath laying was another successful event; fourteen wreaths were laid and nearly 50 people attended. Tea and cake followed at Nuneaton Museum. Jack West, a former student of King Edward VI College, now a student at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, was our guest speaker. Jack, having starred in *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*, spoke of the support and inspiration he had received from the Fellowship through the dramatic productions.

In July we had our Westminster Abbey wreath laying. A coach from the Midlands was joined by a pleasing number of London and Home Counties members. The guest of honour was Canon Edward Pogmore, chaplain at the George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton. Experiences in his ministry produce a wisdom about the human condition which chimes well with George Eliot. Earlier we visited the British Library's 'Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands' exhibition on the sense of place in literature. We were thrilled to see the original manuscripts of *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss*.

The September Study Group at Aldersgate looked at *Suite Francaise* by Irene Nemirovski and was led by Eric Leese. Brenda Evans organizes these study sessions and we are grateful to her for booking the leaders, arranging the venue and making everyone feel

welcome.

In October, Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks visited us for one of their incomparable afternoons of readings. The venue was the Old Meeting URC in Bedworth. This 1726 dissenting chapel has a long tradition of music and public performances, and a local belief that Mary Ann visited it. Their readings from *Romola* and *Brother Jacob* were much appreciated. The acoustics are entirely suited for readings and Gabriel and Rosalind loved the venue, so it is booked for 2013.

The annual birthday luncheon was a great success, efficiently organized by one of our Council members, Juliet Hopper. We had felt unhappy with the service at Weston Hall so moved to Ansty Hall, a fine 18th century house, close to the M6 and M69. Our guests of honour were Canon Edward Pogmore and his wife. He had spoken eloquently at Westminster Abbey, and did so again here; we also welcomed the Mayor of Nuneaton and Bedworth, John Haynes and his wife. John is a Fellowship life member, so was amongst friends. Our president, Jonathan Ouvry and his wife Marjorie also came; it is always good to see them at events.

The annual lecture in 2012 was in December and we made a day of it. The theme was *Romola*, so who better to invite than Professor Leonée Ormond, who edited the Everyman edition many of us had read during the year? Jaque Bohn Donada, a Brazilian PhD student working on *Romola*, had made contact with us; Jaque was visiting Europe in late November and her university let her break the return journey to deliver a paper to us. She spoke of her studies and her research into the public knowledge of Eliot in Brazil. She was a superb speaker. Jaque has since been awarded her PhD and is lecturing at the University of Parana in Brazil. We look forward to future visits from her. After lunch we showed the 1924 silent film again of *Romola* which had so captivated members in June.

In 2012 there were many additional events for members and non-members. We now make higher charges for non-members attending events, and the extra income generated does help to offset costs. Last year was an expensive one for us, since a lot of the website costs had to be met up front, and several events lost money. The most significant event for 35 members and non members was the trip to Florence, in the footsteps of George Eliot and *Romola*. It was a wonderful experience for everyone. Two members flew over from America to join the group and we were blessed with blue, cloudless skies for the entire stay. We must thank Denis Baylis for his meticulous organization of the trip.

During the summer months we arranged more of our 'Introduction to George Eliot' walks. One walk centres round Griff, concentrating on *The Mill on the Floss* and includes readings from the novel. A second takes in George Eliot's Nuneaton with readings from *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Lasting two hours, and free, they have attracted people with no great knowledge of George Eliot but with sufficient interest to find out more. We also offer them to groups who have asked for a talk about George Eliot.

The Fellowship donated £1000 to Nuneaton Museum to provide equipment in their new Writing Room which we hope will encourage new readers to use new technology to reach George Eliot.

In March, which turned out to be summer in the UK, we took part in an edition of *The One Show* for the BBC. Arthur Smith spends a night in the homes of dead authors for a five minute feature about them. I was interviewed in the snug at Griff, the sun shone and even Nuneaton town centre looked attractive. It was good popular TV and we were impressed by the care taken and the amount covered in a short feature.

Also at Griff House, students from King Edward VI College performed excerpts from George Eliot as part of their drama assessment, and several of us attended and admired what they achieved.

Members will recall the proposal to demolish part of the farm outbuildings at the rear of Griff House. They were there in Mary Ann's girlhood, and appear in the engraving of the farm in Cross's 1885 biography. The local conservation officer saw no reason to conserve them, neither did English Heritage, and neither, on appeal, did DCMS. We felt that a building with associations with a great writer deserves to be saved, so we pressed on. Rebecca Mead had a blog in the *New Yorker*, Kathryn Hughes wrote a piece in the *Guardian*, and several academics and authors wrote to the CEO at Whitbread pointing out the folly of their proposal. In December at a meeting with Whitbread they offered to pay £85,000 to restore the building so that we can use it as a George Eliot Visitor Centre. Plans are in hand to restore it and create a meeting/study room, an exhibition area and room for the Fellowship archive. Vivienne Wood is chairing the group which will make it happen.

During Heritage Weekend the museum in Nuneaton took one of Robert Evans's diaries to Griff House. Visitors could see the diary in the place it was written. The second George Eliot Tour was able to look at it during the day. The diary is also available online and as a blog (Robertevans1830.wordpress.com).

The Fellowship continues to have close connections with the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre to bring more George Eliot connections to the Centre. A window now looks across the road to Coton (Shepperton) church, and the George Eliot Fellowship council has agreed to give £1000 to convert part of a room into Milly Barton's chamber. Displays will tell the story of Amos and his family, the links with Chilvers Coton and landmarks like the workhouse and the church.

During the year we welcomed several individuals and groups to the area. From the States, Jacqueline Osherow, a poet and academic was thrilled by the lush green of Red Deeps. Visitors from Kirk Hallam were fascinated to learn of the Evans link with their area, and in August we had a wonderful few days with thirteen Japanese members. We took them to Coventry and Arbury and all our usual destinations. Their visit has helped to maintain the strong links we have with the Japanese branch.

No Society or Fellowship can exist without the time, energy, and dedication of its officers and administrators. We are grateful to John Rignall and Beryl Gray for their unstinting efforts in editing this Review. It is a huge task undertaken with quiet dedication and great skill, ensuring that we are held in high regard all over the world.

John Rignall is joined by Tonny van den Broek in judging the entries to the annual essay prize. Their judgement is invaluable and helps to encourage future academics. Our other vice-presidents have been particularly helpful, especially over the Griff outbuildings, where support makes such a difference. The essay prize for 2012 was awarded to Royce Best, an American student. His paper appears elsewhere in the Review. We hope the new website will encourage more people to enter for the prize, which pays the winner a useful £500.

Finally I pay tribute to the Fellowship Council, who work hard to provide an exciting and interesting programme. Gradually, roles have evolved for each of us, especially the secretariat which shares out the onerous jobs. During the year Joan Bunn resigned as a Council member, having previously relinquished her role as vice-chairman. Joan was always supportive of our activities and I valued her advice and wisdom. May Green MBE also resigned from the

Council. May was always alert to what was needed at events, like refreshments, cakes, flowers, introductions and thanks, and already we miss her help.

Our Treasurer, Jill Bridgewater, is meticulous with our money; Juliet Hopper keeps membership lists updated and accessible, thanks to her IT skills. Pam Weight is always on the lookout for new ways to bring George Eliot to new audiences and also offered us her home as a venue for a reading group. Sue Healey, a former librarian, looks after the Fellowship scrapbooks, and Elaine Peake's background in publishing is invaluable. Elaine also attends Alliance of Literary Societies events. The ALS is forty in 2013, and as it was founded by Kathleen and Bill Adams, (former chairman and secretary of the Fellowship), we need to continue to be involved. Elaine has already started us thinking about how we will celebrate 2019, the 200th anniversary.

Denis Baylis is the most recent addition to the Fellowship Council but already we wonder how we managed without him. Denis brings a careful, critical approach to the texts we study and his erudition is much admired. New ideas for literary trips also come from him, and he then organizes them! Finally, huge thanks to our vice-chairman, Vivienne Wood, who is a great help to me and to the Fellowship. She is involved in every aspect of what we do. It is a privilege for me to be supported by such a talented and dedicated team, and I thank them all on behalf of our members.



The George Eliot Fellowship party outside the Uffizi Gallery, Florence in November 2012.
(Photo: John Burton).