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ANNUAL REPORT 1997
by Kathleen Adams

1997 was, as always, a busy year for the Fellowship, beginning with the Annual General Meeting on 14 March. Mrs Kathleen Porter retired from the Fellowship Council and was thanked for many supportive years. The Chairman had just completed twenty-five years in office and was presented with a gift token to show the Fellowship’s appreciation for all those years in office. Mr David Adams was elected to take the place of Mrs Porter and Mrs Vivienne Wood of King Edward Sixth Form College, Nuneaton was co-opted for one year. A George Eliot version of ‘Call my Bluff’ concluded the meeting.

On a less rewarding note, we saw on BBC Television a film of The Mill on the Floss at the beginning of the year. It was a great disappointment, although attractively filmed. It was so lacking in humour and passion apart from diminishing the story and losing so much of its significance. Far too much had been changed, valuable characters had disappeared and the ending was a total misreading of George Eliot’s story.

In March we were saddened by the death of Ray Green who had been a valuable and very supportive member of the Fellowship Council for many years until ill health had forced him to retire.

‘Heard But Not Seen’ was the title of the 1997 George Eliot Readings devised by Gabriel Woolf and presented by him with Rosalind Shanks in Nuneaton at the Town Hall and in Coventry at the University of Warwick Arts Centre of 17 and 18 April. This was a delightful programme, looking at Victorian children in fiction with particular emphasis on The Mill on the Floss. Unfortunately, our audience was smaller than usual and this was undoubtedly caused partly by the lack of publicity we had locally. The Coventry Evening Telegraph with its various Warwickshire editions promised cover and failed to keep its promise. Also, many of the students who had complimentary tickets did not use them, clearly feeling no obligation to attend an event for which they had paid nothing. We hope to try and get round this problem in 1998 by making a small charge. We are immensely grateful to Gabriel Woolf for the many many hours he puts in to select his material for this annual programme; what we see on stage is only the tip of the iceberg. He and Rosalind Shanks provide what must be the highlight of the year. We are very fortunate to have them.

The Fellowship was well represented at the Annual General Meeting of the Alliance of Literary Societies in Birmingham in April when I was elected Vice Chairman and Joan Bunn, the Fellowship’s Vice Chairman, joined the ALS committee. The Mary Webb Society hosted the seminar after the business meeting and Gabriel Woolf, who is President of the ALS, and Rosalind Shanks read from Mary Webb’s works. The Daily Telegraph covered the meeting and, in a large article in their Magazine, included a rather flippant report of the proceedings. Clearly their reporter thought we were all a trifle daft!

We held our first George Eliot Day on 17 May, and it was a huge success with papers from Ruth Harris, Tom Winnifrith (University of Warwick) and Beryl Gray (Birkbeck College). The
day concluded with a delightful recital by Michael Harris on George Eliot’s own Broadwood piano, purchased for her in 1873 by G. H. Lewes. The piano is now in Nuneaton Museum.

The Southern Branch of the Fellowship also held a George Eliot Day on 31 May at the Guildford Institute. Margaret Jennings, the branch Secretary, was doubtful about it taking place at all because of apparent apathy in the south but last minute bookings saved the day and it was a great success with stimulating lectures by Rosemary Ashton, Gerlinde Röder-Bolton and Beryl Gray, and concluding with a slide show of places and people associated with George Eliot. We congratulate Margaret on her hard work and enthusiasm.

We had an extremely wet day for the Nuneaton wreath-laying – so wet we had to move the ceremony to Nuneaton Museum. Ruth Harris, our Guest of Honour, had written her talk to us around the delightful surroundings in which we were supposed to be standing! In the event, the surroundings included the effigies of G. H. Lewes, John Cross and George Eliot herself who listened impassively to what Ruth had to say.

The Westminster Abbey wreath-laying took place on 21 June with Professor Carol Martin from Boise University, Idaho, as our Guest of Honour. There were readings by me and by our President Johnathan Ouvry; and a scene from *Daniel Deronda* presented by Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks.

There have been two productions of plays based on George Eliot’s novels during the year. At the Derby Playhouse some of us saw an excellent adaptation of *Adam Bede* by actor Geoffrey Beevers, and a most innovative adaptation by Bob Eaton of *Silas Marner* at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. Bob Eaton met some of us a few days later to discuss the production with us and this was a very enlightening meeting as he explained the use of a musical narrative to tell the story.

In May, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council launched an Education Pack on *The Mill on the Floss*, the book of which had been written by Vivienne Wood of King Edward Sixth Form College. The Fellowship was represented and, in the afternoon of the day of the launch, took a party of teachers from all over the country on a George Eliot Country tour which included a schoolroom at the Chilvers Coton Heritage Centre where some of the Vivienne pupils presented their own production of a scene from the novel in a most exciting way.

We were also represented on 5 June when Nuneaton Museum celebrated its eightieth birthday. Joan Bunn, Anne Pavitt and Anna Craig manned a Fellowship stall in the George Eliot Gallery and considerable interest was shown in us.

Several members attended a weekend course on George Eliot’s first and last novels at Maryland College at Woburn under the guidance of Dr Graham Handley. Discussion during the course raised some lively topics and we also showed our collection of slides. The excellent equipment at Maryland exposed the sometimes poor quality of our slides and, as a result, we co-opted onto the Fellowship Council John Burton who has such expertise in this field. Since then John has worked steadily on improving not only our slides but all our display material. Now that we have such excellent material to show we have purchased a fine set of display panels and can now go to exhibitions etc. with pride in our display instead of the tatty col-
lection the Chairman and I have taken with is on such occasions. John is going to be worth his weight in gold to the Fellowship!

The Chairman and I were invited to represent the Fellowship at the opening of a new public house and restaurant in Nuneaton called ‘The Felix Holt’. It has a row of books to give it a slight ‘literary’ touch and it prides itself on not playing music but it has no private rooms in which the Fellowship might meet so, apart from its name, will not add anything to the feel of George Eliot in the town. We constantly lament the lack of George Eliot–associated premises we might use as a meeting place.

The Chairman and I represented the Fellowship at the opening night of ‘George Eliot: a Woman of Some Importance’ written by Robin Allan, a member of the Fellowship, at the Buxton Festival in July and were very impressed by the performance of the four actors in costume. The production was subsequently booked for our George Eliot Day in 1998.

The Study Group met in February to discuss The Law and the Lady by Wilkie Collins under the leadership of our treasurer, Sally Pye who, during the year, became Mrs Poulson. The next meeting of the group was less successful as it attracted far fewer members, probably because three members presented papers instead of a discussion of a novel. It was thought that the Study Group might have run out of ideas and members were questioned as to whether they wished to continue. Eighteen of the original twenty nine replied in the affirmative – there was no reply from the others so it was assumed that they did not wish to continue. However, even with eighteen members the Study Group is felt to be viable and will carry on into the foreseeable future.

Our autumn programme began with a very successful literary outing to the Arnold Bennett Country guided by members of the Arnold Bennett Society on 20 September. Then to Kedleston Hall and afterwards for an excellent cream tea – what a lovely end to a day that had been most efficiently organised by Anna Craig. I extend my own thanks to Anna for taking off my shoulders a task that I know from experience gives a great deal of work if it is to be a success – and Anna’s literary outings always are. Professor Gillian Beer delivered the George Eliot Memorial Lecture on 18 October, taking as her subject ‘A Troubled Friendship’ and telling us about the rather odd friendship between George Eliot and Edith Simcox. It was a most interesting subject. This was the twenty-sixth Memorial Lecture. The first was in 1972: not many literary societies can claim such a record.

Our 1997 programme ended with a very successful Birthday Luncheon in the Raveloe Restaurant at the George Eliot Hospital. Seventy-three members and friends attended and heard our Guest of Honour, actor and director Geoffrey Beevers, propose a most interesting Toast to the Immortal Memory of George Eliot. He spoke about his adaptation of Adam Bede for the stage using only six actors, keeping us all fascinated by how he had managed to do so and remain so very faithful to the book.

The same weekend the Fellowship took part in a series of events to honour Coventry writers. Ruth Harris and I spoke about George Eliot to a rather small but appreciative audience. Some of these events have been held in the afternoon and have attracted much larger audiences and we do know that many people, particularly women, do not like going in to the city centre in
the evening. If more events of this mature are held the City Libraries who organize them are bearing this in mind.

We were, of course, delighted that the Coventry City Libraries have woken up to the fact that the city has a lot to offer in this way. A private concern called Coventry and Warwickshire Promotions is also working on promoting the city’s cultural associations and has already honoured Philip Larkin with a plaque and plan to do more to honour George Eliot. We await further developments.

Behind the scenes the Fellowship Council have been working on your and George Eliot’s behalf. As well as covering ten very busy meetings during the year at the Town Hall, we have worked with Warwickshire County Council and Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council to erect a much more prominent sign in Nuneaton Library to direct the public towards their collection of George Eliot books and documents and towards the nearby George Eliot Gallery at the same museum. On a lighter note we took John Letts and his wife out to dinner to mark their departure from the Astley Studio where John’s statue of George Eliot was created, as well as other pieces in tribute to her. John has not retired from his splendid work as a sculptor and is working from a studio at his Knowle home. We have arranged for the restoration of the Gwyther tomb in Chilvers Coton Churchyard to be undertaken at the Fellowship’s expense (Mrs Gwyther is thought to be the original of Milly Barton in ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton’ in Scenes of Clerical Life). We have also approached the Borough Council about the possibility of a new memorial to George Eliot in the Memorial Garden in Nuneaton. The original memorial was erected first in Arbury Park by Lord Daventry’s grandfather, Sir Francis Newdegate, and was given to the Garden when it opened in 1952. It is very prone to graffiti and vandalism and, it must be admitted, is not really a thing of great beauty. It is intended that it shall remain in place as a historical monument and the new memorial is seen as a bust of George Eliot on a suitable plinth – the bust of course, to be produced by John Letts. Once we have had permission from the Borough Council to erect the new memorial we shall open a public appeal for funds but have already been given a grant of £1000 from a London charity of which one of our members is a trustee. We have high hopes for the new venture and are planning it as our Millennium project.

The gryphons’ heads disappeared from the gateposts at Corley Hall during the year; these were the inspiration for the gateposts at the Hall Farm in Adam Bede. After being damaged in an attempted burglary they are being restored and the Fellowship has offered financial help if needed but nothing further has been heard. One head is back in position but there is still no sign of the other. More enquiries must be made.

Mrs Joan Bunn, Vice Chairman, has typed the entries from some of Robert Evans’s diaries. These had been originally handwritten by our late historian, Dorothy Dodds, but were very difficult to read. Mrs Dodds had arranged the entries in order of theme and they are now much easier to read and could be of use to students and researchers.

The George Eliot Fellowship Prize was again offered for a paper on George Eliot. The 1997 prize-winner was Nicola Harris of Birmingham and as well as guaranteed publication of her essay, she receives two years’ free membership of the Fellowship.

The Borough Council tours of the George Eliot Country, run on five Sundays during the summer in conjunction with the Fellowship, have once more been immensely successful. Those attending are overwhelmed by the good value for money and the extreme friendliness of the guides and those representing the Borough Council. The Chairman and Secretary, Anne Pavitt, Ann O’Callaghan and Joe Davies have done two tours each and the Secretary and Chairman one other for a local society. They both did talks on George Eliot to a variety of societies during the year. Most of these create a new interest in George Eliot locally. One or two give a strong impression that the club has to find a speaker and almost anyone will do. Even they find George Eliot’s interesting life something to marvel at.

During the summer Professor Rosemary Ashton was invited to become a Vice President of the Fellowship in recognition of her excellent work on both George Eliot and G. H. Lewes. She accepted with pleasure.

Harriet Williams, an American Vice President, has collected subscriptions there and issued our newsletters to the members in the USA for many years but has now asked to be relieved of the job. We are sincerely grateful to Harriet for the work she has done to unite the American members and to save the Fellowship a great deal of money in bank charges by collecting the subs and sending us only one cheque to be attacked by the bank. Professor Linda Robertson of Missouri has kindly agreed to take over from Harriet and we extend out thanks to her, too. We call this our American Branch but the members are too scattered to be able to meet although a few do each December at the annual Conference of the Modern Language Association of America when they hold a dinner hosted by one of them.

We have, however, formed a most valuable new branch in Japan. We had several members there and one of them, Professor Uchida of Osaka, offered to start a branch after I had asked Japanese members if they would like to make contact with each other. Professor Uchida organized a conference to mark George Eliot’s birthday on 22 November and this was a great success. He subsequently wrote to say that he had enrolled 120 new members and sent a cheque for £960 to cover their subscriptions. This has given our membership a huge boost and stood at approximately 625 at the end of the year – 120 more than our previous highest total in 1995. When one looks back to the mid-sixties when our membership stood at twenty-six it fills one with amazement!

Our other branch, the Southern Branch, survives largely because of the hard work and enthusiasm of Margaret Jennings. She organized a George Eliot Birthday Lunch in Guildford in November which attracted enough people to make it successful. Margaret herself gave a talk on ‘George Eliot and Evangelicalism’ which was very well received with perceptive questions being asked; a lively discussion followed.

The *George Eliot Review* was published in August and has been very well received. We are extremely grateful to Dr John Rignall of the University of Warwick and Dr Beryl Gray for the large amount of work which is entailed in producing the *Review*. It is in very good hands. We
also owe them a debt of gratitude, along with Dr Anthony van den Broek, for judging the Prize entries each year – a time-consuming task.

We have now been awaiting eagerly the film of Daniel Deronda for a very long time. We are assured it is going ahead but can get no firm information about when – we hope it will be worth waiting for.

During the year we heard from A. S. Byatt, one of our distinguished Vice Presidents, who had been asked by the National Portrait Gallery in London to replace the descriptive panel which accompanies the D’Albert Durade portrait of George Eliot in the Gallery. The original one by Virginia Woolf was felt to be very out of date and reflected a different view of George Eliot’s philosophy than the current one. We felt very happy with Antonia Byatt’s new wording.

Towards the end of the year Mrs Joan Bunn and other members had talked to children from Queen’s Road School in Nuneaton at the time of their visit to the George Eliot Gallery at the museum. The children’s enthusiasm was welcomed; this is another aspect of the Fellowship’s work which will undoubtedly pay off as these children become the George Eliot readers of the future.

The Fellowship received a plea for help in the autumn from Dr Boris Proskurnin of Perm University in Russia whose Centre for Victorian Studies is very short of books about George Eliot. Back numbers of the George Eliot Review have been sent, also a copy of Daniel Deronda which they lacked. We are to send a free copy of the Review each year and have asked Dr Proskurnin what else they need. This is a valuable service to universities where money is very tight but the interest in George Eliot exists.

From this it is clear that the Fellowship is an international organization with the power to help George Eliot enthusiasts who are less well off than we are in England for access to material for their researches. I frequently receive letters from abroad from students who desperately need information which is unobtainable in their own country. I also get pleas for help from students in the UK who seem to want me to do their research for them! However, I can usually point them in the right direction to do the research themselves.

Isn’t it obvious what a contribution the Fellowship can and does offer? We are by no means a ‘social club’ planning happy events for our members. Thirty years ago, almost to the day, I became Secretary of the Fellowship when membership stood at twenty-six and our capital amounted to the princely sum of £11. 17s. 8d (£11.87). The then Chairman of the Fellowship said how valuable our work could be, despite our being so small an organization. Neither he nor I could have foreseen how that work would increase over the next thirty years and how important our influence would become. Inevitably the workload has increased enormously as is evident from the postage bill in this year’s accounts. Including the postage on the Review it amounted to about £800. That is an awful lot of licking of stamps! And our assets have increased from less than £12.00 to over £60,000 – although most of that is from our recent legacy. What a great power for good in the world of literature we can be if we continue to support worthy causes and, more particularly, support the work being done by your officers and the Fellowship Council in promoting and paying tribute to George Eliot.
Finally, for the work of the Council and the officers I give many thanks and particularly to Sally Poulson with the huge task of handling our money so well, and, of course, to my husband, the Chairman, without whose support I could not possibly do the secretarial work which I love but which takes over much of our lives. I also record my thanks to Rose Selwyn of the Borough Council’s Marketing Division who works so hard for George Eliot and, in so doing, for us. And she does it with such enthusiasm, never gets flustered and is a joy to work with. Our thanks, too, to our President, Jonathan Ouvry, for his constant support. We continue to be a good team.

Kathleen Adams with her bouquet marking her 30 years’ service as Secretary of the Fellowship