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Annual Report 1994

Kathleen Adams

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ANNUAL REPORT 1994

by Kathleen Adams

The year got off to an unusual start. The hyperbole associated with the BBC Television production of *Middlemarch* suddenly shot George Eliot into the forefront of many people's minds. The beginning of the year is always a very busy time but from January onwards I was inundated with letters and phone calls. For three weeks the Fellowship became a full-time occupation. The BBC in London and in Coventry were in regular contact, admirers of George Eliot had their interest newly aroused, students aimed enquiries at us, local clubs and societies wanted talks and tours of the George Eliot Country, newspapers constantly wanted the Fellowship's views on the TV *Middlemarch*, the book, George Eliot and the tourism potential of the George Eliot Country; it seemed it would never end. But this added interest enlarged our membership and, for the first time in our 64 year history, our membership went over 500. When we heard that 80,000 copies of the Penguin *Middlemarch* had been sold we wondered, for an awful moment, what we would do if all these readers decided to join the Fellowship!

On 28 January, the Chairman and I together with Ruth and Michael Harris were interviewed at Nuneaton Museum for the BBC TV Late Show shown on 9 February. We spent a long and interesting morning at the museum – for a very few minutes' appearance. The programme just about acknowledged the existence of the Fellowship but showed Michael Harris playing George Eliot's piano with reference to neither the pianist nor the instrument. A number of academics were also included in what became an interesting film.

Michael Harris played the piano again on the evening of the Annual General Meeting. The piano had been refurbished and we were hearing it as George Eliot herself would have done 140 years earlier. The AGM was an uneventful one with all the officers and two Council members being re-elected, but the evening finished on a fascinating note when we heard Dolly Jackson speak of her experience of being an 'extra' in the TV *Middlemarch*, opening our eyes to the discomforts which fully outweigh the glamour of the job.

In the first newsletter of 1994 I asked if anyone would like to start a South of England Branch. Two members responded enthusiastically: Margaret Jennings in Crawley and Elizabeth Gundry in London. Margaret's South of England Branch was launched on 15 April. Because it covers a vast area, the gathering was not a large one but the enthusiasm of the small nucleus of the branch is undimmed. Margaret Jennings' devotion to George Eliot and her keen work in organizing events to promote her will undoubtedly keep the branch not only afloat but swimming strongly.

Elizabeth Gundry, a comparatively new member who was unaware that we already had a London Branch, was brave enough to offer to organize events in London, even though this is an area in which the existing branch officers had experienced great difficulty in eliciting response from members. Elizabeth has had some success and there will more about this as my report continues. The three London Branch officers decided at this time that they

wished to resign. Their resignation was accepted with some regret but we are grateful for what they tried to do in London since the branch was formed over 10 years ago.

In April a small group attended the Annual General Meeting and Seminar of the Alliance of Literary Societies in Birmingham. The Francis Brett Young Society were the hosts for 1994 and they presented a most interesting session, joined by the ALS President, Gabriel Woolf, who read from FBY's novels. It was also the twenty first birthday of the Alliance and I, as its founder, was presented with a bouquet of red roses.

Songs for a Spring Evening was presented at Chilvers Coton Church on 28 April. Marjorie Ouvry was the mezzo-soprano who delighted us with songs about lovers, lasses and lads and, because she generously gave her services free (she is a professional singer), we were able to make a donation to the Mary Ann Evans Hospice of £250.

Jean Bates, Manager of the Mary Ann Evans Hospice, was our Guest of Honour at the Wreath-laying in Nuneaton 19 June. She spoke about the work of the Hospice and its efforts to add some quality of LIFE to the patients. Unfortunately, she has not followed this up with the text of her address so we are unable to publish it in the 1995 Review. During the year we also gave to the Hospice a framed portrait of George Eliot; indeed, a double one, showing the young Mary Ann Evans and the more mature George Eliot. The Fellowship followed this with a set of the novels for the benefit of the patients.

In past years we have mourned the drop in interest in George Eliot in local schools. However, this has now changed a great deal. Middlemarch School, not surprisingly, suddenly woke to the importance of its name after BBC TV had given them a prod with the the serial. I was invited to go into the school and talk to the children and found them delightful and most interested in George Eliot and her local associations. George Eliot School, under a new and enthusiastic Head Teacher, also came to life again and asked for similar visits. On one of these I took a framed portrait of George Eliot which hangs in their entrance hall. Later we presented the school with a complete set of the novels bound in blue and gold – and found, to our surprise, that these are their school colours. Both schools were represented at the Wreath-laying.

On 14 and 15 June we marked, to the very day, the twenty five years in which Gabriel Woolf has been working with us. On those two days he presented another of his popular programmes of George Eliot Readings, this time entitled *JUBILEE!* in which he was joined by Rosalind Shanks. It was, as always, a delightful and entertaining programme which lay particular emphasis on the Lydgate – Rosamond marriage in *Middlemarch*. After the first performance in Nuneaton Town Hall we presented Gabriel with a water-colour of South Farm, George Eliot's birthplace, by a Coventry artist, Lesley Millward and this was followed by a presentation of a lovely crystal bowl on a plinth by the Mayor of Nuneaton. The plinth was inscribed with a message of gratitude for all Gabriel had done to promote George Eliot and the George Eliot Country in those twenty five years. We are deeply grateful to Gabriel for his work during that time but these performances could not

take place without the generous help given by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and, for the one at Warwick Arts Centre, the sponsorship given each year so readily by members and friends. We hope they all realize how great is the debt of gratitude we owe them and how warm our appreciation of their support.

Gabriel Woolf was Guest of Honour at the Westminster Abbey Wreath-laying on 25 June. We had entertained him to tea beforehand and he had a special Jubilee! cake to cut. At the Poets' Corner ceremony we had a good congregation of London and Warwickshire members and friends and the service was conducted by Canon Colin Semper. His presence gave us particular pleasure as he was once Provost of Coventry Cathedral and his welcome to the Abbey was especially warm.

On 17 July the London events programme was launched at Regent's College. The Chairman and I were pleased to be there with good wishes from the parent organization as we had been for the launch of the South of England Branch, and we very much enjoyed Rosemary Ashton's lecture on 'George Eliot in London', containing as it did some new letters from the George Eliot – John Chapman relationship. There was a large and responsive audience and Elizabeth has enrolled a number of new members. We are most grateful to her for the amount of work she has put in to get a lot of publicity for these events and for the Fellowship itself.

A small group from the South of England Branch spent a weekend in Stamford in August deeply engrossed in all aspects of the filming of *Middlemarch* there. A number of members have done the Middlemarch Tour there in 1994 and have enjoyed the experience.

On 10 September we re-visited Bedworth to be shown more of three important buildings in the town: Old Meeting House Church, the Nicholas Chamberlaine Almshouses (of which both Robert and Isaac Evans were governors) and All Saints' Parish Church where George Eliot's nephew, Frederic Evans, had been rector for 50 years. We had tea at Mill Street Methodist Church, saw their Flower Festival where one of the displays had a George Eliot theme in our honour, and also visited Frederic Evans's grave.

On 20 September I had been engaged to deliver the annual lecture in the George Eliot Centre at the George Eliot Hospital. My subject was 'George Eliot and Warwickshire' but, unfortunately, my illness prevented me from being there and my indefatigable husband read the lecture in my absence. However, I was well enough to deliver the J.B.Shelton Memorial Lecture in Coventry on 14 October. I took as my subject here 'George Eliot in Coventry' and had a large and appreciative audience. The lady has certainly had a very high profile in 1994!

The George Eliot Memorial Lecture was given in Nuneaton Town Hall on 15 October by Canon Michael Sadgrove, Precentor and Vice Provost of Coventry Cathedral, who had as his title 'Mary Ann Did Not Go: George Eliot and Religion'. This was a most sympathetic and erudite lecture.

Louis Marks, producer of the BBC TV *Middlemarch*, spoke to us on 1 November about the mammoth task of transferring *Middlemarch* to the small screen. His account was most interesting and must have proved to many of us how easily we accept what we see on our television screens without realizing the tremendous work which is done to bring it there. Undoubtedly there are people who would prefer a great novel to remain within the pages of a book, but to many millions more this adaptation gave enormous pleasure.

Because of illness I missed the Birthday Luncheon on 20 November. Held for the first time in St George's Hall, it seems to have been an undoubted success; any small faults we hope to eradicate in future. Andrew Davies was our Guest of Honour and he inevitably spoke, in proposing the Toast to the Immortal Memory, about his screenplay for the TV *Middlemarch*. Jonathan Ouvry presided and we were joined by the Mayor and Mayoress of Nuneaton and Bedworth. I am particularly grateful to those ladies who manhandled the tables and chairs before the arrival of the caterers and who provided the flowers which made the tables look so pretty. Thanks also to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman who did all the last minute jobs which are usually mine.

The South of England Branch held their Birthday Luncheon the same day and very close to another piece of 'George Eliot Country' – at the White Hart at Witley. They had earlier in the year visited The Heights, George Eliot's home at Witley and been shown round by the manageress of what is now an elderly people's residential home. The Guest of Honour at the Birthday Luncheon was Rachel Power who had played Mary Garth in *Middlemarch* and she proved to be a most popular guest.

In London two events took place in one weekend. In the elegant surroundings of Dartmouth House, Great Charles Street, W1 (home of the English Speaking Union) Elizabeth Gundrey organized a recital by Gabriel Woolf of 'Humour in George Eliot'. The following day she took a small party to the British Library to have a private view of George Eliot's MSS and letters.

The Study Group in Nuneaton has met three times during the year with tutors Ruth Harris and Andrew Cockburn, discussing *Wives and Daughters* (Mrs Gaskell), *Washington Square* (Henry James) and *My Antonia* (Willa Cather). We are deeply indebted to our Group Tutors who give their services so willingly to lead us during these very pleasant evenings.

The South of England Branch also holds a successful Study Group, having already read and discussed *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss* with more sessions to come.

The Chairman and I have spoken to 18 different clubs and societies during the year – some as far afield as the Cotswolds, Stafford and Gainsborough. We have conducted 9 tours of the George Eliot Country during the same period and we know that this extra interest has arisen because of *Middlemarch*.

During the year we presented many scrapbooks of George Eliot-related cuttings to Nuneaton Library for their George Eliot collection. This makes available material which may be of use to students; it also eases the growing problem of Fellowship storage in our small house. How we wish we had premises of our own like the Brontë Society and the Dickens Fellowship.

George Eliot: a Brief Biography was published in a fifth edition by the Fellowship because Warwickshire County Council, who had published it initially, no longer had the necessary finances to produce another edition. This was a heavy call upon Fellowship funds but a worth-while one as the book sells well and is extremely useful as an introduction to George Eliot.

We also published the twenty-fifth issue of *The George Eliot Review*. Under the joint editorship of Beryl Gray and John Rignall, this issue was particularly well received. We are most grateful for the considerable amount of work editing the *Review* entails for both of them, an added responsibility in their already busy academic lives.

In December a small party went from the Fellowship to see a musical version of *Silas Marner* in Birmingham. Performed by the City of Birmingham Touring Opera with music by Howard Goodall, it was a very rewarding experience and the sensitive musical score brought out the magic of the novel.

The George Eliot Fellowship Prize for a paper on George Eliot's works or life was won in 1994 by Dr Lesley Gordon for 'Tito, Dionysus and Apollo: an Examination of Tito Melema in *Romola*'.

With help from the Evans family, the Fellowship made it possible for the Isaac Evans's family grave, a large plot in Chilvers Coton Churchyard, to be covered in gravel to help the area to resist the growth of weeds. Beryl Gray has continued to care for George Eliot's grave in Highgate Cemetery, a task for which we are very grateful as we are too far away in Nuneaton to be able to keep an eye on it ourselves. It is most important that the grave does not have an air of neglect while we are promoting George Eliot in so many other ways.

We are still very grateful for the help of Harriet Williams in America for all she does on our behalf over there, keeping members in touch and collecting subscriptions. It is a crazy situation that, if Harriet was not there to do this for us, each individual dollar cheque from American members would be swallowed up in bank charges in the UK. Overseas payments of subscriptions continue to be a headache to many literary societies like ours. Keeping members together in a country as vast as the USA is no easy matter, but Linda Robertson of Arkansas hosted a dinner after the Modern Language Association of America annual convention in San Diego, California, on 28 December at which members and friends met and talked of George Eliot – what else?

Earlier in the year we invited Dr Beryl Gray to become a Vice-President of the Fellowship and she accepted with pleasure. Beryl has done sterling work for George Eliot for many years and we are pleased to have her amongst the names of our distinguished Vice-Presidents.

We have provided display material for libraries in this *Middlemarch* year; sadly, one of them lost an irreplaceable picture, but this is a risk we have to take since we probably hold the largest collection of such display material in the country.

Some of their own George Eliot memorabilia is included in a large exhibition entitled *Godiva City* at the Herbert Museum in Coventry. Only a tiny postcard reproduction of the D'Albert Durade portrait was initially on show with a totally inadequate introduction attached to it. After a complaint from us, the original portrait was added to a display case together with George Eliot's lamp and table but not one of these items was labelled so that visitors to the exhibition will be no wiser about George Eliot's important connection with the city. Coventry just does not seem able to get it right when it comes to George Eliot, despite our efforts!

Finally, at the end of this very busy and somewhat fraught year, I must add my thanks to all those who have made my task lighter - to members of the Fellowship Council who have met eight times during the year and who have offered the hospitality of their homes for meetings, to Rose Willis, Tourism Officer of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and her colleague, Gordon Mercer, for endless support in my work, to Nuneaton and Bedworth Joint Arts Association for their grant towards the George Eliot Memorial Lecture, but especially this year, to the Chairman without whom I could not have coped during a trying period of illness and convalescence. There cannot be many society secretaries who have a husband who can not only take over the running of the house but can also go out and give my George Eliot talks for me.

March 1995