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Annual Report 2004

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ANNUAL REPORT 2004

By Kathleen Adams

Our year never gets off to an exciting start because the first event is the Annual General Meeting but the 2004 one was rather different. The business meeting was completed swiftly as there was no change to the Council or to the officers. There was still some concern about the positions of Chairman and Secretary as there were no nominations for either post although it was known that both were eager to be replaced. The meeting was very well attended but this was obviously because we followed the business meeting with a visit from Louis Marks who produced the BBC TV film of *Daniel Deronda*. His talk about the adaptation was most interesting and we were pleased that, at last, he had been able to come and speak to us.

2004 was the 150th anniversary of the life together of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes and we had decided to celebrate both of them during the year – ever aware of the supreme importance Lewes played in the creation of ‘George Eliot’.

In April Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks made their annual visit to Nuneaton and this year their theme was ‘Feminism Versus Fiction’. Again an excellent choice of material beautifully delivered. The fellowship Council is very aware of the amount of work Gabriel does to select the material, to edit it for the programme and to rehearse it with Rosalind before we see the final polished presentation.

We held the annual George Eliot Day on 15 May and chose as its theme ‘George Eliot and her Circle’ with papers on her Coventry Circle by Ruth Harris, the London Literary Circle by me, the artists she knew by Professor Leonée Ormond, and her friends Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes by Dr Pam Hirsch. It is progressively difficult to find a new theme each year but this one worked very well. We began these special days as a stop-gap in between what we hoped would be more Warwick University Conferences but the stop-gap now has a very successful life of its own as long as we can continue to find a theme. 52 people attended the event and enjoyed the company and the excellent lunch.

There was an emphasis on Lewes at the Nuneaton Wreath-laying in June when our special guest was his great-great-granddaughter Mrs Nada Lyons. Nada is descended from Lewes’s youngest son Bertie and it was so nice to have another branch of the Lewes family with us to help us remember and honour him.

Lewes was with us again in Westminster Abbey. Jonathan Ouvry and his daughter Philippa, descended from Lewes’s eldest son Charles, read at the service, and our special guest to lay our wreath was Gabriel Woolf. Gabriel is the proud possessor of Lewes’s final diary. Written in 1878 the entries cease shortly before his death in November; his spirit of fun is still obvious in the earlier entries and Gabriel read some of these and the jokes which they contain. Unfortunately, the Abbey had provided a sound system which distorted Gabriel’s words so that many in our large congregation missed a lot of what was said. However, all is not lost as the text – and the jokes – can be found in this issue of the *George Eliot Review*.

Tea at Westminster School before the ceremony was more successful than usual as I had given

everyone a label so that they could be identified and this helped people to talk to each other. We hope that this time no one felt left out. We want everyone to feel as welcome as, indeed, they are.

In August one of our members, David McIntosh of Aberdeen, organised a George Eliot International Conference at Warwick University. This was not a Fellowship event but we helped with some finance and a trip to Arbury Hall on the last day. It was pleasant to see members there from around the world although there were very few from the UK. It began with a flourish as Gabriel Woolf and Rosalind Shanks presented their 'The Female Shakespeare, So To Speak' – a wonderful introduction to George Eliot's life. Many papers followed giving a varied view of George Eliot's work.

On 18 August Ottakar's Bookstore in Coventry invited me to speak at an evening event as part of their promotion of George Eliot. I was very surprised at the size of a most appreciative audience.

Astley Book Farm near Nuneaton arranged an evening visit for our members in September when they could browse amongst their huge collection of second-hand books, including a larger assortment books related to George Eliot than we have ever seen elsewhere. A number of members attended and it was so successful, with the provision of refreshments, that another visit may be arranged.

The thirty-third Memorial Lecture was delivered on 16 October by Professor Dinah Birch of Liverpool University. Her subject "'School-time": Teaching and Learning in George Eliot's Fiction' was most interesting and Professor Birch was a fine speaker who held the interest of the large audience. I had been anxious about ticket sales but an effective reminder brought in many more people. In an effort to add to the audience I wrote to most of the schools in the Nuneaton area, feeling sure that teachers would find the subject attractive. In the event, not one attended similarly, John Burton wrote to 87 local schools about the *Pitkin Guide to George Eliot*, also making a gift of the book to those schools he knew were studying her. Not one responded. Clearly there is no interest in the Schools in Nuneaton's world-famous daughter, which is a great pity.

The Fellowship's Study Group had lapsed for some time but one of our enthusiastic members, Brenda Evans, offered to revive it and their first meeting in October was led by Ruth Harris in a discussion of *Daniel Deronda*.

The *George Eliot Review* was published in August and was again a fine issue. We are so grateful to Dr Beryl Gray and Dr John Rignall for the immense amount of work they put into the *Review* and its very professional appearance. Packing and despatching between 550 and 600 copies is a mammoth task and I am most grateful to the two working parties who helped in this way, also to those Council members who completed about 160 customs declarations which have to be placed on many overseas copies.

After lapsing for a few years the annual George Eliot Lecture at the George Eliot Hospital was resurrected with our encouragement. Speakers are provided alternately by the hospital and the Fellowship. 2004 was their turn and Dr Veenod Patel spoke enthusiastically on 'George Eliot's

Middlemarch: The Message for Current Medical Practice in Nuneaton'. His material was very familiar to Fellowship members but there were a number of hospital staff there on whom it might have made some impact. The lecture was followed by a delicious supper provided by the hospital.

The annual George Eliot Birthday Luncheon posed a problem for the Fellowship Council as the price of the meal had increased by £3 per head, making the total a figure which we thought would be unacceptable to those wishing to attend. The extra space was caused by a large increase in staff wages and also having to pay them double time on Sunday. The Council decided that the Fellowship funds should subsidise the event for that year only. The subsequent cost to funds was almost £500 and it was agreed that this could not continue into other years. The luncheon was extremely successful – excellent food and very good service from the staff. Indeed, it was so much enjoyed that several people said it was well worth the money and they would have been willing to pay the full price. One important reason for the success of the occasion was our Guest of Honour – Professor Rosemary Ashton, always a very fine speaker, who talked to us about that first year when Lewes and George Eliot were together in a relationship which they both felt was a true marriage even if it could never be a legal one. Our President, Jonathan Ouvry, laid the wreath on the hospital's statue before the lunch, always a pleasant little ceremony so close to George Eliot's birthday. The event concluded our G. H. Lewes year.

Although most members are only aware of the events throughout the year a lot goes on behind the scenes. During the year Griff House was refurbished by the Beefeater chain of pub/restaurants. It is now very modern in its decor but what concerned us was that George Eliot's association with this, her childhood home, seemed to have disappeared. The Chairman and I went to look at the so-called improvements and discovered that there was, indeed, one 'George Eliot Room'. To our dismay it turned out to be the snooker room and one has to disturb the players if one wants to look at the George Eliot 'display'. This pitiful acknowledgement of her place in the house amounted to a few small pictures – but not one of her! No one going to Griff House for drinks or a meal would go into that room and snooker seems a most unsuitable connection with a world-renowned author! We entered into negotiations with Beefeater about this absence of George Eliot and convinced them that something should be done to acknowledge her and this will, we hope, eventually bear some fruit.

In March Miss Anna Craig resigned from the Council and her position as Membership Secretary and was replaced by Mrs Sheila Haswell who has proved to be a most efficient and helpful choice.

The Fellowship Council has met nine times during the year and most of the meetings have been well attended. In the two hours we are allowed in the Town Hall we discuss very many topics and these meetings are all very friendly and productive.

No one was available to represent the Fellowship at the AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies in 2004 which was a pity as the ALS was formed by the initiative of the Fellowship in 1973.

The George Eliot Fellowship Prize of £250 for an essay on some aspect of her life or work was

won by Susannah Rutherglen of Princeton University, New Jersey, USA. She also becomes a member of the Fellowship for two years and has her essay published in the *Review*. We congratulate her and hope she will continue her membership when the two years have passed.

While on the subject of America we are most grateful for the help we receive in circularising our members there and in collecting their subscriptions from Dr Linda K. Robertson of Springfield, Missouri. Linda has made my work easier in that direction and is a useful and friendly contact over there for the 75 members in the USA.

The Japanese Branch continues to flourish and they hold a very successful conference in November each year. There are now over 130 members there and it was particularly pleasing to meet a few of them at the Warwick conference in August.

In April the Chairman and I were invited to represent the Fellowship at the formal opening of the Renal Unit at the George Eliot Hospital. The comedian Jasper Carrott opened the unit; his daughter had had a kidney transplant, hence his interest. I am unsure that these occasions raise much interest in George Eliot herself but at least the Fellowship's part in local affairs is acknowledged.

Some interest was aroused in a rather unfortunate way when a delivery lorry ran into the George Eliot statue in Newdegate Square and demolished the plinth. The statue itself was unharmed and will be restored to her position in due course. The irony of the accident was that the lorry was delivering to the Felix Holt pub!

More damage has been caused to the Sara Hennell gravestone in Coventry's London Road Cemetery. Because there was talk of unsteady stones being laid flat in the cemetery our Chairman went to inspect the Bray/Hennell gravestones and found Sara's had fallen and broken. When a stonemason was taken to see it someone had turned it over and its face is now exposed. The cost of repairing the breaks in the stone would be enormous so we have decided to let it lie where it is. Visitors can, at least, read whose stone it is.

We have had for over 30 years an audio-cassette of a BBC radio interview of Gordon S. Haight, George Eliot's eminent biographer and editor of the nine volumes of her letters, by Gabriel Woolf. It was not a particularly clear recording but we arranged for Gabriel to have it transferred to a CD and this has been done successfully. It does seem clearer, and it will last a great deal longer than the audio-cassette would have done and we have on record the voice of a great George Eliot scholar to whom we all owe so much.

Since I became disabled I have been unable to speak to local organisations about George Eliot but I am happy to say that our Chairman has taken over from me and the good work is also being continued by Anne Pavitt and Ruth Harris.

Bill and I have continued to represent the Fellowship at meetings in Nuneaton of the Heritage Forum and the Fellowship was also present at a Heritage weekend in Coventry in September.

Our membership, I am sad to report, continues to fall – 550 members in 2004 a drop of 32 on the previous year. There have been recent years when our membership has exceeded 600. As I have said in earlier reports, local interest in our events has dropped and this continues to cause

us concern. The greatest anxiety, however, is our inability to find a replacement for Bill as our Chairman and myself as Secretary. Neither of us feels that we can go on for much longer and the worry is that if no replacements can be found the Fellowship may die. After 37 years of constant growth I would be so sad to see this happen but unless someone comes forward to run the Fellowship – in their own way, I hasten to add, not mine – the future of this strong and vibrant organisation will end. We must not let this happen.

On a brighter note, I always end this report with my thanks to those who help me throughout the year, to Rose Selwyn the Borough Tourist Officer, to John Burton who has worked tirelessly on the website, to Joan Bunn, Vice Chairman, whose support is invaluable and to Jill Bridgewater our very efficient treasurer. Also to those members of the Council who take on duties and support me but most of all to the Chairman without whom I could not possibly carry on. The past year has been a difficult one for me, healthwise, and he has had to do much more to help me, not only at home but with the Fellowship. He is an absolute treasure – my own G. H. Lewes, in a way!