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Adams, Kathleen, "'Tied to My Heart By a Cord Which Can Never Be Broken': George Eliot and Her Sister Chrissey" (1997). *The George Eliot Review*. 295.
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‘TIED TO MY HEART BY A CORD WHICH CAN NEVER BE BROKEN’:

GEORGE ELIOT AND HER SISTER CHRISSEY

by Kathleen Adams

Christiana Evans, always known as Chrissey, was the first child of Robert Evans's marriage to Christiana Pearson of Astley, near Nuneaton, and she was born, as were Isaac and Mary Ann, at Arbury (now South) Farm on the Arbury estate in 1814. When the family moved to Griff House in 1820 Chrissey was old enough to go to boarding school and she went in advance of her small sister to Miss Lathom's School in nearby Attleborough. This removed her from Griff to the closer vicinity of her Aunt Evarard, later to appear as one of the Dodson sisters in *The Mill on the Floss*, with whom she was a great favourite. Although Mary Ann had nightmares at Miss Lathom's we have no record of how Chrissey fitted in. Indeed, as a child we know little about her feelings but one gets the impression of a more placid child than her younger, more emotional sister. She is thought to be the original of Lucy Deane in *Mill* and of Celia Brooke in *Middlemarch*. If this were true, one can see the likeness. Certainly Chrissey was pretty, a strong contrast to Mary Ann who was not.

At the time of their mother's death in 1836 both girls were at home to comfort their father and to take over the running of household affairs at Griff, although it seems clear that Robert turned more for help and advice to his younger daughter.

Chrissey married Edward Clarke on 30 May 1837 when she was 23 and joined her husband at Meriden where he had a small but not very successful medical practice. Mary Ann was her bridesmaid and Robert Evans gave her a wedding gift of £1000, a not inconsiderable sum in those early days but funds that she was desperately to need as her family grew. Her first child, Edward, was born the year after her marriage, followed by Robert the following year. In 1841 Mary Louisa was born and she was a particular favourite with her aunt Mary Ann who loved to undress her and rock her in her arms until she fell asleep. Sadly, Mary Louisa died the following year, the year when Clara Christiana was born. She, too, was to have a short life as she succumbed to scarlet fever when she was seven in 1849. Emily was born in 1844 and she was to be the longest lived of all Chrissey's children, not dying until 1924. Christopher Charles followed in 1845. He was succeeded by Leonard, born in 1847 and died the following year. In 1849 Fanny was born. She, too, died at the age of seven, having fallen ill, along with her mother and younger sister Catherine, known as Katy, with typhus. Katy was born in 1851, the last of the family but she, too, died at an early age in 1860.

With so large a family Edward, the father, found his slim resources seriously strained. Meriden is not a very large village and he was competing for patients with Dr Kittermaster. His troubles must have been in George Eliot's mind when she was writing about Dr Lydgate in *Middlemarch* many years later.

One of the family's assets was a house in Attleborough bequeathed to Chrissey by her uncle

His anger at what he considered to be her immoral liaison cut her off from her family and her native Warwickshire but she held a lingering hope that Chrissey, at least, would keep in touch: '... that is the point I most care about', she wrote. Sadly, Chrissey wrote only to break off all communication with her.

Two years later Marian had a letter from Chrissey who was ill in bed and consumptive. Perhaps Chrissey realised that she had little time left and wanted to heal the breach between them for she wrote that she regretted that she ever ceased to write to Marian. She acknowledged how kind Marian had been to her and the children and hoped that Marian would reply. Marian, of course, wrote back immediately so that Chrissey would be aware that Marian loved her and cared for her.

Marian had decided to go straight to Attleborough to see her sister but Chrissey's daughter Emily wrote to say that her mother felt that the excitement would be too much for her. On 14 March Emily wrote again to say that Chrissey was worse and the end was expected. The following day she died.

Chrissey was buried in the churchyard at Meriden. Marian does not appear to have attended the funeral but her sister must have been very much in her mind, together with an intense regret that there had not been time for a reunion with someone she had loved so dearly.

In a letter to Sara Hennell on 31 October 1854 Marian had written,

Cara, you and my own sister are the three women who are tied to my heart by a cord which can never be broken and which really pulls me continually.

How relieved she must have been that, although Isaac had tried to break that cord, Chrissey's letter to her in 1859 had shown that it was still intact and would continue to be so. It is clear that the love the two sisters bore each other had not dimmed during their separation.

Notes

1. Robert Evans's Journal 24 January 1842
2. Letter in the possession of Kathleen Adams
3. Letter in the possession of Kathleen Adams