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**‘MY OWN DEAR HEART’S EASE’: GEORGE ELIOT’S COVENTRY  
FRIEND, CAROLINE (CARA) BRAY (1814-1905)  
by Kathleen Adams**

In September 1842 Mary Ann Evans wrote a short but illuminating letter to her Coventry friend Cara Bray:

My own dear Heart’s Ease [it was not unusual for her to give her closest friends the name of a flower as she had done this on several occasions before], ...your looks and words of love are so precious to me. I am together ashamed of myself – do not tell any one that I am so silly as I appear to her whom I love best ...<sup>1</sup>

We don’t know why Mary Ann was so ashamed but we do see clearly what Cara’s friendship meant to her: Gordon S. Haight suggests that although Cara was the most outwardly conventional of the three friends at Rosehill on Radford Road in Coventry, Mary Ann’s friendship was ‘based more on affection than intellectual interests’<sup>2</sup>. The intellectual stimulus undoubtedly came from Cara’s sister Sara, but it was Cara’s warm and loving friendship that was to mean such a lot to her. Although that friendship is well documented both in the *Letters* and Haight’s *Biography* of 1868, details of Cara’s life are less well-known except where it crosses that of her celebrated friend.

Cara was born on 4 June 1814 in Hackney, East London. She was the youngest of the eight children of James and Elizabeth Hennell. Cara’s birth at 2 St Thomas’ Square was followed the same year by the death of Lucy, one of her sisters. Two years later their father died, aged only thirty-three, of consumption. He had already suffered severe business problems but was determined, when he knew his illness was terminal, to provide for the wife and family he would leave behind. He insured his life for a large sum. He was buried at the Hackney Unitarian Meeting House, Gravel Pit Chapel, where Lucy was also buried.

The family now moved to a small house in Hackney at 5 Pleasant Row. Here they lived for ten years struggling in a narrow world of family which brought them all more closely together. Despite the insurance money, life was not easy. Mother was busy making and mending and doing the housework not fulfilled by the one domestic servant they could afford. The eldest girl, Mary, now thirteen years of age, set herself the task of becoming the main prop of the family and took on the education of the rest of the children – Eliza, pretty and romantic; Harriet, generous but with a fiery temper which often tormented the rest of them; Charles who was to become the author of *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838); James, quiet and self-sustained; Sara Sophia who was to play so significant a part in the intellectual life of George Eliot; and Caroline.

In her *Memoir* of Charles Christian Hennell, Sara writes of the happy Pleasant Row days and of their active games, often playing at being the soldiers they saw exercising in London Fields, with Mary as Captain, the rest of them standing in a row or marching in file. Not all of life was



*An old photograph of the house occupied by Mr and Mrs Abijah Pears in Foleshill, Coventry. Mary Ann Evans and her father lived in the adjoining house.*

fun, however, for chilblains were rife. The ground floor of the little house was often flooded in rainy weather – but even this was turned into pleasure, for the children used to navigate the floods in washing tubs. Clearly they all shared an indomitable spirit. It was a great pleasure to their mother to see all seven children, carefully dressed, going with her regularly on Sunday morning and evening, to Gravel Hill Chapel. After supper on Sunday (and supper on this special day had the added enjoyment of pudding), there was conversation on the sermons they had heard. One could hardly imagine this happening to the late-twentieth-century child!

In July 1823 tragedy hit the family. James fell from the top of a wall and became impaled upon a stake which entered his thigh. Charles tried to lift him off without success until further help arrived. The wound was a serious one and James was in great pain. Even the best surgical aid was unable to repair the damage effectively and the boy continued to live under conditions of suffering and deprivation.

All the girls eventually became governesses. Caroline at quite an early age accepted a situation which showed the power she had to interest young children. Bitter tears were shed by her small pupils when she left. At the age of twenty Cara is studying Phrenology and is halfway through an immense work by Combe – and describes herself as four-fifths convinced – which is interesting when one considers her future husband's interest in the subject.

In 1835, when Cara was twenty-one, her sister Mary went on a visit to their uncle Samuel

Hennell, a ribbon manufacturer in Coventry, and while she was there became a friend of Charles Bray. Another visit followed when Cara accompanied her sister. Not long afterwards, Cara became engaged to Bray, who was twenty-five. They were married the following spring. Sara described Charles as kind-hearted, generous, pleasure-loving, intellectual and original. Charles, in his autobiography, says he was very fortunate in his matrimonial connection. 'My wife and I', he writes, 'were of very different dispositions, she possessing what I most wanted. She was exceedingly reserved, I too open, "a leaky fool" as George Eliot calls Mr Brooke in *Middlemarch*'<sup>13</sup>. He goes on to praise her utter unselfishness, her sound moral judgement. If ever a person lived for others, he wrote, she did.

Their wedding tour was made to North Wales. During this time Charles tried to persuade Cara to adopt his own free-thinking attitude to religion, reading to her books on the subject which she found very uncomfortable. Her own Unitarianism was based not on philosophical theory but on deep reverence and long-cherished family associations. She appealed for help from her brother Charles who had already satisfied himself of the validity of the Unitarian position. However, he agreed to re-examine the biblical evidence. Two years later he published *Inquiry* in which he reports the varying stories of the same episodes in the Gospels and concludes that Christianity could no longer be accepted as a divine revelation but was the 'purest form yet existing of natural religion'. This affected Cara's own feelings, inevitably, and she was unhappy about sitting in the old family pew at church in Coventry. In no time at all they stopped attending church altogether.

Cara and Charles were now living at Rosehill, a fine Georgian house on Radford Road. It was surrounded by pleasant fields and rustic lanes. Mary Ann Evans was first taken there by her new neighbour at Foleshill, Charles Bray's sister Elizabeth Pears, on 2 November 1841. This was to be the first of many visits and Rosehill, its occupants and the many men and women she met there, were to be one of the greatest influences in her life. Sara's intellectual influence, for she was a regular visitor, was to play a significant part in Mary Ann's growing intellect. Without Rosehill, would there have been a George Eliot?

This was the beginning of Mary Ann's 'holy war' and, seeing how her new friends had accepted and dismissed their own religious doubts, she was able to do the same. We do not know whether Mary Ann had already read Charles Hennell's *Inquiry* but it must have been a subject much under discussion at Rosehill as a second edition of the book had just been published. The change in Mary Ann's religious views was not entirely caused by her new friends and their stimulating company but they must inevitably have had a lot to do with it. Rosehill became a place of regular visits, not only by Mary Ann but by some of the great names of the Victorian age, with Cara and, from time to time, her sister Sara, the welcoming hostesses. Under an acacia tree on the sloping lawn they spread a bear skin rug and indulged in hours of unrestrained conversation. Guests included Robert Owen, Dr John Connolly (the pioneer in humane treatment of the insane), James Simpson (a champion of free elementary education), George Dawson (a friend of Thomas Carlyle), William Fox (the Unitarian preacher), the phrenologist George Combe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dr W. B. Ullathorne (who had just been assigned to the Roman Catholic mission in Coventry) and, significantly for Mary Ann, the publisher John

Chapman, and Rufa Brabant., the learned daughter of Dr Robert Brabant in whose home Mary Ann was to become a not altogether welcome visitor in 1843.

Charles and Cara were, apparently, unable to have children. They seemed to have an easy attitude to extra-marital friendships. Rufa Brabant told John Chapman that Cara had been in love with Edward Noel for years and that Charles Bray had agreed that Edward should visit Rosehill as often as he pleased. She in turn promised to promote her husband's happiness in any way he wished. Because of her inability to have a child, was this Cara's way of intimating to her husband that, if he wanted a family, he might look elsewhere for someone to mother his children? In 1844 or 1845 one Hannah Steane bore a daughter who was to be called Elinor Mary. Despite extensive research it has not been possible to find any registration of Elinor Mary's birth or baptism. In 1845 Charles and Cara were thought to have 'adopted' a baby girl whose name was Elinor Mary but who was always known as Nelly. Nelly's life is well documented but less is known of the other children who were fathered by Charles Bray – except in the family of Hannah Steane whose name was changed to Gray by the father of her children. Charles Bray wanted her to be recognized as a respectable married lady and she could hardly be called Mrs Bray for there was already a legitimate Mrs Bray who may or may not have known how many other children followed the birth of the dearly-loved Nelly. Certainly George Eliot knew Nelly but we can only speculate as to whether she knew of Nelly's origins or of the rest of Hannah's family. The discovery of the 'Gray' family only came to light in 1977 and is fully covered in Chapter Four of my *Those of us who Loved Her*, published by the Fellowship in 1980.

Nelly seems to have been a great joy to Cara and Charles. Mary Ann, too, often sent love to the little girl. 'I often think of you because I very often think of Papa and Mamma', she wrote in 1851, 'and then little Nelly comes into my mind along with them like the little buds that *will* be gathered with the wide open carnations and roses in summer'. She signs herself 'Your affectionate Auntie Pollian'<sup>4</sup>. Nelly had measles in 1858 and, in 1863, at the age of 18 or 19 she developed pulmonary tuberculosis. On 1 March 1865 Nelly died and was buried in London Road Cemetery in Coventry.

In Nelly's later years Charles Bray had been going through some difficulty with his ribbon manufacturing business. He gave up in 1856, knowing that he had insufficient capital to ride the depression which he foresaw coming, and which badly affected Coventry between 1860 and 1863.

Charles and Cara now felt unable to maintain Rosehill and they moved into Ivy Cottage in the grounds. His income had been £1200 a year in the good times but was now reduced to £400 a year. But he counted his blessings for he recognized that he had a good wife. Times became even harder, however, necessitating a move to a less attractive house in Barr's Hill Terrace in Radford Road.

In 1854 Marian Evans had begun to live with G. H. Lewes. Cara was deeply shocked by what her dear friend had done and for a time would not even write to her. After her move to London,

Marian had been back to Rosehill but was never to call again after the beginning of her liaison with Lewes. The breach with Cara was eventually healed but the warmth of the friendship was never again quite the same.

Meanwhile, Cara had not spent her days in idleness. She had helped at an infants' school in Coventry and she had been writing books herself. These were mainly educational and some of them were very successful. In 1860 she wrote *Physiology and the Laws of Health in Easy Lessons for Schools* and this ran into seven editions; about 15,000 copies were sold. This was followed by *The British Empire* in 1863, *Our Duty to Animals* in 1871 and *The Elements of Morality* in 1882. This last was translated into Italian, Dutch and Hindustani. Other children's books were *Richard Barton* in 1871, *Paul Bradley* in 1876 and *Little Mop and other Stories* in 1886. Inevitably these were not best sellers like those of her friend George Eliot and their sales do not seem to have alleviated the poverty in which Cara and Charles were living. Marian tried to help them financially but they would not accept any money from her. In 1873 Marian had urged Cara to write a children's book about kindness to animals and sent her £50 to help with the project. Cara very unwillingly cashed the cheque.

Cara's concern for animal welfare is shown in her initiative in forming the Coventry Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1874. She was its Secretary for twenty-one years until her resignation in 1895 at the age of eighty. This society eventually became the Coventry Branch of the RSPCA, and after Cara's death a horse trough with a suitably inscribed memorial was placed in her memory in Queen's Road in Coventry. When horses were no longer used in the city the memorial tablet was installed in the wall of the RSPCA premises in Coventry. When these premises were vacated the stone remained embedded in the wall but it was later removed, at the instigation of the George Eliot Fellowship, to London Road Cemetery where, sadly, it lies against the old non-conformist chapel wall, neglected and unrecognized.

On 5 October 1884 Cara's husband died after a full and eventful life. He was buried alongside Nelly in London Road Cemetery.

Although John Cash, the ribbon manufacturer, bought Rosehill and at some stage demolished the Georgian house and replaced it with a Victorian gothic house, Ivy Cottage remained in its grounds. According to a reminiscence by the novelist Mary Braddon, Ivy Cottage was a roomy rambling cottage with a timbered lawn in front of the drawing room window ... 'and far off the blue smoke and slated roofs of one of the ugliest towns in England'. Cara and Sara, the two sisters who had been particularly close to each other as well as to George Eliot, had lived together for some years. At some stage they had moved back from Barr's Hill Terrace to Ivy Cottage, either as tenants of John Cash, or, as seems unlikely because of their limited resources, as still the owners. However, in March 1899 Sara Hennell died from bronchitis at the age of eighty-six. She and Cara had lived a quiet and secluded life. Cara stayed on in Ivy Cottage, still in good bodily health but increasingly confused, though with occasional flashes of her old self. A few days before her death she had entertained friends and even played the piano for them. Then she suffered a fall in her bedroom and although she seemed none the worse for this, within a short time Dr Pickup, who had attended her for some time, found her



*Cara Bray and Sara Hennell in 1897.  
Photograph by Appleby*

suffering from severe shock. She died that same afternoon from heart failure. The year was 1905 and she had reached the ripe old age of ninety. She, too, was buried in London Road Cemetery next to her husband, her sister and the child Nelly who was not really hers but whom she loved dearly during her short life. Cara left no descendants, but, if we are to believe the story of Hannah Gray's descendants, Charles Bray still has great grandchildren living in his native Warwickshire. Whether Cara knew of them we shall never discover – and it seems certain that we are not intended to fit together the pieces of the jigsaw.

Cara was a warm and loving woman who endeared herself to many famous and not so famous people in a long life. One of the most famous was George Eliot who, in the home of Cara and Charles Bray, met the people who were eventually to lead her into the literary life at which she excelled.

#### Notes

1. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), I, 145.
2. *Ibid*, I, viii.
3. Charles Bray, *Phases of Opinion and Experience During a Long Life* (London, 1884).
4. *Letters*, I, 348.