1996

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'DEAR CARA': A NEWLY DISCOVERED LETTER
by Kathleen Adams

At the beginning of the year a donation was made to Coventry’s Herbert Art Gallery and Museum of a box of papers relating to the Fridlanders, a nineteenth-century Coventry watch-making family. Annie Fridlander was a friend of Charles and Caroline (known as Cara) Bray and of Cara’s sister, Sara Hennell. It was not surprising, therefore, to find that some of the letters in the box were written by them to Annie. What was quite unexpected was to discover a tiny envelope containing a short letter from Marian Evans (George Eliot) to Cara Bray, her beloved Coventry friend.

The envelope and letter are on faded white paper with no watermark. The tiny envelope measures $11\frac{1}{2}$ cm. x $4\frac{3}{4}$ cm. and is inscribed Mrs Bray in Marian’s hand. The letter must have been delivered by hand or enclosed in another letter as it bears no address, stamp or postmark. The colour of the ink on both envelope and letter is faded black but, at the top of the envelope, 1856 has been written in blue ink. It is not possible to say by whose hand.

The letter is written on half a sheet of notepaper – the top edge is neatly torn – and bears no address or date or formal greeting. It measures 17 cm. x $10\frac{1}{2}$ cm. and is folded into four to fit the small envelope. Marian writes:

Thank you, dear Cara, for your sweet letter, which was really something my soul thirsted for.

I know writing is a tax, but even a line now and then from your own self would seem something added to my life.

I think we are nearer to each other than we could ever have been before, for I am able to enter into your feelings and understand your life so much better. It is a great experience – this marriage! and all one’s notions of things before seem like the reading of a mystic inscription without the key.

I can’t tell you how happy I am in this double life which helps me to feel and think with double strength. I shouldn’t say these things unless I loved you very dearly, as I do.

Ever your old
yet new
Marian

The text of the letter shows that her love for her dear Coventry friend has not diminished but also demonstrates clearly her joy in what she describes as her ‘marriage’.

Assuming 1856 to be the correct date – and why should one doubt it since the year is writ-
ten in typically Victorian copperplate – I have tried to date it more accurately, bearing in mind the rift in the friendship after Marian Evans left for Weimar with George Henry Lewes in July 1854.

Marian wrote to Charles Bray on 23 October 1854:

I am ignorant how far Cara and Sara may be acquainted with the state of things, and how they may feel towards me ....

She wrote to Sara Hennell on 31 October 1854:

I cannot, even now, see that I did anything deserving so severe a reproach as you send me .... Cara, you and my own sister are the three women who are tied to my heart by a cord which can never be broken .... I love Cara and you with unchangeable affection, and while I retain your friendship I retain the best that life has given me next to that which is the deepest and gravest joy in all human experience.

On 9 January 1855 she wrote again to Sara, sending her love to Cara.

Marian was writing regularly to Charles who was helping to organize her financial arrangements with her brother Isaac. When she and Lewes returned to England she wrote to Charles on 17 June 1855, sending ‘Best love to Cara and the enclosed letter to Sara’. There appears to be no letter for Cara.

Charles called to see Marian and Lewes at East Sheen on 10 January 1855, but without his wife.

While Marian was in Berlin in 1854 Cara had written a letter to her which has never been found but undoubtedly it must have been one of reproach for the life Marian was now living as ‘wife’ of a man who already had a wife, albeit a faithless one, and a family back in England. In Marian’s reply she had clearly said things which Cara had misinterpreted and which had caused Cara to stop writing to her old friend of the Coventry days.

On 4 September 1855 Marian wrote again to Cara to defend herself: ‘If there is any one subject on which I feel no levity it is that of marriage and the relation of the sexes ....’ Cara now resumed her correspondence, but with some reserve. She was still unable accept Marian’s irregular relationship with Lewes with any sort of warmth. However, on 15 October 1855 Marian wrote to Charles from Richmond saying she was very pleased to have ‘Cara’s nice long letter’. But the reserve was still there. Marian spent Christmas 1855 with her sister Chrissey, now widowed and living, with Isaac’s somewhat grudging help, in a poor little house in Attleborough, Nuneaton. She wrote on 1 January 1856 to Charles Bray explaining why she had not broken her journey home to ‘make a call where I had only the invitation of the master of the house’. Would Cara have still found a visit from
Marian too uncomfortable?

Charles visited the Leweses in London again in October 1856. Marian wrote to Sara that she was ‘glad to see Mr Bray looking beamingly happy and healthy’. She wrote again to Sara from 8 Park Shot, Richmond on 24 November 1856:

I feel as if I had written very selfishly in my hasty notes to you and Cara the other day – all about myself and my own feelings, and no word about what, nevertheless, I do care for – you and your feelings.

There is no evidence of any notes being included in letters to Charles Bray or Sara Hennell or of anyone collecting a note to take back to Coventry, but it seems likely that the newly discovered letter may be the ‘hasty note’ she had written to Cara and which Charles may have taken back to Coventry with him on his visit the month before.

Note


I would like to thank Margaret Rylatt, Collections Manager at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, who alerted me to the find of the letter to Cara Bray, and to Jonathan G. Ouvry, copyright holder on all unpublished George Eliot – George Henry Lewes letters for his permission to publish it.