

Behind the Lace Curtain

A revealing glimpse into the hitherto mysterious lives of genteel white womanhood in old Bermuda.
By Sandra Campbell.

Bermuda's history – whether in the pages of Henry Wilkinson or Terry Tucker – has been overwhelmingly focused on male achievements: Sir George Somers struggling ashore in 1609, Hezekiah Frith privateering on the high seas, Tom Dill leading the Bermuda Militia Artillery over the trenches of the First World War. By contrast, Bermuda's great poet and accomplished artist, Eliza Brownlow Gray, was a woman whose life and work have received short shrift from the island's chroniclers.

Bessie Gray's story – and that of her diarist niece Emmie Gray – are not of reefs, pirates and bullets, but of inner dramas and private struggles behind that lacy exterior of turn-of-the-century genteel white womanhood. Restrictions and privations hinted at in Bessie Gray's poems and paintings come across unambiguously in her niece's diaries. And together, their work maps the mysteries of women's lives during their day.

Photographs and reminiscences of poet and artist Bessie Gray (1854-1925) and diarist and teacher Emmie (1894-1967) immediately conjure up romantic images of old Bermuda. There is, for example, the picture of Bessie in a flowing white dress on the wide verandah at Clermont, her stately family home on Harbour Road in Paget. In another photograph, taken on their parents' golden wedding anniversary, Bessie and her statuesque sister look like Victorian handmaidens beside their black-clad father, the distinguished jurist Sir Brownlow Gray, and an equally soberly dressed Lady Gray.

Around Clarmont, set on Lover's Lane bloomed Bessie's beloved gardens, a paradise of narcissi, lilies and old Bermuda roses. She would stroll among them every morning, taking inspiration for paintings and poems.

*The cedar's silver livery was silvered
O'er with dew,
And 'neath the kiss of morning the roses flush anew.*

Memories of Emmie Gray are similarly idyllic at first glance. She seems a kind of early Bermudian new woman, studying at London University before returning to teach at the Bermuda High School for Girls in 1915. She is remembered bicycling to school in the rain, her basket full of flowers, steering with one hand while deftly balancing a large umbrella in the other hand to keep the raindrops off her flowered print frock.

"Graylegs", the girls dubbed Emmie, on account of her thick cotton stockings, and she went on to be a stalwart of the school for more than 40 years, a stickler for good grammar among other worthy tributes. But by night, Graylegs had a much more intriguing secret, or at least private, activity.

Beginning on her 20th birthday, April 18, 1914, Emmie sat down each night and faithfully recorded a paragraph about her day. The volumes are for the most part school copybooks, a series of green and black-bound journals with *Emily B. Gray – Private* neatly penciled on the cover.

Aunt and niece, each in her own way recorded women's lives – well-bred, upper-class white women's lives – in their times. The point of view was unquestionably female, as one of Bessie's brothers joked in an 1869 letter to their parents.

"... her letters are very long and affectionate [but] she does not tell me much news, except what is connected with the officers of Her Majesty's 61st Regiment. There is generally an account of the last day the [regimental] band played, who she paraded with and who bowed to her etc, which you can easily see, cannot have much interest to me."

What exasperated her brother fascinates us. Theirs was a world of bazaars at the Green Door, of amateur theatricals, picnics and sailing excursions, of tennis parties at Clermont, Inglewood and Strawberry Hill, and the various other diversions of a tight social circle people by Trimingham, Goslings, Joneses, Coxes and Grays.

Not long after Bessie's death, Rose Gosling eulogized her in a manner evocative of the ideal Victorian daughter and woman. She had been Queen rose of the rose-bud garden of girls". Further, her brilliant intellect and conversational powers had been tempered by "gentleness and humility" and subservience to domestic duties: "Brought up in the traditions of a well-ordered Victorian home, she early learned that sweet obedience which ever shed about her an aroma of lavender."

A bright picture, certainly, but there were shadows in the lives of these two Gray ladies. Emmie's diary tells the story outright, and Bessie's poems and paintings have it embedded in them. The Misses Gray were roses indeed, but Bessie's verses remind us that roses have thorns and their bloom passes.

*A rain of petals red
From the tortur'd
rose-branch shed.*

A look beneath the surface of social whirl of the diaries and the vivid colours of both poems and paintings exposes the tensions and pressures that two talented women had to live with in two overlapping generations.

Neither Bessie nor Emmie ever married, and their horizons were limited by the male defined order of the day. Bermudian men of their class tended to travel widely, and many of them married abroad. Meanwhile, Bessie did not leave the island until she was 56, and when Emmie went away to be educated (thanks to her aunts, not her father), it was to live in all-girl schools and women-only residences. Given this thin line of opportunity, it could be difficult for Bermudian daughters to find a mate.

The Volumes of Emmie's diary written between 1914 and 1930 reveal that women like her lived in a world full of duties and constraints. They did not have a vote. They were expected to be polite, virtuous, and dutiful and never aggressive or angry.

In the early years of her diary, Emmie was living at Lowood, a house in Paget rented by her father Trimingham Brownlow Gray. She existed in the shadow of her adored brother Jack, a war hero far away on the battlefields of France.

Emmie's father, unlike his older brother, Attorney General Sir Reginald Gray, had never been financially successful, despite such quixotic youthful ventures as cattle dealing in Montana. He consoled himself with nightly expeditions to the convivial male gatherings at the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, and monitoring the lives of his wife and daughter.

Emmie's diary resonates with the double binds of her life. Because the family were strapped for funds, they could not afford a servant. Emmie's mother was responsible for the housekeeping but, given the amount of visiting and entertaining in those days, Emmie often ended up having to do the dishes.

Her teaching job brought no relief from the hostess duties of daughter of the house. Not, despite a contribution of £30 a year from her salary towards household expenses, did she have any of the freedom of a male breadwinner. She had to keep the household accounts to her brother's satisfaction, not her own. And, if guests or relatives dropped in for the evening, Emmie had to sit up and help entertain them till all hours, no matter how many test papers awaited correction in her room or how early the next school day was to begin. If her mother was unable to cook for Jack on his visits home, Emmie had to get up early and prepare his breakfast before she left for school, and await his return before dinner could be served, no matter how tired she was. After one such long, hungry wait in

1920, Emmie confided to her diary, "I really don't think I should care if he went away and stayed 10 years."

When she did venture out of Lowood, Emmie was constrained by post-Victorian values about class and gender. Many girls she befriended – such as Mary Dale, who was to become a successful nurse – were not welcome at home, because the Dales were not considered the Gray's social equals.

"I can't go anywhere with her," Emmie lamented to her diary. "My hope is that she will marry out of Bermuda, where we can meet on an equal footing which we never can here."

Emmie was not even allowed to go bathing with Mary as it was, "too public" to bathe on the rocks below the Dale house.

Visiting another family that did not make social grade, Emmie wrote wistfully, "I feel much more at home in a house like that than in a house where there are four or five servants. Somewhere in my ancestors there must have been some very plebian people, as I always get on with them."

There were further constraints on poor Emmie, this time in the name of guarding the church and choir of St. Paul's, Paget, but it was difficult for her to attend evening choir practices. Why? She was not allowed out at night alone or on foot, and the carriage was reserved for Papa's faithful attendance at the Yacht Club. But neither could she stay alone in the house when the family went out: Papa had decreed that, without a servant to accompany them evening after evening, no matter how tired or overworked she was.

Emmie's deportment was closely monitored, too. After she went bathing with the family at Pink Beach in 1916, her father sent a formal note reproving his daughter for the brevity of the bloomer legs on her bathing costume!

Emmie has another problem: compact of stature and short of sight, she was not conventionally beautiful. Nor did she have the promise of a hefty inheritance to attract a suitor. Her prospects of marriage were further diminished, her diary records mournfully during the period 1914-1918, by the death of many eligible young Bermudians in the battlefield of Europe.

It was perhaps not surprising, all in all, that Emmie felt awkward in the company of men. Dances were a particular ordeal, and she longed to dance a whole programme just once. But "men don't care twopence for me", she told her diary, adding in one entry that at 28 she was already "getting on".

Emmie began to resign herself to sitting with the chaperones at the edge of the dance floor. Anyway, hemmed in by her father's edicts and lectures, she would have to hurry home before dark. The resultant irritability with, and emotional distance from, her family only made Emmie pillory herself more for failing in maidenly sweetness and patience.

Aunt Bessie was no pin-up either. Tall, intense, intellectual and hawk-nosed, she did not fit the mould of regimental sweetheart of British officers stationed on the Rock. Far from it: in her youth, she had written satiric poems about vain young military men who trifled with the hearts of local maidens. In her mocking 1884 poem *The Girls' Own*, one young military spark muses to himself,

*I'm a precious flower of fashion
And aesthetic to the core;
Is it strange I wake such passion
In the sex that I adore?*

Bessie's free spirit was all the more unusual in that her father, Sir Brownlow Gray, who rose to be Bermuda's Chief Justice, was a vocal opponent of women's rights. Bessie was never sent abroad to be trained in literature or painting, though her gifts in both pursuits were apparent very early. Later, Bessie's talents and her sister Mary's athletic prowess (she and a friend, Mary Outerbridge, pioneered tennis in this hemisphere) seem to have kept potential suitors at a distance. And, as spinsters, they were

expected to stay at Clermont to look after their aging parents. Ironically, they were to inherit stately Clermont, thanks to an uncle in England who bought it in 1889 to be willed to them as security for their childless old age.

In her lifetime, Bessie's works were almost as carefully sequestered as she was. No collected volume of her poetry, no large exhibition of her paintings appeared before her death. Readers of the *Royal Gazette* were assured that "her innate modesty prevented her seeking publicity or fame". However, Victorian attitudes towards women seem a more likely reason. In fact, in 1890, when an American woman visitor with literary connections saw her work and arranged for publication, Bessie happily complied. Her illustrated poem *Bermuda in June* was lauded as "exquisite" by American reviewers in 1892. And, thus emboldened, she fired off manuscripts to several major American periodicals, ending up with poems published in such estimable magazines as *Scribner's* and *Munsey's*.

Surviving manuscripts, as well as her poems and watercolours, hint that Bessie was frustrated with the limitations on her life. In her notebooks, she copies scores of quotations about woman's need to be selfless, devoted and long-suffering at all costs. Meanwhile, the imagery of her poetry is that of a restricted life: walled gardens, empty nests, and a longing for release of suffering beyond the grave. In one poem, lilies become a type of Victorian womanhood "pure and white in a stainless gown/Wearing meekly her golden crown", while another poem undercuts the image:

*The shrinking petals fall; and as of old,
The impassive lilies glimmer,
Dull and cold.*

In *Captivity*, she compares herself with a wounded bird, battering itself against the bars of its cage. And there are hints of frustration even in Bessie's lovely watercolours. A delightful spray of roses has the marks of blight and wilt among the healthier leaves and buds. Her landscape of Castle Island shows translucent sea and a waiting dory, but in the foreground a high grey wall (is that you, Sir Brownlow?) and a clump of cactus together conspire to bar the way. In another work, *Cottage - Harbour Road*, The front path is angled to lead the eye inexorably away from the inviting home, not towards it.

Was there any silver lining in the grey clouds that hung over Emmie and Bessie's lives? Both found solace in their strong Anglican faith, and their emotional lives were enriched by close female friendships. (Such friendships were a tradition among Bermudian women: from early times, when many Bermudian men were at sea for months and even years – sometimes never to return – island women had been left behind to comfort and support each other.)

Bessie Gray's lovely silhouette drawing of two women by the seashore reflects a fervour for female bonds. Meanwhile, alienated from her family by their preference for her brother, Emmie developed a close relationship with Caro Jones, a motherly spinster who lived at nearby Milford. She commented to her diary how many such female friendships there seemed to be, and told herself she must be careful not to act like a "silly sentimental idiot". In 1916, Emmie even gave up Caro for Lent: "I am going to give up thinking about her in bed during Lent, then perhaps I shall get over being too fond of her."

Lascivious as this might sound to our modern ears, Emmie and her contemporaries would have been horrified by any suggestions of lesbianism in the above reference: female friendship was cherished but strictly platonic, especially for a devout Anglican like Emmie.

Many of Bessie's poems record a sadder tale, revolving around the early death of a dear female friend.

*A little picture on my wall is set,
And in my heart: - a strip of lonely sand,*

*Of windy sea; a vessel far from land.
Carv'd on the frame that saddest word-
"Regret."*

Their limited horizons and subordinate status led Bessie and Emmie to question the social order. Both identified with other disadvantaged groups in Bermuda society. For example, in her *Song of Katie with Broom*, Bessie asks about the cleaning woman, unnoticed by the prosperous congregation as she sweeps up the fallen Easter lily blooms:

*Who serves the lowest
Serveth also Me
What is – Guest of Honour –
To an upper Room
Some day Love shall beckon
Katie of the Broom?*

For her part, Emmie supported a greater role in church services for the black choir at St. Paul's, despite the displeasure of her close friends in the congregation.

Thus, Emmie and Bessie were well aware that women, servant and black people were all undervalued in Bermuda, and they allocated their sympathies accordingly. They were not alone: Minna Caroline Smith of Bailey's Bay, in her 1900 novel *Mary Paget: A Romance of Old Bermuda*, had her 17th century heroine dreaming of a day when "our black people in the Bermudas may be free and happy, honoured by the whites because of their sobriety and industry and modesty of life."

However, stifled by convention and stymied at the ballot box, such talented women could do little but write longingly of change.

Ironically, while the changes they so badly wanted have not come about, Emmie Gray's diaries and Bessie Gray's notebooks and paintings still survive in storage boxes deep in the Bermuda Archives, a poignant reminder that talented women once had to bloom in the shade.