

Henry Bryan Binns, an English Quaker, was not only one of the earliest Whitman biographers, but the author of several impassioned works that resemble the literature of his friend and mentor Edward Carpenter. In his 1911 manifesto, *The Great Companions*, he profiles another friend, Unitarian minister, social worker, labor reformer, and sociologist Benjamin Kirkman Gray. Because Gray was a lifelong bachelor until the very last years of his life, a gay reading of Binn's rapturous eulogy comes easily.

In 1905, Benjamin Kirkman Gray addressed the Friends' Summer School at Street. ' He had an affection for Quakerism, and especially for what he used delightedly to describe as the "dangerous doctrine of the inner Light." One of his last public addresses was given in the little Meeting at Letchworth. ' [Benjamin Kirkman Gray, Henry Bryan Binns, and Clementina Black. *A Modern Humanist; Miscellaneous papers of B. Kirkman Gray*, (London: A.C. Fifield, 1910), 54.]

-- Mitchell Santine Gould, curator, LeavesOfGrass.Org

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Henry Bryan Binns [1873-1923]. *The Great Companions* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1911). Chapter VII, "one of London's Lovers."

[This transcription does not preserve the poetic typesetting of the original chapter.]

VII. One of London's Lovers

To Ben Kirkman Gray.

He was knotty timber, intricate of fibre, and stern made ; good for the fire once he was kindled.

I can see him still as on some winter's night, against the friendly blaze ; now this way and now that, be-wilderingly he thrusts the searching point of his swift thought, with mischievous delight.

I see him in the fields, the light about him, surrounded by the flowers in the deep grass, worshipping as a lover before the daily beauty of the Earth.

Again, alone in the wet gale, graphng his task, hatless, determined, chin

stubbornly set, eyes big and deep under his brow ; short, compact, I see him stride, with clenching fists, enduring in the fight.

Such a man, I suppose, walked once the Athenian ways, fierce of brain, vehement, relentless, kind : ever-young questioner of all ; lover of men ; cherishing in his breast a late-maturing passion, an age-enkindling flame.

Old Questioner! how many questions are we not fain to ask you ! Could we but catch, O Socrates, even to-day, the secret of that passion that glows so bred among your words !

And he, my friend, knotty and slow of growth, continuing yet to grow, sprang from the root of you, impassioned still as by some primal prophecy out of the constant Earth.

I see him, and guess what word it is that hangs upon his lips, shoots from his eyes and throbs within his brow!

What is it that he sees behind those pages: whose is the face that from the ranked statistics, looks out and answers with unspeakable gaze ?

Walking the hills beside him, guess what is't the trees are telling him, and what the wind declares, what truth it is the Earth is certifying to him, lover of Her and truth.

If you were to go down into the Dorset village where he was born, now, after five and forty years, perhaps the little manse might say over again for you the secret spoken in it then, but though you heard it, would you understand what even he was long in understanding?

For he was knotty timber of the Earth and slow of growth.

It was not indeed for nothing he was bred a country lad, learning the gloom and the clear of the sky, adventuring in green fields where run bright brooks among the king-cups ; crouching under the twisted thorn with all the gale about him, becoming at night familiar with the stars.

At home with the earth-creatures, a child of the Earth, never was he to wander out of Her wisdom, though he should walk the streets, noisy and deep and hard.

He received Her secret and was nourished of the Earth, but could not understand.

No, when he came to London, to take up his lonely life, his uncongenial task, plodding thither and back and forcing his brain to plod while there awakened in him the fierce thirst for knowledge — he might not understand the word that hid within his breast.

Bitterly, but not vainly then he fought for knowledge, and for self-knowledge, pacing the noisy streets, through those long years before he understood, or any understood him.

Lonely, hungry and proud, the heart of the young man cried, "Very well, you world! you shall never understand me!"

He would have hidden himself afar, like a sick wild creature, perishing solitary, unseen, in his dark rage.

But when he went into the fields, the eternal loveliness of Nature wooed him; and Love, wounded by his fierce pride, bade, all night long the stars reprove him, till, with new eyes, he should discern the sympathy of those that shared perplexed, the struggle of

his being, inseparable from his life.

So, coming up to manhood, he began to love now one and now another, and presently, the people.

Then not for nothing he recalled his childish fear, nightmare of dreadful flight from an inexorable hunter — the bland doors of the workhouse waiting, waiting.

But now for other than himself he dreaded them, that loomed up ever blander, ever vaster, before their hopeless quarry, lording it over the foolish city, doors of the huge hold of that werewolf, infidelity.

Confronting them, his fear gave place to wrath against the barren industry, the stupid satisfactions, ineffectual discontents of men.

A fire was kindling in him : as on a hearth, with sacred care, he nursed its smoke-encumbered flame wrath deepened into passion.

Year after year, brooding within his heart and pent behind his hps, the purpose gathered, waiting its time for speech.

He sought in the churches whether there were some place, whence, ringing through the rafters of the past, its challenge might arouse the warrior, Faith.

No place for it he found, but seeking there, if he found pious foes, he won brave comrades — labourers, artisans, young men and women questioning life, who, if they scarcely savoured the too subtle substance of his thought, caught from his face the promise of a task full worthy manhood.

Also, a wanderer emerging from his loneliness, he found a mate to match his eager heart, assure him through impatience, quicken the fire and bring that great word forth.

Rebel against the callow loves and easy moods of men, his sudden-blazing manhood flashed its truth out at a look, a word, stabbing the false thing through with the white scorn of its relentless light: his rough prophetic wrath fed by the passionate tenderness that filled his soul.

For now, whole-hearted, his manhood was become the lover of a City, and she in bonds, in the toils of the great hunter.

London, that has forgotten her hope, sad, beautiful daughter of Earth — to Her he had given his heart.

He knew what joy was lost among the trodden human grasses of her fields, and what ineffable fruit should hang on her bare ominous tree: for the wise Earth had told him.

London, a living soul!

It was not for her past nor for her shows he loved her — save as they shone in the eyes of her gutter-brood a-dance about the organ-man; or of her sweated seamstress, wrapped in some poor linen and the glory of her first motherhood; or of some hungry dreamer of great dreams, — in such he saw her face, her tragic face, all dim with evil things, London, the passion of his life.

Ever more royally, for love of her, he entertained that god-like guest, mocker of

meanness and rebuker of kings, wrath that is also laughter.

Ever henceforward was he at labour for her ; by day and night devising how he might rouse up Faith, and waken her, sad Titaness, with words of Liberty sprung out of her own fair desolate long-unvisited fields, and they might welcome her, returning.

She shall return ! yes, though the bonds thicken about her, and his voice cry out no more.

Was it for nothing he was born a country lad to know the gloom and the clear of the sky? For nothing he won knowledge, for nothing he learned love?

Was it in vain he saw her face, and knew in that sad face the beauty men may die for and not die — the purpose of the ages ?

But his was timber for the undying fire.

His passion made him one with the sure will of Life: grown potent by his love, he died amid creative hopes, imperishable and triumphant.

Sadly I came out of his vacant house, when lo, a red flag flying: a wrathful, challenging flag of flame that flaunted in the breeze and cried, blithe but defiant, as it were he, my friend.

Friend, friend! You would not let us be content with any aims of ours: you kept before us, your keen eyes saw it well, an aim that was better than they.

You would not be satisfied: and because of you, we were ashamed to find our satisfaction in achievements still unreal, achievements that accomplish nothing of the

Task that Man was made for — Liberty — the carrying captivity captive, and letting the oppressed go free.

That Task always before you, near and vociferous as the London street, but ultimate and endless as creation — proving it yours to do, you loved it, friend, and now shall death prevent you ?

No, for I feel you call us comradely that we relinquish other aims, tackling the task sublime reserved for manly comrades, winning our life and death together with you.

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Gabriel Stanley Woods. "Gray, Benjamin Kirkman" *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1912 Supplement.

GRAY, BENJAMIN KIRKMAN (1862-1907), economist, son of Benjamin Gray, congregational minister, by his wife Emma Jane Kirkman, was born on 11 Aug. 1862 at Blandford, Dorset. He was educated privately by his father, and read omnivorously on his own account. In 1876 he entered a London warehouse, but found the work distasteful. His father vetoed, in 1882, a plan which he had formed of emigrating, and from 1883 to 1886 he taught in private schools, at the same time eagerly pursuing his own studies. Of sensitive and self-centred temperament, he interested himself early in social questions.

In September 1886 Gray entered New College, London, to prepare for the congregational ministry. He paid much attention to economics and won the Ricardo economic scholarship at University College. In 1892 he went to Leeds to work under the

Rev. R. Westrope at Blgrave (congregational) Chapel. But congregational orthodoxy dissatisfied him, and in 1894 he joined the Unitarians. He served as unitarian minister at Warwick from that year till 1897. From 1898 to 1902 he was in London, engaged in social work at the Bell Street Mission, Edgware Road, and studying at first hand the economic problem of philanthropy. His views took a strong socialistic bent, and he joined the Independent Labour Party. But a breakdown in health soon compelled his retirement from active work. Removing to Hampstead he devoted himself to research into the history of philanthropic movements in England. In 1905 he lectured at the London School of Economics on the philanthropy of the eighteenth century. He died of angina pectoris on 23 June 1907, at Letch worth, whither he had been drawn by his interest in the social experiment of the newly established Garden City. His ashes were buried there after cremation. In 1898 Gray married Miss Eleanor Stone, who edited his literary remains.

' The History of English Philanthropy from the Dissolution of the Monasteries to the First Census' (1905) and 'Philanthropy and the State' (published posthumously, 1910) are substantial embodiments of much original research and thought. Gray traces through the social history of the nineteenth century a uniform tendency, whereby the effort of the individual is replaced by that of the State. In spite of his strong socialist convictions he writes with scholarly restraint and fairness, and throws light on tangled conditions of contemporary life.

[*A Modern Humanist : miscellaneous papers* by B. Kirkman Gray, with a memoir by H. B. Binns and Clementina Black, 1910.]

