Dinah Craik

Elizabeth Duffield-Fuller

In 1869, the popular Victorian novelist, Dinah Craik, moved to Shortlands, Bromley, with her husband George and her adopted daughter, Dorothy. The Corner House they built there was designed with the help of the up-and-coming architect, Norman Shaw, and was updated to include all the modern conveniences as they became available, including hot water pipes and taps. It was listed as a protected grade II building by English Heritage in 2008 but has twice been denied a blue plaque. It was also, in Craik’s words, “built with books”—on the proceeds of her novels, poems and travel writings.

As the Corner House was being built, Dinah Craik was serializing her novel \_*A Brave Lady\_* in Macmillian’s Magazine—and the connection between her private life and literary works is clear, for in \_*A Brave Lady\_* Craik intervened in the Married Woman’s Property Act debate, which allowed a married woman to own her own home and property. In the novel Josephine De Bougainville, the titular brave lady, has to endure many hardships because of her dependence on her financially insolvent, socially-climbing embezzler husband; at the same time Dinah Craik was busy establishing her own home and also the future financial independence of her daughter, with her own money. Whilst the fictional Josephine De Bougainville—often believed to be a semi-autobiographical tribute to her poor beleaguered mother, Dinah Mulock—travels around England and France looking for an enduring home to rest, Craik herself was setting up permanent roots in the countryside.

The Corner House also became the focus of Craik’s charitable reputation both as an authorial mentor and as a respectable middle-class woman. Her adoption of Dorothy was often seen by others as an act of charity (although Craik herself did not refer to it this way) and her Bromley home became the heart of a growing creative coterie that she mentored. She took in Olive Cockerell, a child of a struggling family friend to help the Cockerell family financially, partially raising Olive alongside Dorothy to help socialize both children. As Corner House was within travelling distance of London, Craik often took both girls up to social events. She also hosted tea parties showcasing aspiring singers such as Carmela Meo and Leonora Braham, and mentored Noel Patton’s daughter, Mona, who came to stay at the Corner House every spring to encourage her creative ambitions and be exposed to a literary network and artistic lifestyle. Craik also hosted tea parties for London seamstresses at the Corner House and established a drinking fountain in the neighbourhood long before such things were typical. For Craik, charity really did begin at home—and as well as becoming the heart of her domestic ideal, and the home of her writing career, Bromley became the heart of her expression of middle-class philanthropy.

Although Craik was not a native of Kent—born in Staffordshire, raised in London with an Irish father and with prolonged visits to Scotland to visit her family friends—Bromley was where she made her home from 1869 until she died on October 12th 1887 in the Corner House she had loved and built with books. She was buried in St Mary’s Churchyard, Keston, Bromley, her final home.