

Chapter 2

'WHAT THEY WERE DOING WITH THEIR CLOTHES OFF I DON'T KNOW': HOMOPHOBIA, LESBIAN HISTORY AND RESPONSES TO 'LESBIAN-LIKE' RELATIONSHIPS, 1860s-1890s

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For those interested in male homosexuality in late 19th century Australia, there is a wealth of resources to explore. By contrast, references to homosexual inclination among women are very few in number. This chapter compares and contrasts several instances of women's same-sex relationships in Australia over a 30-year period from around the 1860s to around the 1890s. The focus is upon how observers and contemporaries responded to the behaviours and preferences they witnessed. It is difficult to describe these cases in terms of 'homophobia', which implies fear or hatred or repulsion of people who prefer sexual activity with their own sex. My impression is that relationships between women, although noticed by observers and commented upon, were not normally taken seriously enough to warrant those kinds of powerful feelings. Instead, observers tended towards expressions of amusement, incomprehension or curiosity. On a personal and individual level, however, anger, aggression and violence were responses of men who felt their own personal sexual power challenged by a wife or girlfriend taking up with another woman. Even these responses, however, more closely resembled straightforward sexism, jealousy and the exercising of garden-variety male power over women, than what we would now view as homophobia.

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along if our many historian friends working in other areas could also keep their eyes open and their brains ticking over for the kinds of understated references that could be clues to quietly-lived lesbian lives. It is possible for historians generally to approach their research with an open mind and an awareness of the ways in which absences can sometimes signal an underlying presence. Even if all that happens is that possible sources are then passed on to historians who have an interest in publishing in the area or to organisations such as the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives for follow-up, a valued contribution will have been made.

Articles, chapters, books, unpublished theses dealing with Australian lesbian history

Pre-Twentieth Century

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- Ford, Ruth, 'Lesbians and loose women: female sexuality and the women's services during World War 2', in Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Gender and War*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp 81-104.
- Ford, Ruth, 'Sexuality and Madness: Regulating women's gender 'deviance' through the Asylum' in Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (eds), *Madness in Australia: History, Heritage and the Asylum* (St Lucia: UQP/API, 2003), pp 109-120.
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- Hardy, Sara, *The Unusual Life of Edna Walling* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005).
- Holmes, Katie, *Spaces in Her Day: Australian Women's Diaries of the 1920s and 1930s* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995)
- Lake, Marilyn, 'Sexuality and Feminism. Some Notes on their Australian History', *Lilith* 7 (1991), pp 29-45
- Martin, Sylvia, "'These Walls of Flesh": The Problem of the Body in the Romantic Friendship/ Lesbianism Debate', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, Vol 20, No 2 (1994), pp 243-265.
- Martin, Sylvia, 'Becoming-Violet: Desire in the Love Poetry of Mary Fullerton', *Hecate*, Vol 23, No 2 (1997), pp 95-103.
- Martin, Sylvia, 'Mollie Skinner, Quaker Spinster and the Witch of Wellaway' in Kay Ferres (ed) *The Time to Write: Australian Women Writers 1890-1930* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1993), pp 200-217.
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- Newman, Sally, 'Silent Witness? Aileen Palmer and the Problem of Evidence in Lesbian History', *Women's History Review*, Vol 11, No 3 (2002), pp 505-530.
- Reekie, Gail, "'She was a Lovable man": Marion/Bill Edwards and the Feminisation of Australian Culture', *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*, No 4 (1994), pp 43-50.
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- Ion, Judith, 'Degrees of Separation: Lesbian Separatist Communities in Northern New South Wales, 1974-95' in Jill Julius Matthews (ed), *Sex in Public* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997), pp 97-113
- Thompson, Denise, *Flaws in the Social Fabric: Homosexuals and Society in Sydney* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985): see Chapter 3, 'Lesbians and the Gay Movement': 55-71.
- Sport, Kathy, 'Below the belt and bleeding fingertips', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol 22, No 53 (July 2007), pp 343-360.
- Sue Wills, 'Inside the CWA: The Other One', *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies* 4 (1994), pp 6-22, 43-50.
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- Ford, Ruth, 'Eugenia Falleni/Harry Crawford', in Robert Aldrich and Gary Wotherspoon, (eds), *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp 157-158.
- Ford, Ruth, 'Evelyn Brown [Powell] and Mary Parkinson', in Robert Aldrich and Gary Wotherspoon (eds), *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp 356-357.
- French, Robert, 'And So To Bed,' and 'A Horrible Woman, A Disgusting Creature,' in Robert French, *Camping by a Billabong: Gay and Lesbian Stories from Australian History* (Sydney: Blackwattle Press, 1993) pp 13-15; 71-73.
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- Ross, Liz, 'Escaping the Well of Loneliness' in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *Staining the Wattle, A People's History of Australia since 1788*, (Melbourne: Mc Phee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), pp 100-108.

Notes

- 1 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), *passim*.
- 2 From titles alone, the theme is obvious: Elizabeth S Wahl, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 1999); Linda Garber, 'Where in the world are the lesbians?', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol 14, No 1/2 (2005), pp 28-50; Cheshire Calhoun, 'The Gender Closet: Lesbian Disappearance under the Sign, 'Women', *Feminist Studies*, Vol 21, No 1 (1995), pp 7-34; Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). How to understand this historical feeling of absence is at the heart of current debates about lesbian history. For an overview of some recent publications debating critical issues, see Kate Chedgzoy, 'In the lesbian archive,' *GLQ*, Vol 11 No 3 (2005), pp 457-467.
- 3 Anne Summers, 'Marion/Bill Edwards', *Refractory Girl*, (Summer 1974), pp 21-22; Jill J Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1984), pp 115-120; Denise Thompson, *Flaws in the Social Fabric: Homosexuals and Society in Sydney* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1985), see Chapter 3, 'Lesbians and the Gay Movement', pp 55-71; Liz Ross, 'Escaping the Well of Loneliness' in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, (eds), *Staining the Wattle, A People's History of Australia since 1788* (Melbourne: Mc Phee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), pp 100-08; Marion Paull, 'A Letter From Australia', in Joan Nestle (ed), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992).
- 4 The bibliography is now available online through the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives website <<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~alga/>>. The intention is that it be regularly updated and become a point of contact whereby those who have written something relevant (or read something that is not on the list) can have it added.
- 5 These are: Georgine Clarsen, "'The Woman Who Does": A Melbourne Motor Garage Proprietor' in Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (eds), *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp 55-71; Ruth Ford, 'Sexuality and Madness: Regulating women's gender "deviance" through the Asylum' in Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon, (eds), *Madness in Australia: History, Heritage and the Asylum* (Brisbane: UQP/API, 2003), pp 109-120; Sara Hardy, *The Unusual Life of Edna Walling* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); Sylvia Martin, *Ida Leeson: A Life* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006) and *Passionate Friends: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Miles Franklin* (London: Onlywomen Press, 2001); Sally Newman, 'Silent Witness? Aileen Palmer and the Problem of Evidence in Lesbian History', *Women's History Review*, Vol 11, No 3 (2002), pp 505-

530; Barbara Baird, "'Kerryn and Jackie': Thinking Historically about Lesbian Marriages', *Australian Historical Studies*, 126 (2005), pp 253-271; Vicki Crowley, 'Drag kings "down under": an archive and introspective of a few Aussie blokes', *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol 43 (2002), pp 285-308, Lorene Gottschalk, 'From gender inversion to choice and back: changing perceptions of the aetiology of lesbianism over three historical periods', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol 26, No 3 (2003), pp 221-233; Nikki Wedgwood, 'Doin' It for Them-selves! A Case Study of the Development of a Women's Australian Rules Football Competition', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol 22, No 3 (May 2005), pp 396-414; Kathy Sport, 'Below the belt and bleeding fingertips: Feminist and Lesbian Music in the Late 1970s', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol 22, No 53, pp 343-360; and Lucy Chesser, "'When Two Loving Hearts Beat as One": Same-Sex Marriage, Subjectivity and Self-Representation in the Australian Case of Marion-Bill-Edwards, 1906-1916' *Women's History Review* (forthcoming, 2008).

- 6 Ruth Ford, 'Lesbians and loose women: female sexuality and the women's services during World War 2' in Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Gender and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp 81-104. On the contraction of feminist publishing see Katie Holmes, 'Past, present, future: the future of feminist history. Feature: The Future of Feminist History Forum,' Paper delivered at the Lilith Symposium 21 November 2005. *Lilith*, No 15 (2006), pp 1-12. <<http://0-search.informit.com.au.alpha2.latrobe.edu.au:80/fullText;dn=200701021;res=APAFT>> ISSN: 0813-8990. (accessed 10 April 2008).
- 7 I did this search on Historical Abstracts in March 2008. Lucy Chesser, "'A woman who married three wives": Management of disruptive knowledge in the 1879 Australian case of Edward De Lacy Evans,' *Journal of Women's History*, Vol 9, No 4 (January 1998), pp 53-77.
- 8 The article was in trouble from its first sentence, which contained an endnote stating that the term 'gay' would be used to mean both gay men and lesbians throughout the article. While it was recognised that this raised some problems related to 'lesbian invisibility' it had been done anyway because it was thought to promote ease of reading! Andrew Gorman-Murray, 'Gay and Lesbian Public History in Australia' *Outing the Past: Public History Review*, No 11 (2004), pp 8-38. The note is on p 32. The mention of some lesbian history came on p 31. Gorman-Murray did also refer to Liz Ross's 'Escaping the Well of Loneliness,' and a collection of lesbian personal stories, in the body of the article. As important as they are as resources, they are not 'lesbian history' in the academic sense. The collection was Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling (eds), *Words From the Same Heart* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1987).
- 9 I refer to *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol 22, No 53. Helen Reddy's denial was mentioned in Michelle Arrow, 'It has become my personal anthem', p 219; Betty Freidan's was in Margaret Henderson, 'Betty

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Friedan (1921-2006)', p 165. Most of the other references occurred incidentally in original quotations or in lists. A brief paragraph by Susan Magarey, which pointed to the lesbian connection within feminist utopian thought, was the only reference that did any kind of justice to lesbian input into the political and social life of the 1970s. Susan Magarey, 'Dreams and desires,' p 338.

- 10 Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Kay Daniels, 'The Flash Mob: Rebellion, Rough Culture and Sexuality in the Female Factories of Van Diemen's Land', *Australian Feminist Studies*, No 18 (1993), pp 133-150; Chesser, "'A Woman Who Married Three Wives'"; and Lucy Chesser, 'Cross-dressing, sexual (mis)representation and homosexual desire in Australia, 1863-1893' in David L Phillips and Graham Willett (eds), *Australia's Homosexual Histories: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives 5* (Sydney: Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research & the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 2000), pp 1-26. I understand that a chapter by Ruth Ford on late 19th century pornography is to be published this year in an edited collection (another international publication).
- 11 Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Terry Castle (ed), *The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology from Ariosto to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). This is just a small selection of a rapidly expanding area.
- 12 See my discussion in Lucy Chesser, 'Parting with my sex for a season': Cross-dressing, inversion and sexuality in Australian cultural life, 1850-1920, PhD Thesis, School of Archaeological and Historical Studies, La Trobe University, 2000, ch 7.
- 13 James George Beaney, *The Generative System and its Functions in Health and Disease*, (4th edn) (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1883), pp 387-391.
- 14 *Ibid*, p 387.
- 15 *Ibid*.
- 16 This was possibly a fairly well-known Melbourne scandal. Chidley described a similar incident involving a 'Mrs Walker' that his father told him about. His father had been part of a sort of Swedeborgian society in that they had tried vegetarianism and experimented with living together. William Chidley, *The Confessions of William James Chidley*, edited by S McInerney (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977), p 60. Historians working on 19th century records should keep their eyes peeled for references, veiled or otherwise, in other sources. Population statistics for Victoria in 1861 show that there were less than 115,000 women aged between 15 and 50 in the whole of the colony. It takes at least two to tango, so Beaney's three cases represent

at least six women and possibly more (the women whose marriages were supposedly ruined). We often emphasise how elusive same-sex relationships can be in the historical record; when I read Beaney it makes me wonder what else might be out there to be found.

- 17 As Ruth Ford has argued, although the law has not directly concerned itself with lesbian acts, it could still be viewed as actively homophobic. The cases she examined were 20th century cases involving husbands petitioning for the restoration of conjugal rights. In these cases women who came before the courts for other matters were persecuted for their inappropriate behaviours and their refusal of men. Ruth Ford, "Lady-Friends" and "Sexual Deviationists": Lesbians and the Law in Australia, 1920s-1950s,' in Diane Kirkby (ed), *Sex, Power and Justice: Historical Perspectives on Law in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p 34. I know of no similar 19th century cases.
- 18 John Freeman's *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1883), p 127.
- 19 'Murder and Suicide. An Artist Shoots a Fellow-Lodger,' *Truth* [Sydney], 15 January 1893, p 5. Coroner's reports for this case shed little further light on events. Sydney City Coroner: Register of Inquests and Inquiries 1862-1926, AONSW Ref 2/772. Reel 1394. Folio 141, No 17. Register of Inquests held in January 1893; Department of Justice Registers of Coroners' Inquests 1834-94: AONSW REF: 4/6620. Reel 2925 No 76, 1893. Van Kaspelen is the subject of a webpage by the Art Gallery of South Australia <www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/noye/Colorist/v_Kaspel.htm>. Oddly, he was also referred to William Chidley's writings as both worked as artists in South Australia in the 1880s.
- 20 Martha Vicinus, 'Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?,' *Radical History Review*, No 60 (1994), p 59.
- 21 Chidley, *Confessions*, p 164.
- 22 *Ibid*, p 164, p 60.
- 23 *Ibid*, p 164.
- 24 *Ibid*, p 175.
- 25 *Ibid*, p 175-176.
- 26 *Ibid*, p 175-176.
- 27 *Ibid*, p 211.
- 28 *Ibid*, p 213.
- 29 *Ibid*, p 233.
- 30 *Ibid*, p 235.
- 31 *Ibid*, p 235.
- 32 In the early 20th century, Chidley published his beliefs on sexuality, nudity and vegetarianism in a pamphlet of this name.
- 33 Chidley, *Confessions*, p 238.

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- 34 Jill J Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1984), pp 115-120.
- 35 Chidley, *Confessions*, p 35, 88.
- 36 Beaney, *Generative System*, p 387
- 37 Marion-Bill-Edwards, *The Life and Adventures of Marion-Bill-Edwards, The Most Celebrated Man-Woman of Modern Times: Exciting Incidents, Strange Sensations. Told in the Graphic Manner By Herself* (Melbourne: WH Junior, [c.1908]), p 8.
- 38 Edwards, *Life and Adventures*, p 10.