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Awfully Devoted Women

Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65

Cameron Duder



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Acknowledgments

Awfully Devoted Women began life as an exploration of lesbian and bisexual women's subjectivity in English Canada before second-wave feminism. As so often happens, it was prompted by questions arising from a single source. A set of letters and journals of a British Columbia woman, Constance Grey Swartz, led me to wonder about same-sex relationships between women in Canada before the 1970s. I realized that in my reading of lesbian history, I had come across very little on lesbians in Canada and almost nothing on Canadian lesbians before second-wave feminism. It was 1993 and Canadian lesbian and gay history was an emerging but still small field. Now, we have much more scholarship to draw upon, yet we still know relatively little about relationships between women in Canada prior to 1965. My hope is that this book helps to fill that gap.

Many people have shared their expertise and advice during the writing of this book. I would like to thank Lynne Marks, Angus McLaren, Elizabeth Vibert, Aaron Devor and Leila Rupp for their advice during and since the writing of the book and for their enthusiasm generally for the history of sexuality. Each provided crucial feedback and challenged and inspired me to think more carefully and critically, and I am a better scholar for their efforts. The University of Victoria provided fellowship funding for my research, and my time teaching courses there in the history and sociology of gender and sexuality has afforded me the opportunity to do further work in this exciting field. I am grateful to the students in those courses and to colleagues and students at the University of Otago in New Zealand for their engagement with debates in the history of sexuality and for inspiring me during the writing process.

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Portions of this book have been published in Karen Duder, “‘That repulsive abnormal creature I read of in that book’: Lesbians and Families in Ontario, 1920-1965,” in *Ontario Since Confederation: A Reader*, ed. Edgar-André Montigny and Lori Chambers, and Cameron Duder, “‘Two Middle-Aged and Very Good Looking Females That Spend All Their Week-Ends Together’: Female Professors and Same-Sex Relationships in Canada, 1910-1950,” in *Historical Identities: The Professoriate in Canada*, ed. Paul J. Stortz and Lisa Panayodotis, and are reproduced here with permission of the University of Toronto Press.

A number of people have supported this project over the years and have sustained me during its evolution into a book. Several have offered incisive and crucial feedback and shared their expertise in the history of sexuality. All have understood the daunting task of writing and have cheered, commiserated, cajoled, and encouraged as needed. I acknowledge particularly Susan Johnston, Carolyn Strange, Sheila McManus, Christie Roome, Becki Ross, Pat Rasmussen, and Janet Sheppard in Canada and Annabel Cooper, Chris Brickell, Rebecca Stringer, Barbara Brookes, Judith Collard, Ros Rice, Trisha Bennett, Su White, and Leslie Turner in New Zealand. Jean Wilson at UBC Press was enthusiastic about the topic from the start and has encouraged and assisted me throughout the book’s long journey to completion, particularly when my own interest was waning. Since Jean’s retirement, I have been fortunate to work with Darcy Cullen and Ann Macklem, who have guided the final polishing of the manuscript. I thank Jean, Darcy, and Ann for their editorial advice, for their invaluable suggestions, and for their enthusiastic support for the project.

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Awfully Devoted Women

Introduction

In 1925 Bud Williams wrote to her partner, Frieda Fraser, “My lamb, it is very hard to be sensible to-night. I’m so awfully thrilled about loving you and vice versa. If you were about, I should probably fall on your neck on the street and kiss you, and disgrace you publicly.”¹ In letters written during periods of separation for work and travel in the 1920s and early 1930s, Bud and Frieda wrote often of people’s prejudice against women who were “devoted” to each other. They protested the unreasonableness of the fuss being made about such relationships, and they wanted to be left alone to live together in happiness. Both women were aware of the need to be discreet about their relationship for fear of disgracing one another in the presence of others, yet they were also determined in their resistance to family and peer pressure on them to end their relationship. Bud lamented in 1926:

I haven’t the remotest idea of what will be the result of all the fuss about us. It can’t be any worse than it has been, can it? Perhaps in time – 20 yrs or so – people will get tired of it and leave us in peace. That is the most we can hope for. I don’t suppose they’ll be enthusiastic about us even in 100 yrs. However it hasn’t made any difference really – we had to exercise tact and discretion, but it hasn’t made any difference to our being devoted to each other, really, has it? It is such a delightfully secure feeling to think that various people have been awfully down on it and done their best to spoil it – and they were the ones who could bring more pressure to bear than anyone else – and yet it is still there more than ever. My lamb, aren’t you proud of us?²

Seventy years later, lesbians spoke to me of their early same-sex relationships from the 1940s to the 1960s and of the same need for secrecy lest knowledge of their lesbianism have a negative impact on their relationships with family and friends and on their employment. In interviews about their lives before 1965, they told stories of a fear of being discovered, of leading a double life, of knowing that they were not supposed to be “like that” yet wanting to find other women “like that,” and of being careful of what they did and said around family, peers, and workmates. A common theme in their stories was the thought that they were alone and the knowledge that their desires were regarded as abnormal or immoral, accompanied therefore by the belief that they could not speak about or obviously act on those desires in public. Discovery of other lesbians was both exciting and terrifying. Mary, describing a holiday she took with her partner, Doris, in 1956, said:

We thought we were the only two lesbians in the world ... until we went with two straight girls to Cape Cod, Provincetown, of all places. When we arrived in Provincetown, I remember Doris saying as we looked around, “My god, there’s more like us around here” ... The clues were that women were holding hands and it was so free. The straight girls said, “I think they’re queer here.”³

Visibility – its form and its consequences – was a central issue for lesbians between 1900 and 1965, in the years before the bar cultures, lesbian feminism, and the lesbian and gay rights movement challenged invisibility and sought to increase public awareness of and to change attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. There are very few sources that tell us what life was like before 1965 for a Canadian woman who desired women, particularly before the 1950s. This book is about such women, their relationships, their sexual practices, and their communities in that period of greater invisibility. *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65* examines relationships between upper-middle-class professional women between 1900 and 1950. Correspondence and journals of upper-middle-class women’s relationships reveal that they modified the earlier model of the romantic friendship. These women did not call themselves “lesbian,” yet their relationships were clearly erotic and outside the bounds of heteronormativity. We know relatively little about upper-middle-class Canadian

lesbian relationships compared to American and British ones, and those scholars who have written of a committed relationship between two women have often been reluctant to discuss it in relation to the possibility of physically sexual involvement. Professional life afforded these women some possibilities of association on the basis of love of women, but requirements of respectability and discretion constrained them in terms of open expression of that love. Canadian women in these kinds of relationships drew upon spiritual and familial metaphors to express their love for one another, and they lived in relationships framed as exemplary of “devotion.” They are an important but largely undocumented part of the story of the lesbian past in Canada.

Awfully Devoted Women also discusses lower-middle-class women and their relationships and social worlds from the 1930s to 1965. Interviews with lower-middle-class women who now identify as lesbian address how they explored and attempted to understand their desires for women in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In most cases, these women were not part of the culture of the public lesbian bar that emerged in the postwar decades. They kept their sexuality hidden from family members and workmates, and either they did not know of other lesbians or they socialized with lesbian friends in ways that would not bring their lesbianism to the attention of others.

Both of these groups of women are an important part of Canadian lesbian history, yet they are little discussed. Lesbian history generally has been less well documented than gay men’s history because of ideas about women’s limited sexuality, because of the greater legal consequences for male same-sex activity and thus men’s greater representation in court and police records, and because of homophobia and a resistance to thinking about the possibility of women’s erotic interest in other women. Lesbian invisibility, however, has not resulted only from the homophobia of earlier decades. The ways we have studied lesbian history have also perpetuated the invisibility of some lesbians. Literature on lesbian history between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s is largely about two kinds of female relationship: noble, allegedly nonsexual, and socially sanctioned middle-class “romantic friendships”; and gender-transgressive, sexualized, and pathologized working-class “butch-femme” relationships. These categories have their basis in lived experience, but they are also the main categories by which lesbians and historians have understood, defined, and analyzed lesbian history, to the exclusion of other possibilities.

Both during the period under study and subsequently, the lives of lower-middle-class lesbians have been made culturally unintelligible by lesbians' and historians' desire to restore to the historical narrative the stories of the foremothers of lesbian community and activism, based on preconceived cultural ideals of what constitutes lesbian resistance against homophobia and heterosexist oppression: living openly with another woman, feminist writing or writing extolling the virtues of romantic relationships between women, or living publicly as a lesbian in the sense of clear sexual preference for women, gender transgression, and the formation of social subcultures based on a desire for women. The tendency has been to look for those women who lived openly in relationships with other women and to see these women as the courageous foremothers of lesbian feminists and lesbian communities in the late twentieth century. In focusing on the dedication or the relative openness with which these women lived without men, and in celebrating that as an essential feature of lesbian experience, lesbians have often ignored and made unintelligible the subjectivities of those lesbians who did not live openly as lesbians, were not political matriarchs of the nation,⁴ and did not fight for "public" space.⁵

Nan Enstad suggests, writing about young working women at the turn of the twentieth century, that the subjectivities of the women she discusses have been obscured by two things: "contemporary organized politics and historical analyses, both of which searched for political actors who matched preconceived cultural ideals."⁶ She further suggests that historians, motivated to restore stories of women's activism to the historical record, actually "narrowed the historical understanding of the diversity of working-class culture and resistance, and foreclosed alternate political subjectivities by the ways they framed their subjects and sources."⁷ Like the women Enstad discusses, lower-middle-class lesbians have been obscured by an emphasis on visibility of particular kinds, where to have been visible as a lesbian in the past or to have left behind a record of one's relationship with a woman is celebrated but where living a life now understood as "closeted" is not. As Nan Alamilla Boyd argues, in the post-Stonewall era,

when political entitlements are linked to public visibility, a language about community based on the relative value of "outness" and "closetedness" has come to structure not only the way historians of gay and lesbian

communities do research (via oral history methods) but the ways those who engage in same-sex practices verbalize their experiences.⁸

Although “unpolitical” lesbians are occasionally recognized, they are often portrayed as “closeted” because of their maintaining a façade of heterosexuality, a condemnation dismissive of their own personal struggles living as women who desired other women when such desire either was not discussed at all or was depicted as pathological. Unlike romantic friends and butch-femme couples, they have no identity category of their own within lesbianism. Their lesbianism is amorphous, undefined, and even reflective of “internalized homophobia.” Because they were not in some way recognizable political actors or literary figures, they do not feature as culturally intelligible within lesbian discourse itself. It is one of the tasks of this study to remedy that erasure. The lower-middle-class women discussed in this book are from this ignored group. They formed relationships and socialized with other lesbians away from public view and in ways that hid them from their contemporaries and, until recently, from scholarly view as well.

For many women from the early to mid-twentieth century, very visible “public” forms of lesbianism were not central to lesbian social life. These were women for whom living more publicly as lesbians would have compromised other, equally important aspects of life. In her analysis of the life of Julia Boyer Reinstein, a middle-class American woman living in Deadwood in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy suggests that “discretion is a distinct social formation and raises provocative questions: Is discretion always oppressive? Is rupturing the closet always liberatory?”⁹ Boyer Reinstein led an active lesbian social life with the knowledge of her parents, but she and her friends did not seek to live a public life as lesbians. Kennedy calls this “private lesbianism” and suggests that Boyer Reinstein and her friends constructed a private world where lesbianism could flourish but one in which discretion was paramount. Two rules operated in their world: in public, one was to behave as a respectable heterosexual daughter, to the extent possible without marrying, and one was never to talk about lesbianism. Acting in accordance with these rules, Boyer Reinstein “received all the benefits and privileges of her class. Furthermore, they allowed her to live without stigma.”¹⁰

In her study of relationships between elite British women, from the Ladies of Llangollen in 1778 to the banning of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, Martha Vicinus emphasizes the importance of respectability and discretion in the lives of elite women and the ways they resorted to code, used metaphor and allusion, and otherwise concealed their relationships from prying eyes. The need for discretion, however, existed in tension with the desire to connect with women of similar feeling, and they developed ways of connecting on the basis of interest in women that looked innocent to the outside world but were clear signals to those interested. Vicinus comments, “The adroitness with which these women used and deflected the public gaze upon their more private relations was extraordinary. They managed to be open and closed, to keep a secret and to tell it to anyone who might be listening.”¹¹ Elite and middle-class women from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century balanced their erotic relationships against norms of respectability and the requirement for discretion. Requirements of class and gender were crucial to their survival, and they explored relationships with women in such a way as not to disturb the financial security, familial relationships, and social networks required to enjoy their social class. Following Harriette Andreadis, Vicinus argues, “we have too long assumed that women in the past *could not name* their erotic desires, rather than recognizing their *refusal to name* them.”¹² For some women, then, whatever gains there might have been in more open relationships with women were dramatically outweighed by the potential losses, and they kept their sexuality very much private.

For the most part, the women in this book lived in the same way: they maintained a respectable façade at work and in the company of family and engaged in relationships with women in secrecy. They were discreet in their same-sex activities and sought to hide their relationships because of the negative impact that exposure would inevitably have had on their family and work relationships. Respectability determined the extent to which and the ways they revealed their interest in women, and their social relationships were founded on that basis. Like the women in Vicinus’s study, they were for the most part able to deflect the public gaze on their relationships and to appear heterosexual, yet in many cases they were able simultaneously to locate other women like themselves. They made themselves both invisible and visible. In this regard, they were somewhat different from those women whose lesbianism was more public, whose

socializing occurred in public bars, and whose lives were linked to other activities that made them much more subject to the gaze of the general public and of the state.

Recent lesbian history has emphasized the bar culture of the mid-twentieth century as a precursor to the lesbian community of the 1970s, and its members have been celebrated for claiming “public” space in large urban centres of the United States and Britain. Community formation has been one of the most important areas of study in the past two decades, and works describing the bar cultures of large urban centres have been central to the broadening of lesbian and gay history beyond analysis of social elites. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis examine the lives of lesbian women and the lesbian bar culture in Buffalo, New York, from the 1930s to the 1950s. Whereas earlier feminist research portrayed the butch-femme relationships of the bar culture as the hegemonic adoption of heterosexual gender role models, Kennedy and Davis credit the importance of these relationships for the eventual formation of community identity in the face of heterosexual repression. They also demonstrate that in some ways lesbian sexuality, as expressed in butch and femme identities, subverted rather than reproduced heterosexual gender relationships by placing the responsibility for sexual satisfaction of her partner on the butch lesbian.¹³ Other works for the United States and for Britain have discussed the bar culture as integral to the formation of lesbian identity and community or as a site of conflict over what lesbians should look like and how they should behave.¹⁴

A similar literature for Canada is only just emerging, and we have but a few studies in which working-class lesbians and their social and working lives are discussed. The most extensive is Elise Chenier’s study of Toronto’s working-class lesbian bar culture, which examines its relationship to the Chinese community, to prostitution, and to the illegal drug trade as well as its importance as the foundation for, and its conflicts with, later feminist organization. Chenier demonstrates the relationship between types of lesbian identity and community and the categories of class, gender, and ethnicity. As in the United States, lesbians suffered harassment and abuse at the hands of the police and were the targets of campaigns against sex deviance, and lesbian resistance to this treatment is now understood as an important part of lesbian and gay history in North America before Stonewall.¹⁵ In Montreal, bar culture from the late 1950s to the 1970s made lesbians

public and was an appropriation of public space for lesbians.¹⁶ Lesbian life in Canada, however, was divided by class, as it was in the United States. Social class, occupation, and bar attendance were intimately linked, and class divided lesbians when it came to their use of social space. Scholarship on Canada's lesbian bar culture shows clearly that this was overwhelmingly a working-class lesbian world and that upper-working-class and certainly middle-class lesbians were disparaging of the lifestyle of women in the bar culture and sought to distance themselves from it.¹⁷

The analysis of lesbian bar cultures has provided a much-needed broadening of our understanding of lesbian history, which previously provided little information about working-class women and instead drew almost exclusively on the records of elite women who left personal records or literary or political works. However, most analyses of the bar communities have examined them from the point of view of identity and community formation, a kind of analysis in which visibility of self and community is taken as crucial, as indicative of adulthood as a lesbian. In emphasizing visible community and spoken identity as the kinds of lesbian history worth investigating and celebrating, other factors in people's lives are ignored. Writing about African American lesbians in Detroit from the 1940s to the 1970s, Rochella Thorpe suggests that historians of lesbians have assumed that bars were central to lesbian communities. The result has been a lack of success in locating lesbians of colour. "Broadening the lens to include other kinds of socializing reveals the importance of race in shaping the social activities in which lesbians chose to engage," she contends.¹⁸ Broadening the lens in this way also reveals the importance of class in shaping lesbian social worlds. The bars were an important focus of lesbian social activity in postwar Canada, but for many lesbians they were not appealing because the risk of public exposure and its consequences far outweighed the benefits of coming together in a public setting with other lesbians. *Awfully Devoted Women* discusses these lesbians, for whom the bar culture was not central. The narrators' testimonies reveal a social world at least partly separate from the bar culture: a world of couples who did not know of others like themselves and a world of house parties in the suburbs and attendance at "respectable" venues. Those who knew of the bars' existence regarded them as exciting but dangerous to their respectability, and they regarded the bar women as "others," as women unlike themselves. For many of the women in this study, the bar was a boundary

marker between the “respectable” and “unrespectable” parts of the lesbian community, and for many middle-class lesbians in particular, the bar was an unknown and unexplored site of lesbian socializing.¹⁹

Scholarship on lesbian and gay history in Canada before 1965 has focused on community, societal pressure and state harassment, and representation, especially in media. Lesbians in Canada grouped together in ways similar to those of their American counterparts, were the target of similar medical, religious, and societal attitudes, were subjected to police harassment and abuse and government discrimination, and had available to them the same limited range of representations of homosexuality in media and medical sources. The twentieth century saw increasing discussion of homosexuality, transforming it from something incomprehensible into something readily viewed and monitored in the public interest.²⁰ The very public discussions and discovery of sexual deviation, venereal disease, and promiscuity in postwar Canada made the language of sexuality more available to a reading and viewing public than ever before. The twentieth-century expert played a key role in the discovery of all manner of “deviant” sexualities and in the promotion of values and practices thought to combat them. Medical professionals, social workers, educators, and the state all functioned to disseminate categories and theories of sexuality in Canadian society. Although it was the male deviant and predator with whom these professionals were mainly concerned, their categorizations also served to pathologize female same-sex activity.²¹

In postwar Canada the family was the foundation of the nation and “was reified as a primary stabilizing influence on both individuals and the nation as a whole.”²² In this context, non-normative gender or sexual behaviours were seen as resulting in “a spectrum of social problems ... from increasing unwed motherhood, unfulfilled housewives, ineffective and absent fathers, greater incidence of child abuse and family desertion, to the growing threat of the sexual deviant – perceived to be homosexual – stalking young children.”²³ That deviant, for most of the period under study, was generally thought of as male, but over the period the amount of comment on female sexual deviancy did increase. It was still the case, however, that many Canadians had little to no knowledge of lesbianism.

One of the challenges in writing lesbian history is that, except for mention in medical sources and in some of the tabloid newspapers, lesbians have received much less attention than gay men. Oral history has been an

important methodology for scholars seeking to examine the lives of lesbians who do not appear in written records. Katie Gilmartin interviewed forty women in the Colorado area to determine how their sexual identities intersected with their class, gender, racial, and ethnic identities between 1945 and 1965.²⁴ She looked particularly at the relationship between lesbianism and class.²⁵ Gilmartin's analysis is one of only a few that address the relationships and boundaries between working-class and middle-class American lesbians before second-wave feminism. Previous work had largely focused on middle-class *or* working-class lesbians rather than on the relationships between them, the divisions and differences between their communities, and the attitudes of each group toward the other. *Awfully Devoted Women* reveals the differences between the women of the bar culture and those who stayed away from it because of fears of public exposure.

Studying different groups of lesbians has meant deciding how to define "lesbian" and which women to include in the history of lesbian life. Anyone writing about lesbians before the homophile movement and the lesbian and gay rights movement is faced with the question of terminology, for most women who had relationships with women before the 1970s did not use the word "lesbian" to describe themselves, nor did they use other available terms such as "sexual invert." A crucial aspect of debates over who should be included in lesbian history and who should not is whether we can prove that a relationship between two women had a physical, particularly genital, component. This question has been an especially important consideration in studies of elite and upper-middle-class women, whose letters and journals almost never mention physical sexuality.²⁶ The working-class women of urban bar cultures have been more readily understood as having engaged in physical sexuality, although we should note that this idea about them derives partly from the greater openness with which they expressed physical sexuality and partly from class-based assumptions about greater working-class propensity for sexual behaviours.

Debate over sexuality and definitions of the lesbian continues. Martha Vicinus proposes that the elite women whose lives she examines in *Intimate Friends* were erotically attracted to women, whatever their sexual practices. She reflects on debates of the past twenty years over who gets to be called "lesbian" and who does not and over whether relationships between women prior to the twentieth century can be called lesbian when a

terminology of lesbianism and communities of lesbians were not yet part of the social landscape. *Intimate Friends* attempts to avoid the limitations of identity-based history of sexuality and discusses a variety of ways women fashioned personal identity based on “a sexualized, or at least recognizably eroticized, relationship with another woman.”²⁷

A woman’s arrival at some kind of identity based on desire for or relationship with women has been a central aspect of histories of lesbian life. The identity “lesbian” suggests a unity of experience, something shared across broad groups of women in terms of their desire for and relationships with women. A number of activists and scholars have challenged that unity, demonstrating very different experiences for lesbians from different socio-economic groups and the ways that categories of sexual orientation are themselves social constructs derived from and perpetuating medicalized discourses. Queer theoretical approaches have called into question the enterprise of “uncovering” the lesbian and gay past as though the information located in historical sources – written, oral, or visual – somehow could be seen as a transparent medium through which to know the history of lesbian and gay lives and communities.²⁸ Many have also criticized the practice of applying modern identity labels such as “lesbian” to people who did not use such labels for themselves. These are useful critiques because they remind us that we cannot “know” how our historical subjects thought about themselves and that we must remember that categories of sexual orientation are neither cross-cultural nor transhistorical. However, as Steven Maynard points out about the privilege involved in calls to give up the search for evidence of homosexual experience in the past, extensive historical reclamation can result in affirmation for those groups whose stories have not yet been made available.²⁹ There remains a place for historical analysis of lesbian lives in the past, for stories of what it was like to live as a woman who desired women in a period in Canadian history when that experience meant great risk and/or great secrecy. Such analysis does not have to posit that experience as wholly factual, as unmediated by culture, as universal, as unproblematic. *Awfully Devoted Women* does not engage with debates about identity but rather describes the lives of a group of Canadian lesbians who have thus far been neglected in historical studies.

The women whose letters I discuss here never described themselves as lesbians, homosexuals, or sexual inverts. The interview narrators now describe themselves as lesbian, but in the period under study many did

not. They simply understood that they were somehow different, that what they desired needed to be kept from their families and work colleagues, and that there were consequences of their relationships becoming known. These two groups of women are divided by period, by class, by identity, and by the means by which we come to know their stories. What connects them, however, is the recognizably erotic, and in many cases recognizably physical, expression of their desire for and of their relationships with women.

Historical evidence of sexuality, particularly of women's sexuality, can sometimes be hard to locate in traditional archival sources. Unless one is examining a form of sexual expression proscribed by law or otherwise dealt with by the state, a record of which might be found in a court document or in the records of a government department, the historian of sexuality must often sift through a significant amount of material before finding evidence of sexual behaviour. In the case of same-sex relations between women, the historian's task is further complicated by an overwhelming gender bias in material regarding homosexuality toward that of gay men.³⁰ To reveal how Canadian lesbians understood their desires between 1900 and 1965, this book examines love letters and interview testimonies of women who desired women and formed relationships on that basis. Five collections of personal papers provide most of the personal material for the period 1900-50, examined in Part 1, "Awfully Devoted Odd Women." These early-twentieth-century documents reveal same-sex relationships that contained attributes of the romantic friendship but contained a more clearly expressed physicality and awareness of societal attitudes toward homosexuality than was found in earlier relationships between women. They provide a first glimpse into Canadian versions of upper-middle-class lesbian life. The largest is a substantial collection of letters and other personal papers of Frieda Fraser and Edith (Bud) Bickerton Williams. The love letters between Fraser and Williams offer a uniquely intimate picture of a relationship between two Canadian women from the 1920s onward. Also important is the collection of personal papers of Charlotte Whitton, Canadian politician and social reformer, whose sexual orientation has been debated on a number of occasions. A portion of the collection, very personal materials relating to Whitton's relationship with Margaret Grier, was not open to viewing until 1999, and more may now be said about this important figure in Canadian women's history than

was possible in earlier studies of her personal life. These two large collections are supplemented by smaller collections in which devoted relationships between women are revealed. Correspondence between Elisabeth Govan and her partner and between Amelia Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie allow a glimpse into middle-class relationships in the mid-twentieth century, when some norms of sexuality were starting to shift but when pathologization of homosexuality was widespread.

Twenty-two of my own interviews, eight interviews conducted by the Lesbians Making History project, an interview conducted by Elise Chénier, and an interview with one of my narrators conducted by a graduate student provide the majority of the material for 1950 to 1965. Narrators were located in a variety of ways. Some were reached via personal contacts within the local Victoria lesbian community, and those women were able to put me in touch with others. I advertised in newspapers in Victoria, Vancouver, and Toronto, and sent calls for narrators and posters to lesbian and feminist organizations in British Columbia and Ontario. Several Ontario narrators were reached via the Metropolitan Community Church, and several in Victoria were located via the Lesbian Seniors Care Society.³¹ In selecting narrators for my own interviews, I chose women who need not have been born in Canada but who had lived in Canada for at least five years between 1910 and 1965. The minimum age for narrators was fifty-five, ensuring that almost all narrators would have reached young adulthood, at the very least, before 1965. I employed a structured yet flexible interview in which narrators responded to a range of set questions but also explored topics of their own choosing and were able to question me and offer contrasting perspectives. Because of the intimate nature of the topic, the interviews began at the most superficial level and worked through to discussion of physical sexuality, many taking several sessions.³²

From the First World War to the advent of second-wave feminism and gay liberation, these women experienced considerable change throughout their lives. Their dates of birth range from 1913 to 1948, and in their childhood and adult years they witnessed some of the most significant events of the twentieth century. Most important for many of them was the development of their attraction toward women, which, in most cases, eventually resulted in the adoption of a gay or lesbian identity label. The timing of their same-sex attractions varied considerably, twelve of the women having their first same-sex experience while still

children and the remainder not exploring same-sex sexuality until adulthood. Despite the differences among them, however, all were raised with heterosexual norms and had to negotiate the tricky terrain of dating, attraction, sex, and relationships. The narrators come from a variety of backgrounds, from very poor working-class families to comfortable middle-class ones. They are overwhelmingly Protestant, with only one narrator, Reva, being Jewish, and one, Chris, being Catholic. Betty is Anglican but was sent to a Catholic school.

All the women interviewed for this study are white. Although many came from working-class or poor backgrounds, most are today comfortably well off. I was unable to locate any Aboriginal lesbians or lesbians of colour who met the criteria for the study in terms of the time of residence in Canada before 1965. The Canadian lesbian community was much less diverse than either its American counterpart in the same period or the community that would form in Canada in the 1970s. Many of the narrators reported that, until the late 1960s at the earliest, the lesbian community contained very few Aboriginal women and women of colour. This opinion is borne out by two of the testimonies from the Canadian film *Forbidden Love*, which examines Canadian lesbians' lives in the 1950s and 1960s, in which the narrators describe the largely monocultural nature of the community.³³ The narrators for this study in some ways form part of a dominant group in society as a whole, yet they are underrepresented in stories of lesbian history. This book provides a perspective from this previously ignored socio-economic group. Also discussed in this study are the testimonies of women involved in Toronto's public bar culture in the 1950s and 1960s. These testimonies, obtained by the Lesbians Making History project in the 1980s and added to by Elise Chenier in the 1990s, show that the Canadian bar culture shared in many ways the characteristics of the American bar cultures described by Lillian Faderman in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* and by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Given that Chenier has used these testimonies in her study of the Toronto bar culture, my use of them here is for comparative purposes only.

This book is divided into two parts. The first, "Awfully Devoted Odd Women," examines the early-twentieth-century collections of letters of upper-middle-class Canadian women whose relationships conformed in

some ways to the norms of the romantic friendship but in several important ways marked the end of the romantic friendship era and the influence of newer, medicalized discourses of sexuality. In these letters, we see a continuation of some of the language of devotion typical in the romantic friendship era, but we also see that these relationships are markedly different from romantic friendships. The women were profoundly aware of negative societal attitudes toward relationships between women, they used and discussed the new medicalized language to describe such relationships, and they were far more explicitly sexual.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the five collections of papers and outlines early-twentieth-century ideas about heterosexuality and about relationships between women, particularly in the North American context. American studies of same-sex sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have often relied in part on autobiographical writings, journals, and letters. These sources have been very important for the history of lesbian women because of their relative lack of representation in the records of institutions of punitive control of “deviant” sexuality. There exist medical case records of lesbian and bisexual women, but there are comparatively few instances in which the stories of lesbians and bisexual women come to light in government, police, or court records, sources that have provided at least some means of accessing the lives of gay or bisexual men. The collections used in this part of the book are from middle-class women in professional positions, women who maintained a lengthy relationship with a female partner.

Chapter 2 discusses how women who desired other women were able to locate each other in a period when there did not exist large and visible lesbian communities and political campaigning. How did women discover other women who were similarly “devoted” to women? What linguistic clues and aspects of appearance might have helped them in the formation of social connections? To what degree did they conform to or reject dominant gender? This chapter outlines the importance of school, university, and work in bringing women together in large numbers and in ways that facilitated the exploration of relationships with women. Using particularly the correspondence between Frieda Fraser and Bud Williams, I reveal how women could continue a relationship, and even find other women who were “devoted,” without being so outside heteronormative

behaviour that they were completely ostracized. In other words, like the women in Vicinus's study, they kept the secret but told it to anyone who was listening. Among their ways of making those connections was a language of devotion and of "odd women," accompanied in some cases by masculine attire.

In Chapter 3 I deal with the question of physical sexuality. Whether or not historians recognize a woman as lesbian has often depended on whether we can show that she engaged in intimate physical activity with another woman. The archival collections on which lesbian historians rely rarely contain specific information about physical sexuality, and whether the historian should make a claim of lesbianism when such evidence is not available has been a contentious issue. Chapter 3 explores the question of physical sexuality in relation to the written sources and suggests that in at least some of them there is sufficient evidence to suggest a physical relationship, even if we cannot prove genital sexuality. More important, however, is the fact that these written records reveal that in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s women in same-sex relationships were influenced by the language of sexology, even if they questioned the depiction of same-sex relationships as unnatural and unhealthy, and they were much more aware of the possibility – and indeed the reality – of societal disapproval and familial rejection. These relationships were also much more explicitly sexual. In outlining the ways that early-twentieth-century relationships between women continued some of the language and the appearance of the romantic friendship but clearly were modern and sexually aware, *Awfully Devoted Women* adds a Canadian perspective to the large literature on the transition in women's relationships from the romantic friendship to the modern lesbian.

The letters also reveal that regardless of what we can or cannot conclude with certainty about a physical relationship, these relationships must be included in a history of same-sex relationships, for they were clearly well outside the bounds of heteronormativity, were recognizably erotic, and were understood by the women as lifelong partnerships. Whether we term them "lesbian" when the women themselves did not use the word will remain a matter of debate. We can certainly discuss them as women whose primary emotional and domestic relationships were with women and whose devotion went beyond the usual structures of female friendship.

Part 2, "Lesbian Lives after the Second World War," uses interview material to build a picture of how women who desired other women

understood and explored their desires when most of them had not heard of lesbianism and thought that they were unique. Some discovered love with women early, whereas some had relationships with men at first and only later came to a lesbian identity. Chapter 4 looks at the childhood experiences of the narrators and the norms with which they were raised. Although in some parts of Canadian society gender and sexual norms were somewhat modified from the early twentieth century to the 1960s, many of these women lived in families in which traditional roles were emphasized. In Chapter 5 the narrators' testimonies reveal the nature and amount of information they had as children and as young adults about sexuality in general and about homosexuality in particular. Like many women who grew up between the 1930s and the 1950s, they were given very little information about how their bodies worked, about the mechanics of sexual activity, and particularly about homosexuality. Despite living in a period when there was supposed to be considerably more information available than for the previous generation, these women were told relatively little by their parents and the education system. In figuring out their bodies and desires and in beginning to explore sexuality, they had to extrapolate from snippets of information gleaned from family members and friends, from what they saw people do in movies, and from whatever reading materials they could find.

Chapter 6 discusses in specific their sexual practices in same-sex relationships. In some ways, the interwar period and the mid-twentieth century saw great expansion in the discussion of aspects of sexuality, yet in other ways Canadians lacked information about sexual desire and sexual practice. Information about homosexuality was more widespread but was by no means universal, and moreover the information available largely reflected medical constructs of homosexuality as pathological. Some information made its way to the Canadian public in sensationalized tabloid newspaper articles about lurid goings-on in major Canadian cities. Most of the women interviewed for this study were unaware of homosexuality growing up or had some knowledge of gay men but none of lesbians. The interview testimonies complicate the picture we have of women in the mid-twentieth century being much more sexually aware than women of previous generations.

The concluding chapters look at two important aspects of lesbian life in the postwar decades: relationships and community. Chapter 7 offers an

examination of lesbian relationships and reveals that most lesbian women hoped for the same things as heterosexual women. Chapter 7 looks at the formation and the nature of lesbian relationships and the difficulties women encountered with their partners. The narrators' testimonies reveal women's longing for relationship, their joy at finding a partner, and their pleasure in coming to an awareness of their desire for another woman, but they also reveal that infidelity, domestic violence, and alcohol abuse were as much a feature of lesbian life as of heterosexual relationships.

Chapter 7 also examines lesbians' relationships with their families of origin. I suggest, tentatively, that in some ways the absolute severing of family ties because of a daughter's lesbianism was more likely to occur from the 1960s onward than before. Prior to the Second World War, a more formal sense of responsibility for one's children and a less medicalized discourse about relationships between women may have worked against parents' desire to completely reject a lesbian daughter. In the later twentieth century, as more Canadians understood relationships between women as pathological, as ideas about familial duty changed, and as it became easier for women to live independently from family and even to find the support of an emerging lesbian community, it may have been more frequently the case that a woman separated completely from her family because of her lesbianism.

Finally, in Chapter 8, this book discusses the lesbian community of the 1950s and the 1960s, specifically how the narrators, who were all in "respectable" jobs in which they were not "out" as lesbians, understood themselves in relation to the working-class bar lesbians of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and the American cities they occasionally visited. The social world of lower-middle-class lesbians was a more private world. Some of the narrators went to the bars at least occasionally and were simultaneously excited and disgusted by the goings-on in the bar culture. Many of them preferred to socialize away from public view and potential police harassment, opting for house parties held in the suburbs. Many others socialized only with heterosexual people and would only later become involved in some form of lesbian community.

The narrators show us that in writing largely about higher-status women in twentieth-century versions of the romantic friendship and about working-class butch and femme women, we have missed a substantial

group of Canadian lesbians. They did not leave archival collections preserved because of the author's social status or institutional affiliation, as in the case of the collections discussed in Part 1. Nor did they have a public presence in the form of very visible appearance, marginalized occupations, or contacts with sex work, the drug trade, and the police, as in the case of many of the working-class butch and femme women of urban lesbian bar cultures. They did, however, form social and occupational networks based on same-sex relationships and were part of an expansion of lesbian community in the 1950s and the 1960s. They are part of a broader fabric of lesbian life before 1965, one in which visible relationships between women, claiming of public space by butch and femme women, and establishment of urban communities of lesbians are important but are not the whole story.

Awfully Devoted Women presents a collection of narratives of lesbian life from a period in lesbian history when political organizing among lesbians had not yet started and when the consequences of being identified as a sexual deviant were severe. Lesbian relationships existed in a context of silence and fear and were balanced against the need for familial connection, financial security, maintenance of respectability, and physical safety. Despite these constraints, women who desired women found ways to explore those desires, to form relationships, often long-term ones, and in many cases to establish social networks based on shared attraction to women. Their relationships were hidden from many but were there to be seen by those who knew when and how to see and hear.

Part 1

Awfully Devoted Odd Women

1

Relationships between Women

The “knitting together of mind and spirit”

In *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, the first parts of which were published in 1897, the sexologist Havelock Ellis wrote that the movement for women’s emancipation was “on the whole, a wholesome and inevitable movement. But it carries with it certain disadvantages.”¹ The main disadvantage, in his view, was that “having been taught independence of men and disdain for the old theory which placed women in the moated grange of the home to sigh for a man who never comes, a tendency develops for women to carry this independence still farther and to find love where they find work.” Ellis, although supportive of some of the aims of the women’s movement, reflected a common assumption about its effects: that women’s emancipation resulted for some in lesbianism. The women’s movement could not, he argued, directly cause sexual inversion, but it could “develop the germs of it.”²

In one sense, Ellis was right. The coming together of large numbers of women in the workplace, in higher education, in “bohemian” movements, and indeed in feminism *did* give women the opportunity to form intimate relationships with each other. As lesbians, or the various kinds of female “sexual inverts” as they were called in Ellis’s day, came together in women-only environments, they were able to realize for the first time that they were not alone in their desires. The workplaces, the universities and colleges, the parties, and the political groups were all sites for the establishment of same-sex relationships between women.³ Between the turn of the century and the interwar period, such environments became increasingly suspect in the eyes of many; for women attracted to other women, they were worlds of opportunity. The school and the workplace were important sites for the formation of relationships between women, providing

numerous opportunities for same-sex social contacts, the like of which disappeared for many heterosexual women upon marriage. Through these contacts, women formed both brief and long-term relationships, sometimes living relatively openly within emerging lesbian communities but more often living very closeted lives.

The few sources attesting to the existence of lesbian relationships in the early twentieth century, before the creation of the bar culture in Canada, come almost exclusively from the upper middle class. Because a public lesbian community, in the form of the bar scene, was established later in Canada than in the United States, we do not have information that would allow the kind of analysis of working-class lesbian life before 1940 found in the two major works on the subject, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.⁴ Our perspective on lesbian life before the rise of the bar culture in Canada is therefore skewed somewhat in favour of middle-class experiences and perspectives.

Several of the women whose lives are the focus of this study are from this earlier period and from this more privileged economic group. We have only written records of their experiences, in the form of love letters and other correspondence. The earliest of these collections comes from just after the period that Lillian Faderman has described as the “the last breath of innocence” in female-female relationships: from the turn of the century to 1920. Faderman argues that the turn of the twentieth century was “the beginning of a lengthy period of general closing off of most affectional possibilities between women.”⁵ She traces the emergence of lesbian subcultures and suggests that the twentieth century saw the erosion of the “sexual innocence” of pre-twentieth-century lesbianism, in the form of the romantic friendship, and the creation of lesbian identities and sexual knowledge between and among lesbians. Perhaps not as rapidly colonized by the ideas of the sexologists and Sigmund Freud, Canada was nevertheless party to an increasing obsession with studying, classifying, and controlling sexuality in its many “natural” and “unnatural” forms. Heterosexual as well as lesbian and bisexual women were subject to the trends that Faderman describes. Expressions of romantic love between women, which previously could have been uttered without condemnation, were, by the 1920s, being viewed with suspicion. After 1920 the author of such an expression would have been viewed as psychologically ill or as deserving of whatever negative consequence was meted out to her.⁶ Faderman argues

that women in twentieth-century America “had to deal with the ‘sexual implications’ of their attachments. To have disregarded them, as they could in a pre-Freudian era, would have been impossible.”⁷ No longer was the excessively romantic, self-sacrificing hyperbole of the middle-class romantic friendship enough to disguise any physical content in a relationship between women. Rather, all such relationships could be viewed with the suspicion that they might be pathological and dangerous.

Lesbian women were, to many Canadians, virtually unknown until the postwar period and were invisible in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Canadian culture. Because women were assumed to be incapable of the same nature and degree of sexual passion as men, it was inconceivable to many that they could desire each other and could engage in same-sex sexual activity. Most historical scholarship on the subject of relationships between women in the nineteenth century and at the very beginning of the twentieth century concerns British and American women in what have been called “passionate” or “romantic” friendships. These relationships were primarily upper-middle-class and were typified by intense emotional bonds, a very passionate language of devotion that was sometimes almost religious in tone, a sense of duty and fidelity, kissing, fondling, and sleeping together. Whether or not the women had sexual relationships remains a matter of some dispute. Society often perceived romantic friendships as being without a sexual component, and some scholars suggested that this was because women were not perceived as, and did not perceive themselves as, sexual beings. Had physical sexuality been revealed, the women concerned would have been condemned. The traditional argument is that romantic friendships were most likely asexual and were socially acceptable during the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth but that the rise of sexology spelled the end of the romantic friendship’s innocence and, by the early twentieth century, resulted in all relationships between women being regarded with suspicion.

The traditional argument has been challenged in recent years by evidence that the romantic friendship persisted well into the twentieth century, “long after the public recognition of women’s sexual desires and passions.”⁸ *Awfully Devoted Women* adds a Canadian voice to that challenge, demonstrating that the women whose letters I examine conformed in many ways to the language of the romantic friendship, even as they incorporated and disputed the new language of sexology. Also modifying the traditional

analysis are studies revealing premarital heterosexual activity, romantic friendships between men, and clear sexual activity in relationships between women in the allegedly asexual romantic friendship. The letters discussed in this book add to that picture too, as they reveal physical relationships.⁹

Although the rapid transformation of the romantic friendship by the new framework of sexology is questioned, it is fair to say that sexology had some influence on people's awareness and interpretation of relationships between women. Ellis's views on the passionate or romantic friendship reflected larger social assumptions about relations between women. Careful to acknowledge that closeness between women was more common than between men and that many passionate friendships were harmless and temporary relationships on the path toward heterosexual matrimony, he nevertheless clearly indicated that he thought many forms of this closeness were abnormal. It was his work, and that of other sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that helped to erode the earlier acceptance of passionate friendships between women. By the 1920s even romantic friendships with no sexual element were increasingly classified as abnormal.¹⁰ It became more difficult for women who had grown up with an acceptance of such relationships now to express themselves openly, given the increasingly hostile climate, but the impact was not wholly negative. The sexological discourse was both employed and rejected by women seeking to understand their "nonprocreative" sexuality.

Sexology was a new "science" of sexuality, which arose in the late nineteenth century and became increasingly influential in the early twentieth century. Sexologists attempted "to isolate, and individualise, the specific characteristics of sexuality, to detail its normal paths and morbid variations, to emphasise its power and to speculate on its effects."¹¹ The sexologists argued that it was possible to isolate and define the nature of what was referred to as the "sexual instinct."¹² Sexuality became something one studied with the lens of science rather than something one pronounced on with the language of religion. Abandoning such moral categories as sin, debauchery, and excess, the new sex pioneers categorized human sexuality as healthy or diseased, normal or abnormal. The construction of the "normal" took place largely by default, as it was primarily the deviations from an a priori ideal about which the sexologists wrote.

The language of the romantic friendship continued well into the twentieth century in middle-class relationships between women, regardless of

their assumed pathology. Even though, as discussed earlier, some viewed expressions of devotion between women with suspicion, the linguistic form of the romantic friendship remained popular among certain groups of women into the 1940s. It was a language of the educated middle and upper classes, it was replete with expressions of adoration, loyalty, and devotion, and it often used spiritual or religious imagery in relation to emotion. The hyperbolic nature of romantic friendship language bore considerable relation to literary expressions of heterosexual courtship, especially to very romantic poetry.

In the nineteenth century such a romantic language fitted well both with notions of women's greater emotionality and lesser physical passion and with middle-class assumptions about (respectable) women's greater spirituality, morality, and religious and marital devotion. By the early twentieth century that same language had become entwined with a new, chic, sexualized discourse, partly taken from Freudian and sexological literature and partly the result of changing norms of courtship. It began to include expressions of physical love and words clearly arising from the new sexological and psychological discourses of the twentieth century but retained its characteristic extravagance of imagery and gushing sentiment. Young women could wax lyrical about their devotion for one another, but they combined more general romantic terminology with new sexualized terms, reflecting a new awareness of sexological and psychological ideas and an increasing awareness of sexuality generally, particularly the knowledge that same-sex relationships were viewed negatively and had to be pursued discreetly to avoid loss of reputation.

Of particular interest to the sexologists, and subsequently to historians, were the relationships between first-wave feminism, women's higher education and financial independence from men, and emerging ideas about sexual inversion. Ellis and his contemporaries clearly identified feminism and women's colleges as breeding-grounds for lesbianism. Reacting to female challenges to established gender norms, sexologists and their supporters used same-sex desire as a rubric within which to explain and discredit those women who transgressed the acceptable boundaries of womanhood. In sexological theory, such women represented at the very least an unfortunate lack of femininity, if not a complete sexual inversion. It is certainly true that many early feminists, and many women in women's colleges, had relationships with one another, but this was due

to opportunity rather than to the effects of the environment itself. Lillian Faderman shows clearly that “women who live by their brains” sometimes did form romantic relationships.¹³

Despite the pathology, however, the new image of the “lesbian” could be liberating for some, allowing as it did an “authorized” transgression of gender identity. A new stereotype began to emerge in public discourse. As Esther Newton demonstrates,

From about 1900 on, this cross-gender figure became the public symbol of the new social/sexual category “lesbian” ... From the perspective of Radclyffe Hall’s generation ... nineteenth-century models may have seemed more confining than liberating ... Hall and many other feminists like her embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and the discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship.¹⁴

The new model of the “sexual invert” at once eroded the earlier respectability of the “romantic friend” and posited a biologically based sexual orientation and gender performance that was argued to be morally right and legal because of its essential nature. A lesbian and gay rights movement based on the biological arguments of the sexologists arose in the late nineteenth century, although it would not bear fruit until the twentieth.

It is difficult to determine precisely the degree to which sexological ideas about sexuality between women permeated Canadian society and over what period.¹⁵ The notoriety of Radclyffe Hall was known to at least some Canadians who were familiar with the controversy surrounding her 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which was publicized in Canada as well as in Britain by the lengthy obscenity trial that surrounded it. The book’s main character, Stephen Gordon, is a self-identified “congenital invert.”¹⁶ The book, and Hall herself, became an instant cause célèbre. Hall brought the sexologists’ terminology and stereotypes to the public in a manner hitherto unknown and was perhaps the most influential lesbian writer well into the twentieth century. Her presentation of Stephen Gordon was designed to elicit the support of a liberal public who, she thought, ought sensibly to see that homosexuality, as something innate to the individual,

ought not to be condemned. She decided to “speak on behalf of a misjudged and misunderstood minority.”¹⁷

Hall presented Gordon as morally upright, despite her biologically flawed nature, yet many were not persuaded by this characterization. After being turned down by several reputable publishers because of the book’s theme, Hall was finally successful in negotiating a contract with Cape for the book to be published with packaging that would ensure its being taken seriously. Despite Havelock Ellis’s endorsement of the book, and several positive reviews, the British Home Secretary demanded its withdrawal. Subsequently, the publishers of the book and the owners of the premises where copies were held were brought to trial. *The Well of Loneliness* was declared to be obscene and was ordered destroyed, and an appeal was unsuccessful.¹⁸ In the United States, *The Well of Loneliness* was prosecuted in 1929 but was acquitted after a successful defence. In addition to newspaper coverage of the trial, reviews of *The Well of Loneliness* were published in a variety of periodicals, including *The Canadian Forum*.

The liberal Canadian journalist S.H. Hooke reviewed *The Well of Loneliness* and wrote against the censorship of the book. In Hall’s defence, Hooke commented that “it is a passionate cry of protest from the side of the abnormal individual against the blind and unreasonable cruelty of society to the unusual type; a protest against the denial to the invert of all emotional outlet.” Concerning the ban of Hall’s book, he observed that “as a result of the ban ... thousands of people have read the book and become aware of the facts of inversion who would ordinarily never have seen the book, nor become cognizant of the facts which it deals with.”¹⁹ Laura Doan regards the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* as a very important moment in lesbian history, “the crystallizing moment in the construction of a visible modern lesbian subculture ... a great divide between innocence and deviance, private and public, New Woman and Modern Lesbian.”²⁰

Lesbians themselves had mixed feelings about *The Well of Loneliness*. Faderman writes that it remained popular well into the 1950s and provided some butch women with a role model in its portrayal of the masculine Stephen Gordon character and her relationship with the feminine Mary.²¹ Not all lesbians, however, were happy with its portrayal of lesbian relationships. An American sociological study of lesbians undertaken in the 1920s showed that many lesbians thought that the book portrayed

homosexuality in a poor light.²² Interviews conducted by Vanessa Cosco for her study of lesbians in Vancouver between 1945 and 1969 revealed that some lesbians found the book affirming in that it revealed the existence of others like themselves, whereas others found it depressing and negative toward lesbians and women generally.²³

Due largely to the extensive publicity surrounding the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*, it became somewhat of a symbol of homosexuality in the eyes of many North Americans in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the standard by which people understood the “sexual invert.” *The Well of Loneliness* proved to be a very popular book in the United States, with 100,000 copies sold in the first year of publication, and by the end of December 1928, it was in its fourth printing.²⁴ We cannot determine with certainty the readership of novels such as *The Well of Loneliness* and thus the range and type of lesbian models in the interwar period in Canada. Knowledge of lesbianism may well have increased dramatically because of expanding coverage in the tabloid press. Steven Maynard argues that “the extensive coverage of the trial, along with follow-up forays into the lesbian world, in a popular tabloid like *Hush*, whose wide circulation surpassed that of elite periodicals, and whose readership reached well beyond medical professionals, suggest that knowledge of lesbianism may have been available to a broader spectrum of the public than we have previously imagined.”²⁵

Lesbian magazine fiction may have been more available to women than were novels such as Hall’s because of the growing popularity of magazine fiction as a genre. In the early twentieth century, before the advent of Freudian theory, much of that fiction was quite frank, for the period, about physical affection between women. Lesbian fiction appeared in such publications as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper’s*, and *Strand*. The stories often involved an older and a younger student at a girls’ school or women’s college. The physical affection portrayed in these stories is without the self-consciousness it would later acquire in the post–Freudian era after the First World War.²⁶

Some sexological works were available at least to some Canadians, sometimes through subcultural networks. Elsa Gidlow, who was born in England but grew up in Quebec, confirms that these works were important in her gaining an understanding of her lesbianism. As a teenager during the First World War, she set up a literary group, through which she met Roswell George Mills, who

apparently recognized immediately my temperament. He said, “Do you know about Sappho?” I don’t remember if I’d heard anything about her, but I went to the library, found writings about her and translations of her fragments, and immediately became interested. Through Roswell – all blessings – I started to hear about some literature that would lead me to some knowledge about myself and other people like me. Other than the literary, I think the first books I read were Edward Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex*, and Kraft-Ebbing [sic], and Lombroso – and all these were revelatory to me because I could have no doubt, having read them, of where my orientation lay. Though they wrote on a level of morbid psychology, and I couldn’t accept the morbidity side of it, it was very interesting to read all this and find out there had been other people like me in the world – and a great many of them, a large number distinguished and outstanding, even if they weren’t acceptable in ordinary life.²⁷

Together, they read Ellis’s *Psychology of Sex* – that is, “such volumes as we were able to get our hands on, as it was mainly available to doctors.” Another member of their group, Louis Gross, a graduate medical student at McGill University, helped them to obtain some of the “forbidden” books.²⁸

Some of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sexological works were available to the public, although they were not widely advertised. In *Between the Acts*, Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks reveal that many of the gay men they interviewed had read the small body of work available to them in the early twentieth century: the works of Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and J.A. Symonds. They argue that works such as these provided gay men with a vocabulary through which they could give meaning to their feelings and recognize that they were not alone.²⁹

The “queer” or “perverse” reading of sexological definitions was widespread. By “queer” or “perverse,” I mean the reading of a text, a norm, or an identity in a way not intended by its creator(s). Bonnie Zimmerman defines a perverse reading as one in which the reader is someone who is “highly conscious of her own agency, and who takes an active role in shaping the text she reads in accordance with her perspective of the world.”³⁰ Such an approach was certainly true of many lesbians and gay men in the early twentieth century, who saw in the sexologists’ terms a ready-made defence against charges of immorality and vice. If homosexuality was biological, if it was an unchanging condition within a human organism,

then moral concerns were irrelevant, and legal punishment and social persecution of homosexuality could not be justified. Rapidly, gay men and lesbians began using the sexological definitions to advance their individual and community rights as best they could.³¹

By the 1920s more authors were writing about homosexuality, and their works were being read by a broader section of the public, although they were not popularized. The extent of the availability of such material to a lay readership is unknown, but there are indications that some sexological works were being read by heterosexual people as well. For example, in 1927 Nettie Bryant wrote to her friend Helene Fraser, mother of Frieda Fraser, advising her on how to handle the lesbian relationship of Frieda and Edith (Bud) Bickerton Williams. Helene had tried without success to discourage the relationship and to tell Frieda the reasons for her opposition. This lengthy letter reveals the conflict between Frieda and her mother over the relationship and the degree to which the relationship was interpreted as unhealthy. Nettie wrote:

If I can *only* transfer to you, unbroken, my dear old friend, the vision which stands in my own mind with *increasingly persistent clearness and vigour* as a sure, safe, and upright method of meeting this rare problem – and, what is more, though God forbid that it should fail! – it seems to me looking at it in every way possible – it seems to me to be the *one and only* way which will bring everything around in the end!

Nettie wrote a lengthy letter explaining how Helene could change her approach to the problem. She suggested that Helene “say to Frieda that this marked preference for Bud carried on, in opposition to your apprehensive wishes, almost to the line of defiance, is eating your heart out.” Helene should remind Frieda that her opposition was not founded on personal dislike but rather that it “lies in a well-founded apprehension, as you believe, that this friendship so-called, is eternally injuring Frieda’s life – her development, her career, her health & her future happiness!” She advised her to tell Frieda that

you have made up your mind to *withdraw* from any further effort in this line – to let Frieda “go to it” just as hard and far and fast as she likes. That you have still one quiet confidence lying in the bottom of your

heart – and that is, that Frieda will never let Bud, or anyone else, crowd you out of that chamber of her affections and her fealty which has always been yours – her own and only mother’s. That your only stipulation in making all this over to her is that she will never try to bring you and Bud together, in future: that that *would* be worse than you could carry! But that you give Frieda up to her in every way – she can go just as far as she likes, you give her *carte blanche* – with this one stipulation that she does not attempt to bring her *to you or to your home*.

In Nettie’s opinion, this course of action “would tell forcefully upon Frieda. The generosity of spirit that it would express to Frieda would, of itself, have a favorable re-action ... One cannot barter strong family ties even for a husband to whom one is rightly devoted, without a feeling of great loneliness in the world! How much more so where it is only for the cause of a girl-friend!” Nettie was sure that “this move would do more to loosen Bud’s hold on [Frieda] than any amount of opposition would do.” Regarding Bud, Nettie remarked:

As to Bud, the reaction that I have felt in realizing that she was not after all of the nature of that repulsive abnormal creature I heard of in that book, has resulted in a more tolerant leniency (perhaps that is expressing it a bit too strongly – as it might seem to you) – even you yourself could not help being conscious if you had read the thing!³²

It is unclear precisely to which book she was referring, but Nettie, in her guidance to Helene, clearly reveals the availability of at least some works attesting to the existence of “abnormal” sexualities and the influence of ideas about same-sex relationships as being detrimental to an individual’s personal development and public life.

Also gaining popularity after the First World War were psychological analyses of homosexuality. Henry L. Minton argues that Ellis’s “concept of individual and cultural relativism in sex and his tolerance for homosexuality had no impact on the medical community.”³³ It was Freud who had the larger influence, at least on American paradigms. By 1900 medical professionals were beginning to classify sexual deviations more rigorously. Sexual inversion, gender inversion, and other forms of sexual “deviancy” became more discrete categories, each with its own set of

characteristics. Freud's theories about sexuality began a slow process of separating definitions of homosexuality from those of congenital sexual and gender inversion, yet this change occurred in a very piecemeal fashion. There remained considerable slippage between the two types of theories. As George Chauncey suggests, even Freud's followers in the United States continued to mix his psychological interpretations of homosexuality with earlier, congenital ones.³⁴ American psychiatrists and psychologists writing in the 1930s associated homosexuality with cross-gender identification, building somewhat on earlier assumptions about inversion. Interwar interpretations, however, did not always have an essentialist basis. Psychiatrist George W. Henry, in his 1937 study of "Psychogenic Factors in Overt Homosexuality," concluded that psychological causes could exacerbate any existing latent tendencies toward homosexuality. In particular, deviation from prescribed gender roles could lead to homosexual tendencies.³⁵

Medical, sexological, and psychological works on sexuality increasingly informed the discourses of the medical and psychological professions. It may have been the case that the definitions and terminologies of sexuality used by these professionals with their patients gradually changed in response to these works, but it is impossible to determine without access to medical case files the degree to which this occurred in the period under study. In addition, one must remember that the descriptors developed in these professions may have been used in patients' files but would not necessarily have been mentioned to patients and families themselves, thus keeping the discourse restricted to the medical profession. A few members of the general public, most particularly those deliberately seeking scientific explanations for their own sexuality, gained access to sexological and psychological works, but it is unlikely that their use was widespread. The rapid expansion in published works on sexuality does not necessarily indicate a public well educated on the subject. Such education was most likely class-specific and perhaps even gender-specific. More information on sexuality was available to Canadians, but their degree of access to it varied considerably. The records of the middle-class women whose lives are discussed in this book do indicate a continuation of the earlier language of the romantic friendship and of areas of ignorance about female sexuality, but they also strongly demonstrate that sexological ideas were becoming more influential among middle-class Canadians. These relationships

are a transition between the romantic friendship and the modern lesbian relationship.

Women's diaries and letters present the historian of sexuality with many difficulties of interpretation, especially if written before the Second World War. In a period when sexuality was largely not spoken of, and when respectable women were thought to be much less sexual than were men, women naturally tended not to write about their sexual desires and behaviours. It was a rare woman indeed who breached these boundaries of appropriate expression since the consequences for reputation could be severe. Even those literary figures whose works ventured into such areas risked being branded as salacious and improper. Little surprise, then, that the few women's records to be found in public archives and private collections contain little or no material on the authors' sexual activities. Acknowledgment of same-sex desires and activities was even riskier and thus less common. These constraints render the manuscript collections discussed in this chapter particularly significant, for they allow us a rare glimpse into the erotic lives of women whose sexual desires and activities were doubly proscribed.

Frieda Fraser and Edith (Bud) Bickerton Williams

The collection of letters between Frieda Fraser and Edith (Bud) Bickerton Williams is the largest thus far in Canadian lesbian history. It is also a rare and unusual collection in its expressiveness and detail about a passionate relationship between two women. Frieda and Bud wrote to each other in language that was similar to that of romantic friends, but clearly evident in their letters is an awareness of new terms for sexuality, ideas about "unnatural" relationships, knowledge of the possibility of familial and societal disapproval, and awareness of other women in same-sex relationships. Their correspondence also reveals the emotional hardships women had to endure in order to be with one another and clearly illustrates the depth of lesbian passion. It is not known when precisely Frieda and Bud met, but it was during their university years that they formed the intimate relationship that would last until Bud's death in 1979. They date the beginning of their "system of partnership," as they called it, to 1918, and they began the passionate correspondence left to us today during their separation between 1925 and 1927, while Frieda continued her medical training in the United

States and Bud travelled and worked in Europe.³⁶ Their families, who were largely disapproving of their relationship, also sought to separate them. Bud and Frieda were separated again in the 1930s, when Bud was living in Aurora and Frieda was in Toronto. In 1939 they were finally able to set up house together. They continued to live together until Bud's death.

Frieda Helen Fraser was born in Toronto in 1899, the child of William Fraser, a professor of Spanish and Italian at the University of Toronto, and Helene Zahn. She was educated at home until the age of fifteen and then was sent to Havergal College. She entered University College in the fall of 1917 and graduated with her bachelor's degree in 1922, having specialized in physics and biology. Frieda completed a bachelor of medicine in 1925 and then moved to New York, where she took an internship at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. She completed her postdoctoral training in chest diseases at the Henry Phipps Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. She then took up the position of demonstrator in the Department of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine in the School of Hygiene in Toronto. She was also a research associate in the Connaught Laboratories. In 1936 Frieda became an assistant professor, and she made full professor in 1949. She retired in 1965 and died in 1992. It was during Frieda's time in New York and Philadelphia that the majority of the letters were written. As a teenager and as an adult, Frieda adopted a boyish and then masculine appearance. She was somewhat reserved, and she enjoyed the outdoors and painting and drawing.

Edith (Bud) Bickerton Williams was also born in Toronto in 1899. Less is known about Bud's background. She too was Presbyterian. That she was of similar social status to Frieda may be indicated by the presence among her remaining possessions of a volume of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poetry containing a bookplate with the coat-of-arms of the Williams family, listing the name Sir John Bickerton Williams, Kt., LLD, FSA. Bud's father was "in insurance."³⁷ Bud spent ten years at "Glen Mawr," a private school for girls. She entered the arts program at University College in 1916 but was an unsuccessful student and failed in her second year. In 1925 she travelled to Britain to work in a bank. Her mother attempted to persuade her to remain in England, but Bud returned to Canada in 1927. In the 1930s she raised poultry in Aurora, Ontario, and then entered the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph. She graduated in 1941, being only the second

female veterinary graduate in Canada and the fifth in North America. She then set up veterinary practice in Toronto, retiring at the age of sixty-five. Bud suffered a stroke in 1976 and another two in 1979, finally succumbing in November of that year. She had a somewhat more feminine appearance than Frieda and was also rather more emotionally expressive.

Frieda and Bud did not encounter family opposition to their undertaking university study and working for a living. Frieda may have been privileged in this regard since she came from a family in which higher education was already valued, her father and one of her brothers also being academics. As noted, her father was in the humanities at the University of Toronto, and Frieda's brother Donald, to whom she was very close, was a scientist. His support may have aided in her being able to pursue the career that she adopted, first as a medical doctor and then as a professor of microbiology. Nor does there seem to have been any opposition to Bud's working in a bank. In fact, Bud's family sent her to England so that she could look after her aunts. Clerical work in the developing banking system was an appropriate employment for a woman of her class. It also had the added "advantage" of keeping her away from Frieda, something Bud's mother desired greatly. It seems from the records available that their upbringing had not included attempts to keep them away from the world of female employment, and thus they had not had to rebel against family wishes in that regard.

Although the ideal and the expected role for all women was marriage and motherhood, it was now rather more customary than it had been just a decade or two earlier for women of Frieda and Bud's class to work before marriage. By the beginning of the interwar period in Canada, many areas of the workforce were opening up for women. Working-class women had long been in paid employment, but a new trend in the 1920s was for a larger number of middle-class women to enter the paid workforce before marriage than had done so in the previous century. No longer was there quite as much stigma attached to the middle-class woman who worked for money, although it should be noted that her employment was to be in respectable and appropriately feminine areas of the workforce, such as teaching, nursing, or good-quality clerical work.³⁸

It was the obvious relationship between Frieda and Bud to which their families objected. The Fraser-Williams relationship commenced at the

cus of two important periods in middle-class lesbian history, the era of the romantic friendship and the Freudian era. Their letters are reminiscent in their expressions of love and devotion of some of the letters of nineteenth-century lesbians in romantic friendships, which were assumed to be nonsexual. Similar middle-class values are expressed, and the social milieu they moved in were middle-class in nature. Yet Bud and Frieda clearly had a physical sexuality. Their letters are much less ambiguous than those of other collections. The letters are replete with such terms of endearment as “my lamb,” “lambie,” and “darling.” Writing almost daily when possible, Bud and Frieda discussed not only their jobs, friends, and family events but also the nature of their relationship, societal attitudes toward relationships between women, their future together, and their families’ opposition to their relationship. Although they do not analyze their own coming to awareness of their same-sex attraction, their discussions of relationships with friends and family and the continuous expression of the terms of their own relationship reveal a sense of the “rightness” and “naturalness” of their union not unlike that expressed in the more recent oral testimonies used for this study. Their letters also reveal the presence, on both sides, of subjectivity based on same-sex desire in their awareness of their difference from other women, their resistance to societal attitudes toward relationships between women, and their passionate commitment to a long-term relationship.

The two women constantly flatter each other, Bud being the more expressive of the two in this regard. Writing to Frieda for her birthday in 1925, for example, Bud said, “My dear – This carries my best wishes for to-morrow and all my love to you. I am quite used to your getting older as you are doing it so nicely. And it is nice to have you catch up to me again – I am not so lonely. I shall burn two candles for you to-morrow – one as a bribe for the future and one to say thank-you for the past.” She continued, flirtatiously, “I hope you’re liking the great out-of-doors – please don’t pick up a he-man!”³⁹ She would ask of Frieda, later in 1925, “Do you think we’ll get over liking each other in time? It might be simpler in heaps of ways but I couldn’t conceive of a worse calamity than to stop loving you, to look at [it] from a purely selfish point of view. O my dear, I’ve an awful lot to thank you for – especially for showing me what affection is.”⁴⁰ Bud’s feelings for Frieda sometimes affected the way she interacted with other people. “I like it most of the time,” she said,

because it is not enough to be really painful, but quite often I get took! It is most unexpected and rather inconvenient sometimes. I begin to be so awfully nice to people. Mollie understands so that when I kiss her when we meet in the evening and try to wait on her hand and foot, she doesn't think that I have taken leave of my senses, but is nice and sympathetic back. But with other people, it is not so simple and makes life very much more complicated. But I've told you about it before. I wish I could explain that I'm not being nice and affectionate because of any feelings I have for them but because I like someone else rather hard.⁴¹

The depth of their feelings for one another is expressed in many letters. In 1926 Bud wrote, "I didn't know that it was possible to miss anyone so much, or that I could love you quite so violently. On having had it happen, I could go on doing it indefinitely without slowing down a bit." Regarding their future together, she said, "The end of our second four years expires this year – what about a new base and for how long? It *will* be amusing to see what we are up to in another eight years – 34, Frieda! And what will we have done?"⁴² Frieda also missed Bud, writing the previous year, "It is a most extraordinary arrangement this system of partnership. I suppose it shows the adaptability of the human organism. I didn't realise till lately how much I need you & depend on you & still, or rather because of it I rely much more on myself than without you. Is that clear? It sounds rather cocky but it isn't very."⁴³

Frieda and Bud often spoke of their relationship in terms of a "valley," which appears to refer to an imaginary or symbolic and idyllic place where their love was expressed fully. "Frieda dear," wrote Bud,

I've tried and tried and I can't write about the valley. I've written pages and then torn them up because they don't say at all what I mean. You are a very understanding person, but when I read it over, it doesn't convey what I mean even to me, so I don't think it would to you.⁴⁴

Frieda had similar difficulty describing the valley, but in both cases the descriptions offer images of a tranquil and almost ethereal place where the emotions between the two women surrounded them, communication was almost telepathic, and the criticism of others was absent. The conjuring up of such an imagined place to express their love might suggest to the

reader a form of resistance to dominant discourse, in the sense that Frieda and Bud created for themselves an ideal world where their love was not an issue, a world sadly lacking in their real lives.

The valley was a mutually constructed oasis in a homophobic world. This might be thought of as a couple's version of what Nan Enstad, using James C. Scott, calls a "hidden transcript," a "cultural [practice] and knowledge ... not visible to those in power."⁴⁵ Enstad is referring to broad cultural practices on the part of subordinate groups who are denied a public voice, but the resistant subjectivities she speaks of can also generate individual practices to produce similar effects. Although created because of social marginalization, and although not a political resistance, the valley served for Frieda and Bud both as a discourse of resistance and as a vision of a different world, where their relationship was allowed to speak its true value.

On several occasions, Bud wrote to Frieda concerning her thoughts on other women's emotional relationships. While in Britain, it seems that she grew to know several lesbian couples, some of whom she compared to herself and Frieda. Once, she wrote to Frieda,

Helen and I sat up last night until three o'clock discussing liking people, etc. I'm awfully sorry for her, the poor lamb. She likes her family quite well, but I don't think she really knows much about loving and doesn't love anyone at all. I can't think of anything worse, and yet think of the millions of people who do it. She was telling me about Esther and Lucie and how devoted they are, which even Helen couldn't miss. And they seemed to have worked it out rather well. They are awfully happy together and seem to consider it a permanent arrangement – at least, Lucie does, I am sure.⁴⁶

Later in 1925 Bud wrote to Frieda about her friend Mollie, who one night "began to tell me about Edith Clarke, to whom she is devoted. She had never said much about her before, and that little very casually, but I had gathered that she rather liked her. However last night she embarked on the whole tale – their families don't like it and Edith wants to come to London to be with Moll, so there is a devil of a row going on." Bud, in response, told Mollie about her relationship with Frieda. She asked of Frieda,

Do you mind my telling Mollie? I have never wanted to talk about you at all, but when I got started, she was so interested and was rather keen to know because in some ways we are a bit farther on. They have had just the same difficulties with their families, but they really had more time before they got on their ears. Edith and M. lived together here for a bit before there was any opposition, but E. was ill and had to go back to Jamaica, and since then their families have got irate.⁴⁷

The phrase “we are a bit farther on” can be interpreted in two ways. The first, obviously, is simply one of duration of the relationship and suggests that Mollie sought Bud’s advice because Bud and Frieda’s relationship was the longer of the two. Also in evidence here, however, is a more qualitative suggestion of experience. Bud was able to offer Mollie her advice about family conflicts over same-sex relationships because she and Frieda had gained considerable experience in this area in the preceding years. In her conversation with Mollie, Bud acted as sage or elder stateswoman for relationships between women.

It would appear that in late 1925, Bud and Frieda toyed with the idea of Frieda forming another relationship in Bud’s absence. Bud had suggested that Frieda get to know a woman called Gwyn. Bud was initially surprised at the connection that was made between the two, writing to Frieda, “I’m glad you think she is lovely – I do, of course, but I’m always afraid that it is because I like her so much, and discount something. But I was not prepared to find you so impressed.”⁴⁸ She further commented,

I’m thrilled to death that you could love Gwyn – please do! I can’t think of a nicer combination of people and it would be so nice for me ... I couldn’t ask for anything more than to have Gwyn my successor, and to be loved by you is the best thing I could wish for her. O my darling, how pleasant it would be! ... My darling lamb, the more I think of you and Gwyn, the nicer it is – do manage it, please!⁴⁹

Whatever Bud’s statements of encouragement, she was not necessarily very pleased about Frieda meeting someone else. Despite wishing Frieda happiness, and thus expressing a willingness to be “succeeded,” Bud became personally rather insecure when it appeared that a close relationship between Frieda and Gwyn might in fact occur. She began to see in Frieda’s

behaviour changes that might or might not have occurred, the cause of which was the relationship with Gwyn. Her concerns are revealed when she asks,

Is there anything the matter? The last little bit, you have been different when I have come to see you. Is it that my successor is in sight? You are just as nice as ever, but a little taken up with something that you're not letting me in on. If it is my successor, I am quite prepared to love her too, even if it isn't Gwyn.⁵⁰

In time, Bud and Frieda realized that Gwyn was critical of their relationship. Bud reported to Frieda that “apart from your being a friend of mine, she likes you, but her whole idea of you is somewhat distorted by the peculiar idea she has of our friendship. You are leading me into all sorts of evil, and I am being stupid not to see it. I'm so sorry for her – isn't it a pity she is such an idiot about it?”⁵¹ She further revealed, “it is all based on the fact that it isn't natural for young women to be devoted to each other.”⁵² Gwyn commented negatively on the relationship on several occasions, and her perspective was similar to that of each woman's family and to dominant attitudes about intimate relationships between women.

Frieda and Bud commented frequently on other people's reactions to their relationship. They were sharply critical of the prevailing views about relationships between women and frequently remarked on the stupidity of the opposition. Frieda said, “Our not being popular is probably due to two things a) people feel left out b) it is against nature.” She went on to state, “a) we have done our best [to] rule out & there is no arguing over b) All of which leaves us at the starting point.”⁵³ Even though the two women were not part of a public lesbian culture and did not use the “sexual invert” terminology of the day to express an identity, they resisted the dominant discourse and all attempts to separate them and to deny the validity of their relationship. Bud suggested that having to “exercise tact and discretion” – to monitor their behaviour around others and to be careful how openly they expressed affection – had not affected the quality of their relationship or their commitment to each other. Bud also took pride in their having resisted the forceful pressure of family antagonism.

Bud's complaints about the treatment the two had received and the general absurdity of people's disapproval should not be taken to indicate,

however, that she was in favour of all same-sex relationships. In an earlier letter, she wrote, “I think I see exactly what everyone objects to about us, and I’m not sure that I don’t agree with them usually, but I am convinced that we are an exception.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately, Bud does not elaborate on those aspects of the relationship that she might, in others, see as less than desirable. It could be that Bud, who was not in favour of the extremely masculine appearance of some women, might have been commenting on the kind of relationships between women described by such sexologists as Havelock Ellis and increasingly in evidence in England in the 1920s, to which the appellation “sexual inversion” might readily be applied. Many a lesbian in this period sought to distance herself from the pathological terminology of the sexologists, even while others – most notably Radclyffe Hall – were embracing it.⁵⁵

Bud’s loquacity on the subject of her relationship with Frieda varied in relation to her assessment of the degree of tolerance of other people. Based on others’ reactions to the subject, or their likely reactions, she tailored her information to the particular situation. Bud was aware that their relationship contravened dominant norms, and she sought to preserve and protect the relationship by being circumspect in some situations. For example, in 1925 Bud was talking to her friend Helen about relationships. When Helen remarked that “it must be nice to have someone to whom it mattered whether you were there or not,” Bud said that she thought it was. “Then she said something about you and me,” Bud wrote to Frieda:

That we hit it off quite well, and I found that all I could do was agree. I simply couldn’t say more or talk about you at all; because she wouldn’t understand and it seemed so indecent; although I had said quite a lot about you to the nice Miss Brown coming over on the boat. I thought I had got to the point where I could chat about you now, but I find I can’t.⁵⁶

Returning to Canada to visit Frieda in 1926, Bud wrote, “I’m so thrilled at everything I’m nearly in a fit. One old boy that I love on the boat wants to know why I’m so thrilled about getting home and I can’t explain that it’s because I’m going to telephone you tomorrow night!”⁵⁷ If it had been a husband or boyfriend to whom Bud was returning, she might have felt more comfortable expressing her excitement, although still modestly; that she did not do so reveals that she knew what would be the probable

reaction to the knowledge that it was another woman she was so excited to see.

Attitudes toward women's relationships sometimes caused the two women considerable mirth. Bud asked Frieda,

Did I tell you about our maid and your letters? I always get one from you now on Monday morning and she always puts it on top and says with an arch air "Here's your letter, Miss" when she brings them up. And if one comes any other time, she says "Here's an extra one this week," and I have been quite amused by it. But one day she came in for something in the evening when I had been out with Hugh and she gave me a little maternal advice about going out with him so much when there was that man of mine – that doctor – in N.Y. writing to me so regular and me writing to him too! I was so amused that I could hardly restrain my shouts of laughter, but I carefully addressed the next letter that I gave her to post to Dr. Frieda H. Fraser, and nothing has been said since. Aren't you entertained?⁵⁸

That Bud appreciated that their relationship could easily be seen for what it was is indicated by her comment that "I found a nice dedication in a book to-day 'To those who believe that life was made for friendship.' But according to most of our friends we are not in that class, are we? Wouldn't we be counted as too abandoned?"⁵⁹ Bud's letters to Frieda suggest a resistance to societal attitudes and a belief that their love would survive social pressures. Discussing their future together, Bud acknowledged in 1926, "I suppose there would be hell raised if we tried to live together."⁶⁰

Frieda commented less often on people's attitudes than did Bud. Her occasional comments reveal that she evaluated societal attitudes at least partly in relation to whether they were intellectually sound. She mentioned to Bud an afternoon tea she had attended: "I went to tea at Gertrude Graden's and found myself suddenly in a rare & intellectual atmosphere. I was immediately introduced to & sat down beside an active middle aged woman with an air whose opening remark was "Tell me about the contraceptive clinics in Toronto." Quite how the conversation turned to the subject of women's relationships is unclear, but Frieda commented, "The problem that seems to be in their minds at the moment was the everlasting

odd women. I wonder if there are enough of them to warrant all the fuss & if they are necessarily abnormal or unhappy or mentally deformed.”⁶¹ Here, Frieda seems to be commenting that society had blown the magnitude of the “problem” out of all proportion and also that the assumptions about “odd women” were, in her view, incorrect.⁶² She continued:

Gertrude’s partner had a pretty idea. She had been reading *Lysistrata* which seems to be a book deploring the sexlessness of working women in modern times & how it was against NATURE. She wanted to write an essay from the point of view of the amoeba deploring the modern trend & how terrible this new business of sex differentiation was. So utterly against Nature & so forth as the amoeba which was invented before sex differentiation would naturally think it.⁶³

A letter of 1926 reveals Frieda being unusually voluble on the subject of societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Her letter reveals a mix of scientific knowledge and Freudian ideas interwoven with her own, more personal perspective. The beginning of the letter has been lost, unfortunately, so we do not know what sparked Frieda’s unusually long discussion of biologically based ideas of “natural” and appropriate human sexual behaviour. She told Bud,

there is an outrageously high value put on the passion of men for women & women for men as such – I wonder sometimes whether it isn’t a semitic influence – or rather a characteristic of theirs which we have misunderstood & aped while giving it our own racial twist. I’ll explain at length if you like – & I’m not rabid about Jews!

When you consider that originally the motive force in question was intrinsically an intermittent mechanism & that now when the need for it is biologically dropping to an extremely low level people keep harping on it as though it were a constantly necessary factor for a normal existence it seems damned silly of them not to say perverse.

No one thinks it indecent of the bees & ants to have developed what is virtually an intersex. In fact they are highly respected. And they do it on the basis of political economy or social hygiene. Imagine what a scandal if some of the workers forgot themselves! And there it seems to be simply a matter of being interested in something else; which a philosopher

might call self sacrifice or self control for the communal good but which a biologist would call a tropism.

Moreover to be truly womanly, take yours truly (generally allowed to be within normal limits even if barely), if one of the ruling instincts of the world is so feeble that in 26 years it has only called attention to itself by my wanting to pat the hair of or kiss the tops of the heads of men engaged in looking down microscopes when I see them from the top, I can't bring myself to take it too seriously.

Of course one could argue a) that I'm setting up a resistance to it a la Freud – allowing that if it is all it is cracked up to be it should surely be strong enough to break down that much.

Or b) that people like me are abnormal. But in that case, though there is no defense, one would have to admit that they manage to rub along in fair numbers.⁶⁴

Frieda's sharp criticism of social norms reveals both awareness of general antipathy toward same-sex relationships and a resistance to that homophobia and also to prevailing gender norms. She clearly regards biological arguments about heterosexuality being for the survival of the species as superfluous in a time when there did not exist the same biological need for reproduction. Her comments on intersex among insects illustrate the influence of early-twentieth-century definitions of a "third sex." It is impossible to determine whether Frieda might have thought of herself in a way we would now classify as "transgender" or simply regarded herself as not traditionally womanly, but she was fully aware and was accepting of her own gender nonconformity. She acknowledged that she was "within normal limits" of womanliness, but her addition of the phrase "even if barely" demonstrates an awareness of her lack of femininity in the traditional sense. That she linked this discussion to her own personal experience at least suggests that Frieda was aware of and comfortable with her own, unfeminine gender performance.⁶⁵

It is clear from this letter that Frieda took philosophical and scientific issue with biological and Freudian notions of the naturalness and rightness of heterosexuality. She found fault with the argument that heterosexuality was the driving human force because in Frieda's case it had little effect beyond the occasional desire to kiss a man affectionately. Countering Freud, Frieda suggested that any force that is natural and

strong should easily be able to counter any resistance. Contrary to sexology's tendency to place importance on the sexual instinct as a biological imperative, Freud largely abandoned the association between biology and sexual object choice.⁶⁶ He developed a complex theory that portrayed sexuality as a series of conflicting desires and dreams constantly at war with a basic libidinal energy. The nature of sexual expression, and most especially of sexual orientation, indicated to Freud the level of psychological maturity in sexual development. For Freud, matrimonial and reproductive heterosexuality was the most mature and evolved psychological state, whereas homosexuality, masturbation, and other nonprocreative sexual behaviours indicated that a person was "stalled" in the process of sexual development by some unconscious and traumatic crisis, which could be cured only by means of psychoanalysis.⁶⁷ Freud's ideas on the subject of sexuality, however, would only gradually inform sexual discourse in the twentieth century. He became increasingly popular with middle-class thinkers during the 1920s, but it was not until the years of the Second World War and the Cold War that Freud's followers became widely influential.

For Frieda and Bud, societal attitudes toward relationships between women were simultaneously amusing, irritating, and oppressive. Their sense of humour about the issue allowed them to defuse some of the stress involved in continuing their relationship in the face of disapproval. Apart from their families and close friends, however, it does not seem that many people knew of the nature of their relationship. It is because of this that Frieda was able to sit quietly at the afternoon tea and listen to the assembled guests discuss "the everlasting odd women," without them being any the wiser that an odd woman was in their presence. And it was not until Bud made it clear by addressing an envelope to "Dr. Frieda H. Fraser" rather than to "Dr. F.H. Fraser" that it occurred to her maid that she might be writing to a woman.⁶⁸

Frieda and Bud found some measure of support among their closest friends, many of whom were similarly "devoted" to women. Others were simply less homophobic than society at large. Their mutual friend B was particularly supportive. In 1926, when Bud was missing Frieda terribly, she expressed to B the desire to quit her job in London and find one in Philadelphia, where Frieda was working. B said to her, "Why don't you? You know you could get a job anywhere." Bud wrote to Frieda, "I was mildly

astonished that she thought it would be a good idea but I didn't pursue it further as she went on to say that we got on so well that it was a pity we couldn't live together." B then said to Bud, "Frieda kept thinking all the time we were in Bermuda that it was a pity it wasn't you." Bud later regretted her response, which fortunately did not offend B: "I made the most dreadful remark at which B shouted with laughter and said that I wasn't blest with modesty. Please I said it quite without thinking and I'm sorry I've disgraced you. It was 'Poor dear – I'm sorry it was so bad that she let it show.'"⁶⁹

Elisabeth Govan and B

A further example of changes to middle-class women's relationships in the early twentieth century is the correspondence between B, a Vancouver social worker, and Elisabeth Govan. Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan was born in Scotland in 1907 and immigrated to Canada with her family. She received her bachelor of arts from the University of Toronto in 1930 and then took a second bachelor of arts at Oxford, graduating in 1932. She followed that degree with a master's in public welfare administration and a diploma in social work from the University of Toronto. In 1938 Govan travelled to Australia to take up a position as a casework tutor in Sydney. The following year, she was appointed to the University of Sydney, and in 1940 Govan became the director of social studies.⁷⁰ Govan returned to Toronto in 1945 and took up a junior position as an assistant professor. She completed her studies in 1951 with a doctorate from the University of Chicago and then left the academic world to work on special projects for the Canadian Welfare Council. She returned to the University of Toronto in 1956 to accept a full professorship in social work.

Little is known of Govan's intimate female correspondent B. From the few letters that remain of her correspondence with Govan during the 1940s, it appears that B was studying at the University of British Columbia for a degree in public welfare. Govan, or "Betty," as B called her, had telephoned B some time in 1944 or 1945. That she and Betty had known each other for some time is revealed by her recollection of their reacquaintance. "You were so delightful, Betty-mine," she said. "'Is that Miss M?' 'Yes' 'B' 'Yes' 'Well, this is Betty Govan!!' 'No!!!' 'Yes!' 'It *can't* be.' 'It is.' What would have happened if you had *not* phoned me, I ask you? But you would have, wouldn't you?'"⁷¹ The two women may have met each other as early as 1928, when Govan was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. After Govan

had visited B in Vancouver, B remarked to her friend Meg, “We picked up just where we left off ...’ and she immediately sensed my sense of ... revelation, or something. She said ... ‘It proved a lot of things for you, didn’t it ... because you have changed and grown up almost completely since 1928.’”⁷²

The correspondence between Elisabeth Govan and B has been examined by Carol Baines, who quotes the letters at length. Baines seems reluctant to call the relationship a lesbian one, suggesting that, “given the lack of definitive evidence, one can only speculate.”⁷³ Although she does suggest that the early-twentieth-century pathologization of lesbians “may well help us understand some of the ambivalence that Govan experienced” about her personal relationships, Baines seems to be seeking evidence of a physical relationship as proof of Govan’s sexual orientation. The letters reveal enough about the depth, passion, and intimacy of the Betty-B relationship to place it firmly outside the boundaries of acceptable heterosexuality, even if Govan and B did not refer to themselves as lesbians or have a genital sexual relationship.

Several letters from B to Betty reveal both the continued use, in the 1940s, of the very hyperbolic language of previous decades and the influence of new ideas about same-sex relationships. B frequently expressed her devotion to Betty. In 1945 she wrote,

Something has lasted all these years better than we ever dreamed it would ... What is it, darling? ... What do you think? I think – and know – that one of the things is my joy in the way your steady old head works ... Another thing is the spring from which your vitality and enthusiasm and joy in living [springs] forth. Very sweet clear water ... You really aren’t any more impervious to feelings than I am ... and we’re old and wise enough now to assess things like that quite accurately, aren’t we? ... It has moved out of the pathological pitfall it fell into just at first because of my need then ... and now? ... such a very tender affection my Betty ... so very dear and to be cherished, now more than ever.⁷⁴

Precisely what B meant by “pathological pitfall” is unclear. It could be that she simply meant that she had at first been quite obsessed with Govan and perhaps a little too clingy. It could be that they had initially had a physical relationship but had withdrawn from it because of their knowledge that such relationships were regarded as abnormal, and they wished not to be

classified or to have to think of themselves in relation to the lesbians who were becoming the subject of increasing public discourse. Whichever is the case, B's use of the word "pathological" illustrates the influence of psychology and of notions of normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy relationships. B appears to have felt that her relationship with Betty was very spiritual as well as emotional and that the two had a remarkable connection despite the fact that they spent very little time together in the same city. She wrote,

Dear Betty-boy ... I only wanted to listen, and look at you, and feel your presence ... and any words of mine were rightly inserted edgewise ... You always go away from me ... that is the pattern for us apparently ... but I still feel you, my dearly beloved child, right to my fingertips. It is a miracle sort of thing that has ... in the words of King James ... been vouchsafed unto us ... It has a religious quality ... perhaps I mean transcendent quality ... and it makes me love the world even more dearly than before ... and feel safer, and freer, and surer. I'm saying all this again because it still overwhelms me ... and yet, had I the faith about which the church preaches, I might have accepted the thing as ordinary. But how blasé ...! Supposing I had had that very reaction ... you would have turned from me in disgust, and I wouldn't have known enough to be disgusted with myself. Thank God for our emotional health, my Betty, and for the mental capacity we both have to recognize a miracle when it happens.⁷⁵

Here again are some elements of the language of the romantic friendship, still present in the 1940s, particularly the linking of a relationship with religion – but with an awareness of the new language of pathology.

B knew well the possible consequences of her relationship, commenting, "I suppose we can't avoid the usual implications of the conservative school ... the biddies who frown upon close attachments between women." Before meeting Betty, B knew that she was not going to fulfil society's expectations of her as a woman. "I faced the prospect of matrimony once," she said, "and decided with a cool sort of half logical knowledge, that I would never be able to face the drudge, nor [be] able to measure up to the usual expectations ... and once that was decided the rest has been easy ... lacking in conflict, I mean."⁷⁶ Here, B expresses a belief in the "rightness" and "naturalness" of her desires, present in so many lesbian accounts: once she

had decided that marriage, the usual path of womanhood, was not for her, emotional conflict disappeared. She became comfortable with herself and was able to live her life more fully.

Several of B's letters reveal that she missed Betty greatly. In November 1945, she lamented, "I wish you were here. We'd hop up to Pender Harbour and walk in our cedary wood, and paddle on lost lakes and wet a line in the salt sea ... every so often I want you with me rather desperately. Your letter was *good* – and I am completely satisfied, for a little space of time, anyway."⁷⁷ Later that month, she told Betty that a friend had said to her, "out of a completely serene sky ... 'You know, it would be a good thing for you to go to the East for a year ...' But you will be in Chicago, so why should I? ... except, if I am ever to have a degree, I'd rather get it in Toronto than here." Money, however, was of concern to her: "I'm an extravagant hussy and would find it awfully hard to endure student poverty," she said. "Would you guarantee me one good meal a week? I could pay it off when you finally get to B.C. [drawing of happy face] – But this sort of chatter is dangerous."⁷⁸

In one of her letters, B described her attraction to Betty:

You have all the things that would, and did, hoist you almost beyond reach of my earthly eyes ... social poise, academic honours that are staggering in comparison to mine, achievement and prestige in the top drawer of social work ... teaching. Even those dizzy heights couldn't deter me, or send me ricocheting away from you as they might easily have ... Instead we reached out to each other from the ... to be analytical about this ... from the libidinal level ... the warm altogether pleasure of our emotional reaction to each other.⁷⁹

B did not mention the two women sleeping together or being otherwise intimate, but her use of the word "libidinal" to describe their attraction clearly indicates the presence of a sexual desire or at the very least of an awareness of Freudian explanations of their kind of relationship.⁸⁰ The sentence follows a passage that can be described as fulfilling many of the requirements of the romantic friendship. B not only expressed loyalty and devotion but also placed the object of her affection clearly on a pedestal, if not in heaven. She described her own eyes as "earthly" and suggested that Betty's attributes placed her beyond earthly terrain.

We see in B's terminology a modern, twentieth-century acknowledgment of physical sexual desire. B regards the word "libidinal" as referring to the women's emotional reaction to each other, but its use in medical discourse generally referred to more physical, and thus more dangerous, passions. It is possible, however, that B was "queering" the notion in the sense that she was able to use the term "libidinal" about feelings between two women without internalizing the pathological interpretation of that desire, which would usually have been directed at lesbians.⁸¹

Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie

Amelia Alexis Alvey served with the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) from 1942 to 1945. Alvey was born in Seattle, Washington, and later attended McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. She was employed as a special technician in charge of photography at the University of Toronto's School of Medicine. Alvey commanded the business-women's company of the Toronto Red Cross Transport Corps and was lecturer to the entire Transport Corps for Military Law, Map Reading, and Military and Naval Insignia. She was chosen as one of the first class of the WRCNS, which began training in August 1942 in Ottawa. Alvey was selected to be acting chief petty officer master-at-arms. She was also deputy unit officer at HMCS Bytown (Ottawa), unit officer with the commanding officer at Pacific Coast HMCS Burrard (Vancouver), unit officer and then lieutenant at HMCS Bytown, and unit officer at HMCS Stadacona (Halifax). After her distinguished career with the WRCNS, Alvey returned to her civilian position at the University of Toronto in 1945. She then joined the University of Washington Libraries, retiring in 1969. She died on 5 June 1996.⁸²

Nancy Olson argues that Alvey was lesbian, although she acknowledges that Alvey's identity was unstable and that the Alvey collection contains no explicit statement of that identity or of a physical sexuality. It is in the phrasing of the letters between Alvey and her partner, Grace Brodie, who was also an officer in the WRCNS, and in their joint life that one recognizes her lesbianism.⁸³ Olson remarks that "Brodie's correspondence to Alvey ... is full of terms of endearment, censored by Alvey as being too personal. There are passages blacked out, though still legible, that demonstrate a physical affection that goes beyond the chaste nature of a romantic friendship."⁸⁴ Other material has been removed entirely by the cutting-off

of portions of the letters. The letters contain many terms of endearment, the most frequent of which are “Belovedest” and “Own Darling.” Brodie wrote effusively, many of her letters revealing her love for Alvey. In October of 1942, during a trip to Vancouver, Brodie wrote to Alvey, “They showed me into a huge room, over looking the harbour and Stanley Park – which would be perfect, if you were here to share it with me.”⁸⁵

As Olson indicates, respectability was very important to Alvey, and this importance accounts in part for her censorship of the letters but also for her construction of the collection, in which she emphasized gentility.⁸⁶ Her concern about maintaining a respectable reputation can be seen in her desire to live a dutiful and proper life in the military. On 8 December 1942 Brodie advised Alvey, “Had your lovely long letter too, which has raised 1000 questions in my mind! I would certainly go out a bit with Russell, she being the discreet person you know her to be. Certainly she will respect your position and you might get away without anyone knowing about it.” Before including this letter in the collection, Alvey wrote a small sidebar identifying the person as a WREN rating. The term “WREN” was the popular name for a member of the British Women’s Royal Naval Service and came to be used for women in the WRCNS as well. Ratings were the junior naval ranks, up to the level of chief petty officer, and were inferior in status to commissioned officers. Alvey commented, “Officers were not to consort with ratings.”⁸⁷ It would appear that this was an ordinary friendship, but Alvey was concerned about it being known that she was friendly with someone of lesser status.

Alvey’s concern about keeping up appearances can also be seen in her management of the collection. Not only was she concerned during the war years to behave in an appropriate manner, but she also was later concerned to remove from the letters anything that might reveal the most intimate parts of her relationship with Brodie. Her excisions are interesting, given that the text, in many cases, remains partially visible and given that other parts of the letters, not blacked-out, are equally suggestive to the modern reader.⁸⁸ For example, Alvey chose to include a letter in which Brodie wrote, “When I meet you I’m going to be overcome by this efficient, important Third Officer.”⁸⁹

Alvey’s attempts to maintain a respectable façade during the war years were eventually unsuccessful. The very close relationship between Alvey and Brodie, and Alvey’s masculinity, were enough eventually to set off

alarm bells in the administration. Canada's military, and indeed society at large, was becoming more adept as the 1940s wore on at identifying "odd women." Alvey began her naval career as a sublieutenant and by May of 1944 was acting lieutenant commander. She was highly regarded by many. By October of 1944, however, her relationship with the naval administration had soured. She was informed by the new director of the women's naval service that she was to be transferred "from her prestigious posting in Halifax, to a clerical position in the photographic division of National Service Headquarters in Ottawa."⁹⁰ Later that year, Alvey resigned. Olson argues that the director was pressuring Alvey because her relationship with Brodie had become known within the women's service. She bases this argument on a memo from Alvey to the director in which Alvey stated, "In view of your knowledge of our personal affairs, you will undoubtedly appreciate the importance of my returning to civilian life at the same time as Lt. Brodie. Anything you can do to expedite our release together would be greatly appreciated."⁹¹ It was because of exactly this sort of pressure that many lesbians chose to remain closeted in the war years, fearful as they were of the consequences of lesbian activity.

In Alvey, one sees a more conflicted subjectivity based on sexual orientation than one sees in other relationships discussed here. Respectability was important to all the women, but for Alvey it was important enough to affect her later portrayal of her relationship with Brodie. The requirement for "tact and discretion" affected the behaviour of Bud and Frieda and of Govan and B, insofar as they were unable to publicly express their emotions for one another. In Alvey's case, however, the dedication to respectability compromised her willingness to leave the contents of the letters untouched as late as 1988, when they were donated to Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia. By the 1980s she could have surmised that their relationship would not have been viewed as negatively as it would have when the letters were written, yet she still censored them.

Alvey's management of the collection, especially her censorship but inclusion of Brodie's letters, suggests an internal conflict between her sexuality, her notions of class and respectability, and her desire to have her story recorded for posterity. Although she did not resist the dominant discourse to the same degree as Frieda and Bud, and thus did not remain unrepentant about and proud of her relationship with Brodie, she also did

not completely remove that part of her life from public consumption. Brodie is present, even if she is muted by Alvey's censorship.

Charlotte Whitton and Margaret Grier

Charlotte Whitton was born in 1896 into a merchant family in Renfrew, Ontario. Intelligent and a keen student, she excelled in her studies at the Renfrew Collegiate Institute and won numerous scholarships. She took her bachelor of arts at Queen's University, followed by a diploma in teaching. In 1918, having left Queen's, she took a position as assistant secretary to the Social Service Council of Canada. She became the assistant editor of the new journal *Social Welfare* and began organizing the Canadian Council on Child Welfare on her own time as a volunteer. In 1926 she was appointed its director. In 1950 Whitton embarked on a career in politics and in 1951 was elected to the Ottawa Board of Control. In 1952 she served as the Canadian delegate to the Commission on Child Welfare at the League of Nations. She was mayor of Ottawa from 1952 to 1956 and again from 1960 to 1964. She retired from civic politics in 1972 and died three years later.

Patricia Rooke and R.L. Schnell suggest that Whitton had a happy childhood, apart from divisions within the family on religious grounds. Whitton was raised to be both a monarchist and a Canadian patriot. She was apparently somewhat of a tomboy and preferred the blacksmith's or the livery stable to traditional girls' play.⁹² Whitton began to succeed early at school, "and with such rewards she appears to have begun early to embrace views of innate merit and virtue, where the world fostered the talented and hard-working, and where the self-made man or woman could attain anything desired."⁹³ Such an attitude was, of course, largely informed by class, and its expression in later life would reveal Whitton to be someone disinclined to recognize the importance of social factors such as poverty in the lives of those less fortunate than she. It was also an attitude, however, that informed her later relationship with her long-term partner, Margaret Grier, as Whitton valued above all else Margaret's worth as a person.

Charlotte Whitton is remembered primarily as "the old lady bitch mayor of Ottawa,"⁹⁴ but it was her activism for the cause of child welfare in the early twentieth century that saw her become one of Canada's most influential public figures. Her life's work was the improvement of the condition of children in Canada, and she campaigned tirelessly on the

issues of juvenile delinquency and illegitimacy. In keeping with the feminism of her time, Whitton was simultaneously progressive and conservative, deploring society's differential treatment of the mothers and fathers of illegitimate children, while in the next breath arguing against the immigration of groups she regarded as undesirable. She alienated herself from many social workers in 1945 when she published a pamphlet arguing against what she considered the subsidization by the state of the reproduction of "defectives." Throughout her career, Whitton voiced clearly conservative opinions on a variety of social issues. During the Depression, for example, she emphasized the need to differentiate among the deserving and the undeserving poor, and she argued against cash relief on the basis of her suspicion that many who were receiving it were also in receipt of earnings. Mothers fared no better: Whitton argued against giving Mother's Allowance to any but unwed, deserted, or widowed mothers.⁹⁵

From Whitton's later work in the field of social welfare, we can infer the gendered values with which she was raised. Although Whitton herself was never to marry or have children, she nevertheless embodied many of the traditional attitudes of her day. She certainly believed that motherhood was ideally to take place within marriage. Throughout her working life, Charlotte Whitton was often to equate unmarried motherhood with "feeble-mindedness."⁹⁶ Although she was one of the few voices in the early twentieth century castigating Canadian society for failing to make responsible the fathers of "illegitimate" children, Whitton was "convinced that unwed mothers were usually of low intelligence and weak morality."⁹⁷

Whitton was inspired by close relationships with women throughout her life. Upon entry to Queen's University, she had become friends with a number of women, especially in a group called the Levana Society, a women-only group whose members shared visions of their futures, wrote poetry to one another, and acted very much as a sorority. Their mentor was Professor Wilhelmina Gordon, who remained important in Whitton's life for some years after she left Queen's. Whitton had found a mentor in Gordon, becoming eventually somewhat her protégée.⁹⁸ Gordon was disappointed by Whitton's decision in 1918 not to pursue graduate studies at Bryn Mawr and then Oxford but rather to enter into social work. They nevertheless remained friends.

Whitton maintained "passionate friendships" with several female friends in the Levana Society, particularly Mora, nicknamed "Mo," and

Esther. Letters between these women were written in very passionate and romantic terms. There is also some suggestion of physical contact. In 1917, for example, Mo reminisced about their times together, stating that she missed the “always strong arms about me which used to make me feel so safe and secure.”⁹⁹

Rooke and Schnell argue that Whitton was essentially celibate and suggest that her attitudes toward unwed mothers reflect the view that “all women without recourse to licit sexual expression be as strong-willed as she; they must demonstrate the same discipline and self-control.”¹⁰⁰ I maintain that Charlotte Whitton was not necessarily as celibate as she has been portrayed, but it is certainly reasonable to suggest that she thought that heterosexual intercourse ought properly to be expressed only in matrimony. It is very likely that this was one of the main values with which she was raised, coming as she did from a family whose early religious practice was Anglican but whose original denominations were Methodist and Roman Catholic.

Rooke and Schnell are at pains to distance their analysis of Whitton’s life from any “taint” of homosexuality. On several occasions, they make it clear in *No Bleeding Heart* that, in their opinion, the amorous correspondence between Whitton and other women was simply a playful manifestation of close friendships, belonging “to the literary genre which emerged out of the ‘romantic friendships,’ which were not uncommon in an era where gender roles were clearly defined and where unsupervised heterosexual interaction and social intercourse were constrained.”¹⁰¹ But whereas Lillian Faderman and others who have discussed romantic friendships place them clearly within lesbian history, Rooke and Schnell seem to agree with those who argue that lesbianism requires proof of a physical sexuality, and in the absence of certain proof of it, they discount the suggestion that Whitton was lesbian.

Around 1918 Whitton met Margaret Grier, who worked for the Juvenile Court and Big Sisters. Grier, who was to become Whitton’s *grande passion*, replaced Mo in Whitton’s affection. Rooke and Schnell quote Mo’s acknowledgment of her defeat:

I must admit you are a most diplomatic bigamist and an irresistible hubby. It pleases me to think that Marg. has a similar string [referring to a necklace Charlotte had given her] and that I can wear mine in Toronto

without fear of losing eyes or hair ... Give my love to Margaret and tell her I esteem her in spite of her usurpation.¹⁰²

In 1922 Whitton and Grier moved to Ottawa, where Whitton took up positions as secretary to the minister of trade and honorary secretary of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare and where Grier became secretary of the Canadian Tuberculosis Association. They were to live together until Grier's death in 1947. Throughout their relationship, Charlotte Whitton referred to Margaret Grier in terms common to the romantic friendships of the nineteenth century; she wrote in words exalting Margaret's beauty and expressed devotion and commitment to her companion. Grier, as much as one can tell from the few letters she left, was equally expressive. For example, on 27 December 1915 Margaret wrote to "Lottie," saying,

I must confess I am deeply, head over heels in love with you and it expresses itself in an overpowering desire to devour you beginning at your throat of course ... Lottie I am going to keep your letters tied up with ribbon with my lover letters – which I haven't got yet and read them over when I am an old grey haired maid dressed in combinations of lavender and old lace as Myrtle Reid describes – when you are famous I will tell my friends how I used to enjoy kissing the famous authoress on the neck and how I have even slept in her arms.¹⁰³

The main clues that the relationship between Charlotte Whitton and Margaret Grier was something more than a friendship exist in letters written by Whitton after Grier's death in 1947. As Grier lay dying, Whitton was in Alberta defending her theories at a Royal Commission called by the Alberta government to investigate social welfare in the province in the light of the criticisms Whitton had made in a study she had undertaken at the behest of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire.¹⁰⁴ The commission opened its hearings in August 1947 and then adjourned until the fall. Whitton spent the summer at the lake with Margaret and returned to Alberta for the hearings, which resumed on 24 November. Grier had become ill in the summer and had had abdominal surgery. A second operation in October weakened her, and she eventually died from cancer on 9 December. Whitton had left Alberta for Ottawa the day before but did not arrive in time to be with Grier when she died. She would later claim that

she had been unaware of the severity of Grier's condition and that the doctors had insisted on her return to Alberta, suggesting that, given the importance of the Alberta hearings, Grier would become aware that her condition was critical if Whitton did not go. As Rooke and Schnell argue, it was likely that Grier had also pushed Whitton to return to the commission, knowing that it was an important part of the re-establishment of her waning career.¹⁰⁵ After Grier's death, Whitton began to doubt her own motives and worried that she had allowed her work to take precedence over Margaret. Just a few months after Grier's death, she wrote,

O do you know where you are, how hourly I realize how much you did all these years for me, how selfish I accepted the service of your love and all the time death tugging at your strength. Did you know all those many recent times when you would say it did not matter, and I thought you were using your blunted weapons to battle me? O darling, did you know and in the shadowing crisis of your life and my obsession with my work did I deny you sympathy, understanding and support? These questions gnaw at me night and day.¹⁰⁶

Grier's death provoked a crisis in Whitton, and she obsessively pursued a hostile confrontation with the Alberta government.¹⁰⁷ In early 1948 Whitton and two others were charged with conspiracy to commit defamatory libel, after an inflammatory article based on Whitton's information had been published in *New Liberty*. The case against her proved insufficient, however, and a stay of proceedings was declared in April of 1948.¹⁰⁸ Whitton moved on to a new career in civil politics.

Although there is no concrete proof of a physical relationship between Charlotte and Margaret, some information does suggest that the women slept together and shared embraces. That Grier proposed to keep Lottie's letters with her "lover letters," which she had not yet received, need not indicate that she did not think of Lottie as her partner. The word "lover" was associated with male partners, and its heterosexual connotations may have caused Grier (and, as revealed in Chapter 3, Bud Williams) to interpret it as not referring to her love for another woman.¹⁰⁹

A file of personal letters that Whitton allowed to be opened to researchers only in January 1999 offers more evidence of intimacy in the relationship than was available to Rooke and Schnell. Of particular interest in

the collection is a group of ninety-six letters Charlotte wrote “to” her late partner. The two volumes that she named “Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe” represent Whitton’s attempt to come to terms with her grief and her guilt, the latter for not having been at Grier’s side when she died. In these letters, one can see the depth of this relationship, which lasted thirty years and, in Whitton’s mind at least, was to have been a lifelong one.

“Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe” takes the reader on a journey through Whitton’s pain as she processed the death of her partner. On the eve of 1948, while Whitton was on a train to Edmonton, she wrote a lengthy letter to Grier in which she said, “This will be the first of the New and Empty Years in which I shall go on alone.” She continued,

Mardie, Mardie, Mardie [Margaret’s nickname], I don’t yet understand what numbing of my will let them keep me here that Friday night ... I gambled and you died without me. Mardie, they tell me of the light in your eyes when they said you would hear my voice. You and God know the light and peace I denied you by not getting into that room and clasping your poor, beaten body. Oh! Mardie! Mardie, how can I go on? Ours wasn’t love: it was a knitting together of mind and spirit: it was something given to few by God: there wasn’t anything silly or weak or slaving: it was just that our minds and spirits marched so together that they were the same in two different bodies ... O Mardie, my heart will beat on but all the years, I will walk always with you beside me and this void, this void forever until I too go hence.¹⁰

In this quotation, we can see the weaving together of the themes of loyalty and devotion and a placing of their love above the earthly. Whitton separates what lay between them from ordinary love when she says not only that God gave it to them but also that it was not “silly or weak or slaving.” Given that Whitton was often prone to be rather judgmental about those human instincts that she would have regarded as base, this statement surely suggests that she thought their love to be noble and beyond reproach, and not “basely” sexual. In March of 1948 she wrote,

Darling: Midnight again and the busy world hushed and just you and I alone together again. O my dearest dear three months gone this early dawn you have been and I left you to die with strangers. Agnes and

Grace are both fine but O Mardie, how terrible it must have been for you, knowing, and how you loved me, that I was letting you down: you see I hoped against hope.¹¹¹

Keenly aware of the date on which her beloved died, Whitton wrote in May, "Darling: Five months ago today! O Mardie I look at your picture, I look at your dear kinky handwriting and I tell myself over and over that you are dead, you, my gracious, gentle radiant Mardie, and I can't believe it."¹¹² For Whitton, 1948 was a difficult year, and all of the letters from that year in some way express her grief at Grier's death. A month after Margaret's death, Charlotte remembered fondly, "I could almost feel you brush my untidy hair back off my forehead as you would do when you passed me working at my desk at night as you would say goodnight and go down to your room."¹¹³ In 1949 Charlotte wrote, "You will be with me everywhere, always now. Several nights I've dreamed of you, and now you are happy, so happy we both were the other night, lying together in my big bed, joshing as we often did when we had 'breakfast in bed' on Sunday."¹¹⁴ That Whitton enclosed the phrase "breakfast in bed" in quotation marks may or may not be significant. It is unclear whether this demarcation indicated that the phrase was code for physical intimacy or was simply in some way unusual within her parlance. It is rather the emotional content of the letters that indicates that their relationship was very much akin to a marriage. That Whitton restricted access to the volume of letters may be even more significant. It indicates that they were, perhaps, extremely personal in the sense that they revealed not only her process of coming to terms with her grief but also the depth and the passion of her relationship with Margaret. Even in the alleged absence of a physical relationship, Whitton and Grier were, in all other respects, in a same-sex "marriage."