

“The Burning, Wilful Evidence”: Lesbian/Gay History and Archival Research

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When first asked to address this topic I must admit I was quite excited by the possibilities. A captive group of archivists, I thought. I had often dreamed of such an opportunity and, now, here it was. Here was my chance to declaim about the problems I have faced as a gay researcher using public archives to uncover something of the gay past in Canada.¹ But when I sat down to determine exactly what I wanted to say, I became less excited and more overwhelmed by the task before me.

I knew that one of the main things I wanted to do was provide some idea of the kinds of archival sources used by lesbian and gay historians. I quickly realized, however, that in order for this to make sense, archivists would have to have some idea of what researchers might be looking for in these sources. I would therefore have to say something about the central research concerns and intellectual debates that have emerged within lesbian/gay history over the past decade or so. This, naturally, would lead me into a discussion of the development of lesbian/gay historiography within the context of the emergence of the general history of sexuality. I was then reminded that not everyone in an audience of archivists would necessarily understand that sexuality has a history, and so I would have to spend some time sketching out the ways in which human sexuality is the product of complex historical forces.²

In my experience of giving talks on lesbian/gay history, I have found that before there can be any discussion of basic issues, we often must begin by confronting some of our own deep-seated ideas about sexuality. One of the most important of these is the notion that sex and sexuality are biological or natural. Of course, there is a physical dimension to sex — which appendages get inserted into which orifices — but such things as the different meanings we attach to sex (Is it for reproduction, personal intimacy, physical pleasure or power?); the range of erotic preferences (heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual); the various forms of sexual regulation (what is deemed “normal” and acceptable; what is defined as criminal, sinful or sick); and the ways in which sex is politicized (witness the anti-homosexual campaigns of the 1950s, for example, or the rise of the lesbian and gay liberation movement) — all of these things are *social* processes, processes connected to broader relations of gender, race and class, all of which vary and change over time. To understand sexuality in this way brings us

back not to biology, but to history. Competing ideas about sexuality, particularly notions that it is something personal and private, have conspired to determine that there has been very little *public* record of sexuality. As American gay historian Martin Duberman has written,

Sexuality itself [has] been treated as such a shameful part of our history — diaries bowdlerized, relationships concealed, photographs and letters burned — that any straying from mainstream mores, any permutation at all, [has], through time, been ignored, denied, hidden, and, ultimately forgotten.

Duberman goes on to say that for many years “all scholarship on sexuality was suspect — curtailed or suspended by archival custodians, by foundations which allocate research funding and by academic institutions which control student degrees and faculty promotions.”³

Political and intellectual developments over the past twenty years or so have done much to alter the situation described by Duberman. On the political front, perhaps most significant has been the rise of the lesbian and gay liberation movement. In Canada, the gay liberation movement began in the early 1970s and quickly spawned the grass-roots lesbian and gay history movement.⁴ This includes the establishment in 1973 of the Canadian Gay Archives, which in many ways marked the beginning of a self-conscious gay history movement in Canada.⁵ Working in and alongside the Canadian Gay Archives were numerous individual researchers and archivists, busy uncovering fragments of the lesbian and gay past in Canada. Reports of their research were often communicated to the lesbian and gay communities through the lesbian and gay press, particularly *The Body Politic*, a gay liberation magazine published in Toronto. Over the years, conferences have provided a focal point for lesbian and gay historical research in Canada and abroad; between 1980 and 1985, Canada hosted three international lesbian/gay history conferences. What is important to note about this activity is the fact that it has been community-based. Given the exclusion of lesbian and gay history from universities and academic journals, and the conscious and unconscious suppression of lesbian/gay materials in mainstream archives, the sources and locations of gay history have, by necessity, emerged outside of these institutions.

Such political change in the broader society has done much to transform things inside the university. Before the emergence of the lesbian/gay movement, the black civil rights movement, the women’s liberation movement, and the New Left provided the political background for the rise of social history in the 1960s and 1970s and its emphasis on ordinary people in everyday life. Within social history, the development of women’s history was particularly important in sensitizing historians to issues of gender and sexuality, and the impact of the feminist movement made it clear that the “personal” and “private” were also political and historical.

These changes, both inside and outside the university, have gradually created a place for the history of sexuality and, to a lesser but increasing degree, lesbian and gay history as well.⁶ After twenty years of groundwork, I believe the 1990s will be the decade in which lesbian/gay history really comes into its own. Certainly, we see many signs of this. I would point to such indicators as new academic journals (*Genders*, *Gender and History*, and, most recently, the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*); the

increasingly frequent appearance of book-length studies (such as Allan Berube's history of gay men and women during World War II or *Hidden From History* — a showcase of some of the best lesbian and gay history written over the past decade⁷); and the increasing number of international conferences devoted to lesbian and gay studies. The Fifth Annual Lesbian/Gay Studies Conference sponsored by Rutgers and Princeton Universities took place in the autumn of 1991. The 1990 conference, held at Harvard, attracted over 1500 lesbian and gay scholars.) In Canada, I would point to such signs as the establishment of accredited lesbian and gay studies courses at Concordia University and Ryerson Polytechnical Institute; the half-dozen lesbian and gay graduate students currently doing lesbian/gay historical work; the founding of the Toronto Centre for Lesbian and Gay Studies and, through the Centre, the establishment of the Michael Lynch grant in lesbian and gay history;⁸ the continuing growth of community-based history⁹; the lesbian and gay sessions at the Learned Societies meetings in Kingston in May 1991; and an international lesbian/gay history conference scheduled for Montreal in 1992.

I recite all these developments because I think they are evidence of what will be one of the most exciting and important trends within historical research in the 1990s. These are the reasons why I think archives and archivists should be interested in, and begin to prepare for, the research needs of those of us working in this rapidly expanding field of history. I propose, then, for the balance of my paper, to go over some of the archival sources for and problems of doing lesbian and gay historical research.

Let me begin by describing for you a situation in the archives. In my own research, I have been using nineteenth-century criminal court case files housed in the Archives of Ontario. Occasionally, I come upon a document that I need to photocopy. It is at this point that my trepidation begins. I fill out the copy request form, carefully gather up the dusty, fragile deposition and, mustering my friendliest smile, I give the tell-tale document to the reference archivist for approval. As I stand there with knees shaking and hands trembling, I look for the smallest trace of reaction on the archivist's face as she or he looks over the document and reads "sodomy" — "buggery" — "gross indecency" — or some such crime. So far, I have not received any shrieks of horror or looks of disgust, but I relate this story so that archivists will appreciate that for the lesbian or gay researcher even the simplest of archival routines can be layered with tension; when simply requesting a photocopy (never mind explaining your research project) might serve as some kind of admission of one's sexual identity. Now whether these tensions and fears are well-founded is not really important. The point to understand is that the pervasive discrimination experienced by lesbians and gay men in the larger world — particularly, for our purposes, in the provision of so-called public services — does not somehow magically disappear as they walk through the doors of an archives. Never knowing what reaction one might get from an archivist confronted with a lesbian or gay research topic, the gay researcher must always weigh the potential costs of being candid about their subject and/or sexual identity. What this also means is that the recovery of lesbian and gay history depends almost entirely on those of us who are able to be publicly "out" and open with our sexuality.

One of the other problems unique to lesbian and gay history is the relative invisibility of the lesbian and gay experience. During the 1960s and 1970s, social historians discovered ways to uncover the history of what was referred to at the time as "anon-

ymous" people — women, blacks, the working class, those who had been ignored by a history preoccupied by great white men. Based on the discovery of the usefulness of such sources as the manuscript census, historians recovered the experience of those who did not leave behind written records such as letters or diaries, or whose voices were not recorded in the documents of political and intellectual history. While immensely important in their own right, and while they have served as inspiration for much lesbian and gay historical research, the innovations of social history during the 1960s and 1970s do not necessarily lend themselves directly to uncovering the lesbian/gay past. This is so for two reasons. First, because lesbians and gays have been not just anonymous but even invisible, we are not easily found in the traditional sources of social history. To illustrate this point, let me put it in rather ahistorical terms: while the manuscript censuses of 1871 and 1881 recorded an individual's occupation, gender and sometimes race, nineteenth-century census-takers did not think to ask people about their sexual preferences. Secondly, due to the stigma attached to such lives both historically and in the present, when sources or evidence of lesbian and gay experience do exist, they have often been hidden or suppressed. This is captured in the title of the book, *Hidden From History* — which is to say, lesbian and gay experience is not simply hidden *in* history, waiting for the interested party to come along and find it; it is actively hidden *from* history, posing many problems for those of us who know that it is there, but encounter difficulties trying to rescue it. As Lisa Duggan, a lesbian historian, has stated, "Though historians have often neglected or distorted the experiences of minority groups and deprived classes, only lesbians and gay men have had their existence systematically denied and rendered invisible."¹⁰

Given some of the problems stemming from the invisibility and suppression of sources, where then do we look for evidence of the lesbian and gay past? It needs to be said that given the problems of archival or documentary sources, and the necessity of recording memories before they fade, oral history has been crucial to lesbian and gay history. This includes the many oral history projects undertaken over the years by community-based history groups as well as more "formal" oral history archives developed by such groups as the Hall/Carpenter Archives in London, England.¹¹ Currently in Canada, I know of at least five or six history projects underway which make extensive use of oral history techniques. It also needs to be noted that given the significance of oral tradition in black and other "visible minority" communities, oral history has been especially important to lesbians and gays of colour in their efforts to reclaim their own history.¹²

But what about the more remote lesbian and gay past? For historians of sexuality, court records have proven to be particularly important. Again in Canada, I know of at least two recently completed Ph.D. theses on aspects of women's sexuality in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ontario which make extensive use of criminal court records.¹³ In my own search through Ontario criminal court records of the same period, I am looking for men charged with "crimes" involving sex with other men. By tracking these men from the court room or jail cell into their neighbourhoods, workplaces, and households, I hope to be able to say something about the social organization of same-gender sexuality.

One of the main problems I have faced in this research is the current state of these records in various archives. Once one has finished with the records of the higher courts

and moves into district or county courts, one encounters a set of records that is often stored off-site and remains unprocessed. The task of sifting through these unorganized court documents in search of a relatively few cases is daunting and time-consuming, to say the least. As I understand it, archivists, swamped by the amount of current incoming material, are left with little time to process the existing backlog. But, from the perspective of the history of sexuality, it is imperative that these court records be processed and that finding aids be revised and updated. And while I am obviously speaking with a degree of self-interest, it is not only that. I believe that court records are to the history of sexuality what the census was to social history in the 1970s. As the history of sexuality expands in the 1990s, therefore, research needs and user demand for court records will increase dramatically.¹⁴

Much of what I have said about court records could also be said about other records important for gay history, such as those of prisons and jails. To this list I would add judges' notebooks, bench books, police magistrates' diaries and ledgers, etc. The reason, of course, why I am focusing on crime-related records and institutions is that homosexual activity has most often been illegal, and so it is in these types of records that "homosexuals" usually appear. This is perhaps not so much the case for lesbian history, where there have been fewer formal legal restrictions against lesbian activity, though the historical links, for example, between prostitution and lesbians need to be more fully explored in Canada. This is probably also a good point at which to indicate that gay history is not simply about seeking in the past what today we would call lesbians and gay men, but it is also about locating and analyzing those institutions, such as the legal arm of the state, which have criminalized or otherwise regulated homosexual lives in many different ways over time.

Some of the other sources I want to bring to the attention of archivists include newspapers, particularly the satirical broadsheets of the early nineteenth-century, the police court scandal papers of the late nineteenth-century, and the tabloid press of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵ It is, for example, in newspapers that I believe we shall discover an important part of the lesbian and gay past, the history of cross-dressing — those women and men who adopted the clothes, style and sometimes life of the opposite gender for various sexual and economic reasons. In addition to being described as criminals, criminal, lesbians and gays have also been defined at different times as mentally ill, and so we need a search of the existing records of hospitals and asylums. In the United States, the records of reformatories for girls and women have provided some evidence of the particularly difficult task of identifying lesbians in history. Within lesbian history, the topic of nineteenth-century romantic friendships between girls and women has loomed large and thus so have the records of women's colleges and boarding schools. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Other potentially important sources include the records of urban boarding-houses for single, wage-earning women; settlement houses for immigrants; sexual advice and sexological literature; social surveys and the moral tracts of reform movements; and the records of the Canadian military and state security apparatus.

Much more needs to be said. I have not addressed, for example, the difficult issues of confidentiality and archival restrictions. On the one hand, probably no one understands the need to respect confidentiality more than lesbian and gay researchers. This is particularly the case for more recent historical periods. On the other hand, archival

practice has sometimes used restrictions and the designation “restricted access” in arbitrary, often discriminatory ways, serving to impede or obstruct research into the lesbian and gay past.¹⁶ All of this points to the need to devise some code of ethics addressing confidentiality and the use of restrictions, geared specifically to lesbian and gay research.¹⁷ I would also add that in my opinion any such undertaking should be a combined effort of professional archivists and those of academic researchers working in the field of lesbian and gay history.

I have also said very little about the politics involved in writing lesbian and gay history and doing archival research. Those of us, for example, using court or other government records need to be critical of documents generated by a system designed to regulate the very lives we are trying to uncover. As well, lesbian and gay researchers need to remain sceptical of archives in the same way as we are of many public institutions. One need not adopt a theory of archivists or archives as conspiratorial to recognize, nevertheless, that archives stand in a regulatory relation to lesbian and gay researchers, as the gatekeepers, if you will, of the documents of our past.

Within these strictures, there is, I think, much room for us as individual archivists and researchers to move. To alleviate some of the tension experienced by lesbian and gay researchers, those of you who desire to help might become more proactive in creating a climate of sensitivity, where one might be the first to make a gesture which indicates to a researcher that you are comfortable with and/or interested in lesbian and gay history. Those responsible for library acquisitions could facilitate research by increasing holdings in lesbian and gay history. Martin Duberman, the historian I mentioned at the outset, suggests that researchers and archivists should no longer continue “to accept and abide by anachronistic definitions of what constitutes ‘sensitive material’,” and he hopes that a “new generation of archivists continues to cultivate its sympathy toward [lesbian and gay] scholarship, declassifying ‘sensitive’ data at an accelerated pace.”¹⁸ We all need to press the appropriate agencies for increased funding and support for more archival storage space, staff positions and other material resources with which to arrange and describe backlog, and to open up and expand in such areas as multicultural issues and gender and, perhaps therein, a commitment to issues of sexuality.

I want to conclude by saying something about the “why” of lesbian and gay history. Lesbian and gay history was born of a political movement; those of us working in it have long recognized how important a knowledge of our history is to building strong communities and effective politics. In these days when our existence is increasingly under attack, further exacerbated by AIDS, a knowledge of our history is vital not only for the parallels or lessons, but also because it is evidence that we have and shall again survive. These are only a few of the reasons for reclaiming lesbian and gay history. I hope I have provided some indication of what is being done. I shall end by suggesting that for anyone interested in joining in or helping out, there is — out of both need and excitement — much more to be done.

Notes

* This paper is based on a presentation made at the Annual Meeting of the Ontario Association of Archivists in St. Catharines, Ontario, May 1991. The first part of my title — “the burning, wilful evidence” — comes from the poem “History” by Brenda Brooks, in *Somebody Should Kiss You* (Charlottetown, 1990).

1 I am aware of the problems associated with the use here of the terms “gay” or “lesbian” when referring to history, particularly for those periods that predate the emergence of contemporary lesbian and gay sexual

- identities. I retain their use here, however, because I believe it to be important strategically and politically at this still early stage in the development of the history of erotic experience.
- 2 While I will be focusing primarily on lesbian and gay history, it should be noted that all sexual identities are the product of historical forces and so we must remember that *heterosexuality* is also a historical invention. On this see, Jonathan Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," *Socialist Review* 20 (Jan./Mar. 1990), pp. 7-34.
 - 3 Martin Duberman, "Introduction," *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* (New York, 1986), p. xiii.
 - 4 This is not the place to go over the early history of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in Canada. For a more detailed discussion see, "Victories and Defeats: a gay and lesbian chronology, 1964-1982," in Ed Jackson and Stan Persky, eds., *Flaunting It!: a decade of gay journalism from The Body Politic* (Vancouver, 1982), pp. 224-242, and Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada* (Montreal, 1987), pp. 181-182.
 - 5 For more information on the Canadian Gay Archives, see Rick Bebout, "Stashing the Evidence," *The Body Politic* (August 1979), pp. 21-22, 26; Stephen MacDonald, "Diggers," *The Body Politic* (November 1984), pp. 35-36; James Fraser and Harold Averill, *Organizing an Archives: The Canadian Gay Archives Experience* (Toronto, 1980); as well as the *Gay Archivist*, the newsletter of the Canadian Gay Archives. It should also be noted that, in addition to the Canadian Gay Archives, there are other independent archives that play an important role in lesbian and gay history. I would point, for example, to the Canadian Women's Movement Archives/Archives canadiennes du mouvement des femmes, particularly their publication *Lesbian and Gay Holdings at the Canadian Women's Movement Archives* (Toronto, 1987). On the CWMA see, Karen Dubinsky, "Looking Forward, Reaching Backward: The Canadian Women's Movement Archives," *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly* 29(Summer 1989), pp. 117-120.
 - 6 For overviews of work in lesbian and gay history see, for example, Joe Interrante, "From Homosexual to Gay to ? : Recent Work in Gay History," *Radical America* 15 (Nov/Dec 1981), pp. 79-86; Martha Vicinus, "Sexuality and Power: A Review of Current Work in the History of Sexuality," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Spring 1982), pp. 147-151; Lisa Duggan, "History's Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History," in S.P. Benson, S. Brier, R. Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 281-290; Randolph Trumbach, "Sodomitical Subcultures, Sodomitical Roles, and the Gender Revolution of the Eighteenth Century: The Recent Historiography," in Robert Maccubbin, ed., *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment* (New York, 1987), pp. 109-121; Martin Duberman, "Reclaiming the Gay Past," *Reviews in American History* 16 (Dec. 1989), pp. 515-525; John D'Emilio, "Not a Simple Matter: Gay History and Gay Historians," *Journal of American History* 76 (Sept 1989), pp. 435-442; "Introduction," Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York, 1989), pp. 1-13; Jeffrey Escoffier, "Inside the Ivory Closet: The Challenges Facing Lesbian and Gay Studies," *Outlook: national lesbian and gay quarterly* 10 (Fall 1990), pp. 40-48.
 - 7 Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York, 1990) and *Hidden From History*, op.cit..
 - 8 See, *CENTRE/FOLD: The Newsletter of the Toronto Centre for Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2 Bloor Street West, Suite 100-129, Toronto, Ontario, M4W 3E2.
 - 9 See, for example, the *Canadian Lesbian and Gay History Network Newsletter*, in care of the Canadian Gay Archives, Box 639, Station A, Toronto, ON, M5W 1G2.
 - 10 Lisa Duggan, "History's Gay Ghetto," op.cit., p. 284.
 - 11 See Hall, Carpenter Archives, *Walking After Midnight: Gay Men's Life Stories* (London, 1989) and *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories* (London, 1989).
 - 12 See, for example, Joseph Beam, ed., *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston, 1986) and Makeda Silvera, "Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians," *Fireweed* (Spring 1989), pp. 8-18.
 - 13 See, for example, Karen Dubinsky, "Improper Advances: Sexual Danger and Pleasure in Rural and Northern Ontario, 1880-1929," (Ph.D. Thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, 1990).
 - 14 For a report on court records in at least one archive see, C.J. Shepard, "Court and Legal Records at the Archives of Ontario," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 117-120.
 - 15 For the possibilities of the tabloid press from the 1950s and 1960s, for example, see Robert Champagne, ed., *Jim Egan: Canada's Pioneer Gay Activist* (Toronto, 1987).
 - 16 For one discussion see, Martin Duberman, "'Writhing Bedfellows' in Antebellum South Carolina: Historical Interpretation and the Politics of Evidence," in *Hidden From History*, op.cit., pp. 153-168. Another area that needs to be explored is the impact of the Access to Information Act on lesbian and gay archival research. Is it now more difficult to get access to lesbian/gay-related materials since the passing of the Act? For a discussion along these lines from the perspective of labour history see, Gregory S. Kealey, "The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Public Archives of Canada, and Access to Information: A Curious Tale," *Labour/Le Travail* 21 (Spring 1988), pp. 199-226.
 - 17 For more on confidentiality and restrictions from the perspective of lesbian and gay archives see, Harold Averill, "The Church, Gays, and Archives," *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), pp. 85-90.
 - 18 Martin Duberman, "'Writhing Bedfellows,'" op.cit., pp. 168 and 161.