

# Footsteps and Witnesses

## LGBT history in Scotland – twenty years after

In the first part of an exclusive online article, **Bob Cant** charts twenty years of LGBT history in Scotland and a growing wave of historical endeavour, as new projects record the history of LGBT people who lived in 20th-century Scotland

*Footsteps and Witnesses does not claim to be 'the' history of lesbian and gay communities in Scotland – rather the beginning of showing that lesbian and gay communities in Scotland have histories at all.*

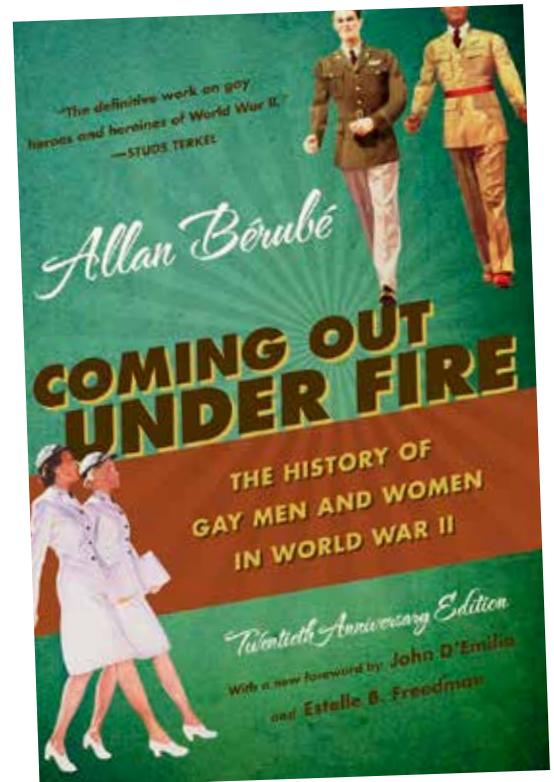
When *The Scotsman* reviewer used the word, 'communities', she touched on unarticulated questions about the history of sex and sexuality in the minds of many of her readers. Some will have been surprised by a word which suggests a whole set of social experiences and shared memories. It implies that homosexuality, far from being limited to physical behaviour, has a social dimension defined by the people who experience same sex desire; the judgements of others, whether they be hostile or friendly, are no longer the only route to understanding the range of homosexual experiences; the narratives of homosexual people had been placed in the foreground.

*Footsteps and Witnesses: Lesbian and gay lifetimes from Scotland* was published in 1993 and it was the first attempt to gather together stories told by lesbians and gay men in Scotland on their own terms. At that point in time male homosexual activity had only been de-criminalised in Scotland for thirteen years; the HIV epidemic had taken its toll on gay men and anti-retroviral treatments had not yet been developed; but there was a cultural vitality in terms of writing, theatre and opening up of more meeting places for lesbians and (especially) gay men. There was a strong desire among lesbian and gay activists to disrupt the tyranny

of silence which inhibited academic debates around sexuality but progress was very slow.

An oral history approach seemed particularly appropriate for collecting historical data about this group, which had been largely ignored by mainstream historians. Eleven lesbians and twelve gay men told the stories of the development of their same sex desires, their same sex relationships and the other important elements in their lives in the historical context of Scotland in the second half of the 20th century. There was a loose framework of five topics which was presented to everyone but the narrators were in control of the stories they told. A second edition was published fifteen years later, using eleven of the lifetimes told in 1993 and a further eleven told in 2008.

In this, the first of two articles, I will examine some of the factors that shaped the production of *Footsteps and Witnesses*. Most particularly, I will outline the state of the debates around the history of sexuality in 1993 and in 2008. Most of these debates were taking place in larger metropolitan centres, such as London or Paris or San Francisco, rather than in smaller societies such as Scotland or New Zealand or Norway. Drawing upon the international debates, I will explain my understanding of the development of lesbian and gay identities and the terminology which is used about them. In the second of these articles, I will examine more closely the methodology used in gathering stories for *Footsteps and Witnesses*, as well as exploring some of the other Scottish historical projects in this field. In the third article, I will engage with the content and significance of some of the stories that can be found in both editions of *Footsteps and Witnesses*.



Allan Berube's *Coming Out Under Fire* charted the history of gay men and women during World War II

### Theoretical debates

I will begin by explaining the intellectual journey I made to get to the place where I am today in terms of my understanding of this area of history – whether it be called gay history or lesbian and gay history or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) history or queer history. Although I became aware, in a confused way, that I desired other men while growing up in Angus in the early 1960s, there was no forum in which to discuss that. Sex educators, if they mentioned homosexuality at all, explained that it was most likely to be a passing phase. It was only when I left home and met other like minded people that I began to make sense of these sexual desires. After I became involved in the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in London in the early 1970s I



began, for the first time, to think about homosexuality in a historical way. Some people got support and a sense of recognition from reading novels by Mary Renault about homosexual men in ancient Rome but if I had tried to define my homosexuality at all I would probably have said it was outwith any historical framework. It was only when I met other men and women through GLF that I began to engage with the social meaning of my sexuality and the reasons why society found it so troublesome. A politics was being developed not only through consciousness raising and direct action but through pamphlets such as The GLF Manifesto and Psychiatry and the Homosexual. The historical turning point for me was reading and discussing The Homosexual Role by a British sociologist, Mary McIntosh, which was published in a Californian academic journal called Social Problems in 1968. Even the abstract shook my pre-conceptions – and my growing sexual self-confidence – to the core.

*The current conceptualization of homosexuality as a condition is a false one, resulting from ethnocentric bias. Homosexuality should be seen rather as a social role. Anthropological evidence shows that the role does not exist in all societies, and where it does it is not always the same as in modern western societies. Historical evidence shows that the role did not emerge in England until towards the end of the seventeenth century. Evidence from the “Kinsey Reports” shows that, in spite of the existence of the role in our society, much homosexual behaviour occurs outside*

*the recognised role and the polarisation between the heterosexual man and the homosexual man is far from complete.*

Her focus on distinguishing between role and behaviour was unusual for the time, but her research had uncovered a number of societies where different patterns of homosexual roles had been developed. She drew attention to the Mohave Indians of California and Arizona where boys who began to behave like girls underwent a ceremony which gave them public recognition as transvestites and they would be expected to marry men as they grew up. Here, as in many other societies, the distinction between a more passive partner and a more active partner was central. She also wrote about the development of the homosexual role in England in the later part of the 17th century; she had uncovered a contemporary account of clubs in the early 18th century, one of which was known as The Mollies Club; these were frequented by men who were interested in sexual relations with other men but there was a great emphasis on transvestism and the mimicking of stereotypical feminine behaviour. Her argument was that this was the first sub-culture in the English-speaking world that could be described as being primarily homosexual; homosexual behaviour before this period had been much more likely to result from encounters in mainstream settings rather than contact in the exclusive clubs which she described. Her interest in the emergence of homosexual

**From left: episodes writing in Aberdeen took place in the OurStory Tent, with the aid of Madame Hystoria; Scots Makar Edwin Morgan is interviewed; oral history interviews were carried out to allow narrators the opportunity to talk about their experiences** (all images © OurStory Scotland)

roles helped to set the tone of the gay politics of the time which was increasingly interested in social categorisation rather than any medical categorisation.

McIntosh later explained that she was concerned about publishing something that might undermine the law reform campaigns of that period which were arguing that homosexual men should not be punished for an inborn condition. The law reform campaigns of the Scottish Minorities Group (SMG) began in 1969 and they used the same essentialist arguments as the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) had successfully done in England. When homosexual activity was decriminalised in England in 1967, Scotland was excluded because of establishment opposition to reform; SMG’s politics were based on a kind of Scottish radicalism that disapproved of discrimination against minorities. There was a comfort for some individuals in believing that homosexuality was a condition and there was certainly a political benefit to this way of thinking. McIntosh’s historically based arguments suggested an element of fluidity about sexuality and, while she never suggested that sexuality was something that you chose like an object off a supermarket shelf, the question of socialisation which she posed was very challenging. The idea that men became homosexual (in a way that was not dissimilar to Simone de Beauvoir’s theorising about the social process of becoming a woman) raised more questions than it answered.



She was not alone in questioning the social processes around sexual identity and academic interest in the social dimensions of sexual experiences and sexual identities developed rapidly throughout the 1970s. The work of Michel Foucault was particularly influential in terms of re-configuring debates around sexuality and shifting the major focus away from repression. His focus was on the question of power; power was, in his view, not an institution or an individual strength but it was omnipresent and, as such, interacted with all expressions of sexuality.

*Sexuality must not be thought of as a natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.*

Foucauldian analysis is complex but it can be seen as providing a new compass to make journeys through our analysis of sexuality. Its interpretation of power enabled the development of insights into the interaction between people who experienced same sex desire; as well as seeking to understand desire it also engaged with significant factors in their lives – such as their bodies, family structures, geographical locations, workplaces, social meeting places, cultural artefacts, values, schooling systems, medical systems and laws. The social construction of roles increasingly shaped debates around sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. The historian Jeffrey Weeks has been a key British figure in interpreting and developing such Social Constructivist analysis.

By the time of the publication of the second edition of *Footsteps and Witnesses* in 2008, there was a plethora of theoretical arguments about the historical development of sexuality. Many of these were, at least loosely, part of the Social Constructivist tendency but there were those

historians who took a much more essentialist line about sexuality.

Rictor Norton has been a particularly prolific writer and critic of Social Constructivism; he is probably the most prominent advocate of what is sometimes described (though not by him) as an essentialist position about homosexuality. He has written mostly about homosexual men but also about homosexual women; he sees both as members of an identifiable minority group. People who, in the 19th century, argued the case for understanding homosexuality as a third sex, would feel very much at home with his world view. I would venture to speculate that gay popular culture would be more supportive of his view than those of Social Constructivists. The ongoing popularity of Gloria Gaynor's refrain, *I Am What I Am*, is testament to a widespread but vague sympathy with essentialist views about the immutable nature of homosexuality. Lady Gaga's song, *Born That Way*, has been used in a similar way by proponents of the case for same sex marriage.

Norton has been highly critical of social constructivist history and he has argued along the following lines.

*The proper business of queer history should be to emphasise the generally unrecognised features that are integral to the culture itself and not as a result of oppression. Queer culture, like an ethnic culture, can be independent of the dominant culture, self determined rather than socially controlled.*

One of Norton's most highly regarded publications has been *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Sub-culture in England 1700-1830*. This is the very same sub-culture about which Mary McIntosh had written back in 1968 but where she saw it as being indicative of the development of homosexual roles, Norton interpreted it as being the original precursor of the gay sub-culture of the late 20th/early 21st centuries. Where I particularly disagree with Norton is in his assertion that queer culture has a stand alone quality that means it can be understood as distinct from other

ongoing social experiences. Social Constructivists, so far as I am aware, have never argued that queer culture has been determined exclusively by oppression; rather they have argued that oppressive laws have been factors along with economic circumstances or political stability or the weather in shaping the ways in which particular cultures and sub-cultures have developed. The Molly House sub-culture, as I see it, has to be understood in the context of a number of factors, including the wider culture of London at the time.

Queer Theory has also become a force to be reckoned with in academic debates since the 1980s. Judith Butler is prominent in the world of Queer Theory and her most influential book is *Gender Trouble*. It is here that she develops her theory of performativity and while she is relating it here to gender it is a theory that can be applied to any identity or aspect of identity.

*As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established.... Gender ought not to be construed as a social identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in space through a stylised repetition of acts... If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute would be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.*

The way in which she focuses on ritualised social behaviour takes the emphasis away from pre-ordained or biologically-determined notions of identity and brings it fully into the social world. It offers an historical explanation of how behaviour might change and might have different meaning in different social circumstances. It helps us to understand how, for example, a kiss between two men would have different significance depending on the circumstances in which it happened;

two men kissing each other in a gay bar in Edinburgh or two footballers kissing each other at Tannadice Park would be interpreted differently but they could both be seen as ritual dramas familiar to the men involved and to other people around them; two drunk men kissing each other late on a Saturday night in Arbroath would lack that element of ritualised behaviour and their behaviour would require a different analytical approach to understand it. No-one, as I implied above, actually calls themselves essentialists but Butler's theory and her interest in ritualised social behaviour is very much of the anti-essentialist school. More importantly, it provides different ways of reflecting on the development of identities from those provided by more traditional discourses.

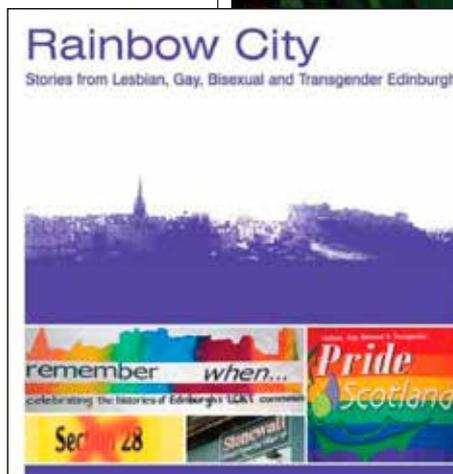
### Terminology

The terminology has shifted over the years since homosexual people began to define themselves in relation to the world in which they lived. The fluidity which exists in relation to the use of language reflects some of the fluidity within this population group and, as the population grows and changes its values and priorities, we can expect the terminology to continue to change.

The word, gay, began to be used widely in relation to same sex desire as a result of the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front, first in USA in 1969 and then in the UK in 1970. The word itself was a part of the process of self-determination. Since the late 19th century the word, homosexual, had been used to describe people who were known or believed to express same sex desire. Sometimes, it was used in relation to both men and women but, more commonly, it was understood to relate only to men; women's sexuality was, for the most part, absent from these debates. Its early usage is particularly associated with a German psychiatrist, Richard von Kraft-Ebbing, and a German lawyer, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. Both of them moved towards the theoretical position that homosexuality was something congenital. The idea which emerged from their theories was that the homosexual was an intermediate sex; this was taken on board by the Sheffield-based socialist, Edward Carpenter, and he used the notion of

an intermediate – or third – sex within the framework of a progressive politics. By the 1960s, the term, homosexual, was primarily understood as a medical term and was widely used in the media, the legal system, religious circles, political debates as well as the world of medicine. What had begun as a fairly progressive term to understand the roots of the behaviour of a group of social outsiders had been transformed into a normative term to objectify a minority. People who belonged to that minority tended to develop their own words to describe themselves but these words were used only within their own circles.

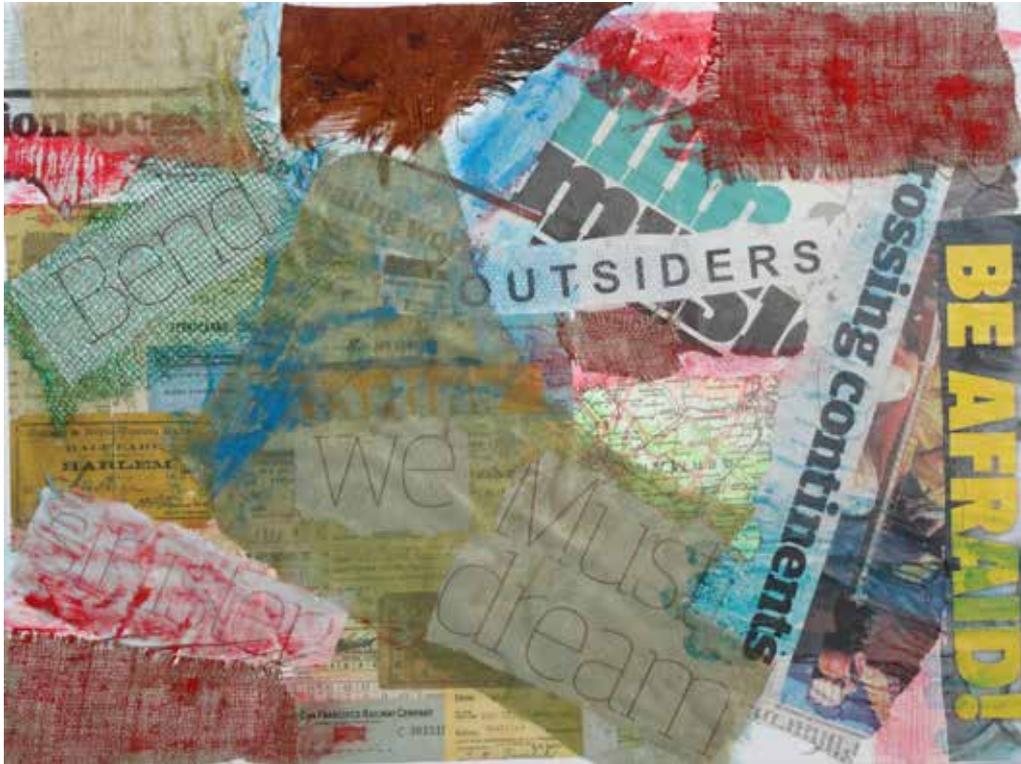
While the term, gay, as it began to be used in 1969, was partly an expression of anger and of dissidence, it was also, increasingly, an expression of pride. It was a definition of an identity by people who experienced same sex desire, whether or not they were sexually active. It was, in the early days of GLF, used by both men and women. Other words, such as homosexual or the openly abusive word, queer, were largely abandoned by people who supported the gay movement. It was more of a mass movement than it was a political organisation and gay was used widely throughout the industrialised and post-industrial world as a self-description; the people who described themselves as gay may not have been familiar with all the political and theoretical arguments but they knew that it was a term that connected them with other people like themselves who wanted control over their own lives. People were urged to come out about their sexuality and let the world know that they were gay and that it was something about which they felt good. The coming out process became the central value of the gay movement and it could take many forms, whether that was political activism, community participation or the banishment of self-loathing.



**From left: *Rainbow City* was published by the Remember When project; Skeletal Stories were developed at a workshop at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, focusing on the bare bones of a life story before fleshing it out**

(© OurStory Scotland)

By the 1980s, the term, gay, was itself becoming problematic. It was increasingly seen as a male oriented term. Many women expressed the view that their social experiences as women were at least as important as or more important than their experiences as people who felt same sex desire. After a leading male member of the SMG referred to the 'red herring of feminism' a group of women set up a magazine called Red Herring, which published, among other things, humorously-feminist knitting patterns. Women argued that the gay movement often focused on the problems facing men in a way that excluded or diminished them. Gay men, it was argued, were as sexist as heterosexual men. Such women increasingly defined themselves as lesbians or lesbian feminists. What had once been a homogenous gay movement began to recognise itself as a coalition between men and women and to reflect that shift the term, lesbian and gay, was widely used. (This was frequently a much more acrimonious and painful process than this summary suggests but the shifting of ground and the re-shaping of alliances is not the theme of this article.) The fact that Footsteps and Witnesses in 1993 used the term,



lesbian and gay, in the title reflects those debates and the processes of realignment that had been ongoing since the 1980s.

The process of questioning and coalition building went further and continues to do so. As people who experienced desire for people of both sexes began to come out more openly as bisexual, they expressed the view that their narratives, though closely connected, were being excluded from those defined as lesbian and gay. For several years, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) became a common way to describe people who decided to openly declare that their identities were not primarily heterosexual. More recently, people who define themselves as transgender have joined this coalition. The term, transgender, is quite broad and encompasses those who wish to declare that their gender identity does not match the gender which they were assigned at birth. The breadth of the term means that it can include people who have undergone gender reassignment surgery, those who are in the process of doing so, cross-dressers, people who experience desire for those with the same gender identity, those who experience desire for those with another gender identity and the asexual, amongst

others; the transgender population is very diverse. As they have begun to associate themselves with the coalition of LGB people, there have been endless debates about the significance of co-operation between people whose declared identity primarily related to their sexuality and those whose declared identity related primarily to their gender identity. These debates continue but the term, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), is now widely used to denote a population of people outwith the traditional heterosexual mould. More recently, people who define themselves as intersex have begun to come out and some writers and activists have begun to talk about the LGBTI population.

LGBT is the term which is most widely used in 2013 to describe this population of people whose identity is not traditionally heterosexual and that is the one that I am using in these two articles. Its inclusivity has been welcomed by funding bodies but there is a concern that a term which is so tidy and clarificatory may be damaging to and objectifying of a population whose combined identities are far from tidy. There was a time when the word, homosexual, was progressive but it went on to become an objectifying

**Collage for the Love out of Bounds project**  
(© OurStory Scotland)

burden; the same fate may await the acronym, LGBT. The normativity of the term has generated growing interest in the use of the term, queer, to denote a politics which is driven by a sense of dissidence. People of my generation who remember the widespread use of queer as a term of abuse have found this difficult but there are precedents of terms of abuse being reclaimed by the abused population and queer may be re-entering the lexicon in a new emancipatory form.

The terms, gay and LGBT, have been criticised by some commentators as being too ethnocentric or too 'white'. Sometimes, this is used as part of a political argument against the advancement of human rights for LGBT people; in such cases, the objection is not only to the use of language but to the very existence of people with same sex desires in particular societies. In many cases, however, the terms 'gay' and 'LGBT' are criticised for being too ethnocentric by people who are supportive of the validity of same sex desires. I first became aware of this strand of argument with the appearance of Pratibha Parmar's film, *Khush*, in 1991. *Khush* in Urdu means ecstatic pleasure but the film examined the way in which this term reflected some of the concerns of South Asian lesbians and gay men in Britain and other parts of the post-industrial world about the question of culturally rooted experience of sexuality in a world where they belonged to an ethnic minority. There are other such models of narrative from people who do not define themselves as white. One of the most notable is that of African-American men who describe themselves as Down Low. Although they have sex with one another, they define their identities primarily in relation to their race and their masculinity; they reject – or keep their distance from – the gay sub-culture which they see as white and effeminate. 'Gay' and 'LGBT' are far from enjoying any universal acceptance, although they do enjoy near-universal understanding as terms which reflect the right of self-definition by people who experience

same sex desire.

There is, to my knowledge, no Scotland-specific terminology in the public domain to describe those who express same sex desire but there are Scots demotic terms to describe such behaviour and such relationships. Before the establishment of SMG in 1969, there were parties on Saturday evenings in private houses in Edinburgh where men used women's names and indulged in the kind of female name calling that sounds reminiscent of the Molly Houses in 17th century London. Given the growing interest in the use of the Scots language, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that a more sophisticated language and cultural framework might be developed, based upon the narratives of people who have lived and expressed same sex desires in Scotland.

At the time of the publication of the first edition of *Footsteps and Witnesses* in 1993 I defined myself historically as belonging to the Social Constructivist tendency and, twenty years later, I still do so. I seek to understand and to encourage understanding of the development of sexuality in relation to particular social and historical factors. It is for that reason that people who told their stories for *Footsteps and Witnesses* were encouraged to tell their stories in the social and historical context of life in Scotland. So, people's stories included their experiences of World War II, of employment, of housing, of access to leisure facilities as well as other more obvious manifestations of sexual identity.

### **Oral history approach**

The oral tradition of telling stories as a means of transmitting information, values and pleasure is probably as old as human experience itself. My decision to use an oral history approach for lesbians and gay men was based on the fact that the records which existed for gay men were almost entirely about criminal convictions, while there were almost no records for lesbians at all. The lack of a substantial body of evidence about the lives of lesbians and gay men in Scotland

convinced me that oral history could be a useful starting point to end the tyranny of silence. The lesbians and gay men I decided to ask to tell their stories were those who defined themselves as such. There were no criteria of behaviour involved; the only criterion which interested me was self-identification.

I wanted to give them an opportunity to tell the stories of their whole lives in such a way as to include their sexuality. I was not looking for stories devoted to sexual encounters, although if anyone had offered me that I would not have rejected it. I was hoping for stories where something which was normally hidden away no longer had to be so; their sexuality could be revealed for the place it had in their lives. Perhaps, they would even tell me the whole story of their whole lives rather than a self-censored account of part of their lives. That might have been ambitious but I wanted them to have an opportunity that lesbians and gay men in Scotland had not previously enjoyed.

This extract from the story which Ruby, who was born in Fife in 1940, told illustrates some of the potential of this approach.

*I got a job in a factory. It wis weaving and the only men that wis there wis the engineers, the guys that sorted the looms. The workforce wis women. I wanted to be in female company. I didnae feel comfortable with men until I wis older. The first woman I went with wis when I wis fifteen and I wis working in the factory. It wis all straight females but if ye seen somebody ye fancied ye just went for them. Maistly it wis for a one night stand but sometimes a relationship lasted two or three months. It wis a' straight lassies. They a' got married and maist o' them are grannies now. When I look back it wis really amazing. I met them at work and we went tae the pictures or the dancing. I wis always a tomboy and I dinnae ken if they realised how far it wis sexually but it never made any difference. Where I worked there wis girls came frae a' over Fife tae work; there wis people frae Cardenden and Ballingry. If I said, "Mum, I'm going out wi' my*

*pals the night, is it a' right if such and such stays?" She said, "Aye". But at the same time ye had tae be discreet. Ye couldnae dae things like ye can dae noo. There wis no instruction manual to look at. It wis a kiss and a cuddle and it led to other things. I wis careful to make sure I knew them well enough and I never ever had any rejections.*

This quotation is itself rich with all the issues it raises in relation to sexuality, gender and class in the 1950s as well as cultural issues relating to social norms in Fife and Scotland. An oral history approach is particularly well suited to engage with the meaning of such narratives of the everyday lives of lesbians and gay men. A fuller exposition and discussion of such data will take place in the second article in the next issue of *History Scotland*.

Continued next month at:  
[www.historyscotland.com](http://www.historyscotland.com)

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*Dr Bob Cant is the editor of Radical Records: Thirty years of lesbian and gay history, 1957-1987 and a founder member of the Millthorpe Project, a sound archive of the lifestories of LGBT trade unionists.*

### **Further reading**

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London 1981).

Bob Cant (ed.), *Footsteps and Witnesses: Lesbian and gay lifestories from Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1993).

Ken Plummer (ed.), *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*. (London, 1981) [This includes both the original 1968 text of Mary McIntosh's *The Homosexual Role* and Postscript, and her 1981 commentary on its significance.]

Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (London 2000).

Rictor Norton  
[www.rictornorton.co.uk](http://www.rictornorton.co.uk)