



A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500

By Rebecca Jennings

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Drawing on a wide range of historical sources - court records, newspaper reports, medical records, novels, oral histories and personal papers - *A Lesbian History of Britain* presents the extraordinary history of lesbian experience in Britain. Covering landmark moments and well-known personalities (such as Radclyffe Hall and the publication and banning of her lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*), but also examining the lives and experiences of ordinary women, it brings both variety and nuance to their shared history. In doing so, it also explores cultural representations of, and changing attitudes to, female same-sex desire in Britain.

The narrative is arranged chronologically and begins with the accounts of a number of women in the 18th century who passed themselves off as men. The C18th & C19th saw 'Romantic Friendships' between women and, later, the emergence of a science of sexuality, and the concept of the female 'sexual invert'. At the same time, 'New Women' were pursuing independent careers, a self-confidence reflected in the publication of a number of novels explicitly about lesbian experience. The 20s and 30s were characterised by parliamentary debates on lesbianism, court cases and scandals, though, with two world wars, lesbian experiences were already changing, and a newly vibrant lesbian 'scene', centred on bars and night-clubs, was emerging, supported by a growing number of lesbian-oriented magazines and societies. The contemporary period has been marked by political movements and campaigns, in which lesbians have been active, and increasingly vocal debates surrounding the 'sex wars'.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This title has been reviewed jointly with *Her Husband Was a Woman!: Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture*, by Alison Oram....Two new books make an effort to address that central question in the context of Great Britain. Jennings (history, Macquarie Univ.) covers the period from 1500 to the present day, discussing how women's same-sex relationships adjusted to larger social and political developments. She synthesizes and builds on existing research to demonstrate the numerous forms lesbianism has taken across the centuries, from covert acknowledgement of homoeroticism in the 16th century to the romantic friendships of the 18th century and the bar culture of the mid-20th century. The work is valuable in its own right, and also serves as a straightforward introduction to major trends and controversies in lesbian historical scholarship....Both of these books are valuable additions to the literature. Recommended. All levels/libraries." - **Choice**

"For the reader wishing to explore some of the lush concoction of types of lesbian sexualities that have proliferated over the past 500 years, [the book] is successful and readable, particularly for non-specialist readers wanting a coherent, well-written introduction to the field. *A Lesbian History of Britain* would be of vital interest to students and could stimulate them to seek out more specialist scholarship. For that reason...I would highly recommend it, particularly for university and local libraries." - **Times Higher Education Supplement**

"The myths of lesbian life are many. From the legend of Queen Victoria's view that it didn't exist, to the stereotype of the hairy-legged, man-hating butch, they are also at the extremes. Rebecca Jennings's serious and sensible book rejects the crude and salacious versions, but she also explains and counteracts the silences. For those familiar with queer history there will be little that is new here. But in recent years a great deal of scholarly work has been devoted to seeking out the traces of lesbian existence and tracking the varied manifestations that marked out different historical and cultural contexts. Jennings succeeds in synthesising all of this and in making clear the complicated interaction between what may, or may not have happened then and the political motives (or wishful thinking) of historians writing from the perspective of now." - **Margaret Reynolds, The Guardian**

"In their separate histories of gay and lesbian Britain, Matt Cook and Rebecca Jennings have produced not only impressive historiographical summaries of recent scholarship but also compelling narratives of same-sex desire in Britain."Reviewed with *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages* - **Journal of British Studies**

About the Author

Dr. Rebecca Jennings is a Research Fellow in the Modern History department at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She has taught and researched modern British lesbian and womens history at the University of Manchester and her book, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A lesbian history of post-war Britain, 1945-71* was published in 2007. She is currently living in Sydney and working on a new project exploring the history of lesbian migration.

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