

“They Sure Got to Prove It on Me”: Millennial Thoughts on Gay Archives, Gay Biography, and Gay Library History

James V. Carmichael, Jr.

The American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Task Force (GLBTRT)* justly takes pride of place as the first professional gay organization in the world.¹ While the ALA itself ended discrimination based on sexual orientation in 1974, antipathy to gay issues within the profession is by no means dormant. At the same time, the growth in gay archives and gay studies in the past twenty-five years has been phenomenal. Gay librarians and archivists can continue to play an increasingly important role in promoting these collections and their use, but only if they understand the full range of historical problems that gay history and biography present. Where appropriate, library historians should also chronicle the achievements of gay library worthies.

Apologia Pro Vita Sua

From 1970 to 1976 I worked as a trust administrative assistant at an Atlanta bank, a job for which I was temperamentally and intellectually ill-suited. In addition to learning how foolishly some widows and orphans spend their money and how easily private foibles become common public knowledge anytime money is involved, I began to sense that all of the gray suits and silence in the world would never save me from who I was, a gay man. I was the shortest, least muscular, and most troubled member of the twenty or so young men who ran up and down stairs all day long to do the bidding of trust officers on the second floor—opening estates and spendthrift trusts, drafting checks in amounts that represented the lifetime earnings of most trust department employees, sorting through the papers, jewelry, and financial records of the recently deceased, and occasionally holding the hand of a

*Formed as the Task Force on Gay Liberation in 1970 (shortly thereafter the Gay Task Force), the name of the group was expanded to the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1986, the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Task Force (GLBTF) in 1995, and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Round Table in 1999.

widow who wanted to spend an afternoon complaining about the quality of available domestic help on bank time.

One estate that arrived along with a box of papers was unforgettable—that of a retired professor. In the box, along with a truly remarkable collection of early-nineteenth-century cryptograms, was private correspondence to the professor from his best friend, interspersed with some titillating although not raunchy gay pictorial pornography. What I remember now about that experience is the all-male guffaws about the illegality of the material, speculations about the depraved professor, and comments about how sick the letters were. Thinking back on those touching, tender, and outrageous letters, I surmise that they were minor literary masterpieces. The professor and his friend addressed each other as “Mary Ann” and “Emily” and alluded in a parody of the finest nineteenth-century ellipsis to racy encounters with attractive males, the price of fine linens, mundane household matters, and the legal quagmires of gay males who were even in the 1970s still being entrapped by the Atlanta police. What struck me was the fact that Mary Ann and Emily really cared for each other under their campy disguises, and I resented the dehumanizing banter around me, even if it would be several more years before I cut myself off from that workaday world of testosterone-laden coffee breaks that often assumed the ambience of a pack of dogs pursuing a bitch in heat. It is a shame the letters were destroyed like disease-bearing rags.

This memory resonates with me today because I wrote many such letters myself to my friend John when he and his lover, Gary, moved to upstate New York in the early 1990s. During the difficult period when I was struggling to achieve tenure and John was establishing a practice as a gay substance-abuse counselor in his home state, the letters provided a focus for all the pent-up professional anger, romantic frustration, fears of living alone and dying alone, self-pity, and impatience that any normal forty- to fifty-year-old gay man feels from time to time. The letters were spiced with gossip about mutual acquaintances in Chapel Hill and flights of sheer imagination, hyperbole, and overstatement that had more than a kernel of truth to them. They were invariably signed with the names of obscure female personages, some of them librarians, with elaborate Victorian names—which would send one or both of us to the library to look that one up and come back with an even more hilarious example. John understood my feelings. He had come out to me at age thirty-one while he was still married; he had been through the rigors of a doctorate at Notre Dame. He was the best-looking man I ever saw, bar none, with his rugged rangy body and a black Irish twinkle in his eyes, especially when he recited “Dangerous Dan McGrew” in flawless County Cork brogue.

The night John called me to tell me he had AIDS in October 1993 I had just seen the AIDS Quilt for the first time. When I got home from work in May 1994 to find a message on the phone from Gary saying that John had just been removed from his house in a body bag, I could not believe that we were not ever going to write those letters again. They had kept me going for five years. I suppose I had been more than just a little in love with him. His family made me much more a part of his memory than I deserved, based on our short but intense friendship, and I sent them my letters from John, since they had already discovered the other half of the correspondence, and since they had repeatedly expressed their appreciation of our relationship. I sent the originals with no hope of ever seeing them again because somehow the letters were secondary to the feelings that produced them.

The Growth of Gay Literature and Gay Consciousness

Great progress has been made in the quantity and quality of historical and biographical studies in lesbian history over the past quarter-century. In 1995, the high-water mark of gay publishing to date, over 244 nonfiction monographs were published, of which at least 27 were historical or biographical.² Compare this figure to only twenty-seven monographs in 1970 (one historical plus two literary histories), thirty in 1981 (three historical plus two literary histories), and forty-three in 1985 (no history per se but two literary histories), and one begins to appreciate what the numerical trends say about the growth of gay studies in the past decade. These monographs correspond to a growth in the number of theses and dissertations on gay themes in the same period. In spite of the fact that these figures do not include exclusively lesbian monographs, they indicate clearly that gay studies have become a desirable specialty in some academic settings—even if some researchers in narrative history would maintain that as soon as any subject becomes entrenched in the academy, its research product becomes irrelevant to the ongoing concerns of the population under investigation. One can't have the same sort of confidence in analysis of the statistics for gay archival collections, because only a fraction of relevant material is cataloged online.

Fairly detailed accounts of the gay movement in America have emerged, not only of the post-Stonewall era "revolution" but also of Victorian and Colonial antecedents that could have scarcely been imagined when Jonathan Katz first published his groundbreaking documentary history.³ Some important urban centers as well as discernible regions have been studied, and the biographical and autobiographical genres have flourished, particularly since the advent of AIDS.⁴ Gay biographical studies are more problematic, perhaps. Here, too, although no writer has achieved a

totally satisfactory “outing” of Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, or Henry James, whose surviving papers still remain opaque as far as explicit discussion of sexual detail, some authors deploy more sophisticated historical analysis to contextualize “gay behavior” in other eras.⁵ Of course, there is repetition: the 1990s heralded still another interpretation of Oscar Wilde’s fall, one that basically adds little but explicit sex, more elaborate period detail, and Stephen Fry’s uncanny resemblance to the Irish playwright, to Robert Morley’s and Peter Finch’s earlier cinematic interpretations (both released in 1959). At any rate, one can point to the compilation of numerous biographical dictionaries and almanacs from which beginning researchers can peruse the list of famous gay men and lesbians as signifying greater awareness of the importance of gay history.

Most encouraging of all is the growth and development of over sixty U.S. and Canadian repositories for specialized gay archives from which are drawn the raw materials of gay historical research.⁶ The WorldCat database now includes at least 125 entries for archival material, plus another 100 or so entries that would qualify as special collections material, and these merely give a rough indication of the growth of primary documents that support gay history. Among the most notable of these gay collections are the James Mariposa Human Sexuality Archives at Cornell University, the International Gay and Lesbian Archives, the James Hormel Collection of the San Francisco Public Library, the Gebner-Hart Archives in Chicago, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and the New York Public Library. Gay historian and educator James T. Sears has promoted the formation of similar archives throughout the Southeast, and Duke University is only the latest recruit to the expanding gay archives field.

Thistlethwaite brilliantly describes the manner in which archivists and librarians of past eras squelched research into gay and lesbian topics by destruction of records, creation of byzantine and pejorative (not to mention blatantly inaccurate) subject headings, inventory descriptions that euphemize sexual relationships and others that fail to mention them at all, and a compulsive recalcitrance to deal with sexuality of any sort in the profession (in this, librarians, as always, have reflected the social mores of the eras in which they lived).⁷ The new collections supposedly augur an era of social acceptance for homosexuality, one that Thistlethwaite is at pains to remind the profession may only run skin-deep.⁸ Without putting too fine a point on recent findings that suggest that, even in urban collections, gay literature and gay studies have received uneven treatment or recent evidence of a backlash against social responsibilities as a part of the librarian mandate, it is probably no exaggeration to claim that gay studies have progressed in spite of librarianship as well as because of it.⁹

The Task Force on Gay Liberation (TFGL) of the American Library Association, formed in 1970 at the height of the social revolution and activism of the Vietnam era, was the first gay professional association in the world. That it was established by Israel Fishman mainly as a means for its founder to meet available gay men and developed only secondarily into an organization for redress of professional and publishing inequities, a forum for discussion of gay issues impacting library service, and a vehicle for recognizing quality gay fiction and nonfiction for both younger and adult audiences should confirm what we understand about a population whose entire being was defined in terms of its sexual behavior.¹⁰ Only when Barbara Gittings, a longtime lesbian activist sans library credentials, took over leadership of the Task Force in 1971 and began to plan programs that reflected larger concerns within librarianship and the gay community at large did its coherence and visibility as an established organization increase. Ironically, like so many other social minority groups within ALA, TFGL had to wait nearly thirty years to achieve more than task force status (because the task of liberation was still ongoing?), and two nomination attempts have yet to win for Gittings an intellectual freedom award for the sixteen years of leadership she provided gratis to librarians.¹¹

Perhaps the most damning qualification to be placed on librarian involvement in the gay movement is the relative paucity of historical literature about gays in libraries. While we now have several negative examples of how libraries participated in the persecution of homosexuals in the pre-Stonewall era, examples of positive librarian influence are nearly nonexistent.¹² Both Gittings and Marie Kuda, nonlibrarians who have made significant contributions to the GLBTRT and bibliography, are cited in standard historical and biographical sources, but only one librarian, Jeanette Howard Foster (author and one-time librarian of the Kinsey Institute, among many other library jobs she held), is included in a recent gay and lesbian encyclopedia.¹³ Foster was the third winner of the ALA Gay Book Award, although she is virtually unknown to the current generation of librarians, straight or gay/lesbian.

The 1990s have seen the publication of three important gay library titles, Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt's pioneering *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*; Norman Kester's collection of personal essays, library anecdotes, and coming-out stories from lesbian and gay librarians, *Liberating Minds: The Stories and Lives of Lesbian and Gay Librarians and Their Allies*; and my own collection of essays on the challenges of writing lesbian-gay library history, *Daring to Find Our Names: The Search For Lesbian and Gay Library History*.¹⁴ One may applaud these efforts while excoriating the ALA's lack of leadership in bringing gays and lesbian issues into the grand design of the organization. Granting a minority organization round table status is

one way to squelch rebellion without ceding power, but as some blacks within the ALA have discovered, task forces and caucuses do not engender the kind of solidarity necessary for coherent social programs and professional self-development. The formation of the Black Librarians Association in 1994 reflected a discontent of several decades with the ALA's tepidity on racial issues. It is doubtful that lesbians and gays will register a similar degree of alienation from the professional organization, especially because many gays are so used to compromising their identities that any recognition strikes them as amazing, because the organization does provide them with some funding, and because a more radical agenda threatens the invisibility that the gradualist agenda affords. External signs of encouragement from the ALA arrive none too early: the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of GLBTF was attended by two ALA past presidents, the current president, and at least one nominee for president-elect, yet in twenty-five years, only one ALA president has ever explicitly defended gay rights.¹⁵ Still, the programs of GLBTF of the 1990s emphasized a positive social and publishing climate, signaled most significantly, perhaps, by the summer 1999 program that focused on gay archives ("Daring to Save Our History: Gay and Lesbian Archives," 26 June 1999, New Orleans).

This "boom" in gay archives and collections arrives at a felicitous moment when the availability of online technology has precipitated a new awareness of the accessibility of archives among professionals in the field. Scholars no longer necessarily have to travel thousands of miles or spend hours on the telephone to ascertain what the holdings of archives are: many inventories and descriptions of archives are now accessible online. Who knows, one day library directors may come to realize that weekends are the most convenient time for most academic researchers to do their work and support weekend staffing of the archives accordingly.

In spite of the numbers, there are at least three problems that challenge gay archivists and historical researchers that will be more difficult to resolve by fiat. The first, "mothball outing," consists of the "outing" of historical personages who may have never identified themselves as homosexual, who merely may have been unmarried, or who left no trace of their personal passions on paper. Gay historians, in their eagerness to create a lesbian pantheon from which struggling young gay people may gather inspiration, sometimes ignore normal rules of historical evidence in favor of more circumstantial cases for their subjects.

Circumstantial Evidence and Ambiguity

While the growth of gay archives over the past twenty or thirty years seems nothing short of miraculous, the application of historical principles

to the stories of lesbians and gays, blacks, Native Americans, and Latinos, to name only a few minorities deserving of revisionist interpretations, has been inconsistent. While it is true that historians of the nineteenth century, in their frenzy to apply “scientific” principles to what was basically a literary form (historical narrative), almost succeeded in killing narrative interest (storytelling ability) entirely with narcotic chronologies, facts, and footnotes, in the late twentieth century, post-Warhol fame game, the rigors of evidentiary protocols have been loosened to include speculation and insinuation. Apologists defend the practice of “outing” Eleanor Roosevelt and her secretary Lorena Hitchcock, although clearly Roosevelt would never have made a public pronouncement on her sexuality, period, since sexuality according to her time, tradition, and station of birth was an unmentionable subject outside of a lover’s arms. Revisionists defend this practice on the grounds that (as one writer put it in the *New Yorker*) the *possibility* that such a relationship existed has more importance to the future of the gay movement than any squeamishness about evidentiary value can have to the case for acceptable historical standards.¹⁶ Rose Gladney discussed the problems of generational differences between lesbians at the 1995 meeting of the GLBTF, where she described her difficulty in probing the nature of the Lillian Smith/Paula Snelling ménage by engaging Snelling in a conversation that women of her generation never had.¹⁷ Other than for hypocrites like federal prosecutor Roy Cohn, who prosecuted lesbigays during the McCarthy era while hiding in his own closet, outing anyone against their will is a perpetuation of the kind of emotional violence to which people of earlier generations were routinely subjected. As Andrew Sullivan noted in one of his most famous reactionary statements,

In all the recent brouhaha over the “outing” of alleged homosexuals, one fallacy has remained virtually unchallenged. It’s the notion of the simple “closet” and the crude assertion that one is either in it or out of it. I know of no one to whom this applies. Most homosexuals and lesbians whose sexualities are developed beyond adolescence are neither “in” nor “out.” They hover tentatively somewhere in between.¹⁸

While one may abhor the damage that closeted lives imply for the gay “movement,” gay historians and historians who are gay should never forget that coming out can be a singularly painful experience for many people. In other words, *historical evidence must support the assertion of homosexual activity before one can claim they were “gay” in the modern sense of that term.* This caveat becomes even more essential when no signifying relationships are involved, due to the fact that few writers are equipped to deal with the situation of single people, straight or gay.¹⁹

Related to this problem is how people from an earlier era regarded their own same-sex attractions.

The Canonical Gay "Experience"

Daniel Harris has noted the negative as well as the positive effects of gay liberation in the post-Stonewall era.²⁰ Primary among the negative effects is the narrowing of vision related to the gay experience. The tendency to categorize gays, to assume homosexual activity where archival evidence remains ambiguous, and to simplify all same-sex affections as homosexual is astounding, even if it represents an understandable tendency, given the centuries-long invisibility of many gay people and the desire to claim group identity. Yet identity politics also tends to preclude dissent from the politically correct orthodoxy of the moment—it does not leave much room for conservatives like Bruce Bawer or Andrew Sullivan, for example, and even gay conservatives and neo-individualists sometimes feel hemmed in by the political, religious, and social orthodoxies of their nomenclatures.²¹

How orthodoxy, combined with a superficial, tabloid-deep respect for supporting documentation, plays out in gay history is both fascinating and terrifying to behold. One wonders what future gay historians will think when they examine the unevenness of the historical record regarding gays and lesbians one hundred years from now. John Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Greg Louganis, Bessie Smith, Amy Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop—these lives have been documented as lesbigay with very little room for guessing what we mean by “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual.” Yet one will look in vain for confirmation of the sexual orientation of lesser-known gay figures who emerge in some recent reference sources.

George Washington Carver appears as an important gay scientist in the 1995 compilation *Out in All Directions*, but he fails to appear in the *Gay and Lesbian Biography*, *The Gay Almanac*, *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*, or indeed, as a homosexual in standard biographies.²² In a section tellingly labeled “Queered Science,” we are told that Carver was “openly gay all of his life” and “lived for years with his loving successor at Tuskegee, Dr. Austin W. Curtis, Jr.” What the entry does not tell us was that when Curtis joined the Tuskegee staff as Dr. Carver’s research assistant in 1936, Carver was already over seventy years old, and the next year his health began to decline. While the newly published, widely hailed *American National Biography* (1999) does not label Carver as homosexual, it does note Carver’s “special talent for friendship” with many famous people, including Henry Ford, the Roosevelts, and foundation officials, as well as his proposal and near-marriage in 1905 and his several nervous collapses, to which *Out in All Directions* does

not allude. The standard biography by Linda McMurry makes it clear that Carver was rarely well enough for Curtis to have been more than his caretaker and that Carver saw Curtis's appointment in terms of the younger man's professional advancement. In Carver's later years, Curtis was primarily interested in securing increased revenues for patent rights on Carver's inventions. Does the fact that Carver is usually shown knitting in old age mean that he was openly gay? Tailoring was a leading occupation for black men when I grew up in the segregated South, but one would have to search hard for an openly gay black man even in the Harlem Renaissance because of the especially strong social stigma attached to black gay male identity. The *American National Biography* mentions that Carver spoke of Curtis "like a son." Has a doctoral student discovered some new papers, or has Carver's academic relationship with Curtis been proven to include "bumping ugly"? If so, the compilers of *Out in All Directions* should have included footnotes to support hitherto undocumented facts or drop Carver until more conclusive evidence came to light.

Ditto composer Stephen Foster Collins, who is claimed by both *Out in All Directions* and *The Gay Almanac*, even though no documentation to support such a claim appears in either the recent biography of Foster or in the research bibliography on Foster that appeared in the 1980s.²³ While there may be some uncertainty about the reasons for his separation from his wife and family several years before he died (were the reasons financial, as some have claimed, or his increasing addiction to alcohol?), the down-at-the-heels life he lived in a grocer's barroom in the Bowery, a section of New York where "Nancys," among many others, congregated, hardly constitutes proof that Foster had homosexual relationships and shortchanges the significance of his career, which is a classic American saga of wasted talent and unscrupulous publisher greed.

The central historical tenet that has failed in practice more often than succeeded is the discussion of ambiguity in evidence. A good example of effective discussion of ambiguity is William J. Mann's biography of silent-screen film idol and Hollywood decorator to the stars Billy Haines.²⁴ Although Mann was prevented from documenting some facts due to Ted Turner's purchase and subsequent sequestration of the MGM archives, he nevertheless presents a more convincing case for the physical relationship of Cary Grant and Randolph Scott than does Boze Hadleigh, whose *Hollywood Gays* devotes two chapters to Grant and Scott based on lengthy (but circumspect and inconclusive) interviews he conducted with both men before Grant died.²⁵ One of the reasons Mann succeeds where Bozeman fails is that he has done his background homework, has corroborated information from interviews with extensive double checking, and discusses evidentiary ambiguity ad nauseam. Whatever such attention

to detail detracts from narrative and “scoop” value, it certainly adds to credibility. The focus of Mann’s biography of Billy Haines, the number one male box office attraction in Hollywood from 1926 to 1931 who lived an openly gay life and sacrificed his career rather than give up his long-time lover Jimmy Shields to pacify Louis B. Mayer, certainly has more to say to the current generation of gays than the incidental screen gossip gleaned by Bozeman about stars who snuck around for “nookie.” Mann employs a larger cast of characters on a much broader sociohistorical palette and introduces names to the lesbian celluloid closet that are often ignored—Claudette Colbert, Elsa Maxwell, and Rod La Rocque, among many less famous others. Of course, theater and film are natural subjects for a gay biographer since the arts have been historically associated with people on the fringe and homosexuals in particular. Still, if the stories are told with little reference to theater or studio history, they have little to impart beyond the cheap thrill afforded by any grocery-store rag.

Similarly, Theo Aronson’s roundabout portrait of the heir presumptive to the English throne, *Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld*, achieves an authority that few previous accounts of the Cleveland Street Scandal and its aftermath attain.²⁶ Again, it is not so much the evidence itself that has changed—the royal family, probably under the direction of Prince Eddy’s father, Edward VII, destroyed all papers related to the affair shortly after Prince Albert Victor (Eddy) died in 1892. The depth with which existing evidence is examined and analyzed as well as Aronson’s comprehensive look at not only Eddy’s relationship to the Cleveland Street Scandal but also unrelated sensations like Jack the Ripper murders, to which he has in the past been linked, bolster reader confidence. Aronson, incidentally, sums up the plethora of Ripper scholarship deftly and succinctly but relies for his own primary evidence on the files of the director of public prosecutions at the Public Records Office—a nightmare of bureaucratic disorganization if ever one existed—and conducts a thorough examination of periodical and newspaper accounts of the period—no mean task.

Perhaps the most effective lesbian biographies of recent years are those of Alla Nazimova and Stephen Tennant.²⁷ Here the evidence is profuse, some oral history sources are still available, and corroborating evidence exists in abundance. Ironically, Nazimova, a failed icon of the stage and screen by the 1930s, is restored to her rightful place in American theater as the premier interpreter of Ibsen to American audiences. Her multiple lesbian love affairs (immortalized perhaps for all time when her love nest became the Garden of Allah, that seediest and coziest of gathering places for the Hollywood glitterati of the 1930s) as well as those of her arch-rival, Eva La Gallienne, are secondary to the persistence of her

professionalism. On the other hand, Stephen Tennant, relatively unknown even to gay cognoscenti as the lover of poet Siegfried Sassoon, was so excessive even as an outrageous member of the minor nobility, “in an electric brougham wearing a football jersey and earrings,” for example, as the *Daily Express* described his arrival at a 1927 society ball, that he became an icon of eccentricity more than of fagdom.²⁸ Like Nazimova, he is a person about whom so much documentary evidence exists that the biographical quest becomes one of weighing what is fair and just about the person more than it is reconstituting shavings of sexual scandal into shards of pseudo-history.

Discretion about sexuality may not be, as many writers maintain, solely a protective device. It may simply be the better part of taste and “common sense.” Gore Vidal condemns gay nomenclature as too limiting of the range and complexity of human experience, nor is the gay movement his sole source of dissatisfaction with sexuality in America.²⁹ Even Ma Rainey’s notorious lesbian blues of 1928 echo the defiance of a sexual nonconformist who refuses to be categorized: *They say I do it / Ain’t nobody caught me / They sure got to prove it on me.*³⁰ Certainly history, with its century-old emphasis on evidence, is an appropriate place to apply stringent qualifications and definitions, whatever the political needs of the moment.

The final historical sin results from willful ignorance as well as the inevitable toll of three decades of identity politics.

The Varieties of Gay Experience

Whose papers get collected? Which gay dissertation director decides who gets written about? In the WorldCat records one finds a preponderance of information not only about the Religious Right but about mainstream denominations and congregations that have rather selflessly examined their collective consciences about homosexuality and stood behind the lines as sub-rosa allies for these thirty years. The story of these groups and how they have influenced the growth of gay spirituality would make a fascinating document of far-reaching historical interest in an era when the word “Christian” has become synonymous with intolerance.³¹

There are many facets of gay lives that remain undocumented because a younger gay generation may well want to ignore reminders of oppression in the gay past, and, of course, every generation is more interested in its own accomplishments than in those of some other. Jeb Alexander’s diary, *Jeb and Dash*, for example, provides only one less glamorous example of the life of a repressed gay Washington bureaucrat from 1919 to 1945 from which, nevertheless, we gather many significant details about the continuity of gay experience over a span of several decades.³²

Library historians and archivists are in a unique position to discover and publicize gay archives and particularly findings that new collections reveal. In this they should be pioneers rather than followers in establishing acceptable historical standards in order to curb the unbridled zeal of the converted to any hint of same-sex inclination while addressing the professional antipathy to the sexual nature of biographical subjects, period. It is probably not by accident that the first full-length biographical dissertation about a gay librarian was written by a historian rather than a librarian, and while it is true that Laura Bragg is important not only as the first female museum director of a major museum in America but also for her association with the Charleston writers of the 1920s Southern literary renaissance, it seems symptomatic of not only homophobia but ahistoricity that librarians did not first claim her as one of their own.³³ There are lesbigay librarians and archivists worthy of inclusion in the biographical canon. How many librarians can cite the achievements of Jeanette Howard Foster? As the fifteen examples included in Jessie Carney Smith's *Notable Black American Women* demonstrate, librarians and archivists play a central role in minority communities and at the point of intersection between those communities and the world beyond.³⁴ So, finally, *before gay librarians and archivists clean up the whole palace of history, they have to air their own rooms.*

Let the reader pretend for a moment that by the year 2075 lesbigay identity won't really be a negative tag, that cases of discrimination, victimization, and persecution will be almost nonexistent in Wyoming and Alabama as well as in Israel and Iraq. Given that unlikely scenario, what purpose will gay archives serve other than to document varieties of gender experience? When there's no longer a revolution to fight, will gays look back with pride not only on their ability to march and to champion the causes célèbres but also to be inclusive in their collection and interpretation of those aspects of their experience that are personally distasteful to them? Will all they have to disclose be the fact that they were or were not gay (so what?), and, if so, with whom they slept (ho hum), down to what sexual acts were committed (close the door!). Perhaps they merely dropped campy bons mots now and then, overdressed, flipped their wrists, donned leather chaps, marched in a gay parade, indulged in interior decoration on the grand scale, pierced their nipples, or drove a pick-up truck, thus confirming social stereotypes of gays. Or is there a more fundamental significance to the quality of their lives that makes them worthy of study or remembering? With such a standard in view, whether gays are silent or outspoken, they can begin to place their archival efforts in more coherent historical form than prescribed gay collection areas, the magnetic force of celebrity, or the transient sexual mores of the decade. They can literally live their lives from the inside, without undue concern for what posterity may make of the result.

Postscript

As Emma Tennant, Stephen's niece, wrote in her own reckoning with her family's and her uncle's past, "As with the dreams and documents that fed my obsession with the past, there is no way of saying that what is true to me is not also history."³⁵ Just as the letters themselves can no longer afford me a truer sense of the John Noonan I knew than the post-mortem romance I have construed of our friendship, it will take more discerning eyes than mine to sift what is false from what is true in my boasts, using what papers still exist, what witnesses still live, and what background facts our individual histories afford. It will be left to the historian to say what, if anything, any such story has to tell other people about the quality of relationship of these two men who just happened, by the way, to be gay. The words we wrote tried vainly to stab at feelings, some of which escaped the pen and some of which endured in ink. As to what should be made of the evidence we collected of our tenuous and very fleeting past or whether it has any historical significance at all, one must trust to the laws of historical principle and the processes of decay.

Notes

1. Throughout this essay I use "gay" in its most inclusive sense to embrace lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and "others" whose interests in homosexual issues are personal. I use "lesbian" when speaking specifically of women who are gay. "Lesbigay" is used to denote gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals.

2. The figures come from a recent unpublished citation study, James V. Carmichael, Jr., "Deconstructing the Myth of a Boom in Gay Publishing: Quantitative Measures vs. Qualitative Advances," a paper delivered at the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, Madison, Wisconsin, 16 July 1999. Contact Jim_Carmichael@uncg.edu. Among the notable historical 1995 titles are John Boswell's posthumously published *Same-Sex Unions in Modern Europe*, Gary P. Leup's history of homosexuality in Japan (*Male Colors*), Scott Lively's *The Pink Swastika*, Colin Spencer's *Homosexuality: A History*, and Neil Miller's remarkable *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present*. Biographical subjects include Oscar Wilde, T. E. Lawrence, John Maynard Keynes, David Norris, and Robert Mapplethorpe.

3. The most wide-ranging sampler of these discoveries is contained in Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vincus, and George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989); Jonathan N. Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian, 1992).

4. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (New York: Eastview Press, 1997); Gean Harwood, *The Oldest Gay Couple in America: A 70 Year Journey Through Same-Sex America* (Seacucus, N.J.: Birch Lane Press, 1997). The later writings of Paul Monette epitomize the AIDS memoir, but a fine, lesser-known example is

John R. Noonan, *The Singing Bird Will Come: An AIDS Journal* (Latham, N.Y.: Cantic Press, 1997).

5. See Colm Tóibín, "Roaming the Greenwood," *James White Review* 16 (Spring 1999): 3–11, esp. 11, for a thorough, even-handed, and commonsensical critique of "queer readings" of James, in particular.

6. Alan V. Miller, comp., *Directory of the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries* (Toronto: Canadian Gay Archives, 1987); Lesbian and Gay Archives Roundtable, *Lavender Legacies: Guide to Sources in North America, 1998*, available at www.archivists.org/units/lagar/htm, accessed 21 June 1999.

7. Polly J. Thistlethwaite, "The Gay and Lesbian Past: An Interpretive Battleground," *Gay Community News* (Boston) 4 (Winter 1995): 10–11, 24. For a fine example of the degree of specificity and currency needed in gay subject headings, see Dee Michel, *Gay Studies Thesaurus: A Controlled Vocabulary for Indexing and Accessing Materials of Relevance to Gay Culture, History, Politics, and Psychology* (The author, 1985). Copies of the thesaurus are available for \$15.00 by writing Dee Michel, 2236 Hillington Green, Madison, WI 53705.

8. Polly J. Thistlethwaite, "Gays and Lesbians in Library History," in Wayne A. Wiegand and Donald G. Davis, Jr., eds., *The Encyclopedia of Library History* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1994).

9. Eric Bryant, "Pride & Prejudice," *Library Journal* 120 (June 1995): 37–39; Stephen Joyce and Alvin M. Schrader, "Hidden Perceptions: Edmonton Gay Males and the Edmonton Public Library," *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 22 (April 1997): 19–37. For information and documentation on the backlash, see James V. Carmichael, Jr., "Homosexuality and United States Libraries: Land of the Free, but Not Home to the Gay," *Proceedings of the 64th International Federation of Library Associations Conference 1998*, booklet 7, 136–45, esp. 141.

10. Israel D. Fishman, "Founding Father," in James V. Carmichael, Jr., ed., *Daring to Find Our Names: The Search for Lesbian and Gay Library History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 107–12. Fishman, incidentally, has disclaimed this essay, according to a letter to be published in the *Library Quarterly*.

11. To be fair, Gittings was honored in 1998 with many others at a dinner given by the Intellectual Freedom Committee, and when the Philadelphia Free Public Library and PrideFest America honored her at a ceremony at the Free Library on 27 April 1999, ALA director William Gordon was on hand to note her accomplishments on behalf of the association. See *American Libraries* 30 (June–July 1999): 43.

12. For some of these negative examples, see the illustration on page 102 in Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman, eds., *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: New York Public Library, 1997), of a report filed in 1899 at the NYPL by a customer who was accosted in the men's room; see also John Howard's detailed account of the 1953 sting conducted by Atlanta police in the men's room at the Atlanta Public Library using a two-way mirror in "The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post World War II Atlanta," *Radical History Review* 62 (Spring 1995): 166–87; and Louise Robbins, "A Closet Curtained by Circumspection: Doing Research on the McCarthy Era Purge of Gays from the Library of Congress," in Carmichael, Jr., ed., *Daring to Find Our Names*, 55–64.

13. *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

14. Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt, *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* (New York: Garland, 1990; now under revision for a second edition); Norman Kester, *Liberating Minds: The Stories and Lives of Lesbian and Gay Librarians and Their Allies* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997); and Carmichael, Jr., ed., *Daring to Find Our Names*.

15. Marilyn Miller spoke at the rally of lesbigay librarians protesting Denver's rescission of its antidiscrimination policies. See John Berry, Francine Fiakoff, Evan St. Lifer, and Michael Rogers, "Under Protest: ALA Midwinter in Denver," *Library Journal* 118 (March 1993): 32-38.

16. Mark A. Thompson, Letter, *New Yorker*, 26 September 1994, 14.

17. Margaret R. Gladney, "Biographical Research on Lesbigen Subjects: Editing the Letters of Lillian Smith," 47-54, in Carmichael, Jr., ed., *Daring to Find Our Names*, 51-52.

18. Paul [i.e., Andrew] Sullivan, "Sleeping with the Enemy," *New Republic*, 9 September 1991, 43.

19. Exceptions exist: the novels of Anita Brookner are exemplary; a model of biographical treatment is Victoria Glendinning's *Edith Sitwell: A Lion among Unicorns* (New York: Knopf, 1981), esp. 158-60.

20. Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

21. See for, example, explorations of this topic in Bruce Bawer, ed., *Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

22. Lynn Witt, Sherry Thomas, and Eric Marcus, eds., *Out in All Directions: The Almanac of Gay and Lesbian America* (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 27, 37-38; Michael J. Tyrkus and Michael Bronski, eds., *Gay and Lesbian Biography* (Detroit: St. James Press, 1997); *The Gay Almanac* (New York: Berkeley, 1996); *Completely Queer*; Linda O. McMurry, *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). See also Carver's biography in *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), vol. 4.

23. Ken Emerson, *Doo-Dahl!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); Calvin Elliker, *Stephen Foster Collins: A Guide to Research* (New York: Garland, 1988).

24. William J. Mann, *Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998).

25. Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Gays* (New York: Barricade, 1996), 237-308.

26. Theo Aronson, *Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld* (London: John Murray, 1994).

27. Gavin Lambert, *Nazimova: A Biography* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1997); Philip Hoare, *Serious Pleasures: The Life of Stephen Tennant* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990).

28. Hoare, *Serious Pleasures*, back dust jacket (not cited in notes).

29. Gore Vidal, *Gore Vidal, Sexually Speaking: Collected Sex Writings* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1999).

30. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, *Prove It on Me Blues*, Paramount Records 12668, June 1928. Reissued on *Ma Rainey: The Complete 1928 Sessions in Chronological Order*, Document DOCD-5156, 1993.

31. John J. Carey's *The Sexuality Debate in North American Churches, 1988-1995* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1995) concentrates on the reactionary backlash of the 1990s.

32. Ina Russell, ed., *Jeb and Dash: A Diary of a Gay Life, 1918-1945* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993).

33. Louise A. Allen, "Laura Bragg: A New Woman Practicing Progressive Social Reform as a Museum Administrator and Educator" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1997).

34. Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992).

35. Emma Tennant, *Strangers: A Family Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 182.