

Podcast Transcript

E: Hello listeners, welcome to Hidden Histories. I'm Elena

N: and I'm Natasha. We will be your hosts today.

E: This episode will take you through the untold stories of the First World War in the context of Canadian history. While World War One (WWI) is a wide historiography, there are always experiences that aren't acknowledged.

N: Queer experiences are one of these untold stories, and what we will be covering in this episode.

Same-sex relationships in World War One have increasing interest in recent years, exploring mostly interactions within the military and among men. While this podcast will touch on some of those histories, we intend to focus on queer women's experiences during this era (in the Canadian context).

E: We want to centre this historical investigation around two women: Ellanore Parker and Murney Pugh, who met in England but settled in Victoria, BC after the Second World War. This episode doesn't intend to dissect their entire lives, but more to place them in the context of queer history in Canada.

N: Before diving into the details, it's important to address both the language we use and the source material compiled for this podcast. Because we're dealing with a time period that persecuted queerness, finding explicit admissions about relationships or sexuality in primary sources is rare. Instead, we've chosen to use the term *queer* to describe a broad spectrum of identities and experiences that may not have been labeled as such during the time.

E: Historians like David Halperin emphasize the value of the term *queer* as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" to quote—a term that resists fixed boundaries and instead embraces the fluidity of human desire and identity. As historian Laura Doan also notes, queer history is less about assigning modern labels to the past and more about exploring how people navigated and expressed their relationships within their specific historical and cultural contexts.

N: By using *queer* in this discussion, we aim to acknowledge the diversity of experiences, including forms of love, intimacy, and connection that go beyond direct romantic or sexual

relationships. This approach helps us explore the nuances of hidden, constrained, or coded relationships in history, particularly in times when expressing such connections openly was dangerous or impossible.

E: Which brings us to the sources we used to create this episode. In a historiographical sense, we've found secondary books and articles that shine a light on queerness in World War One. Most of these books, such as Cynthia Toman's 'Sister Soldiers of the Great War: the nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps' deal directly with the social roles of women during warfare and relationships formed there—one of which is Ellanore and Murney's. We will list a full catalogue of all the secondary references used in addition to this book. We will also be diving into some of the primary material from the BC Archives, graciously donated by Murney Parker. We also used an online webinar from the RBCM@Home channel titled 'Queer Lives During WWI' presented by Sarah Worthman.

N: Now that we've covered logistics, we should set the context in terms of history. What kind of social environment and legal stipulations were present leading up to and during WWI. Of course, [open] homosexuality was illegal in Canada at this time. The 1892 Criminal Law Amendment Act, section 149, outlaws the act of 'gross indecency', formerly sodomy, defining any sex act that does not result in procreation (basically heterosexual sex). This law would remain in place until 1969. It's important to note here that evidence did not need to be physical or witnessed, suspicion alone could warrant persecution.

E: There were specific sections based on being a member of the Canadian forces during the war as well, although this would generally be pointed towards men, it's still useful to understand the legal intensity here when it came to queer relationships (or even suspicions of them). Court martials for gross indecency were placed under the 1881 Army Act. Terms to define the crime were very vague, with language such as 'behaving in a scandalous manner, unbecoming of [an] officer and a gentleman' (from section 16). This section was meant for officers specifically, and was disciplined less harshly. Sections 18(5) and 41 of this act were devoted to enlisted men, defining 'indecent or disgraceful conduct'. These sections almost always resulted in harsh prison sentences. Given that this was during the war, detainment spaces were cramped and unsanitary, and men were forced to wait hours or even days to be transported to a military prison and put on trial.

N: These trials were incredibly invasive. The sexuality and personal lives of charged soldiers were publicly interrogated. According to the LGBT Purge Fund, 35 men were charged for gross indecency, 19 of which were for consensual queer relationships while serving. We put

this history forward to set the context for the period, and also to show how difficult—if not impossible—it would be to openly speak or write about queerness as we do today.

Relationships between women are even more ambiguous in some cases, as the policing of queer women was at times exhibited differently than men. In general, female relationships during wartime are critically understudied.

E: We won't say that all these relationships between women were queer or romantic, of course. But the war created an environment for female relationships to flourish, as genders were segregated between the nurses and the male soldiers. Participation as combat nurses also did away with some traditional gender roles, such as staying at home, as women were put in intense situations on all fronts of the war, even if they were not directly fighting. Friendships between nurses were encouraged in these spaces, but there was direct discouragement of 'sexual inversion', as suspicions rose among the hierarchies imposed within medical stations.

N: However, it's important to note that the worry for nurses was not an obsession with potential same-sex relations, but rather the opposite. Much of the disciplinary rhetoric around sex was focused on heterosexual, premarital sex between nurses and soldiers on the front. Much of this was due to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality (comphet, for short), which assumes heterosexuality as the norm and, therefore, enforced by society. Because of this, same-sex relations between nurses were not outwardly visible, and were silenced both out of safety and out of social expectations.

E: Being in this violent, quick paced situation, sometimes for years, would bring forward community and closeness. Or, maybe in a more colloquial sense, trauma bonding. However, a lot of the specific nature of these relationships can be difficult to decipher. Unlike testimonies from soldiers, first person experiences of nurses is difficult to find and often fragmented. We have correspondence, but a lot of it is nurses writing to their families and friends at home as opposed to written communication with each other.

N: That doesn't mean there isn't a lot to reveal about the way women conceptualized themselves in these positions. Verging away from the typical image we might think of when it comes to a wartime nurse. In Andrea McKenzie's edited book about nurses Laura Holland and Mildred Forbes, the description of war nurses seen in the public eye as virginal, nurturing caregivers as healing figures to male soldiers juxtaposes with the women's wartime correspondence. Whether these pieces of experience are queer or not, they still open up the

historiography around WWI to different perspectives during this incredibly violent time, and pays more attention to the individual relationships formed within the fronts.

E: Which brings us to some of the specific experiences we want to present around the intersectionality of queerness and women's roles in WWI, staying in the context of Canadian stories. As stated in the intro, we will talk about Ellanore Parker and Murney Pugh, but to show that this was not an experience unique to just these two, we will briefly mention Laura Holland and Mildred Forbes as well from Andrea McKenzie's edited book.

N: Much of the secondary information we found on Ellanore and Murney is from Cynthia Toman's work *Sister Soldiers of the Great War*, as a foundation for our exploration into Ellanore's own pieces at the BC Archives. So, Ellanore was born in Ireland in 1878, graduated from Winnipeg General Hospital in 1910 and enlisted as a combat nurse in 1914, serving until 1919 after gas exposure had her medically discharged. Her semi-autobiographical novel titled *The Flower of the Land* detailed Ellanore's experiences as a nurse, commenting on the violence and social turmoil of working as a nurse, not simply helping the soldiers but also detailing the complex relationships she formed with the other women.

E: Not all of these were good relationships either, as her book speaks a lot about hierarchies and division between matrons and common nurses. However, Ellanore also met Murney Pugh, her lifelong partner, around this time. They met in France while serving together in the no. 2 Canadian General Hospital unit, both of them becoming familiar with the deadliness of gas attacks at Vimy Ridge. Ellanore herself would be discharged due to medical issues years later from gas exposure, leaving her with chronic bouts of pneumonia for the rest of her life. Murney would stay to care for Ellanore after the war.

N: They spent the interwar years and WWII in California, and then relocated to Victoria, BC in 1948, staying there permanently (where this podcast is being filmed). In census records from their residences, it shows that Murney is sometimes labelled 'partner' and sometimes 'sister', showing at least a deep closeness between them. Along with this, there are many photos of them together, sitting close and interacting throughout life. Murney assisted in Ellanore's lifelong writing career, and even wrote [transcribed] and edited many of her poems after her death - including a note in the archival material that "She never wished to show any of her poems I just found them tucked in old scribbles or pieces of any kind of paper. No one else has previously seen any of her poems but me."

E: Not only this, they are buried together in St. Luke's Anglican Cemetery right here in Victoria. This is one of the biggest implications that the two of them were not simply friends, but were romantic partners for most of their lives. Barker, Cooke and McCollough observes the position of the graves as further proof that the women's relationship was deeply committed. To quote them on page 23 of *Material Traces of War Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914—1945*, 'Their upright headstone sits atop a large rectangular grave plot outlined in stone blocks, similar to other graves surrounding it. According to one scholar of cemetery symbolism, borders like these are important markers of a family relationship.'

N: This may seem like nothing but symbolism and funerary culture in North America, but given that queer life had to be kept hidden in all its forms, even after the war, the only option we have is to read between the lines of people's actions, decisions and, in this case, writing. Much of what we know about Ellanore's inner mind is from her writing, some long form fiction, some poetry and notations found in the archives.

E: Ellanore's writing is just as implicit as the observations made in the secondary sources we use. For this segment, we're going to go through some of Ellanore's work we found in the BC Archives. Since there were a lot of documents, and we have limited time here, we decided to focus on some of her poetry, as they focus largely on her emotional experiences in wartime. Keep in mind that these interpretations are our own, based on the secondary sources we've talked about here, but aren't a direct assumption of Ellanore or Murney's sexuality or relationship. The aim of this reading is to get a sense of Ellanore's personal writing alongside her career and relationships that we know about. Natasha is going to read the poem titled 'The Sinner' and then Natasha and I will interpret this in our own discussion. The poems are available in the handout if you would like to read along, we encourage this as punctuation is an important tool in Ellanore's writing:

N: This poem is entitled 'The Sinner'

Why stone him,
He whose hand reached out for beauty?
Man-made were the laws
That held him down to duty.
In the old book, so often quoted, -- so seldom lived --
He was held up a man
Whose life held wives and children
In goodly numbers

For his life's span.
Why stone him,
He whose heart betrayed him
Into loving?
Upon his hearthstone sat his wife -- in name --
Guarded by law;
Serene, untroubled; desire long spent,
Upon her way she calmly went.
Why stone him,
If a rose upon the path of life
Seemed for awhile to bloom for him?
Wayward, unwise,
Old Adam all supreme
He lingered in a garden of forbidden love;
The rose was his, but for the asking ...
Why stone him?

E: Such a beautiful poem, and so much woven into it, even though it's only a page long. An aspect of this that really stuck with me is the line '*Upon his hearthstone sat his wife—in name—Guarded by law*'. From my interpretation of this, words of adoration aren't used around the term 'wife' like we normally would when talking about a spouse. Rather, much like the earlier line about being held to duty, it's written around legality and obligation. At the time in history, many marriages were committed to out of societal pressure or a need to conceal one's own queerness in some cases. For Parker, I think this could be a metaphorical grappling with her own feelings of being inauthentic or maybe lacking a sense of belonging in her life. These feelings may not have only centred on her sexuality; we can never know the many ways she may have felt like she didn't fit the moulds put upon her by her circumstances. But I think the general tone of the poem, introspective and sort of resigned to the hypocritical relationships between religious teachings and human behaviour, implies a feeling of emotional waywardness and going against the grain.

N: Okay, before I go into my analysis, I do have to admit that English Literature and interpreting poems is not my strong suit, so I did have to consult my sister on this, but what came up for us when we spoke about this is that religious judgment and double standards take center stage in *The Sinner*, particularly in the line, "*In the old book, so often quoted, -- so seldom lived.*" Here, Parker calls out the hypocrisy of using the Bible as a weapon for judgment while ignoring its core principles of compassion and understanding. This critique

lands powerfully in an era where morality and sexuality—especially for women—were policed with unforgiving scrutiny. As a writer and potentially queer individual, Parker might be pushing back against the societal norms that punish love deviating from convention.

The poem's reference to Adam ties these themes to original sin and temptation, echoing the broader societal condemnation of "forbidden" desires. The "*garden of forbidden love*" feels particularly loaded for me, suggesting a hidden space for genuine yet socially unacceptable feelings. Within a queer reading, this garden becomes a metaphor for a sacred yet stigmatized love—beautiful, natural, but harshly judged.

E: Yeah and the wording suggests a close relationship between the religious and the legal. These two themes seem to guide the life of the unnamed character whether that's wanted or not. It is only between the lines of doctrines and of domination that we can see imagery around beauty and passion, like the line '*if a rose upon the path of life*' and then the line '*He lingered in a garden of forbidden love...*'. I like this use of the organic and natural vegetation working against legal or religious rigidity. Maybe I'm reading into it too much, but it felt like a purposeful juxtaposition to nuance the feeling of being trapped in institutions that don't allow for free, emotional growth.

N: And those who aren't reading along, there is a closing question, which is the final "*Why stone him?*", and for me this is especially poignant. It transitions from rhetorical to deeply reflective, becoming an earnest plea for empathy. Rather than endorse condemnation, Parker invites readers to challenge why society punishes love or desire that defies its rigid expectations. In the context of her era, this subtle yet sharp critique highlights how marginalized identities—queer or otherwise—were subject to unjust moral scrutiny. Parker's work here becomes not just a lament but a call to question and ultimately reject these double standards.

Next, Elena is going to read a poem entitled 'Bundling'

E: Have you a little bundle
Of sweetness, and neatness
 To bundle with me?
I'd never heard of bundling
In an old New England home --
And yet I've lived in Paris,
 And in Rome.
Of course, when nights are frosty

It's very plain to see
My bundle of sweetness
Might like to bundle with me.
A board is not too comfy, I'll admit;
But if we both are pretty slim
I would not mind a bit ...
 Bundling ... on one side.
Of course, I can't be certain
 Just how I'd bundle
For my tastes are somewhat prim;
It would depend upon the
Charm of ... Jean ... or Jane.
 ... Bundling ...
It must have been a pretty sight
For Pa and Ma to see
The shadow on the parlour wall
When men and maid were bundling;
When heads were raised to snatch a kiss --
Or, were they, too, forbidden.
I'll never rest until I test -- bundling.

N: Thanks for reading that, Elena. So, for me, on the surface, it's playful—Parker pokes fun at this strange, outdated courtship practice where couples could share a bed but only with strict rules, like a literal board separating them. But beneath the humor, there's something deeper going on. Bundling creates this paradox: it allows intimacy whilst enforcing distance. And that tension—between closeness and restriction—is a theme Parker returns to again and again in her work.

Take the line "*Charm of Jean ... or Jane.*" there's this ambiguity in the speaker's preferences. That little moment of gender-neutrality opens the door to do a queer reading. It suggests that for the speaker, charm is what matters—not gender. In the context of Parker's life and her time, this is really powerful. It echoes the experiences of wartime nurses who, living in close quarters with other women, often formed intense emotional or romantic bonds. Bundling's physical separation might even mirror the secrecy that queer love required—a love that was real but hidden, constrained by societal rules.

But, for me, what makes this poem so clever is how Parker uses humor to critique those very rules. Bundling, a practice that once dictated how people could connect, now feels quaint,

even ridiculous. And that's the point—these kinds of restrictions don't last forever. Society changes. Rules around gender, sexuality, and relationships evolve. For me, Parker's humor reminds us of that inevitability, but it also invites us to question the rules we're still living by.

E: Yeah so, I think of this as a very intimate poem on top of the humor. More personal than some of her other ones we found that are very reminiscent of war and what she endured at Vimy Ridge. She uses the term 'bundling' throughout, I've taken that to mean romantic intimacy (not necessarily sex, but just tender physical affection). There is no directed gender here, she isn't addressing a man or a woman. But she does have this line at the end of the poem where she mentions '*man and maid*' bundling, and wonders if they, like her, would have to do it in secret. This, and the line about a board not being comfy, yet can fit the both of them if they are 'pretty slim'. Two small figures point to two women, rather than a smaller man, given that wasn't the masculine beauty standard at the time and maybe not typically featured in poetry. I think it must be, given the mentioning of feminine names as well with 'Jean or Jane'.

N: In the end, *Bundling* isn't just a lighthearted take on an old tradition. For me, it's Parker exploring the tension between closeness and distance, freedom and restriction. It's a reflection of her ongoing fascination with love—whether it's constrained by religion, culture, or secrecy—and how, despite everything, human connection always finds a way to push through.

E: These poems speak a lot to Ellanore as a person and how she conceptualized emotions like love, passion and trauma. Taking her work and considering her lifelong companionship with Murney, we can see that there was a lot of affection and commitment in their lives—if not carried with the themes of secrecy and subtlety, as that was their only legal option. Ellanore's work doesn't just tell her story; it speaks to a broader network of hidden lives, offering a fragment of a much larger, unspoken history.

N: Ellanore's poems give us a sense of longing and resistance—her way of pushing back against a world that dictated who and how one could love. They carry a quiet defiance, wrapped in metaphor and subtlety, as though she's writing to both express and protect herself. The imagery of hidden desires and constrained intimacy isn't just poetic—it's a reflection of living in a world where love outside the norm was simultaneously sacred and dangerous.

E: These also poems reveal the personal parts of Ellanore that could not be seen in census records, government documents and even photographs. But this is not a story exclusive to

them. As stated before, other relationships between women have been recorded from WWI. We wanted to briefly touch on another example to show this, through the couple Laura Holland and Mildred Forbes.

N: Much like Ellanore and Murney, Lauren and Mildred were nurses as well, and would remain together throughout the First World War, they even made professional sacrifices to stay together in a relationship that, editor Andrea McKenzie, stated quote “was in some ways as close as a marriage.” Andrea McKenzie’s work brings together their letters from Lauren in British Columbia and Mildred in Ontario. They spent the war years as nurses together in England from 1915 and were dually discharged in 1919. During the war, those who knew them (colleagues, friends, etc) saw them as a pair, to the point of being invited places together. But McKenzie’s book, as do we, note that this isn’t enough to call them a romantic couple for certain.

E: In a historical sense, we know they would not have identified as lesbians or bisexual, given that the terms at the time hadn’t really come into common knowledge, not even until almost a decade later. Lillian Faderman claims that the concept of lesbianism was constructed as a category during the twentieth century, meaning that Laura, Mildred, and their families and friends would probably not have seen their friendship in terms of sexuality at all.

N: But their letter writing suggests an incredibly close relationship, and often focused on each other rather than socializing with the male soldiers like other nurses often did. If only in the sheer amount of letters written, with 164 letters between them, according to McKenzie highlights not only the constancy of their communication but also the emotional significance they placed on maintaining their connection.

E: Overall, by reflecting on their relationship as well as Ellanore and Murney’s it is clear that these women shared a deep, intense bond that was strengthened by the hardships of war. They supported each other through sickness, bombings, emotional struggles, and even found joy together upon their return from war. And while each of their stories are unique, it is also part of a bigger picture— it illustrates that many close friendships like theirs thrived in the Canadian nursing corps, and it’s likely that queer people existed and found love in these very wartime contexts.

N: Our podcast episode has explored just a couple of the silenced voices of individuals and relationships that were often erased or hidden due to societal stigma during and after the

period of WWI. By analysing Parker's poetry, we have been able to speculate on personal and emotional truths that official records or censuses fail to reveal. It was really important for us to explore these hidden histories and challenge the dominant heteronormative narratives, so that we could demonstrate that diverse forms of love and identity have always existed, even if they were marginalized or concealed. Parker and Pugh's story reminds us that love and resilience transcend time and societal restrictions.

E: As we come to the end of this podcast, we want to encourage further research into this topic themselves. We only had time to cover one, specific experience. But queer histories exist within all facets of WWI. We want to specifically point to 'drag culture' amongst soldiers during the war. While it wouldn't have been called drag at the time, the concept is a similar expression of male performers dressed as women for entertainment. In the Canadian context, the musical group called The Dumbells is a prominent example of this very aspect and how popular it was, as this group featuring queer men continued to perform after the end of the war.

N: Jason Wilson's book *Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War* is a detailed introduction into this group. In addition, the RBCM@Home video that we reference in this podcast also features the Dumbells as a force for queer culture during WWI. We will also supply a reference list for the sources we have used so you can access those as well, as we strongly encourage you to read more about this incredibly valuable historiography.

E: Thank you to the Royal BC Museum's Learning Program Developer Kim Gough for giving us the opportunity to provide this podcast episode as a potential resource for historical education.

N: We also want to thank Dr. John Lutz at the University of Victoria for creating this project idea for our public history class (not just in the hopes that he is going to give us a good grade), but for giving MA students an opportunity to experience museum education and framing history for the public. And thank you to everyone else who listens to this episode, we hope we helped in expanding your knowledge and raising interest in this impactful topic.

Poems

The Sinner

Why stone him,
He whose hand reached out for beauty?
Man-made were the laws
That held him down to duty.
In the old book, so often quoted, -- so seldom lived --
He was held up a man
Whose life held wives and children
In goodly numbers
For his life's span.
Why stone him,
He whose heart betrayed him
Into loving?
Upon his hearthstone sat his wife -- in name --
Guarded by law;
Serene, untroubled; desire long spent,
Upon her way she calmly went.
Why stone him,
If a rose upon the path of life
Seemed for awhile to bloom for him?
Wayward, unwise,
Old Adam all supreme
He lingered in a garden of forbidden love;
The rose was his, but for the asking ...
Why stone him?

Elleanore J. Parker

Bundling

Have you a little bundle
Of sweetness, and neatness
 To bundle with me?
I'd never heard of bundling
In an old New England home --
And yet I've lived in Paris,
 And in Rome.
Of course, when nights are frosty
It's very plain to see
My bundle of sweetness
Might like to bundle with me.
A board is not too comfy, I'll admit;
But if we both are pretty slim
I would not mind a bit ...
 Bundling ... on one side.
Of course, I can't be certain
 Just how I'd bundle
For my tastes are somewhat prim;
It would depend upon the
Charm of ... Jean ... or Jane.
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It must have been a pretty sight
For Pa and Ma to see
The shadow on the parlour wall
When men and maid were bundling;
When heads were raised to snatch a kiss --
Or, were they, too, forbidden.
I'll never rest until I test -- bundling.

Elleanore J. Parker

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