

‘Coming Out in a Small Town’: Eldon Hay and the Founding of PFLAG – Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – in Sackville, 1988-1998.

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Introduction

This exploratory essay draws on both archival and oral history research methods. The oral history approach offers insight into many groups and communities that have been overlooked or marginalized in historical writing. Often applied to feminist research and women’s history, oral history has been scrutinized as an historical method.¹ I would concur with scholars who view oral history as a valuable tool for learning about any individual or the communities in which they have lived. In writing gay and lesbian history, oral history has played a major role in surfacing a lot of what has gone unseen and overlooked.² I have had the privilege of using it as a research method in my exploration of the work of Eldon Hay, founder of PFLAG chapters in Moncton, Amherst and Sackville, and activist for the gay and lesbian experience in Sackville New Brunswick. My paper explores Hay’s activism and events between the years 1988-1998, through an examination of Hay’s personal documents, letters, as well as local news articles and additional archival interviews.

Reverend Eldon Hay is a retired United Church minister, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Mt. Allison University, as well as an author and counselor. Hay’s inspiration to become an advocate for gay rights was launched in 1986 when his son,

¹ Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History” In *Rethinking Canada*, ed V. Strong-Boag, Mona Gleason and Adele Perry, 221-223. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² Valerie J. Korinek, “‘Winnipeg – One Gay City!’: Reconstructing a Gay and Lesbian Geography of Winnipeg, 1930-1975” HIST 4951A Course Materials. p. 3-5 (Sackville: Mt. Allison University, 2007). Also please see the following article for further information on gay and lesbian historiography: Becki L. Ross, “ ‘The Stubborn Clutter, The Undeniable Record, The Burning, The Wilful Evidence’: Teaching the History of Sexuality,” in *Atlantis* (2000): 28-38.

Ron, confessed that he was gay. Eldon's initial reaction was concern, both for his health and physical safety. At this point AIDS, in our western society, was associated with homosexual men. In addition, discrimination, gay-bashing and violence provided further grave threats to this community. Ultimately, Hay provided the necessary emotional parental support for Ron, which also initiated his activist career to fight for a safe and equal society for the GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans-gendered, and Queer) community.

Through an exploration of Hay's activism documented in archival and oral history materials, I will highlight some key characteristics that have shaped the gay and lesbian experience in Sackville, New Brunswick between the years 1988-1998. Looking particularly to Hay's own personal experiences and his work with PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) I was able to get a better understanding of what it was like to 'come out' in a small Maritime town.

Attitudes towards Homosexuality in Sackville: 1988-1998

The study of Sackville or any specific city or town, can provide a better understanding of specific regional dispositions within a national context. Studying gay history and urban environments provides a lens for exploring gay identity, culture, community building, political activism and social networks.³ Furthermore, public attitudes towards gay communities or individuals may also be a subject for investigation in this context. In the late 1980s, homosexuality largely continued to be stereotyped within western culture as either deviant and disordered, or a choice one made.

³ Korinek, 3-5.

Associations with AIDS and pedophilia were often assumed along with popular and professional perspectives on homosexuality as an abnormality.⁴ It was only in 1973, for example, that the term was removed from the [American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#).⁵ There is evidence that attitudes were changing however, by the late 1970s and early 1980s as more public figures were ‘coming out’ with the courage and confidence that they would be treated with equality and respect. A preliminary investigation of archival documents in the Mount Allison University Archives revealed deep-seated homophobia towards homosexuality on a local and campus level in Sackville by the 1980s.

To illustrate the degree of homophobia on the Mt. Allison Campus, (populated with about 1700 students at the time), I would like to highlight a letter that Hay received in 1988 from a student underneath his door after Hay had openly commended Svend Robinson, Canada’s first openly gay politician, in one of his lectures. It reads:

Dear Professor Hay, I commend you for your openness on the subject of homosexuality. As a student at Mt. Allison, which is a small society in itself, it is nice to find an open mind. Also, since there are many ‘in the closet’ gays and lesbians, I hope freedom, such as hand holding in public, will be right around the corner. I know that at some large universities there are gay support groups, but at a university the size of Mt. Allison, one would be the center of malicious rumors. Unfortunately, some of the students at Mt. A would probably protest such a group. As a parent of a gay son, I believe you are extremely understanding and special. He is very lucky. THANK YOU FOR YOUR MORAL SUPPORT.⁶

⁴ Mount Allison University Archives. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/D28. Interview and discussion with callers, CBC Maritime Noon. 25 June 1991.

⁵ According to Ben Harris, book review: “Departing from Deviance: A History of Homosexual Rights and Emancipatory Science in America.” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 58.4 (2003): 489.

⁶ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/D20. Student to Eldon Hay. March 1988.

Not only does this letter reflect how difficult it might be to ‘come out’ in a small community like Mount Allison, but it also indicates the harsh climate that a gay or lesbian individual might have to face.

Only a few years later, the Sackville community experienced the severity of a homophobic climate. Robert Barnes Read, a local Sackville man, was the victim of brutal gay-bashing which ultimately caused his death in 1991. Read, only 33, had been out at a local downtown bar, Ducky’s, and on his way home encountered a group of young males who harassed and followed him shouting things like ‘fag,’ ‘fruit,’ ‘faggot,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘asshole’ and ‘Get Him!’⁷ Although the perpetrators testified differently, the accounts of their testimonies reported in the court records concluded that Read was physically assaulted and left on the road where only moments later, a pick-up truck ran over Read (however, police indicated that the driver of the vehicle was not at fault). Throughout the closing statements by the defense lawyer, by the prosecuting lawyer and the sentencing by the Honorable Mr. Justice Alfred R. Landry, this tragedy was not once addressed as a consequence of gay-bashing. This appears to reveal the kinds of attitudes prevalent within the region around gay and lesbian issues well into the early 1990s. However, the response of the New Brunswick Human Rights Coalition, also indicates significant movement towards a gay-positive community in New Brunswick at this time. A few months later the New Brunswick Coalition for Human Rights Reform Inc., published an article reflecting on Read’s death as the direct result of systemic violence and discrimination that gays and lesbians face everyday in New Brunswick. The President of

⁷ Whether or not Read could have been assumed to be gay as apparently alleged by local media at the time, this tragedy reflected homophobia at the most violent levels. It should be noted that the *Tribune-Post* later ran a letter of apology to the Read Family for implying that Read had been gay. See: “Clarification and Apology,” *Sackville Tribune-Post*, December 18, 1991, 1.

the Coalition referred to a survey which showed ‘that over 80 percent of gay and lesbian New Brunswickers had experienced some type of violence or abuse...’⁸

Broadening this discussion within the surrounding environs, I would like to highlight an incident affecting a Moncton citizen, Bruce, who is now a PFLAG member. In 1980, Bruce wrote an article in the Moncton *Times and Transcript* with a favorable view of gays and lesbians. Shortly after its publication however, he began to receive death threats and had a brick thrown through a window of his Moncton home. When Bruce sought help from the police they told him they could not guarantee his safety and to ‘get out of town.’⁹ Although police are employed with tax payers dollars and given the mandate to ‘serve and protect’ this obviously did not extend to citizens with liberal attitudes towards homosexuality. Indeed, such harsh advice suggests how deeply seated cultural attitudes were towards gays during the early 1980s in a larger Maritime city. The fact that the Moncton police refused to provide safety for Bruce, instead advising him to ‘leave town,’ reflects the systemic nature of homophobia.

The cases of Robert Barnes Read and Bruce furnish important contexts for exploring hetero-normative thinking, gender identity and queer theory. In Hay’s eyes, it is this development of new perspectives that will help eliminate misconceptions about gays and lesbians. However, he also acknowledges that changes can only be made ‘through concerted efforts of people willing to become informed about the truths and myths surrounding homosexuality’.¹⁰ Finally, these cases further highlight the importance

⁸ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9923/1A/14. “Homophobia in a Small Town- Part 2”, 1991, 1-4.

⁹ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9923/1A/6a. “Eldon Hay 1997 Human Rights Award Recipient NB,” 10 December 1997.

¹⁰ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9923/1C/12a. 1998.

of support networks for gay and lesbian communities confronted with discrimination on a daily basis during the 1980s and 1990s.

PFLAG & Gay Rights Activism in the Maritimes

Through his son's experience, Eldon Hay both encountered and challenged homophobia any chance he got. In his university classes, he would often talk about his gay son Ron, revealing his openness and support for lesbians and gays. He wrote countless articles in local newspapers such as the *Sackville Tribune Post* and *The Moncton Times and Transcript* just to name a few. Hay also appeared on several CBC Radio broadcasts featuring discussion about gay rights and attitudes towards homosexuals. One of these radio broadcasts in 1991 asked, "How would you react if your child told you that they're gay or lesbian?" and requested members of the region to call in and respond to this question. Along with host, Noreen Nunn and another guest, Judith Meinert, a mother with a gay son, Hay listened and engaged with callers responding to the topic of discussion. The radio show broadcast a variety of callers, mostly parents of gay and lesbian children describing the 'coming out' experience of their children. At one end of the spectrum was a caller, a mother, who believed she would never have to deal with the issue of homosexuality as she 'would see to it that their upbringing, their scriptural upbringing, in particular...' would eliminate the possibility for her children to be homosexual. Another parent claimed that if she were confronted with a child's 'coming out' she would 'tell them how unnatural it is and that, with prayer, they could be changed.' On the other end of parental attitudes was a mother who was very open and

supportive; she explained how she tried to expose her young son to different lifestyles so he will grow with an open mind as well. Several callers commended the program, as well as the panel for their openness and ability to speak about these issues with ease. However, a recurring fear expressed amongst the callers related to their concern about the discrimination and stereotypes their child would face especially in seeking employment and having a career or professional future. In one instance, this fear was well illustrated when a caller refrained from using her last name, worrying that she would lose her job if her employer found out she was a lesbian.¹¹

Following this CBC broadcast, Hay received an abundance of letters from across the country commending him on his openness and activism for homosexuals. Many of these letters were from parents with gay children who were dealing with the stress and worries concerning the well-being of their child. One letter came from Mary and Laurie Jones, a couple that Hay calls the Godparents of PFLAG Canada.¹² The Jones had started PFLAG chapters in Ontario and were urging him to initiate a PFLAG for Sackville and surrounding communities. In addition to the support from the Jones, Hay had also received a letter from a distressed mother who had recently found out her son was gay and was seeking help and support.¹³

Such instigations led Eldon Hay in 1996, to found a regional chapter of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) in Moncton. In 1995, Hay had failed to initiate a PFLAG chapter in Sackville when his proposal to hold group meetings at the

¹¹ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/D28. Interview and discussion with callers, CBC Maritime Noon. 25 June 1991.

¹² MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/D25/xvii. Laurie and Mary Jones to Eldon Hay. 1991.

¹³ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/D25/xvii.

local Sackville United Church was denied.¹⁴ Subsequently, Hay turned to the Catholic Information Center in Moncton which readily provided a space for meetings and offered an education / information day on homosexuality which was very well received and well attended. From this point on, PFLAG Moncton was established and monthly meetings began.¹⁵ Only months later, Hay also initiated a PFLAG chapter in Amherst, Nova Scotia, meeting at Trinity St. Stephens United Church.¹⁶ Today, the Amherst chapter is now shared with the Sackville community and has a meeting location at the Drew Nursing Home.

Through group meetings and get-togethers PFLAG not only offered support, education and comfort for the family and friends of lesbians and gays but also worked towards a healthy society respectful of gender and sexuality.¹⁷ For Hay, PFLAG offered an accepting, open, gay positive atmosphere to share personal experiences. Hay emphasized ‘real life experiences and practical solutions for people trying to cope, either with the initial disclosure, or its continuing impact on all people involved in the life of a gay person.’¹⁸

‘Coming Out’ in a Small Town

In her recent research on gay and lesbian history within Canadian urban centres, city studies Valerie J. Korinek states that “historical and cultural narratives of queer life

¹⁴ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/1C/140. Proposal for group meetings. 1995.

¹⁵ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9923/1C/10. “Homosexuality- Can Christians Converse?” 1995.

¹⁶ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/1C/207. Amherst Daily News- PFLAG. 1995.

¹⁷ “About Us” PFLAG Canada <http://www.pflagcanada.ca/en/index-e.asp> (accessed March, 2007).

¹⁸ Eldon Hay, “PFLAG-Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays,” *The Argosy*, February 19, 1998.

used to stereotypically presume that all homosexual people from the smaller cities, and the ‘regions’ fled to the larger centres where people could be openly homosexual in a way that was impossible in their hometowns.”¹⁹ Yet Korinek also acknowledges that big cities do not always provide a safe space for homosexuals and small towns are not always a place of discrimination. In a recent interview, Hay admitted that it could be more difficult to provide support in the smaller communities because people have such a fear of being ‘outed’ or ‘seeing someone they know.’²⁰ Some citizens may have felt like their reputation was on the line. Here, Hay identified the strong traditional values and conservative religious ideologies, so prevalent in small Maritime communities, as a key factor inhibiting disclosure of individual gender identity and sexuality. These conditions make it even harder to break down stereotypes surrounding homosexuality and could make ‘coming out’ a tough time for not only youths, but for any person.²¹ To illustrate, Hay discussed the tensions his son Ron feels whenever he returns to Sackville.²² When Ron ‘came out’ in the eighties he was living in Toronto and had been on his own for some time. It was perhaps a relatively easier context to ‘come out’ in as larger urban centers allow for the advantage of anonymity. By stark contrast however, Sackville has a close-knit culture and community in which it is much more difficult to remain private. Indeed, Hay suggested that in Sackville it would have been much tougher on parents, families, friends, as well as the GLBTQ individual themselves.

¹⁹ Korinek, 3-5.

²⁰ Interview with Eldon Hay, Spring 2007.

²¹ MAA, Eldon Hay fonds, 9801/1C/212. “Supporting Homosexuals in a Homophobic Society,” 10 January 1996.

²² Interview with Eldon Hay, Spring 2007.

At PFLAG meetings, Hay has often used his personal story to initiate discussion and sharing around key issues of concerns. Members attending are encouraged to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable with and are also promised complete confidentiality. Group sharing not only helps parents get a better understanding of the situation for their son or daughter but also highlights the need for potential support. Many parents experience feelings of guilt, embarrassment or shame, or a sense that they are to blame for their children's sexual orientation. Others may experience fear for their children's safety or fear of physical and emotional abuse. Although everyone's situation is unique, knowing that one is not alone and that other parents are dealing with similar problems families can find comfort and friends to support one another. According to Hay, these sessions usually offered concerned parents and their children opportunities to overcome these feelings and rejoice in understanding and acceptance, celebrating ones courage to 'come out' and be appreciative of that.²³

However, Hay's PFLAG experience has not been all positive; he has taken a lot of criticism and even had a student withdraw from one of his classes in opposition to Hay's beliefs and attitudes toward homosexuality. Concurrent with his activism, Hay has also faced opposition from the United Church due to religious debates on homosexuality. When confronted with conflicting religious perspectives, Hay explains that, although the Bible does reject homosexuality, it also supports slavery and the oppression of women: two beliefs that we have abolished in our culture.²⁴

²³ Eldon Hay, "PFLAG-Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays," *The Argosy*, February 19, 1998.

²⁴ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9923/1H/32. Q & A in Times and Transcript, 1998.

Conclusion

In 1997, Hay was awarded the New Brunswick Human Rights Award for his work in PFLAG and his commitment to making his community a safer and more accepting society for the gays and lesbians. At the award ceremony, held at Tantramar High School in Sackville, Hay was commended for making New Brunswick “a better place for gay, lesbian and bisexual persons and their families, and thus helped build a province where individual rights and diversity are respected.”²⁵ Within the years previous to receiving his Human Rights Award, the Human Rights Act in New Brunswick was amended in 1992 to include sexual orientation as grounds for discrimination, and in 1996, the Canadian Human Rights Act was also amended to include this as well. Clearly, Hays activism was truly on the cutting edge of Human Rights legislation in Canada, a significant contribution to our society today.

In addition to Hays efforts on gay and lesbian issues, his recognition of the feminist movement should not go unnoticed. Viewing feminism as a paramount contributor to the gay and lesbian movement, Hay claims that it has opened the door for other marginalized groups who are entitled to equal rights and protection against discrimination. In Hay’s view, when women are seen as fully human and treated with equality in Canada, the possibility for gays and lesbians to be treated the same way will be that much closer.²⁶

While our society has come a long way in eliminating discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, I concur with Hay’s argument that it is only

²⁵ MAA. Eldon Hay fonds, 9923/1A/6a, “Eldon Hay, 1997 Human Rights Award Recipient NB,” 10 December 1997.

²⁶ Interview with Eldon Hay, Spring 2007.

through education and openness that our misconceptions and stereotypes around GLBTQ issues will erode.

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