

"I need you more and more... my heart goes wandering around and calls for Susie... none other than you are in my thoughts, yet when I seek to say to you something not for the world, words fail me."

So wrote poet Emily Dickinson in the 1850s, to her neighbour and eventual sister-in-law Sue Gilbert, with whom she shared a passionate 36-year correspondence. However, if you assume such an unabashed declaration of female-to-female love during this time would have been entirely stigmatised, you'd be wrong.

In the 1980s, historian Lillian Faderman, referred to by many as the "mother of lesbian history", discovered that from the 16th century, what were known as "romantic friendships" between women in the UK, US and parts of Europe, were not only tolerated but often even actively encouraged by wider society.

In Lillian's analysis of letters, diaries and novels, we see women embarking on tender and demonstrative romances with one another. They exchanged locks of their hair, wore portraits of each other on their wristbands and professed their undying love – all without self-consciousness or censure from the societies they lived in. Where fiancés permitted (which was rare given the restrictions on women during this time), some even lived together independently of men.

This LGBT+ History Month, DIVA spoke to Lillian to learn more about this important piece of sapphic history. In my Zoom call to the 82-year-old historian in her California home, she spoke of one such example of two women who ran away together. Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, who became known as the Ladies of Llangollen, and lived together for 50 years in a gothic house in north Wales during the 18th century. Highly respected by the wider community, they achieved celebrity-like status and were visited by many famous people, including the poet William Wordsworth.

According to Lillian, whether their relationship was also sexual, it's impossible to say. The conventions of the time meant they were unlikely to have written about this openly. However, their contemporary, Anne Lister, featured in the television programme Gentleman Jack, did write about her

erotic experiences with women by using a secret code. What is clear about the Ladies of Llangollen, however, is their deep and lifelong devotion and love for one another.

But why were these "romantic friendships" considered socially acceptable at the time?

"Those who condoned these relationships didn't contemplate the possibility of them being sexual," Lillian explains. "For the most part, they were perceived as beautiful and emotional – a rehearsal in girlhood' for the great drama of these women's lives, which was seen as marriage. It would have been very dangerous for young women to express the kind of passion they shared with each other with men because their chastity would be at risk, and this was a quality which was seen as making women eligible for matrimony. It was considered a woman could best express those feelings most safely with another woman."

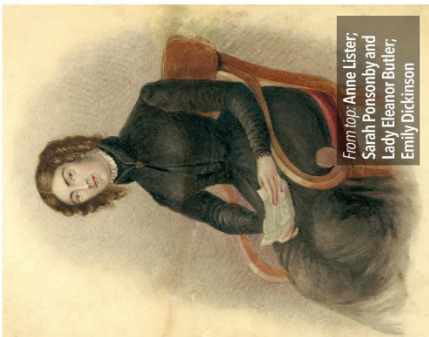
In fact, when Sarah Ponsonby's family realised that she had run off with another woman, they even expressed relief that her reputation would not be as damaged as had she run off with a man.

But this golden age for female romantic friendship was not to last. In the 1880s, sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis wrote about what they referred to as "sexual inversion", presenting homosexuality as a congenital defect. At first, these ideas were only prevalent in medical circles, but they began to filter down into the general population.

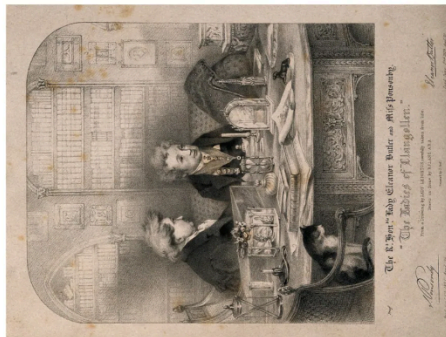
"From then on, what had been accepted came under suspicion and such close, intimate relationships between women became pathologised," explains Lillian.

We can see this shift in the way Emily Dickinson's letters to Sue Gilbert were edited when they were published after her death. At their time of writing, it was the heyday of female romantic friendship and women could express their love with less question. By the 1920s, when Emily's niece released them to the public, the tide had changed. Aware of how Emily's longing to hold Sue in her arms and kiss her would be perceived, she, in Lillian's words "cut out all the good parts."

A lot has changed since that point. Emily Dickinson's love letters to Sue Gilbert have now been published, without



From top: Anne Lister, Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler, Emily Dickinson



Dr. E. S. P. "Boy-Eleanor Butler" in Miss Hemmings' "The Ladies of Llangollen."



censoring. For Lillian, it's so important that young LGBTQIA people know their history.

"I came out during 1950s gay girls bar culture, and I thought – and wasn't alone in thinking this – that we invented the concept of women loving women," she tells me. When looking for more of an insight into the past, she was disappointed to find only the texts of the sexologists and the lesbian pulp

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fiction of the mid-20th century, which, she says, included "lovely scenes of passion between women, but in which lesbians always had to eventually suffer, commit suicide or get married to men, to show these relationships led to no good end."

For many young, pre-internet lesbians and bisexual women, Lillian's explorations of these romantic friendships were some of the only writings reflecting their sexual history. But with Stonewall finding that two in five LGBTQIA pupils are never taught about LGBTQIA issues at school, it seems that even in 2023 there is still a need to educate about the past and remember that we have long existed. **B**



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HANNAH MACKENZIE INVESTIGATES THE "FEMALE ROMANTIC FRIENDSHIPS" OF YESTERYEAR