

Friendship, Intimacy and Desire in Young New Zealanders' Diaries, 1880–1940



DIARIES ARE INTIMATE DOCUMENTS. They tell of daily activities, feelings and personal transitions; sometimes they include confessions the author wants to write down but keep to themselves. Young people's diaries typically include all of these impulses. Finding oneself, figuring out priorities and working through new kinds of relationships are the stuff of young people's personal writing. So too is same-sex sociability. Schooling and leisure have often been segregated by gender, giving rise to particular kinds of relationships among New Zealand's adolescents and young adults. Friendships, erotic relationships and more ambiguous connections emerged between the 1880s and the 1940s. Far from being stable, friendship, intimacy and desire have changed significantly over time.

The diaries of Fred Gibbs from the 1880s, James Courage from the 1920s, and Shirley Albiston from the 1930s reveal a changing spectrum of friendship and desire in young New Zealanders' lives over a 60-year period. Gibbs's, Courage's and Albiston's diaries tell of same-sex attachments of all kinds, including the school 'pash', the courting of potential mates, and the ways discussions between friends challenged or reinforced understandings of sexual identity. These little histories go beyond merely the individuals who record them, also evoking the lives of friends and associates. In the process they point up the connections between daily experience and broader social preoccupations, hinting at the ideas circulating in the mass media and gesturing to the ways history and consciousness shape one another. By looking carefully at these diaries we see their specific contribution to affective history and learn about shifting patterns of intimacy in New Zealand over the period.

Diaries serve their writers in a range of ways. Miles Fairburn lists the roles of a diary: a companion of sorts, an attempt at self-memorialization, a form of literary expression or a pleasurable diversion from everyday tasks.¹ Some diaries reflect their writer's progress in emotional, economic or spiritual terms: they document experiences and relationships.² As Irina Paperno notes in the international context, diaries tie biographies to history, 'inviting comparison between the writer's life and the social world outside. The diary allows the linking of the self to historical time.'³ As an artefact of an era, it reflects its writer's responses to the world he or she inhabits, and reveals itself as a space in which intimate identities are negotiated.

A number of New Zealand historians have written about diaries and drawn from their pages to explore aspects of subjectivity and social change, but there is relatively little on adolescents' and young adults' diaries in particular. There are a few exceptions. Frances Porter and Charlotte Macdonald's collection *My Hand Will Write What My Heart Dictates* includes several excerpts from the diaries of nineteenth-century girls in their teens, although adolescence is not the editors' main focus.⁴ Tony Ballantyne's essay on the diary of 11-year-old Herries Beattie reveals an account of boyhood pursuits, family connections and 'a kind of inwardness', while I have begun to examine how diaries chronicle young nineteenth-century men's affective relationships with other men and young women.⁵

Internationally, the history of adolescence is covered in more detail, and diaries are used as sources.⁶ Historians note that young people record their experience of moving through a significant phase of life in specific settings.⁷ Diaries, Harvey Graff notes, show how young people express themselves and make meaning of their lives.⁸ Celia Hughes suggests the diary of young English New Left activist John Hoyland 'shows a young male subjectivity in the process of careful construction' during the 1960s, 'a formative moment of political, personal and social change'.⁹ The youthful diary is a valuable source: it offers an immediate historical engagement that memoirs and oral histories often fail to capture. Diaries lay bare the processes through which intimate identities are actively constructed in a particular moment in time, not how they are recalled decades later.

Some historians suggest diaries are a form of writing associated with women rather than men, but this is not true for New Zealand.¹⁰ Adolescent diaries, at any rate, are as much the preserve of boys as girls. Among their pages young New Zealanders tell of settler life, school, work, sexual awakenings and romantic disappointments. The gendering of intimacy is relatively complex. Contrary to what we may suppose, boys reported vulnerability and girls told of desire. Spurned by a would-be girlfriend in 1893, law student Charles Knight wrote sadly: 'Goodbye. Her face lit up by the crescent moon. I turned and fled hurriedly down Armagh Street.'¹¹ Conversely, in 1881, Ina Clougstoun dreamed she 'violently wanted' to get a 'grizzly lad' named Barton into bed with her.¹² On a boat trip around Stewart Island in 1899, Helen Anderson told of her adoration for the ship's mate – 'everyone is in love with him including me' – and once ashore, at a concert, she made out with 'a Stewart Island native in the corner!'¹³

When it comes to same-sex attachments, New Zealand historians have explored affective attachments without focusing on diaries' unique contribution to an understanding of friendship, intimacy and desire.¹⁴ This

article examines diaries from three middle-class or well-off young New Zealanders, and explores the themes of homosocial engagement – friendship, intimacy and sexuality – in their writers’ lives in order to trace the shifting terrain on both personal and social levels. The early volumes of Fred Gibbs’s diary tell of a lad’s school years in Nelson; James Courage’s diaries detail the Cantabrian’s adolescence and cover his early 20s; and Shirley Albiston describes her teen years in Wellington.

Frederick Giles (‘Fred’) Gibbs had a rambunctious home life. As an adolescent he threw tea dregs at his brother Dick, who teased Fred about growing whiskers; argued with his sisters over where they should swim – not in the Maitai River, Gibbs insisted, a favourite of men and boys; and catalogued boisterousness in his sketchy style. ‘On Friday C. Paton slept here, up till 12.30 yawning & in morning pillow fight, etc, [my younger brother] Sid kicked C.P. nearly through door onto verandah in nightgown.’¹⁵ Gibbs could be a serious lad. He was bemused when his brothers, sisters and mother fell about laughing for no obvious reason, as they often did, and he withdrew into himself when nobody shared his love of literature. A diary ‘represents a lasting trace of one’s being’, Paperno notes, and Gibbs’s writings spin a long thread through time.¹⁶ He began diary writing in 1883, at the age of 16, and carried on until 1952, the year before he died. During his adolescent years he wrote in his diary several times each week. He recorded both the rhythm of daily life and the occasional confession, dividing his focus between three main themes: home, school and leisure.

Friends and enemies at Nelson College provided fodder for many diary entries. Gibbs was ambivalent about some of his classmates and presented to them a ‘guarded, cold and even suspicious demeanor’.¹⁷ He happily spent time with Walker discussing Political Economy, but described himself as ‘reserved and cautious with Harling’.¹⁸ Gibbs talked philosophy with another lad, but was ‘utterly sickened & disgusted’ by what he had to say – ‘looks on all men as rogues and fools ... Seems to have no reverence or spirit of hero-worship in him.’¹⁹ This reference to ‘hero worship’ hints at something more: Gibbs’s emotional connection to other young men.

The gender segregation of nineteenth-century society has been well documented and debated by New Zealand historians. Jock Phillips has explored the rough homosocial worlds of (mainly) rural men in the colonial period, chronicling the hardships of frontier life.²⁰ Fairburn suggests male lives were often atomized during this period, but Caroline Daley has found degrees of connection between men in late nineteenth-century towns.²¹ Like many of the men in the existing historiography, Fred Gibbs spent much of

his time in male company. His diaries document the hours whiled away with brother Sid and school friends, tramping, walking, swimming, hunting, and shooting bottles. What, though, of emotion? Phillips suggests male colonials suppressed ‘gentle feelings and sympathies’, but my own work documents the ways some male New Zealanders forged close and even affectionate bonds.²² The ‘romantic friendship’ common in the nineteenth-century United States, in which those of the same sex shared intimate sympathies, had its local expressions.²³ Gibbs’s diaries reflect this impulse. On a late winter’s night in 1883 he headed to a friend’s place:

Two or three weeks ago went up to J[im] Gully’s. He alone. Spent glorious evening: we are rather awkward with one another, as he is extremely refined & I always feel a boor in his company. On the other hand I am much better read & the better arguer & he in his sensitive, but to me embarrassing way, looks up to me for information. He professes to have no poetic feeling but what I have seen leads me to think differently. On evening referred to, after time [we] got on [a] track I am so enthusiastic but extremely reserved in, namely influence of souls on one another, mesmerising beauties of art, & sensitiveness, soul & body etc.²⁴

Although Fred professed to be embarrassed by Jim’s need for guidance, he admired his friend’s refinement and poetic sensibility. They carried out their discussion in an atmosphere of trust and mutual disclosure.

Fred Gibbs’s interest in souls proved prophetic. The next year, 1884, he became extremely close to his schoolmate Fred Kelly, who tragically died soon after, accidentally shot during school rifle practice.²⁵ Gibbs told his diary of the friendship’s trajectory. ‘Something so sad has happened’, he began, ‘I have dreaded putting it on paper.’ He went on to outline the relationship’s genesis: ‘Our friendship must have grown very fast / this was the time when I was so thick with R.C., he made more advances to me than I to him / we must have been very intimate in a way but he was not yet my chief friend / I was not very friendly with F. but showed preference for R.C. / I think I remember finding F. rather awkward coming home from school as he often kept me from walking by R.’s side. *What a fool I was!*’²⁶

This was a courting process of sorts. Advances were made, intimacies exchanged, and friendships ranked in importance. Shared moments strengthened the bond. ‘He and I were together I remember, a great deal at Nelson v Wanganui [rugby] match’, Fred Gibbs recalled of Fred Kelly. At a swimming hole with Kelly and another lad, Jones, ‘we had a delightful bathe, though not a long one’.²⁷ This second occasion gave rise to a host of formative moments:

We constantly stopped to talk[;] now and again [we] raced [and] Kelly and I kept nearly abreast with Jones far behind. As we got close down by Hunter-Brown’s hill, a beautiful sunset took

place ... Then suddenly remembering that the other two were in a greater hurry than myself to get home I turned to descend, when Kelly in his simple way, expressed admiration at my description [of the sunset] and both declared I was a poet etc ... We got down at dusk having spent a most delightful afternoon, in fact it was the most rapturous time I ever had.²⁸

Poetry made an appearance once again in the following paragraph, a symbol of intimate sharing and aesthetic comradeship: ‘Since then Kelly and I have had the most perfect understanding. Without realising it I was far more confidential with him than with anyone else. We could always enter into and sympathise with one another’s moods, which I now perceive to be the greatest proof of true friendship ... Jones’ character forbids you pouring out your soul to him much, to Kelly I would say anything without reflecting whether it were grave or gay.’²⁹

In these excerpts – and presumably in Fred Gibbs’s friends’ lives more generally – shared sympathies defined true friendship. There were classical antecedents for this fellow feeling. A scholar of Greek and Latin, Gibbs read Plato – whose *Symposium* vigorously discussed love between men – along with Euclid, Virgil and the ever-popular Tennyson, Gibbs’s favourite poet. The latter’s long poem ‘In Memoriam’, a requiem for the poet’s close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, would surely have resonated with the young Nelsonian. Was Kelly Gibbs’s own Hallam?³⁰

Fred Gibbs’s emotional intensities found a physical expression too. One day in 1884, after his time swimming with Kelly, Gibbs wrote: ‘On way home, Fred and [my]self would dash about like mad. On the flat between the two [swimming] holes, I charged at him with a towel as hard as I could go, but he dodged every time till suddenly I intercepted him and he rushed right into me head down and I caught his head between my knees. Then chased him along path.’³¹ Gibbs’s experiences spoke to the affective presumptions of the time. In the late nineteenth century the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality had yet to attain popular purchase, as did the presumption that masculinity required controls on intimate closeness between men.³² Fred Gibbs’s diary shows us quite clearly that he considered touch – of both bodies and souls – to be compatible with prevailing codes of masculinity. Still, these codes had their boundaries. Gibbs disapproved of dandified men, for instance. One young chap over from Melbourne ‘looks a fop’, he noted with disdain – and what was worse, he tried ‘to make me prefer Byron to Tennyson, an impossibility’.³³ Gibbs also complained about a preacher who talked in a ‘high affected voice’ and ‘contorts his body into divers [sic] shapes’ while sermonizing. ‘I was utterly disgusted at his manner’, he wrote with evident hostility.³⁴

For Gibbs, masculine self-presentation had clear limits. But what about sexual attraction? He admired only men, not women: one public figure was ‘a

fine looking fellow', he noted, and another 'gave me tremendous impulse'.³⁵ He only reluctantly danced with girls and went out of his way to avoid meeting them in public: on a walk down Bullock Spur, he 'nearly met girl party or rather feared doing so, so [continued] long and hard long along line to next spur'.³⁶ Still, the only possible hint of sexual interest in other men turns up in a diary entry from 1887, when Gibbs described an evening with a male colleague: 'H. & self necessarily interfere with one another, while the most unfortunate result is that I get nervous & unnatural.'³⁷ Gibbs did not elaborate on the precise nature of this 'interference' and 'unnaturalness' – although during the nineteenth century, the term 'unnatural' was often used as code for sexual relations between men.

Whatever Fred Gibbs's sexual interests, his diaries allow the modern reader to glimpse a more emotionally engaged set of male relationships than we usually associate with Victorian society. It is worth considering the significance of class here too. Most New Zealand historians of the nineteenth century have focused on working-class masculinities, while the American discussion of romantic friendship tends to privilege middle-class men.³⁸ Perhaps emotionality differed according to class, although it is difficult to make any overarching claims. The atomism of which Fairburn writes, in the context of labourers in particular, probably shaped male relationships in specific ways; but still, we cannot assume fleeting friendships fostered no emotional closeness.³⁹ If there were indeed class differences, these could be malleable, and some urban working-class men participated in friendships with a spiritual or romantic component: Fred Kelly, Fred Gibbs's 'closest friend', was the son of a foundry worker, whose access to secondary education depended on a series of scholarships.

Affective connections with one's fellows were the norm during adolescence, especially for those whose lives were strongly shaped by same-sex schooling and the spaces of homosocial leisure, and Fred's diaries hint that other young New Zealanders also built male-centred emotional lives for themselves. The romantic friendship model still held sway, and sexological ideas about same-sex eroticism would not circulate widely until the following decades, at the time when James Courage came to reflect on his own attachments to other men.

James Courage began his diary writing in 1920, some 40 years after Fred Gibbs. Born in 1903, the son of a runholder grew up near Amberley, and began a journal – prefaced 'For MYSELF and no other' – while a student at Christ's College in Christchurch. His entries for the early years were introspective, less about friends than Courage's sense of difference from both the norms

of New Zealand masculinity and his father's expectation that any son would forge a life on the land. Courage focused on his artistic temperament: he wrote of a love for music ('What do I live for? My music, yes'), his 'slight streak of effeminacy' and a love of dress ('To have nice clothes and to look smart is one of my ambitions').⁴⁰ 'I am extraordinarily conceited and I shall now put down my character as I see it. I am fickle. ~~My numerous flirtations show me that~~', he wrote, crossing out the last sentence so it was only half visible. Did he feel he had confessed too much, even to himself?

Courage's performance in school plays rated a mention too. 'I got so many compliments it nearly turned my head', he wrote of one occasion.⁴¹ From the time he was 14, Courage 'worshipped' a number of artistic figures: Chopin, Rupert Brooke, Katherine Mansfield, Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire and Walter Pater.⁴² Courage's artistic interests fuelled an ambition to travel to England, where he would attend Oxford University from 1923 until 1927. 'I must have originality, I must have individuality', he declared, following in Mansfield's footsteps.⁴³ (Some years later he wrote of Mansfield: 'Her early struggles at self-expression in N.Z. – so exactly like mine – it's positively uncanny').⁴⁴ Courage crossed the world in the opposite direction to Fred Gibbs, who had arrived in Nelson from England in 1877 at the age of 11 with his widowed mother and eight siblings.⁴⁵

There are both similarities and differences between the diaries of Fred Gibbs and James Courage. Both men carried on their diarizing until the end of their lives: Courage continued to record his daily activities and feelings until 1963, the year he died. Both revealed their adolescent preoccupations in an introspective way, gave a sense of their intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, and prioritized their relationships with other young men. In other respects, though, the diaries are quite different. Gibbs wrote about school, weekend rugby and meetings of souls in the evenings, but Courage was more tentative and prone to confessing (and occasionally crossing out) the quirks of his personality. He certainly had much more to say about his sexual interests and the ways friendships fostered discussions of sexuality. Over the 40 years since Gibbs began writing, the romantic friendship model had weakened – though it did not disappear entirely – and doctors like Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of 'sexual inversion' and publicized the term 'homosexuality'. The infamy of Oscar Wilde's trial resonated throughout the English-speaking world, and in 1927 Courage wrote: 'What a repulsive shock one would get if a school-boy ever said to one: "my father once slept with Oscar Wilde".'⁴⁶

By the time Courage set sail for England he knew where his sexual interests lay. Still, the process of migration shaped those sexual feelings in

significant ways.⁴⁷ Courage's experience of wandering London's streets, far away from the surveilled spaces of Christ's College, gave rise to intense responses: 'Directly I saw him approaching up the road something inside me "switched on". I tried not to look at him; surveyed the magnolias in the garden. Then, just as he passed, I looked into his face and met a confident (yes!) smile. My heart quivered like a hot light, and the blood rushed into my face. I felt lusty but intensely embarrassed. I don't even know his name.'⁴⁸ In this instance and several others – in June 1928 Courage 'lusted after at least five total strangers' – his diary both recorded and evoked the embodied experience of desire.⁴⁹ In writing down such phrases as 'something switched on' and 'my heart quivered', he showed how emotions are visceral and discursive, both intensely felt and eloquently committed to paper.⁵⁰ These diaries offer other examples too: 'Parted with C. today and felt sad and a bit hopeless over nothing at all. If I had not slept with him the parting wouldn't have given me a single pang. How damnably sex colours everything!'⁵¹

James Courage's diaries show us, an audience never intended, how his sexuality was simultaneously a source of pleasure and of uncertainty. Friendship, with its physical interactions and discussions, proved to be a powerful moderator of his self-understanding. He usually identified his friends by their initials only, and clearly spelled out their sexual involvements. While C. left behind a saddened young James, R. had a proposition to make: 'R. writes, saying that he is going to Paris (this June) to complete his service (military). He asks me to go over and take a studio with him, and adds "would it please you to have all Paris say you were the bon ami d'un petit poilu? [a little soldier's good friend]" What an inexplicable postscript! The trouble is that it's going to be a physical menage, and I'm not certain I want it. (Though the consciousness of living in sin is certainly a great attraction).'⁵²

At 25, Courage described his own contradictory subjectivity. '[M]y sexual nature is compounded almost equally of sensuality and of acute fastidiousness', he confessed. 'In consequence when I'm in a healthy state I am constantly seeking a sexual satisfaction from an ideal – an impossible state of affairs, productive of a terrible nervous asceticism.'⁵³ Conversations with friends gave him pause for thought. Not all of them found their sexuality so confounding. Not only did R., the 'little soldier', rather like the idea of sharing a studio with James, but another friend, D., challenged Courage's claims of outsidership: "'You're less abnormal than you think", D. said to me this evening. "Perhaps", I replied, knowing perfectly well he was speaking the truth and I was clinging to my "differences". By the way, why is it that when D. and I are alone together we do nothing but talk about sex, giving slightly heightened accounts of our own erotic experiences?'"⁵⁴

While Fred Gibbs's friendships involved abstract arguments about the relationships between souls, Courage's much more explicit discussions with D. allowed both young men to make sense of sexual desire. Over the course of the weeks and months, talking, seeing and feeling reinforced one another, and London's cultural spaces fed the contradictions. In Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, Courage would 'dream for hours before Hermes or the Discobolus-thrower or Myron's "Satyr"'.⁵⁵ Inside the British Museum he 'purposefully avoided going into the room containing the Greek statues of young men. Perfection like that humiliates me, and the physical side of it wakes up a state of sensual libido that tortures me.'⁵⁶ If Gibbs drew any erotic inspiration from Tennyson and his reading of the Greeks, then he did not articulate it like Courage did. This difference is partly one of temperament – Gibbs's erotic interests remain veiled, after all – but also reflects the periods these young men lived through. Courage came to terms with his sexuality in the post-Freudian era, when discussions of sexuality took place more overtly than they did when Victorians mumbled about 'unnaturalness'.

If diaries (sometimes) tell us about sexual feeling, they are also repositories of shared sexual knowledge. Two important terms make an appearance in Courage's journals during the 1920s: 'invert' and 'homosexual'. Seemingly influenced by the 1927 pamphlet *The Invert and His Social Adjustment*, by an author with the pseudonym 'Anomaly', Courage wrote: 'To society at large the individual invert is anathema – an unthinkable anomaly. To himself he is often a collection of half-understood but painful perceptions. More frequently he is aware of his state, and it is then that he understands his loneliness, his seemingly purposeless segregation in Nature.'⁵⁷ Another friend, M., shared Courage's disquiet: 'M. was upset because I said that a Picasso drawing (of some naked Spartan youths on horseback) which he was about to buy for his room, was "an awful give-away"'. He was scared stiff by the suggestion that it might be too outward and visible a sign of his inversion. Good heavens! – as if the very way he spoke to women wasn't a sufficient "give-away"!'⁵⁸

This kind of discussion reveals the tensions between the inwardness of identity and the ways young people conveyed those identities to others. Popularized by Ellis in 1896, the term 'invert' referred to the idea that the same-sex-attracted man possessed a woman's soul in a male body. Male inverts, Ellis added, often enjoyed 'dramatic and artistic aptitudes'.⁵⁹ James Courage saw little point in trying to conceal the signs of one's inversion – either a friend's or his own – of which a keen artistic sense was the most visible. At the same time, he wrote that sexual inversion deserved a defence against its detractors: 'Sexual intercourse between males – where both are

inverts – has every scrap of right to be considered as normal as that between men and women’, he insisted.⁶⁰

Courage first used the term ‘homosexual’ in 1928, writing about the ‘glamour’ of the royal guardsmen’s uniforms. ‘Is that, I wonder, the attraction guardsmen in London have for a certain type of homosexual?’ (In sexual storytelling mode, a friend once told him ‘I’ve had dozens of them, but, God, they’re all the same without a uniform!’)⁶¹ Courage read widely, and some of his literary heroes – Mansfield, Wilde and Pater – were publicly associated with homosexuality. Of Chopin, he wrote: ‘His whole character and his every act show him to have been homosexual.’⁶² Sappho provided inspiration too: ‘Read some of it at once and was so profoundly stirred that I spent two hours writing an excessively erotic poem addressed to an unknown youth.’⁶³

James Courage’s diary text is self-referential. The young man was his own and only audience, until 2005 when an embargo on his personal writings expired. Nevertheless, as documents of Courage’s life, these journals reveal both social processes and self-expression. The weight of public opinion is palpable, while the spaces and interactions of the city and the recollections of antiquity inform his construction of identity. The diaries illustrate how one young man shaped an intimate life during the early years of popular psychology, at the same time internalizing and resisting social norms.⁶⁴ Friendship proved fundamental to identity. James Courage’s discussions with friends had their significance not only as a means of personal support, as they did in Fred Gibbs’s world, but also as a way to negotiate sexual subjectivity.

The supportive qualities of same-sex friendship, if not the sexual discussion, were a key theme in the 1930s diaries of Wellington schoolgirl Shirley Albiston. These reveal gendered dynamics in more detail. Isobel Shirley Albiston (she usually went by her middle name) formed intense attachments to her female friends. A student at Wellington East Girls’ College, Albiston began writing a diary in 1934 at the age of 14. Her journals continued until the early 1940s, when she had established herself in the Wellington workforce, having given away plans of becoming a teacher and taken up an office career. Albiston’s diary entries share a fluid, reflective style, and they discuss others’ foibles as well as her own. She wittily depicts teachers, school friends and, later, work colleagues.

Two kinds of relationships appear most regularly. First, Albiston documents the emotional lives of her contemporaries and their beaux. The reader meets Rena’s ‘special boyfriend’ Ross, ‘whom we call for no special reason Bottlebrush’, and learns that Valerie sneaked out to meet her ‘beloved’

John at the tram stop – ‘so clandestine, and oh so romantic!’⁶⁵ Valerie claimed John’s eyelashes were like ‘willows overshadowing rippling brooks’. Bella, meanwhile, professed an interest in sailors.⁶⁶ One, a French lad, had ‘quite captivated [Bella’s] heart’, Albiston wrote, but his visit was all too fleeting and Bella ‘consoles herself by composing letters in French to him’.⁶⁷

Shirley Albiston was not interested in boys – not even Valerie’s willow-eyelashed John, whom she thought ‘a most uncouth looking creature’ – other than as sources of gossip.⁶⁸ (She claimed Colin, an earlier boyfriend of Valerie’s, ‘looks like a cabbage’.⁶⁹) Instead, she directed her affections to two young women. The first, schoolfriend Nancy, offered friendship and a safe harbour: ‘I have leant on her, all the time she has been a kind of protection for me from the outside world ... It was like creeping inside a good strong hollow tree during a storm – you know you are safe, the tree can never bend.’ This friendship had its complexities. Shirley noted that Nancy suffered a ‘dark and morbid side to her nature’, the result of her mother’s early death, before admitting that ‘to a certain extent I let her influence me’.⁷⁰ These kinds of statements show Albiston’s diary, like James Courage’s, to be both confidante and confessional, a place to work through the contradictions in her emotional life.

This was just as true when Albiston wrote of her intense attachment to teacher Ru Gardiner. The diary chronicles Albiston’s ‘love’ and ‘worship’ for Gardiner, then in her mid-30s. Ru certainly looked the part: ‘All the school was talking about how beautiful her dress was, and I don’t think I have ever seen her look so lovely ... It was really the colour of the dress making her eyes such a lovely blue, and the heat of the room making her cheeks so pink.’⁷¹ Ru was ‘sweet and fresh and full of enthusiasms’, and Albiston revelled in her voice ‘so magically reading Keats and “Queen Victoria”’.⁷² As ‘lovely’ as Ru looked, she also symbolized the qualities encouraged at Wellington East Girls’ College: ‘youth, enthusiasm, beauty, truth’, Albiston listed rhapsodically, ‘and that feeling of adventure that youth feels as it looks forth on the world that has to be lived in’.⁷³ Only later would she classify her attachment to Ru as a ‘childish adoration’, something to be left behind as school gave way to the world of work.

Shirley Albiston’s feelings can be read as both deeply personal and historically located. In the highly gender-segregated society of nineteenth-century America, Caroll Smith-Rosenberg notes, women played a highly significant role in each other’s emotional lives. In boarding schools in particular, young women forged firm bonds and many chose a ‘special friend’ with whom to exchange confidences.⁷⁴ In turn-of-the-century New Orleans, girls’ school scrapbooks contain declarations of romantic

attachment, references to friends' beauty, and sometimes a spiritual language of benediction.⁷⁵ Back in New Zealand in 1883, Fred Gibbs had described his sister Resa's attachment to a Miss Furlong, who declared: 'Oh Resa I used to love you more than any one in the world & to think you near perfection as possible, & I used to sleep with your likeness under my pillow, kiss it last thing at night & show it to my friends saying "there's the girl", etc!'⁷⁶ Although the romantic friendship model had retreated by the interwar years, it retained its influence in girls' lives in particular. The 'hollow tree' metaphor is one example from Shirley Albiston's diaries; so too is the adoring description of Ru Gardiner's beauty.

Late nineteenth-century American girls had 'smashes' or 'crushes', intense attachments that followed courting rituals.⁷⁷ We have already seen an example of a similar ritual between boys, in Fred Gibbs's Nelson. At Wellington East Girls' during the 1930s, the 'smash' had its equivalent in the 'pash'. In 1938, Albiston wrote of her friend Nancy's relationship with Olga, a Russian student on exchange: 'Nancy was very thrilled to think that Olga had had such a "pash" on her, when she had come from such an interesting country. But it is just the law of opposites, Olga so passionate and Nancy so reticent.'⁷⁸

How far did these attachments go? Scholars suggest some romantic friendships had a sexual component, but evidence is difficult to find.⁷⁹ When questioned about their activities, a few young men masked a sexual interest under the veil of friendship, and it is possible young women did the same.⁸⁰ Smith-Rosenberg documented kisses and endearments among adolescent girls, but Shirley Albiston's diary offers no hints about any physical connection.⁸¹ Her friends' relationships with other girls appear to have been intensely emotional rather than physical. In the American context, women's close friendships came under closer scrutiny by the turn of the century, when sexologists and physicians began to write about sexual inversion: the new psychology addressed same-sex attachments among girls.⁸² In 1933 Havelock Ellis suggested that an 'enthusiastic devotion for other girls' was 'inevitable' during the 'youthful phase' of a young woman's life, but he downplayed the erotic possibilities.⁸³ Not always were such friendships seen as pathological, but discourses of homosexuality created a certain anxiety among young women. 'Valerie White says that [a particular teacher] is neither feminine nor masculine', Albiston wrote warily, evoking the idea of inversion, 'which is rather horrid because it might insinuate anything.'⁸⁴ At the same time, there is no evidence that she equated her friendships with such 'horrid' insinuations, and her diary offers no more than glimmers of the new discourses.

Other elements of the nineteenth-century romantic friendship linger in Shirley Albiston's diary, including the principle of non-exclusivity. As Smith-Rosenberg notes, friends 'did not form isolated dyads but were normally part of highly integrated networks'.⁸⁵ At Wellington East Girls' the affections ran several ways. Shirley was not perturbed or threatened by Olga's 'pash' on Nancy, thinking it interesting. Nor did she guard Ru Gardiner closely. Although Nancy had originally teased Shirley about her affection for Ru – and, in turn, Shirley teased Paula Matthews for her own 'ardent worship' of the teacher – Nancy soon fell 'victim to Ru's charms' and 'idolised' her.⁸⁶ Intriguingly, Nancy's presence intensified Shirley's feelings for Ru and, once Nancy had left school, Shirley wrote that her own 'excitement for Ru seems to have subsided'.⁸⁷ Like a tightly woven piece of cloth, this web of relationships strengthened each of its strands.

Shirley Albiston and her school chums only partially inhabited a gender-segregated world. Their single-sex school was not a boarding establishment and, as we have seen, many of the girls forged friendships with boys from other schools (or in town, in Bella's case). The female 'pash' existed alongside heterosexual arrangements, for some of the girls at least. Nancy was one of them, as Shirley documented in 1938:

Went to museum, then to Rena's, ostensibly to play monopoly. Rena had four of her boy friends there. I was surprised at her boy friends. They were much better than I had expected them to be. One of them in particular, Ted by name, was very handsome and Nancy thought so too. But he is more Rena's type than Nancy's and I think Nancy is very stupid to think he would do for her as she seriously does. One of the boys walked home with Nancy, and she was very thrilled. She seems to be a contradiction. A few years ago I could have sworn she would never have got a thrill out of so slight a thing as that.⁸⁸

If Shirley thought Nancy's sudden interest in Ted absurd – although she did concede he was 'handsome' – she especially enjoyed the effects of male company on Rena: 'Rena asked Nancy and I to go for a picnic with her boy friends and we went. Ted's sister came too and three other boys. Masculine company brings Rena out. It seems to make Nancy self-conscious and shut her up, but Rena blossoms out like a flower. I found it very pleasant to be in her company. She is so natural and happy and contented.'⁸⁹ Boys had their uses. They made Rena more ebullient, fun to be around, and strengthened her appeal to Shirley.

Smith-Rosenberg advocates that historians focus on social structures rather than psychosexual dynamics.⁹⁰ Indeed, much had changed in New Zealand between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s: gender segregation began to break down, young people mingled more in public – sometimes, at the

beach, boys and girls were overtly affectionate with one another, and they certainly wore less than their predecessors – and secondary schools, including co-educational ones, proliferated.⁹¹ In this context, it is hardly surprising that female worlds of love and ritual, to use Smith-Rosenberg's phrase, continued to change. Some localized versions persisted into the second half of the twentieth century, including in New Zealand's girls' borstals, where inmates' relationships involved kissing, proclamations of love and sexual connection.⁹² Unlike the boarding school girls of the nineteenth century, Shirley Albiston's friends Bella, Rena and Nancy supplemented their intense female friendships with relationships with boys – relationships enabled by the increasingly public mingling of male and female adolescent cultures. By the 1930s, same-sex and opposite-sex adolescent attachments jostled much more frequently than they did during the nineteenth century.

While a broad social and historical analysis is crucial, we cannot overlook the meanings of friendship and romantic attachment for those who wrote about them. Shirley Albiston's friendships both frustrated and sustained her, and many details of her friends' lives bemused her – their interest in boys, for instance. Albiston was aware of how the narrative ought to run. The 'childish adoration' for Ru Gardiner would die away as she grew up, and she would become interested in boys instead: 'I am not content to bathe in her [Ru's] glory. It is all because of another growing menace, the opposite sex.'⁹³ The developmental narrative of Havelock Ellis and others made its presence felt, if only implicitly. While Shirley knew how her emotional life was supposed to change, she was reluctant to convert theory into practice. While she noted boys as sources of gossip in her friends' lives, not one made his way into her own affections. A year after writing about the 'growing menace', she airily reported: 'I have so much to occupy my time, there is no room to think about boys.'⁹⁴ Albiston's last diaries, from the 1940s, had nothing to say about young men – only female friends.⁹⁵

At first blush, diaries deal with personal topics; but they also tell of identities formulated and presented to others. They offer narratives that speak to wider ideological positions and societal and personal changes. The diaries of Fred Gibbs, James Courage and Shirley Albiston provide a wealth of detail, telling of specific friendships, tantalizing gossip and frustrated desires.⁹⁶ The transformation of romantic friendship, the expansion of secondary education and the arrival of new discourses of desire all had an impact on subjective experiences of intimacy. Written as resources for the self, diaries later become resources for the historian.

The diaries of Gibbs, Courage and Albiston illustrate shifting ways of conceiving erotic desire. As he worked out what kinds of engagements

frustrated or satisfied him, James Courage navigated a language of inversion and homosexuality – terms simply not available to Fred Gibbs and his friends. Perhaps this is why Fred disavowed some forms of masculinity – those that were foppish or overly flamboyant – but had nothing to say about same-sex desire per se. The word ‘homosexuality’ made rare appearances after 1900 and ‘inversion’ appeared during the 1920s, but there was almost no public discussion of lesbianism in New Zealand before the Parker-Hulme murder case of 1954.⁹⁷ Other, more fluid discourses of same-sex attachment circulated prior to 1940, as Shirley Albiston’s writing reveals: the ‘pash’ between girls, the adoration for a teacher, and the notion that such things would disappear in the face of male irresistibility.

While friendship and erotic desire were not the same thing, there were some overlaps. Smith-Rosenberg suggests we ‘view sexual and emotional impulses as part of a continuum or spectrum of affect gradations strongly effected by cultural norms and arrangements’, and the friendly intimacies recorded by Gibbs and Albiston involved mutual support and admiration; as a cultural form the courting ritual cut across both friendship and romantic relationships.⁹⁸ It is possible that elements of the romantic friendship ideal persisted for longer among girls – well into the 1930s – than they did in the case of boys. Few, if any, archived adolescent boy’s diaries from the interwar years tell of soulful connection in the way Fred Gibbs’s do.⁹⁹ Traces of this gender differentiation linger today; many sociologists suggest intimate expression underpins female friendships in a way it does not among men.¹⁰⁰

Gibbs’s, Courage’s and Albiston’s diaries offer unique and valuable insights into past emotional worlds in New Zealand. They give their reader a sense of inner life that is relatively uncensored – other than by a desire to adhere to convention – and their accounts are shot through with emotion. In general terms, diaries are especially good sources for the historical study of young people, a field where adult preoccupations – newspaper complaints about young people’s lives, for instance – can overwhelm youthful voices. More specifically, they are invaluable guides to the fields of friendship, intimacy and sexuality – whether or not their writers realized the historical significance of their daily jottings.

CHRIS BRICKELL

University of Otago

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