‘Lovely and Secret’: The Life of a Poet’s Muse, Katie Anna Lush

Danielle Scrimshaw

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Vic.

Abstract

This article focuses on the life of Katie Anna Lush (1887–1935), a figure who exists primarily in the historical narrative as the friend, lover and muse of the Australian poet Lesbia Harford. What began first as an exploration of the women’s relationship, grew into a larger biography of Lush. A philosophy tutor for the University of Melbourne, an anti-conscriptionist and belonging to a circle of prominent Australian socialists of the 1910s and 1920s, Katie Lush provides valuable insight into unmarried white women’s political and academic careers in the early twentieth century. As the subject of several romantic poems written by Lesbia Harford, this article will additionally consider the relationship’s queer potential. This is the first extensive study of Katie Lush’s life and draws upon former research regarding Lesbia Harford in addition to new detail accessed from the Lush family collection.

* * *

All the pretty poplar trees have robed themselves in silver,
Like the clouds and like the waves they’ve clothed themselves
with light.
Now they’re singing songs to me. Maybe across the river
Sister trees sing just such songs for Katie’s ears tonight.¹

The above poem, ‘Geisha’, was written in January 1912 by Lesbia Harford, a little-known Australian poet who was largely unpublished during her lifetime. This is one of several poems that Lesbia wrote of her tutor and friend Katie Lush, ‘a very tall rather dominating woman with red hair & a mind like a knife—a logical relentless mind rather than a sympathetic

1 Lesbia Harford, ‘Geisha’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Oliver Dennis (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2014), 3.

one'.² Lush was a philosophy tutor at Ormond College, and while little is known of her life there are clues scattered in newspaper articles, letters and the poetry of Lesbia Harford. In research on Harford, scholars have been attracted to her poetry, socialism and sexuality, while Lush has been treated as a secondary figure whose life remains fragmented. A 1991 play inspired by Lesbia Harford, *Earthly Paradise* by Daryl Emmerson, features Lush in only one scene, after which she disappears from Harford's life because, in the protagonist's words, 'for a while there were things I had to learn from her. Once I understood them, she had nothing more to give.'³ From reading Harford's poetry, we can see that this is not an accurate representation of their relationship. While poetry may not always present itself as a historical source, I believe it provides important context for Katie Lush's relationship with Lesbia Harford while also highlighting the latter's affections. However, these poems should not be read too literally—they are creative works of a poet who used writing as a method of expressing her thoughts and feelings in private notebooks. There is little way of knowing whether a poem was inspired by real events or only a product of Harford's imagination. Despite this, given the limited documentation surrounding Lush's life, Harford's poems are important in offering one woman's insight into a figure who is almost inaccessible to modern historians.

My aim for this article is to draw greater biographical attention to Katie Lush, as previous studies have neglected to discuss her in her own right, and argue for her significance as an historical figure. This, admittedly, cannot be done without considering the life and writing of Lesbia Harford, as records concerning Lush are so scarce that one is required to rely on information associated with Lesbia Harford. Research on Harford has declined since the work of historian Jeff Sparrow and literary theorist Ann Vickery in the late 2000s.⁴ Consequently, there have been no further attempts at uncovering the details of Katie Lush's life. By returning to the previous work of Sparrow and Vickery, along with other historians and literary critics such as Lesley Parson, Marjorie Pizer and Drusilla Modjeska, I have been able to expand the narrative of Katie Lush by

2 Letter from Professor A. Boyce Gibson to Marjorie Pizer, 1962, in Ann Vickery, *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007), 218.

3 Daryl Emmerson, *Earthly Paradise* (Paddington: Currency Press, 1991), 14.

4 Jeff Sparrow, "'Signed Up in a Rebel Band": Lesbia Harford Re-Viewed', *Hecate*, 32, no. 1 (2006): 8–35; Ann Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford's Romantic Legacy', in *The Intimate Archive: Journeys Through Private Papers*, ed. Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman and Ann Vickery (Canberra: National Library of Australia), 81–132; Ann Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford: Writing Revolution', in *The Intimate Archive*, eds Dever, Newman and Vickery, 215–62.

revisiting archives and making contact with the daughters of Sir George Lush (Katie's nephew)—Mary, Margaret and Jenny Lush. The following is a biographical article about a woman who has existed primarily in the historical narrative as a poet's muse and lover. The relationship shared between Katie Lush and Lesbia Harford has, on several occasions, been interpreted as a lesbian one due to the love poetry written by Harford for her friend and tutor. This interpretation evolved from the publication of Pizer and Modjeska's edited collection of Harford's work, *The Poems of Lesbia Harford* (1985), in which the editors drew their conclusion from the basis of poetry and interviews with Harford's brother, Esmond Keogh, and political activist Guido Baracchi. Since this publication, other historians such as Joy Damousi have accepted the relationship as queer.⁵ Lush and Harford have additionally been discussed in recent popular podcasts *Making Queer History* and *Queer As Fact*, which again use Lesbia Harford as the central focus while Lush is referred to as an apparent romantic partner.⁶ Despite this, there is no recorded evidence of Katie Lush ever reciprocating the affections of Lesbia Harford, or indeed maintaining a romantic relationship with another woman. This does not necessarily mean Katie Lush should be viewed within heteronormative discourse, however, and throughout this article I will be emphasising the very real and valid potential of Katie's queerness.

When not being actively denied, queer histories are rarely acknowledged or considered. In the mid-1990s, American historian Martha Vicinus argued that lesbian history, on a global level, is under-researched—since then, queer women's history, particularly in Australia, remains largely under-represented.⁷ Vicinus references the work of literary scholar Terry Castle, who suggested that 'the lesbian is repeatedly treated as if she were a ghost, whose sexuality cannot be pinned down, and yet she repeatedly reappears, haunting the heterosexual imaginary'.⁸ Lucy Chessser, one of the few historians to research Australian lesbian history in the colonial era, has argued:

5 Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally: Socialism, Communism and Gender in Australia 1890–1955* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22.

6 Will and Laura, 'Lesbia Harford', 13 December 2020, in *Making Queer History*, podcast, MP3 audio, 49:29, podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/lesbia-harford/id1157710271?i=1000502223761; and Eli, Irene, and Alice, 'Lesbia Harford', 15 December 2017, in *Queer As Fact*, podcast, MP3 audio, 54:00, queerasfact.podbean.com/e/lesbia-harford/.

7 Martha Vicinus, 'Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?', *Radical History Review*, no. 60 (1994): 57–75.

8 Ibid., 60.

in relation to lesbians and lesbian history, the dynamic that tends to emerge repeatedly is absence or invisibility, the simple non-presence and non-recognition of lesbians within cultural production, including historical production.⁹

Vicinus, Castle and Chesser have all justifiably pointed to the overlooking of queer women's histories, leading to the issue of invisibility within our cultural narratives that so often positions queer women as 'ghosts'. The scarce historiography of queer Australian women is not only due to limited availability of sources, but because of the limitations regarding the knowledge of queer women's sexualities and how these sexualities are expressed and defined. As Vicinus has argued, lesbianism tends to depend on evidence of sexual contact, whereas heterosexual relationships are confirmed through a variety of social forms such as marriage, even if unconsummated, abusive or childless.¹⁰ Even where romantic language is present in letters and diaries between people of the same sex, the couple can easily be disregarded as 'close friends' from a heteronormative perspective. By reducing the availability of 'legitimate' evidence for queer women in this manner, there arises a danger of losing queer histories simply due to an assumption of heterosexuality, to say nothing of the limitations of defining lesbianism strictly based on genital contact.

Language has additionally restricted how women's sexualities can be studied. In many cases, a binary of gay and straight has been utilised, rather than acknowledging the fluidity and complexity of sexuality. For this reason, throughout this article I will be preferencing the term 'queer' to 'lesbian' in order to account for the fluidity and complexity of sexuality, particularly during a time where these labels were not accessible. Some lesbian academics reject the term 'queer', as it is non-specific and can equally be used to describe homosexual men. Terry Castle, for example, has labelled Greta Garbo a lesbian despite Garbo's known affairs with men. Instead of referring to Garbo 'more properly' as bisexual, Castle argued that it is 'more *meaningful* to refer to her as a lesbian'.¹¹ While this stance may be meaningful for Castle's own work, it does not consider

9 Lucy Chesser, "What They Were Doing With Their Clothes Off I Don't Know": Homophobia, Lesbian History and Responses to "Lesbian-Like" Relationships, 1860s–1890s, in *Homophobia: An Australian History*, ed. Shirleene Robinson (Annandale: The Federation Press, 2008), 40.

10 Vicinus, 'Lesbian History', 59.

11 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 15 (emphasis in the original).

Garbo's entire sexual identity and is intrinsically biphobic.¹² My intention behind using 'queer' is to include women whose sexualities may not be so easily labelled, or could more appropriately be identified as bisexual rather than lesbian. While I acknowledge that in some particular cases a queer history cannot be definitively proven, I believe there is a significance in the *possibility* of these queer readings, particularly for women whose sexualities have historically been neglected and denied.

This article fits into a wider Australian feminist historiography but should also be read as queer history. In examining Lush's life independently from Harford, rich documentation has been found on central feminist historical questions such as women's higher education, anti-conscription protest, international travel for single women, and socialist politics of the First World War era. The question of whether Lush and Harford's acquaintance was romantic or sexual is not the most important aspect of this research—instead, I want to reach beyond the discussion of intimate friendships and historicise Katie Lush as a figure in her own right.

A Lush Upbringing

Katie Anna Lush was born in Kew on 14 May 1887 to Martha Dalgeish Finlay and George Lush. She had a younger brother born the following year, Robert Finlay Lush, and two half-siblings from her father's first marriage to Mary Mabel Elizabeth Nicol Fullarton, who died three days after the birth of Mabel Mary Hailes Lush in 1881.¹³ The family lived in Oakwood, a large 16-room house on Studley Park Road, until the death of George Lush in 1932.¹⁴ Katie's mother, Martha, was remembered by a younger cousin as 'a very kind and generous person ... we would always come away heaped with flowers after visiting her'.¹⁵ This kindness and generosity was extended to Martha's own children and step-children, and she formed close relationships particularly with Katie and Mary, who

12 Biphobia includes various negative stereotypes concerning bisexual people in addition to the denial of bisexuality's existence. For a lesbian feminist critique of bisexuality, see Sheila Jeffreys, 'Bisexual Politics: A Superior Form of Feminism?', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22, no. 3 (1999): 273–85.

13 Ruth Benjamin, 'Lush, Mabel Mary (1881–1958)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lush-mabel-mary-10875/text19305.

14 'Advertising', *Age*, 27 August 1932, 2.

15 Margaret Berry, letter to Marjorie Pizer, 14 May 1984, Marjorie Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, Mitchell Library (ML), Sydney.

lived with her for the majority of their lives. George Lush was a respected figure himself, and son to one of Victoria's first Baptist ministers. He held various management positions of merchant companies and was president of the philanthropic Royal Humane Society of Australasia from 1893 to 1925.¹⁶ The Lush children consequently enjoyed a comfortable, middle-class upbringing, with Katie and Mary attending the prestigious Ruyton Girls' School.

Katie Lush was a talented scholar, passing her matriculation exam in 1905 and winning an exhibition in French and German the following year.¹⁷ At the age of 18 she 'came out' at a debutante ball held at Melbourne Town Hall in April 1906, organised by students in connection to the University of Melbourne's jubilee celebration. She was one of 29 debutantes among 1,000 guests, including university professors and the Lord Mayor of Melbourne.¹⁸ Three years passed before Lush commenced a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Melbourne, studying philosophy, mathematics, English, Latin and Greek in her first year.¹⁹ Women's admittance into university had been in effect since 1880, with Julia Margaret (Bella) Guerin becoming the first woman to graduate from an Australian university in 1883.²⁰ The community of women at the University of Melbourne was small, yet continuously growing during Lush's time as student and staff member. In 1912, she was awarded the Hastie Scholarship in philosophy and received £25 for 'special research and investigation work', though there is no record of how this money was spent and what kind of research she pursued.²¹ During her undergraduate degree, Lush joined the women's Princess Ida Club and became involved with the *Melbourne University Magazine* (MUM), serving on the board of management for its ninth volume in 1916, alongside future prime minister Robert Menzies. With a small community of students, many women joined the Princess Ida Club to establish friendships and create a space for themselves on campus. An old student from Lush's philosophy class remembered the university's atmosphere as 'idyllic', stating 'we women students were all members of the Princess Ida Club in 1913 ... we were

16 'Death of Mr George Lush', *Argus*, 26 May 1932, 6.

17 'University of Melbourne: Matriculation Examination', *Age*, 20 June 1905, 8.

18 'The University Ball', *Australasian*, 5 May 1906, 43.

19 Lush, Katie Anna, student record, University of Melbourne, Lush family collection.

20 Farley Kelly, 'Guerin, Julia Margaret (Bella) (1858–1923)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/guerin-julia-margaret-bella-6503.

21 'News of the Day', *Age*, 5 March 1912, 6.

so few that we all knew each other by name'.²² Lush was a member of the club until it merged with the University Union Women's Representative Committee in 1915, holding the position of honorary secretary in 1910.²³ She completed her Bachelor of Arts in 1912, beginning work as a philosophy tutor at Ormond College as she studied a Master of Arts from 1913–15.²⁴ Lush was a respected member of the university both as a student and staff member. One Princess Ida member commented that Lush's standing as a student and scholar was 'unquestioned among the women at present attending lectures', while Leonard Edward Bishop Stretton (later a County Court judge) later told Lush's nephew that 'he offered to fight another student whom he considered to have insulted K'.²⁵ Perhaps no one was in greater awe of Katie Lush, however, than her student Lesbia Keogh.

Figure 1: George Lush, Robert Finlay Lush and Martha Dalgeish Lush inside Oakwood, Kew, c. 1916.

Source: Lush family collection.

22 Ms Warren, letter to Marjorie Pizer, undated, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, ML.

23 'Princess Ida Club "At Home"', *Punch*, 4 August 1910, 28.

24 Lush, Katie Anna, student record, University of Melbourne.

25 *Melbourne University Magazine*, 6, no. 2 (1912): 51; Sir George Lush notes on Katie Lush, 1984, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 13, ML.

Figure 2: Lesbia Keogh (left) with an unidentified woman who is thought to be Katie Lush, the University of Melbourne, c. 1912–16.

Source: Marjorie Pizer Papers, MLMSS 7428, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Student Politics and the Rebel Girl

Lesbia Venner Harford (née Keogh) was born in Brighton on 9 April 1891, the eldest child of Helen Beatrice and Edmund Keogh. A ‘blue-baby’, Lesbia suffered from a congenital heart disease, which gave her a faint blue complexion and restricted physical activities throughout her life—she was only expected to live to the age of 25 and was herself aware of this.²⁶ Between 1912 and 1916 she studied law at the University of Melbourne, paying her way through the degree by taking art classes and tutoring in schools.²⁷ In her first year of university, Harford met Lush and was most likely tutored by her, enrolling in logic in 1915 and receiving first-class honours in moral philosophy in her second year.²⁸

26 Lesley Parson, ‘The Quest for Lesbia Harford’ (Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 1976), 4.

27 Damousi, *Women Come Rally*, 22.

28 Parson, ‘The Quest for Lesbia Harford’, 8.

Lesbia Harford was one of 18 women who graduated in law at the University of Melbourne between 1903 and 1922, the discipline being notoriously challenging for women to enter due to it being recognised as a masculine profession.²⁹ Grata Flos Greig was the first woman to graduate law from the University of Melbourne in 1903, later being admitted to the Bar in 1905 as the first woman in Australia to enter the legal profession.³⁰ That year, perhaps as a response to Greig's admittance, the university chancellor John Madden was quoted in the *Argus* as claiming: 'it seems to be an accepted fact that no woman is logical and that no woman is judicial'.³¹ This prejudice was not isolated to the law school but extended throughout the academic institution. Women at the University of Melbourne held fewer staff positions and female students were a marginalised group only just beginning to increase in number. While Lush and Harford studied they continuously came up against public expressions that challenged their presence. In May 1916, Harford's final year, a letter was published in the university magazine by 'Theolog' that addressed the growing presence of female scholars: 'if not nipped in the bud of its early dawn, [it] will recoil upon those who stand inactive and submerge them by its tropical and hot-house manner of growth, dragging with it the fair banners of our most honoured professions'.³² These letters, however, were few in number during the war years and were often challenged in the following issue by a female student. The concern of 'Theolog' that women would 'drag' the honour of academic professions was ignored by Lush, Harford and friends such as law students Christian Jollie Smith and Lou Barry, and future literary figure Nettie Palmer, who continued to pursue careers in their profession and encourage female peers.

Katie Lush held strong socialist beliefs and had no fear in making them publicly known, despite some of these opinions proving unpopular to the wider community. In 1915 a letter written by Lush appeared in the correspondence section of *MUM*, protesting the forced resignation of the university's German lecturer Walter von Dechend, 'not because of any fault committed, but because the governing body has worked itself up into a state of morbid suspicion and distrust'. The letter was accompanied

29 Damousi, *Women Come Rally*, 22.

30 Ruth Campbell and J. Barton Hack, 'Greig, Grata Flos Matilda (1880–1958)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/greig-grata-flos-matilda-7049/text11103.

31 Farley Kelly, *Degrees of Liberation* (Parkville: The Women Graduates Centenary Committee of the University of Melbourne, 1985), 21.

32 'Theolog', *Melbourne University Magazine*, 10, no. 1 (1916): 31.

by a petition signed by 33 students ('L. Keogh' being the first), claiming that 'so long as German remains a subject which undergraduates are allowed and wish to study there must be a German on the University staff'.³³ Despite their efforts, von Dechend and the Conservatorium's German piano teacher Eduard Scharf lost their positions and were not re-employed in future years.³⁴

During the war Lush was additionally active in the movement campaigning against conscription for military service, an issue that was defeated in two Australian referendums in 1916 and 1917. 'Miss Lush' is named in a 1917 issue of *Women Voter* for 'putting in fine work at factory and open-air meetings' for the anti-conscription cause, fleetingly mentioned below paragraphs on prominent suffragists Vida Goldstein and Cecilia John.³⁵ At a university debate in 1916 chaired by Robert Menzies, Lush refused to stand when the National Anthem was sung by pro-conscriptionists to interrupt Maurice Blackburn, who, like Lush, was against conscription.³⁶ When asked why Lush remained seated, she responded, 'when you sang it legitimately to open the meeting I stood, but not when it was used for obstruction'.³⁷ Lush's brother Robert Finlay Lush enlisted in the military in 1916, along with three of her cousins—of which, two died while in service. Her family's involvement in the war brought Lush into close contact with the trauma caused by losing a loved one, and potentially strengthened her commitment to protest forced enlistment. Her sister Mary acknowledged the resilience Lush needed to speak publicly against conscription, exposing herself to ridicule and insult in working-class suburbs, to the disapproval of her father. Writing two months after Lush's death, Mary recalled that 'it was very much against my Father's ideas that his daughters should face a tough crowd in places like Richmond. It says much for them both, that their affection and mutual respect survived the strain'.³⁸ This description is a testament to Lush's values and independence.

33 Katie Lush, letter to the editor, *Melbourne University Magazine*, 9, no. 2 (1915): 66.

34 Stuart Macintyre and R. J. W. Selleck, *A Short History of the University of Melbourne* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 63.

35 'Miss Cecilia John', *Woman Voter*, 6 December 1917, 2.

36 R. J. W. Selleck, *The Shop: The University of Melbourne, 1850–1939* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 566.

37 'The Anti-Conscriptionists', *Age*, 24 October 1916, 6.

38 Mabel Mary Hailes Lush, letter to Sir George Lush, 6 January 1936, Lush family collection.

During this period Lush's social circle was made up of dedicated socialists, all white, middle class and university educated. In 1918 she attended a dinner party organised by Katharine Susannah Prichard and Christian Jollie Smith—later co-founders of the Australian Communist Party in 1920—to farewell writer and critic Vance Palmer before he left to serve in the Australian military forces.³⁹ The guest list included a small group of academics and political activists, including Nettie Palmer (by now a respected writer, and Vance's wife), Marxist scholar Guido Baracchi, author and suffragist Mary Fullerton, and Unitarian minister Frederick Sinclair. Harford was also a close friend of Nettie Palmer's, having known her as a child, and the two women with Lush attended the Free Religious Fellowship meetings in 1913–14.⁴⁰ In a letter to Palmer, Lush wrote about Esmond Keogh's presence at one of these meetings and noted that 'Lesbia came too; because I put her on the cast and specially asked her ... She was really too tired to come; I wished I had not asked her when I realised what the strain is for her. She's coaching all the time'.⁴¹ Despite Harford's fatigue, she proved an active and passionate member of trade union movements, serving on the organising committee for the Free Religious Fellowship and joining the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) sometime between 1916 and 1917.⁴²

Relationship with Lesbia Harford

An untitled poem dated October 1917 mentions a song written 'for Katie's sake / When I was fresh from school and loving her / With all the strength of girlhood'.⁴³ In other poems Harford frames her relationship with Lush as a sisterly bond, such as 'Birthday', written for Lush in May 1915:

I have a sister whom God gave to me;
He formed her out of trouble and the mists of the sea.

Like Aphrodite, she came to me full-grown.
Oh, I am blest forever with a sister of my own.⁴⁴

39 'Women's World', *Herald*, 9 July 1918, 3.

40 Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford's Romantic Legacy', 104.

41 Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford: Writing Revolution', 227.

42 Sparrow, "'Signed up in a Rebel Band'", 10.

43 Harford, 'Do You Remember Still the Little Song', in *The Poems of Lesbia Harford*, ed. Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer (North Ryde: Sirius Books, 1985), 42.

44 Harford, 'Birthday', in *Ibid.*, 52.

This 'sisterly love' evokes the conventions of romantic friendships from previous centuries, explored at length in Lillian Faderman's book *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981).⁴⁵ Faderman's concept of romantic friendship—a passionate relationship between women that was not considered in a homosexual context at the time—has been met with criticism from feminist and queer academics, however, as the approach 'romanticises the past by constructing a lost age of innocence: a time before ... sexologists invented "lesbianism" as a sexualised mannish stereotype and imposed it on passionate relationships between women in order to condemn them'.⁴⁶ Faderman argues that the expansion of sexology and subsequent theories of female homosexuality changed how women's friendships could be expressed and explored. Harford's naming of Lush as a sister emphasises that she valued her more than a teacher or friend, and while this positions the relationship as platonic, it may be due more to the fact that the poem was given to Lush for her birthday. If Lush was uncomfortable with Harford's display of physical desire, it would make sense that these feelings remained within Harford's private journals. Frustration at having to suppress same-sex desire is hinted in an earlier poem, dated April 1915:

Would that I were Sappho,
Greece my land, not this!
There the noblest women,
When they loved, would kiss.⁴⁷

While feeling free to express her same-sex desires in unpublished poetry, Harford makes clear that these affections cannot be acted upon to the same effect as they could have been in this idealised impression of Sappho's Greece.

In a 1915 poem titled 'The Electric Tram to Kew', Harford writes, 'Through the swift night / I go to my love'.⁴⁸ Though Lush is not named in the poem, as she has been in several others, Harford likely wrote this with Lush in mind. The poem implies that the two women met outside university at Lush's home, or somewhere close in the neighbourhood. There is a gentle sentimentality within the verse, naming the subject of

45 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981).

46 Liz Stanley, 'Romantic Friendship? Some Issues in Researching Lesbian History and Biography', *Women's History Review*, 1, no. 2 (1992): 196.

47 Harford, 'I Can't Feel the Sunshine', in *The Poems of Lesbia Harford*, 51.

48 Harford, 'The Electric Tram to Kew', in *Collected Poems*, 24.

the poem, 'Lovely and secret / As thou, my friend, / Who art all heaven / At journey's end'.⁴⁹ Whatever loving relationship shared between Harford and Lush would have had to remain 'lovely and secret' by necessity to avoid unwanted attention and discrimination. Harford directly names Lush in poems such as 'Geisha' and 'In the Public Library'. Others, such as 'I love to see' and 'Lie-a-bed', could potentially be about Lush, or indicate another woman who was the subject of Harford's sexual desires and affections.⁵⁰ It is certainly possible, and quite likely, that not all of her poetry was written with a specific person in mind—where none of her lovers are named, Harford might have been constructing a fictional identity or situation to express her thoughts and feelings.

Yet, whether a homoerotic poem was written with a specific figure in mind or not is not so much the point. It is simply enough for Harford to have written such poetry at a time when same-sex desires were not explicitly expressed or spoken of in a positive manner. This act alone tells us much about Harford's own beliefs and values regarding women's sexuality. It also suggests that the audiences she shared her poetry with were comfortable with and accepting of same-sex love and desire. Sylvia Martin emphasises the significance of poetry in her study on Mary Fullerton, another Australian poet who during this period lived in England with close friend (and possibly romantic partner) Mabel Singleton:

Meaning in poetry is relational. It involves the rational mind, the imagination, the emotions and the senses as it is experienced visually, aurally and intellectually, even the most basic experience of living—breathing—is an integral part of it. Poetry is very much an embodied experience.⁵¹

The first collection of Harford's poetry was released posthumously in 1941, edited by Nettie Palmer. In the foreword Palmer wrote, 'we could not know that she wrote so much: we only knew that she fed on poetry'.⁵² Despite limited publicity during Harford's lifetime, she wrote extensively in private notebooks and shared poems with friends and lovers. In a letter sent to Palmer in late 1915, Harford included a poem with the message

49 Ibid., 25.

50 Harford, 'Lie-a-bed', in Ibid., 22; Harford, 'I love to see', in Ibid., 68.

51 Sylvia Martin, *Passionate Friends: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton & Miles Franklin* (London: Onlywomen Press Limited, 2001), 62.

52 Nettie Palmer, Foreword to *The Poems of Lesbia Harford* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1941), np.

'here's a rhyme I've just been sending to Kate'.⁵³ This statement is important as it shows there had been a written correspondence between Harford and Lush, yet these letters have been lost. Any papers left after Lush's death were likely passed onto her sister Mary, and potentially discarded over the years. We can only guess at how extensive Lush's correspondence with Harford may have been.

Within the 1941 collection, the poems that reflect Harford's same-sex desires and advocacy of free love are absent. This was possibly deliberate on Palmer's part, perhaps out of a desire to conserve her late friend's respectability in an era when homosexuality was still condemned.⁵⁴ Harford's poetry was written for and about both men and women, offering an insight into the various relationships she maintained throughout her life. As such, her verse can be considered as one of the earliest examples of queer poetry written by a woman in Australia—preceding Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, both published in Britain a year after Harford's death in 1928.⁵⁵ Harford likely felt comfortable writing freely of her same-sex affections due to her poetry being shared with only a small and personal audience. In 1926 she wrote to Percival Serle saying, 'I take my poetry seriously, and I am in no hurry to be read'.⁵⁶ By limiting the publication of her verse, Harford freed herself from any requirement to censor her love and desires.

Historian Jeff Sparrow has argued that Lush and Harford's relationship was likely not as socially transgressive as literary feminists such as Drusilla Modjeska suggested in the 1980s.⁵⁷ According to Sparrow, the difficulty of reading the relationship as queer 'lies in the fact that, in 1914, women could, in certain circumstances, declare a love for each other, praise each other's beauty and even kiss, without encountering the social stigmas later associated with these actions'.⁵⁸ Frank Bongiorno has similarly noted

53 Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford: Writing Revolution', 225.

54 Male homosexuality was a criminal offence in all Australian states until 1975, when South Australia decriminalised homosexual acts. While lesbianism was never criminalised in Australia, same-sex relationships between women were similarly discriminated against throughout the twentieth century.

55 Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* is heralded as the first lesbian novel published in Britain and the United States, and was banned in the United Kingdom and Australia in 1929. The title character of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* was based on Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West. See Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928); Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928).

56 Parson, 'The Quest For Lesbia Harford'.

57 Drusilla Modjeska, 'Introduction', in *The Poems of Lesbia Harford*, 20.

58 Sparrow, 'Signed up in a Rebel Band', 22.

'the idea that a young woman would experience "crushes" with others of the same class and sex had widespread acceptance as a middle-class rite of passage', which would explain why Lush and Harford's relationship was seemingly accepted by their contemporaries.⁵⁹ However, this does not mean that historians can analyse every intimate relationship shared between middle-class women during this era as a 'romantic friendship'. It would be naïve to assume a heteronormative stance on such a concept purely because there was, to some extent, a level of acceptability concerning same-sex relationships (provided they were perceived as non-sexual). Returning to Sparrow's comment, emphasis should be placed on *certain circumstances*, which could also be expressed more precisely as *socially acceptable* circumstances. Women's sexuality was stigmatised prior to and during the 1910s if it was openly expressed and publicly acknowledged. A famous case from the time is that of Marion Bill Edwards, the 'famous man-woman' who wrote openly about making 'hot love to women' and whose perceived gender fluidity caused a stir in Australian newspapers.⁶⁰ While the circumstances are clearly different, with Edwards dressing and living as a man for several decades, the public abhorrence of Edwards' sexual activities emphasises that queer sexuality and non-conformist gender were considered abnormal and controversial, even a medical illness. In 1916 while appealing a conviction of sly-grog selling in Melbourne, questions about sex came up when it was revealed that Edwards, described as 'a young person in male attire who ... would not declare whether he or she was a man or a woman', had slept in a double bed with the female witness.⁶¹ Edwards refused to answer, as the question did not relate to the conviction, but the sensation generated by this revelation illustrates the extent to which queerness among women and those understood to be women was a taboo topic. If the relationship had been unambiguously sexual, the pair would have attracted negative attention and consequences. Despite lesbianism not being a criminal offence in Australia, women's same-sex relationships (when deemed to transgress 'romantic friendship') were treated with the same level of intolerance as male homosexuality. In one respect, the absence of

59 Frank Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012), 117.

60 Marion Bill Edwards, *Life and Adventures of Marion-Bill-Edwards, The Most Celebrated Man-Woman of Modern Times* (Melbourne: no publisher, 1907), 15.

61 'A Sex Problem', *Daily Mail*, 6 December 1916, 8.

criminalisation combined with the presumption that single middle-class women were ignorant and reserved in matters of sex, may have assisted lesbian couples in maintaining a certain invisibility to the wider public.⁶²

The close relationship between Lush and Harford was acknowledged by their circle of friends. In the 1960s, Baracchi recalled Lush as ‘tall as Lesbia was small, and these two, this great blonde and the elegant philosophy teacher and Lesbia, the rebel girl, they were tremendous friends’.⁶³ While the extent of this relationship may remain uncertain, with no clear confirmation that Lush ever returned Harford’s romantic feelings, the pair were exceptionally close in the 1910s. At least a dozen of Harford’s poems written from 1912 to 1915 were inspired by Lush. One that remains unpublished can be found in Harford’s private notebooks, held in the papers of fellow poet Marjorie Pizer (1920–2016) in Sydney’s Mitchell Library. Written in 1912, it is not necessarily a love poem, but portrays Lush in a romantic light:

Katie’s going wandering and seeking lovely places
That by summer day and night blue heavens overlook.
Forgetting musty libraries and all the sad town faces
She’ll take the sun for comrade and the sea for book.

Half the blue day and bluer night she’ll lie on the warm beaches
And watch the golden birds of heaven that nights encage.
Or scribble down such theories as deep contentment teaches
With a patterned shell for pencil and the sand for page.⁶⁴

Romantic as this poem may be, an aspect of truth lies in its verse. Though the poem is Harford’s imagining of Lush and not necessarily an exact representation of a real event, it shows the reader how the subject is viewed and admired by the writer. In this sense it is clear that Harford respected Lush a great deal, and brings a certain description to her that is deprived from modern historians due to the lack of photographs. Instead of relying on physical images of Katie Lush, Harford provides another way of viewing her—through gentle, metaphorical imagery.

62 Middle-class sexual ideals are discussed in Bongiorno, *Sex Lives of Australians*, 75.

63 Notes of interview with Guido Baracchi, 20 August 1964, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 13, ML.

64 Lesbia Harford, untitled poem, 1912, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 9, ML.

Gender and Profession in the Post-war Years

Lesbia Harford moved to Sydney in 1918, living with friends from the IWW while working in a clothing factory.⁶⁵ This course of manual work was pursued by Harford upon graduating, in order to better understand working-class women as her socialist ideals grew. As Ann Vickery has observed, factory conditions in the early twentieth century 'often involved excessive heat and noise, overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and dimly-lit rooms', which would have taken their toll on Harford's already delicate health.⁶⁶ Her brother Esmond later claimed that 'her employers felt guilty about her and she never stayed long in one place'.⁶⁷ Katie Lush additionally travelled to Sydney in 1918 and stayed with the poet Alys Hungerford; in her letter to Nettie Palmer there is no mention of visiting Harford, but she does write about meeting with author Mary Gilmore.⁶⁸ Two years later, in November 1920, Lesbia married Patrick Harford, fellow IWW member and painter, and returned to Melbourne to settle in South Yarra. In the same year, an all-women's run garage was opened in Cotham Road, Kew, by 23-year-old Alice Anderson. The existence of Anderson and her garage would have certainly been known to both Harford and Lush, as the Alice Anderson Motor Service was advertised widely in Melbourne newspapers. Anderson herself proudly asserted that her staff were well-known locally, saying in an interview, 'oh, yes, everyone in Melbourne knows us, and all are quite used to seeing us in our uniforms'.⁶⁹ Her garage was the first of its kind in Australia, being staffed exclusively by women and attracting the admiration of many customers of both genders. This included a 'university crowd', a 'group of lesbians who worked and lectured at the University of Melbourne, many of whom had their vehicles maintained at the garage'.⁷⁰ Katie Lush may not have been part of this group (no evidence of her even owning a vehicle has been recorded), but it is likely that she would have

65 Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 24.

66 Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford: Writing Revolution', 230.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 245.

69 Loretta Smith, *A Spanner in the Works: The Extraordinary Story of Alice Anderson and Australia's First All-Girl Garage* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2019), 209.

70 Ibid., 226.

known some of the university staff who utilised Anderson's services. Katie Lush not only lived nearby the garage at her family residence in Studley Park Road, but was also a distant relative of Anderson's, and the two may have been acquainted through this connection.⁷¹ Both women were members of the prestigious Lyceum Club, with Anderson being admitted in 1918, so it is also possible they met through this circle.

While Lesbia Harford's bisexuality is now recognised without much dispute, the sexuality of Alice Anderson remains uncertain.⁷² Two of Anderson's sisters, Frances and Claire, have denied that she was a lesbian.⁷³ Mary Cohn, daughter of 'garage girl' Nancy Houston, disclosed to the author of Anderson's recently published biography that Alice 'was a lesbian'.⁷⁴

Houston had simply believed prevailing gossip. However, there remains a legitimate possibility that Anderson's sexuality surpassed heteronormative boundaries—Smith at least acknowledges this, saying, 'there would have been every opportunity for her to act on any lesbian attraction she might have had. Who knows whom Alice might have shared the little bed with in her den next to the office'.⁷⁵ Regardless of Anderson's own personal relationships and sexuality, it is clear from numerous accounts and photographs (such as Figure 3) that the Kew garage provided a 'safe space' for queer and single women wishing to gain their own financial independence. Living nearby, Katie Lush would have regularly encountered this image of womanhood and female intimacy.

71 Margaret Derham's mother was Katie Lush's first cousin; in turn, Margaret's first cousin Alfred Derham married Alice Anderson's sister Frances. Margaret Berry's (née Derham) letter to Marjorie Pizer in 1984 confirms this. Berry, letter to Marjorie Pizer, Marjorie Pizer papers.

72 Les Murray, 'Foreword', in *Collected Poems*, xviii.

73 Smith, *A Spanner in the Works*, 234.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 226–27.

Figure 3: Alice Anderson (right) with a client, c. 1919.

Source: Frances Derham collection, 1988.0061.01553, University of Melbourne Archives, Melbourne.

While Harford adjusted to married life in the early 1920s, Katie Lush maintained her independence and travelled overseas from 1922 to 1923. She accompanied Miss Brenda Sutherland, who was the same age as Lush and studied a Bachelor of Science at the University of Melbourne during the period Lush completed her arts degree.⁷⁶ Sir George Lush recollected this trip and believed that one of the reasons his aunt accompanied Sutherland was 'to explore the possibility of finding more advanced knowledge of Parkinson's Disease either in London or other capitals'.⁷⁷ This may certainly have been the case, as Sutherland's intention for travelling was to visit international universities and could have offered the opportunity for Lush. Brenda Sutherland was the superintendent of the College of Domestic Economy on Lonsdale Street, an institute founded in 1907 to provide women education in domestic arts.⁷⁸ Lush and Sutherland arrived in London in September 1922, where they stayed at the residence of fellow Melbourne University graduates Dr and Mrs H. H. Woolland. The women then departed England for Canada on 28 December, where Sutherland filled a lectureship on chemistry and hygiene for six months.⁷⁹ Lush's declaration upon arriving in Canada stated that her residence would be with Brenda Sutherland at Toronto University, though it is uncertain whether she stayed for the entire six months with her friend. A border crossing document indicates that Lush entered the United States of America in February 1923, while an article in the *Argus* states that the period of 'Miss Sutherland's lectureship at Toronto, Miss Lush spent in Italy'.⁸⁰ If Lush returned to Australia with Sutherland, she would have returned in September 1923, a year after they arrived in England.

Lush and Sutherland must have shared a close relationship to have travelled overseas together, though there is not much evidence of this friendship outside the journey. It is likely the women knew each other during their university studies, or met later through similar social circles. Brenda Sutherland had travelled to Canada and the United States previously, having won a travel scholarship upon the completion of her science degree.⁸¹ She shared feminist ideals and awareness of Australian women's social and political situation, telling a journalist in 1911 that she would 'like to be on the staff of the Government Agriculture Department, but, of course, that is hopeless. They never appoint a woman to any of those positions'.

76 'Scientist Wins Distinction', *Herald*, 11 July 1916, 5.

77 Sir George Lush, letter to Alan Gregory, Master of Ormond, 17 September 1991, Lush family collection.

78 'Domestic Service Problem', *Register*, 30 May 1921, 6.

79 'Women's Views and News', *Argus*, 14 September 1923, 12.

80 Ibid.

81 'Woman Scientist', *Land*, 7 June 1918, 10.

When asked why the department would not make an exception, she laughed and replied, 'a man would not be dictated to by a woman'.⁸² Like Lush, Sutherland never married and was financially independent. In Lush's will, signed October 1932, she appointed Brenda Sutherland as the sole executrix of her will in the case of her half-sister Mary predeceasing her. The majority of Lush's estate was to be given to Sutherland 'for her absolute use and benefit'. Mary did not predecease her younger half-sister, but it is possible that she bequeathed some of Lush's personal belongings following probate being granted.⁸³ The inclusion of Sutherland in Lush's will, given higher importance than her surviving half-brothers, sheds light on the intimacy of their relationship.

Figure 4: Unidentified woman in Mabel Mary Hailes Lush's photo albums, believed to be Katie Lush, late 1910s.

Source: Lush family collection.

'Katie doesn't need me': Life After Lesbia

In his reflections of the two women, Guido Baracchi portrayed the relationship between Lush and Harford as 'a great constant but secret love, to which Lush, bound by social mores, could not outwardly commit'.⁸⁴ This is most likely the reason why some of Harford's poetry reflects a frustration of her love being unreciprocated, such as she wrote in 1913:

Katie doesn't need me,
want me, or heed me.

I might weep the night through
And she wouldn't care.⁸⁵

⁸² 'Women's World', *Herald*, 27 June 1911, 3.

⁸³ Katie Lush, 'Last will and testament of Katie Anna Lush', 29 October 1932, Lush family collection.

⁸⁴ Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford's Romantic Legacy', 88.

⁸⁵ Lesbia Harford, 'Katie walketh lonely', Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 1, Folder 1, Vol. B, ML.

And in 1915:

Why does she put me to many indignities,
Shifts to prevent myself thinking upon her,
My golden Katie, who loveth not kisses?⁸⁶

Esmond Keogh, speaking of his sister years later to Marjorie Pizer (co-editor of the 1985 volume of Harford's poetry), presented a vague image of the two women: 'was it a homosexual relationship? Not overt, I am sure, but very intense'.⁸⁷ In a letter to the Master of Ormond College in 1991, Sir George Lush similarly referred to the 'lesbian suggestion' and concluded, 'I simply don't know. I was rather surprised to find that I was not shocked by it, but I am also a long way from being convinced'.⁸⁸ Without any known surviving papers of Katie Lush, it is difficult to determine whether her feelings for Harford were of the same 'intensity' as the poet's. They evidently shared a significant and enduring bond, however, lasting throughout Harford's life despite Lush's reluctance—or feeling of impossibility—to commit romantically. Lush was present when Harford died on 5 July 1927 at St Vincent's Hospital, after suffering from tuberculosis.⁸⁹ Guido Baracchi later recalled that 'Katie was knocked rotten when Lesbia died, and she didn't live very much longer herself ... I think life for her without Lesbia would be not nearly so good'.⁹⁰ While the first part of this statement is probably true, Baracchi's assumption that Lush's life without Harford would be lacking indicates more how he considered Lush as a person independent from the poet. Sir George Lush, son of Katie's half-brother John Fullarton Lush, provides the most detail regarding Katie's life following Harford's death. He remembered that Lush 'did not have the ease with children that Mary had, with the result that ... Mary was the favoured aunt. We rather went in awe of K'.⁹¹ As a student at Ormond College in the early 1930s, George Lush was taught philosophy by his aunt and frequently visited her boarding establishment in Greycourt, Royal Parade. In 1924 this building was remodelled by Brenda Sutherland and converted into a private hotel, possibly the reason why Lush decided to take up residence here in the

86 Harford, 'Why does she put me to many indignities', in *Collected Poems*, 36.

87 Vickery, 'Lesbia Harford's Romantic Legacy', 89.

88 Sir George Lush, letter to Master of Ormond, Lush family collection.

89 Ibid.

90 Notes of interview with Guido Baracchi, 20 August 1964, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 13, ML.

91 Sir George Lush, notes on Katie Lush, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 13, ML.

late 1920s.⁹² As her arthritis developed, Lush was unable to walk without great difficulty and was required to move closer to the university. Margaret Berry (née Derham), a second cousin of Lush's, also studied philosophy at the University of Melbourne and was taught logic by Lush in 1928 or 1929. Margaret remembered Lush as:

very tall and quite thin, almost gaunt and was at that time very badly equipped by arthritis. She walked with two sticks and I know was often in pain, though she overcame her disability and in fact disregarded it as far as possible. Her appearance belied her gentle, kind and sweet disposition.⁹³

Margaret and George Lush both praised Lush's teaching method and claimed that this opinion was shared amongst their classmates. Her employment with Ormond College ceased, however, when Lush was obliged to resign due to her worsening condition. She returned to live with her mother and sister in Barrington Avenue, Kew, where George Lush continued to visit every Sunday afternoon after graduating.⁹⁴ According to Lush, during the last two years of Katie's life she 'was practically nursed by Mary; they had, I believe, always been very close'.⁹⁵ A year after her brother Robert's death, Katie Lush died on 10 November 1935, aged 48.⁹⁶ She is buried with her family at Melbourne General Cemetery.

Guido Baracchi's assumption that Lush's life would not be as good without Harford interestingly reflects how she has been regarded in historical and literary texts. In all cases, Katie Lush is only considered because of her association with Lesbia Harford. This is due to her presence in Harford's love poetry, as an idolised figure who held significant influence over the young poet, yet for various reasons has not been researched and discussed at length in her own right. Two months following Lush's death, her half-sister Mary wrote to their nephew George to share memories of 'Auntie Kate'. 'Soon we pass and are forgotten', she ended the letter, 'remember her George for a little'.⁹⁷ He did remember, and was able to share information concerning Lush to historians who later became interested

92 'Graduate Turns Business Woman', *Herald*, 16 September 1924, 8.

93 Berry, letter to Marjorie Pizer, Pizer papers, MLMSS 7428, Box 2, ML.

94 Sir George Lush, notes on Katie Lush, Marjorie Pizer papers.

95 Ibid.

96 Family notice, *The Age*, 12 November 1935, 1, trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/203893215.

97 Mary Lush, letter to Sir George Lush, 6 January 1936, Lush family collection.

in her relationship with Harford.⁹⁸ While Marjorie Pizer and Drusilla Modjeska aimed to provide a portrayal of Katie Lush for the introduction of *The Poems of Lesbia Harford*, no one has ever committed to a study that primarily focuses on Lush. As the historical and cultural interest in Lesbia Harford lessens, so too does the remembrance of Katie Lush.

98 In a letter to the Master of Ormond in 1991, Sir George Lush states that the increased historical interest regarding his aunt prompted him to document his memories of Katie. 'I realised that there were extant papers relating to K.A.L and that if I did not note my memories there would be no record of her at all.' Courtesy of the Lush family collection.

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 27*,
published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.27.07