

*Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence:
My Life as a Canadian Gay Activist*

Jim Egan (compiled and edited by Donald McLeod)

Toronto: Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives and
Homewood Books, 1998. 157 pp. \$15.00 paper.

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JIM (JAMES) EGAN emerged as a Canadian gay icon in the 1990s. He challenged the federal government's refusal to grant him, and his partner, Jim Nesbit, pension benefits under the Old Age Security Act. In 1995, after eight years of lower court wranglings, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the government had infringed on the rights of queer folks enshrined in the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms but that this infringement was justified. However, the court also ruled that "sexual orientation" must be read into the charter as a ground of discrimination analogous to religion, gender, and race: a solid step forward for queer Canadians.¹ Egan and Nesbit interpreted the Supreme Court's decision as a partial victory – "a black cloud with a silver lining." Indeed, the ruling subsequently paved the path to subsequent pro-queer decisions involving same-sex equality rights (though same-sex marriage is still prohibited). Honoured for his tireless activism, Jim (with his lover Jack) was a marshall at Lesbian and Gay Pride Day in Vancouver and Toronto in 1995. Though he and Jack escaped the swirl of activist Toronto

for a more bucolic British Columbia in 1964, Egan never lost his edge. From 1981 to 1993 he worked as an openly gay city councillor for Comox-Strathcona on Vancouver Island, near his home in Courtney, British Columbia – a period during which he and Jack also hosted a monthly drop-in for gay Islanders in their home.

What is less well known is the early stirring of Jim Egan's passion for social justice in Toronto after the Second World War. This is the strength of his memoir, *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence*. As Donald McLeod notes in his Preface to the book, Egan began his crusade against discrimination twenty years before the first gay organization was formed in Toronto in 1969 – the University of Toronto Homophile Organization. Egan's was, to cite McLeod, a "lone voice in the wilderness, and his actions were nothing less than revolutionary" (11).

Jim Egan was born in Toronto in 1921. As a young boy, he was an "omnivorous reader" who lacked any interest in sport. A dark-haired, lean, and tall young man, he worked as a laboratory technician, assisted biologists in the production of vaccines, joined the navy for two years until the end of the Second World War, and later specialized in the preservation and sale of marine biological specimens. Through travels in the 1940s, Egan learned about the

¹ For more on this case, see Donald Casswell, *Lesbians, Gay Men, and Canadian Law* (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 1996), 371-411.

lively gay underworld in London, Hamburg, and Sydney. Returning to Toronto in 1947, he explored the small, loose web of local gay spaces: parks, cafes, public washrooms, bathhouses, hotel beverage rooms, and private house parties. At the bar in the Savarin Hotel on Bay Street, Egan met Jack Nesbit. Within two weeks, they'd moved in together – a loving union that would last fifty-two years.

In careful detail, Egan describes the dangers faced by Toronto's gay demi-monde in the 1940s and 1950s. He notes how homosexuality was perceived as a sin, a sickness, and a sex crime, and how police routinely entrapped men and laid charges of gross indecency. Most gay men and women remained deep in the closet, fearful of police arrest, job loss, rejection by family and friends, and denied housing. Egan chronicles the homophobic coverage of gay life in the mainstream press and the scandal sheets, luridly entitled *Hush*, *True News Times* (*TNT*), and *Justice Weekly* (the precursors to modern-day pulp tabloids *National Enquirer* and *Star*). Headlines flashed: "Queers Flushed from 'Love' Nest" and "Unparalleled Orgies of Perversion Exposed." In 1949, enraged by the anti-homosexual "gross inaccuracies and libels" in the mass media, Egan commenced a furious, voluminous letter-writing campaign that lasted fifteen years. Ironically, he was able to convince the publishers of *True News Times* (in 1951) and *Justice Weekly* (in 1953) to run columns that he had written in order to educate readers about gay stereotypes, gay bars, the Kinsey Reports (1948, 1953), and amendments to the Canadian Criminal Code regarding gross indecency law (which criminalized homosexual sex between consenting adults). I admire how Egan penetrated the media's silence and lies through letters and articles he wrote

for the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Telegram*, *Saturday Night*, and *Toronto Daily Star*, among others. And yet I would love to learn more about why he endorsed an essentialist (as opposed to social constructionist) view of a "homosexual personality" and of homosexuality as genetically determined – concepts energetically debated today.

In Chapter 5 Egan reflects on "gay characters" in Toronto in the 1950s and early 1960s. I found the profiles entertaining and informative, but I wondered about the absence of lesbians and bisexual women in the lives of Egan and Nesbit, and the barriers to friendship between gay men and women. I also wondered about the queer men and women of colour who encountered the double jeopardy of homophobia and racism.² At the same time, Egan's frank observations on a class-stratified gay (male) culture were refreshing. Noting that he and Jack belonged to the "lower orders," he relates the ranking of "your opera queens and highly educated university types at the top, and the ribbon clerks at Simpson's at the bottom" 70. As much as Egan's recollections are generously sketched, I would have enjoyed more extensive comment on the couple's non-monogamy (after the

² For pioneering efforts to consider the history and present of queers of colour in Canada, see Makeda Silvera, "Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians," in *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology*, ed. Makeda Silvera (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1991); Wesley Crichtlow, "Buller Men and Batty Bwoys: Hidden Men in Toronto and Halifax Black Communities," in *In a Queer Country: Lesbian and Gay Studies in the Canadian Context*, ed. Terry Goldie (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2001), 69-85; and *Forbidden Love*, NFB documentary, dir. Aerlyn Weissman and Lynn Fernie, 1992.

first monogamous twenty years); Jim's thoughts on the vexed relationship between feminism and gay liberation; and his views on ever more complex queer identities, communities, and political priorities in the 1990s. Also, Jim's lover Jack Nesbit is a shadowy presence in the book, and I found myself yearning for insights into Jack's passions as a hairdresser, marriage counsellor, gardener, and dog lover.

Egan acknowledges the homophobic social climate of the 1950s. But I wish he had more to say about a culture steeped in Cold War hysteria and in images of heterosexual married bliss, the baby boom, nuclear families, and suburban consumerism.³ TV sit-coms *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Honeymooners*, and magazines such as *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Chatelaine*, peddled rigid (and unequal) gender roles, rewarded heterosexuality, and normalized Whiteness. Happily, Egan's personal reflections on the postwar era are richly contextualized when read alongside two recent social histories: Mona Gleason's *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada* (1999) and Valerie Korinek's *Roughing It in Suburbia: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (2000). Moreover, I'm curious about why Egan tells us nothing about the federal government's campaign to purge "alleged" and "confirmed" homosexuals from the civil service and the Departments of

National Defence and Foreign Affairs in the late 1950s. In *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence*, he makes brief reference to similar, McCarthy-led campaigns inside the US State Department, but the shameful targeting of queers as threats to Canadian "national security" is oddly missing from his oeuvre.⁴

In spite of my unanswered questions, this book is a testament to the power of community-based initiative. The Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal granted editor and compiler Donald McLeod much needed financial support, and, as co-publisher, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives supplied not only access to valuable memorabilia but also funds. McLeod succeeds in stitching together Egan's own words from numerous audio- and videotaped interviews, and from Egan's own writings housed at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives and at the Metro Toronto Reference Library. The book's black-and-white photographs are especially provocative, as are the covers of early gay magazines *Gay* and *Two*, and copies of letters to and from Egan. An appended chronology of Jim Egan's life, together with three checklists that catalogue Egan's publications and correspondence between 1950 and 1964, smartly round out McLeod's compilation.

Jim Egan died in March 2000 in Courtney at the age of seventy-eight. His relationship with Jack Nesbit lasted fifty-two years, and their mutual affection and respect is captured in a moving tribute: *Jim Loves Jack: The*

³ See Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Doug Owsram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

⁴ See Gary Kinsman, "Constructing Gay Men and Lesbians as National Security Risks, 1950-1970," in *Whose National Security? Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies*, ed. Gary Kinsman, Dieter Buse, and Mercedes Stedman (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2000), 143-53.

James Egan Story (1996) by filmmaker David Adkin.

In 2002 urban lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth tend to take for granted queer magazines like *Xtra West*, rainbow flags, the *Queer as Folk* TV series, Dykes on Bikes at Pride events, Toronto's Pussy Palace (women's night at the steambath), the Pink Pages (telephone directory), and queer studies in colleges and universities. Less concerned about the right to marry than the schedule for Vancouver's annual "Out on Screen" queer film festival, youth might be quick to discount the

efforts of a White, gay, high school dropout named James Egan who dared to disrupt the profoundly anti-homosexual ideology of religious leaders, psychiatrists, journalists, and cops more than half a century ago. Yet by dismissing or forgetting James Egan's contributions, we perilously ignore a chunk of the foundation upon which we stand. To me, Egan's extraordinary belief in the power of homo self-acceptance and equality rights for all makes him a queer hero, worthy of remembrance.

*Blueprint:
Black British Columbian Literature and Culture*

Edited by Wayde Compton

Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001. 315 pp. Illus. \$24.95 paper.

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THIS IS AN EXTREMELY important collection and is well served by its editor, Wayde Compton. The title itself, with its pun on both "blueprint" and the "Blues" (that defining art form for the Black diaspora) avoids any easy essentialist gestures, as is illustrated by the following statement at the end of Compton's introduction: "Much of the uniqueness of the work in this anthology is exactly the result of the shifting patterns of migration and the absence of a sharply defined regional tradition. If an aesthetic is in development, it may be best to view it – from the ground floor – as provisional rather than as a progression towards an essence" (37).

When I first arrived in Vancouver in 1995 and was familiarizing myself with the extent of the presence of different cultures in the city, I was often told that, unlike eastern Canada, here there was a dearth of Black people and that this appeared to have been the case throughout the history of British Columbia. *Blueprint* effectively challenges this perception.

The collection begins with the controversial figure of James Douglas, sympathetically situating his writings and his dilemma (in relation to the acknowledgment of his "blackness") within the ideologies of his times. As Compton expresses it in his own poem "JD" at the end of the book (272):