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Jim Egan. *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence: My Life as a Canadian Gay Activist*. Compiled and edited by Donald W. McLeod. Toronto: The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives and Homewood Books, 1998. 159pp. Includes preface and afterword (by McLeod), photos, bibliographical references of Egan's correspondence, index. ISBN 0-9683829-0-8.

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The late Jim Egan was an important figure in the history of Canadian gay and lesbian activism: he counter the homophobic views of articles appearing in national publications in the 1950s, organized and presided in discussion groups in Toronto in the 1960s, and in the 1990s, he and his partner Jack Nesbit were involved in their Supreme Court challenge of the Old Age Security Act's discriminatory policy excluding same-sex couples from receiving spousal benefits. Given that "[T]he result of the May 25, 1995 Supreme Court decision in Jim Egan/Jack Nesbitt [*sic*] same-sex spousal benefit case ... embodies the ambiguous and contradictory character of the current legal situation facing lesbians and gays in Canada" (Kinsman 5), Donald W. McLeod's *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence* is indeed a timely contribution to Canadian gay and lesbian historiography. For the book offers not only a portrait

of its subject's life narrative, but equally interesting, an ethnographic and historical study of the homophobic sociocultural context in which Egan found himself embedded and against which he struggled.

In his preface, McLeod begins by recounting a personal anecdote. As a participant during the annual pride celebrations in Toronto in June 1997, McLeod joins his colleagues from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in carrying around banners that read: "Keeping our Stories Alive" (9). He recalls that day:

By the time we get to Yonge and Wellesley, the crowds have taken over most the street ... Hundreds of thousands of people ... have pressed into a few blocks to celebrate gay pride. I feel overwhelmed. I ask myself, "How the hell did I end up here?" and ponder the more important question, "How did gay people in Toronto end up here?" (10)

McLeod's strategy in recalling this anecdote is especially pertinent: for he sets the stage for the entry of Jim Egan, the social actor who is the subject of *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence*. McLeod, convinced that "the best way to tell Jim Egan's story would be for him to tell it himself, in his own words," usefully clarifies in his preface that "this work is in fact an oral history of Jim Egan," an extended and amalgamated transcript of "a series of taped interviews conducted over a period of ten years" between Egan and McLeod and others (13).

The experience of reading *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence* illustrates the book's success in preserving the quality of its subject's speech and thought processes, as Egan negotiates himself through the recesses of his memory, recalling both the important and quotidian events in his life. The 'transcribed' prose reveals Egan to be a sensitive and modest yet determined man, highly self-reflexive in the act of recounting his past to his various interviewers. Consider the following passage as Egan recalls his childhood:

I was extremely fortunate compared with some young gay males. Mind you I'm not saying I had any intimations of being gay at the age of nine. I didn't. But I certainly had that feeling that many gays have that I was somehow different than the other boys. I had only the faintest notion of that, but I did feel different. I felt somewhat alienated from them, but I was fortunate in that I was never what could be described as a sissy. I got along quite well with the other boys on the

street. We chummed around together. But they were interested, eventually, in playing baseball and I never, ever, had the faintest interest in that sort of thing. And so it developed, in a perfectly natural way, that I became very much of a loner, which didn't bother me in the least. (17)

Passages like the above (and there are many) are wonderful and vivid not least because they are able to retain the nuances inherent in Egan's simultaneous acts of speaking and remembering. Egan is here captured in a moment of honest and genuine reflection: he articulates the extent to which his childhood sense of alienation from other boys and his eventual acceptance of being self-sufficient have equally contributed to shaping his identity as a gay man.

The book's conversational tone, moreover, convinces its readers of Egan's abilities as a great storyteller. Such skills are most evident in Chapter 5, entitled "Gay Personalities of Old Toronto," where Egan shares his "random memories of a few of the personalities and characters who were active in [Toronto's] gay community" in the 1950s and 1960s (70-78). In less than ten pages, Egan introduces his readers (and listeners?) to a cast of men as varied in their personalities as they were in their wardrobes. Here we meet, among others: George Hislop, who later formed the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT) in December 1970 (70); Jimmy Roulton, who played the piano at the Chez Paree Restaurant, once a meeting place for gay men in Toronto (72); Frances and Geraldine, two interracial friends who dressed in drag – the former, "a black guy who weighed two hundred pounds at the absolute minimum and was always plastered with makeup, including green eye shadow and lipstick," the latter, "also about two hundred pounds but with porcelain features and makeup galore" (72); Miss Jeffries, "an absolutely fragile little creature ... sort of pretty, in a refined kind of way, and [who] always wore these vinyl jackets" (73); and Alex Bakalis, who was murdered by a male hustler in May 1960 (77-78). Egan's brief but colorful character sketches of random acquaintances and close friends alike foreground not only the diversity of the emerging gay community in postwar Toronto, but also the ways these men's lives intersected with each other's. Egan's descriptions illustrate the extent to which these men, despite their differences, once indeed inhabited (literally and metaphorically) the same geography of desire.

The book's strength – namely, its success in preserving intact

Egan's conversational tone – is also, however, at particular moments, its greatest weakness. While McLeod no doubt means well in attempting to replicate the idiosyncrasies inherent in Egan's act of verbally recalling his past, he could have taken a bit more editorial liberty at the level of 'form' without necessarily sacrificing the integrity of the 'content' of his subject's life story. Put another way, he could have drawn more concrete connections between formative moments in Egan's life in order to provide a more substantive and even reading experience of his book. For example, consider the book's treatment of Egan's voracious reading habit during his life:

I gradually became an omnivorous reader [as an adolescent]. A lot of my reading was not necessarily intellectual. I read everything by H. Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle and Verne and Dickens and most of H. G. Wells. I read all the Saintstories by Leslie Charteris, the Charles Chan books, Agatha Christie ... and everything that Edgar Rice Burroughs ever wrote. *And many biographies and autobiographies.* I used to buy the old *Doc Savage* and *The Shadow* magazines every month ... I simply gobbled up books in the library, at the corner of Danforth and Pape avenues.

As I became aware of my own interest in males, I found that in those days, of course, there were few references to homosexuality in any of these books. There was Whitman, when I finally discovered him, and Housman, whom I discovered when I was sixteen or seventeen, but even then I still knew very, very little ...

The work that really triggered gay awareness for me was my quite accidental discovery of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde. And although I was probably fifteen when I read that book I instantly recognized myself as Basil Hallward. (18-19; emphasis added)

I must say that when I was writing and researching my articles and letters [in the 1950s] I did feel sometimes that I was working in a vacuum. But I wasn't completely alone. My omnivorous reading habits continued unabated throughout this period, and I read all the gay classics I could find. I was particularly interested in the historical and philosophical aspects of homosexuality, and read works by

Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and others. I read the classic works of Wilde, Proust, and Gide, and kept up with the latest gay literature, from Vidal ... and others. (57-58)

The wide-ranging inventory of titles in both of these passages clearly reveals Egan as both passionate and resourceful in his reading habits. From his accidental discovery of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* to his later interest in reading works of sexologists, Egan recalls the ways in which reading has shaped his understanding and acceptance of his sexuality throughout his life. Yet the first passage appears in Chapter 1, entitled "Beginnings"; and, the second, in Chapter 4, entitled "Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence: Jim Egan's Emergence As a Gay Activist during the 1950s." While these passages intimate an important connection in terms of content, their separate appearances in the book leave that very connection tenuous at best. To what extent was Egan's reading of, say, sexological case studies as an adult informed by his reading of "many biographies and autobiographies"? And, in turn, to what extent does this shape his desire to narrate his own life story? In short, as an interviewer, McLeod could have asked much more pointedly leading questions of his subject. Likewise, as an editor and compiler of those interviews, he could have drawn more concrete connections when the evidence warrants them.

Paradoxically, however, readers such as myself who gently fault some of McLeod's editorial decisions must necessarily also commend him for his obvious sensitivity toward, and his genuine respect for, his subject and evidence. For, in the end, McLeod has indeed produced "an oral history of Jim Egan" (13), as well as provided an extensive bibliography of Egan's correspondence between 1950 and 1964 in the book's several appendices. Even though the book focuses mainly on Egan's life in Toronto during the 1950s and 1960s, McLeod's afterword and the chronology in Appendix A provide useful and thorough documentation of Egan's later years in British Columbia. *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence* will attract a wide range of readers, academic institutions, or local community archives interested in any or all of the following: autobiography and life narrative, the early history of Canadian gay and lesbian social activism, and the history of postwar Toronto. Those already familiar with Gary Kinsman's *The Regulation of Desire* will find *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence* an especially wonderful companion text: for

the latter offers a more elaborate and intimate glimpse of Jim Egan, an important figure whose life story helped to shape the larger narrative of gay and lesbian history in Canada.

Given that members of LGBT and queer communities often “do not have the institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built” (Warner 51), *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence* reminds us of the necessity to honor and embrace what we have inherited from the past, least of all as means with which to make intelligible the present historical moment and to shape the future. As Egan eloquently reminds us, “Gay people today have no idea what it was like being gay in those days. Homosexuality was not discussed openly in polite society. There were no positive gay role models” (86). To the extent that the book’s publication coincides with two anniversaries – the fiftieth anniversary of Jim Egan and Jack Nesbit’s relationship (23 August 1998) and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (September 1998) – readers of *Challenging the Conspiracy of Silence* are invited to celebrate our role models and the keepers of their stories.

Works Cited

- Kinsman, Gary. *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Heterosexualities*. Montréal: Black Rose, 1996.
- Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: Free, 1999.

Catherine Lake, ed. *ReCREATIONS: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Queer People*. Toronto: Queer Press, 1999. 192pp. \$14.95 (Cdn) ISBN 1-895564-06-9.

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At first, *ReCREATIONS* seemed destined to join the ranks of other anthologies on queers and religion which often chronicle the unfortunate experiences had by many gays and lesbians at the hands of organized religion. Happily, this presumption of mine