



Craig M. Loftin. *Letters to One: Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. 208 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-4298-3; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-4297-6.



Reviewed by Donna Knaff (ORISE Fellow, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command)

Published on H-Histsex (October, 2014)

Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

Something New, Something Old: LGBT Voices before Stonewall

Letter writing, Craig M. Loftin begins the introduction to his book, is a dying craft (p. 1). Using letters sent to *ONE*, the first openly gay magazine in the United States, *Letters to One: Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s* is an interesting look at the lives of gay men and lesbians from that era. *ONE*, Inc., was one of three major homophile organizations of the 1950s and 1960s, Loftin explains. He combed through a large collection of unlabeled boxes in the *ONE* archives to find letters that captured the fears, anxieties, and disasters that befell gay people during these years of McCarthyite repression and institutionalized homophobia, and that also demonstrated the growth of post-WWII gay and lesbian groups (p. 3).

The worth of these letters lies in the histories of self-identified gay men and lesbians from the critical pre-Stonewall era. Many led lives of subterfuge, secrecy, and thwarted sexuality in order to get or hold jobs and/or families. Their stories of dishonorable discharge from the military, sexual assault, and psychiatric treatment for their illness make for a compelling, if often dismaying,

insight into their life experiences.

A remarkable feature of many of the letters is the level of expression the writers adopted. Several letters discuss articulately and at length fiction, poetry, film, psychology, theories of homosexuality, drama, and other subjects. Other letters reveal only a pained acquaintance with education, spelling, and grammar, their messages perhaps even more poignant because their authors often had no historical, literary, or cultural context for their persecution. Some writers used the magazine editors and readers as their at-long-last listening ears, a receptive audience for people who have had to conceal their affections and orientations their whole lives. Many letter writers, consciously or unconsciously, showcased what Loftin calls their resilience and strategic adaptation with a sense of irony and even humor (p. 3).

Organized into five chapters, entitled Biography and Self-Analysis, Love, Sex, and Relationships, Repression and Defiance, Incarceration, and Representations and Stereotypes, *Letters to One* provides a criti-

cal insight into the 1950s and 1960s (post-WWII, pre-Stonewall), an era that is as important to historians of gender as the period between the world wars is to historians of war. Once the WWII military, with its "discharges for homosexuality and its "queer stockades," unwittingly assembled a society of men and women whose shame or condition of discharge kept them from returning home, the cities where they were demobilized (San Francisco, New York, etc.) became the birthplaces of lesbian and gay communities.

Other authors have covered similar topics but with different emphases. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (2012), Lillian Faderman, for example, explores lesbian lives in the 1950s and 1960s through a wide range of sources, including journals, unpublished manuscripts, songs, media accounts, novels, medical literature, pop

culture artifacts, and oral histories. Examining the same time period, Loftin narrows his focus specifically to one source—letters to *ONE* from men and women who were motivated for whatever reason to write to the editor. Loftin's study presents the stories of more men than women. This is a fact that Loftin acknowledges and explains: many more men than women wrote to *One*, so the stories of gay men are disproportionately represented. (Interestingly, some female readers did write to *One*, demanding to know why a lesbian viewpoint was not more represented.)

Although *Letters to One* is technically a secondary source, it often reads like a primary source. Short of actually visiting the *One* archive, this work may be the closest that Loftin's readers will come to hearing the voices of an earlier age of gays and lesbians.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Donna Knaff. Review of Loftin, Craig M., *Letters to One: Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. October, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38947>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.