'Historians Will Say They Were Just Good Friends': University Histories, Queer Histories

I'd like to begin with a Tiktok.[1] [show tiktok] I imagine some of you will have previously encountered versions of this meme, which circulates widely on social media. The message of the meme formula is that 'historians' are this external, and perhaps slightly villainous, force dedicated to erasing the reality of queer history, while the speaker and the presumed-queer viewer, *not* professional historians, are united in their shared understanding that they are uncovering the queer truth that 'historians' have sought to hide.

When I first started to notice these memes a couple years ago, I felt a bit attacked. I'm an academic historian, and my research and teaching tend to focus on telling complicated, nuanced, and often politically unsatisfying stories about the queer past. Am I 'historians'? Is this what my students think about my teaching?

But I was also intrigued. This meme makes some interesting claims about the nature of expertise; about the nature of research and teaching in academic history; about who gets to tell, and to claim ownership over, certain kinds of narratives about the past; and about how we can and should interpret the lives of people who lived in different times and places. More than thirty years ago, what was then called 'lesbian and gay' history was riven with something called the 'transhistoricist–social constructionist' debate: lesbian and gay historians, the vast majority of whom identified as lesbian and gay themselves, disagreed vociferously about whether it was politically important to establish connections between people in the past and present-day lesbians and gay men; or whether it was more important to understand on their own terms the social and cultural contexts in which people in the past lived, in which sexual orientation as such wasn't a part of how people understood their own identities or how society

[1] https://www.tiktok.com/@raynemcgowan/video/7054304236716444974, accessed 5 February 2022.

was organised. The upshot of this debate was that we academic historians reached a kind of compromise middle ground, though social constructionism mostly won out—but I think the 'historians will say they were just good friends' meme suggests that lots of up-and-coming, would-be queer historians outside professional academic history are demonstrating a renewed interest in the transhistoricist position. What does it mean to claim as queer people who didn't name themselves as such? How do we know whether two people were in a relationship, loved each other, or had sex? What can and can't archival documents tell us? And how important are those questions, actually, to what it means to practice queer history in the academy today?

In the next forty minutes or so, I'd like to invite us to think through these questions together, through the prism of the lives of some women who feature in the book I'm currently writing about gender and British higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [SLIDE] Margery Fry, Rose Sidgwick, and Marjorie Rackstraw were women academics and university administrators who pursued careers in the first decades of the twentieth century. In a historical moment in which it was unthinkable, and sometimes structurally impossible, for a middle-class woman both to marry and to pursue a professional career, Fry, Sidgwick, and Rackstraw all lived lives by definition opposed to opposite-sex marriage, reproduction, and the nuclear family. They also lived at a particular historical moment when the understanding of what intimacy between women meant was especially in flux. The category 'lesbian' was available to them—indeed, they lived at a time when the hetero/homo binary was becoming increasingly stable and hegemonic as a framework for distinguishing normal from abnormal behaviour, especially for women—but there is no evidence that any of them ever used it to understand themselves. All of them understood themselves as 'spinsters', as single women. But to what extent was a life lived outside marriage and reproduction choice, and to what extent was it circumstance, a byproduct of the

decision to put career first? How can we understand what Fry, Sidgwick, and Rackstraw meant to each other, and to the other important people in their lives, in terms that would have made sense to them? And what do their lives tell us about queer history, and what it means for academic historians like me to research and tell queer stories?

I am going to start by telling you the story of Fry, Sidgwick, and Rackstraw's overlapping lives, focusing particularly on the time that they all spent together working at the University of Birmingham and living as resident faculty in the women's hall of residence there. Once I've told the story, I'll offer some thoughts about what it all means. How historians have understood people like Fry, Sidgwick, and Rackstraw has changed over time, and their own archives don't allow us to draw any definitive, once-and-for-all conclusions about whether they 'were' or 'weren't' lesbian or queer, or whether the kinds of desires and intimate relationships they had look like the kinds of desires or intimate relationships we imagine as constitutive of 'being lesbian' today. But, I'll argue, whether Fry, Sidgwick, and Rackstraw *meant* to live queer lives or not, the life paths they carved out, for themselves and for other women, at odds with the imperatives of marriage and reproduction; the family and kinship structures they created; are and should be central to what we mean when we talk about 'queer history'.

Our story starts at Somerville College in 1894 [SLIDE], when Margery Fry arrived to read maths. Fry was from a very wealthy Quaker family—her grandfather had made a fortune as a chocolate manufacturer—and her father was a judge and she grew up in London. Fry's brothers went to Cambridge, but her parents did not believe in higher education for women. It took years of steady campaigning for Fry to convince her parents to allow her to attend

Somerville—though they insisted that she not sit any exams, concerned about the effect that the stress might have on her health.[2]

Somerville in the 1890s was a pivotal place and time in the history of women's higher education in Britain. Only fifteen years old in 1894, the college had quickly established itself as both a safe and respectable place for upper-middle-class parents to send their daughters, and as the nation's premier academic institution for intelligent and highly educated women with ambition. At Somerville, students adhered to strict norms of propriety and respectability—they had to attend lectures with a chaperone; they could not socialise with men students—but they were taught by the very best tutors and were encouraged to have the highest aspirations for their careers and for the contributions they might make to wider society. As compared to women students at other UK universities at this time, Somerville women tended to come from especially well-off and socially prominent backgrounds, and they tended accordingly to perceive themselves to have a noblesse-oblige responsibility to dedicate their lives to the good of society. Having pursued haphazard and winding roads through education at a time when girls' formal academic secondary education was still sparse, many were older than the average man Oxford student: well into their twenties at the time they began their degrees, and already moving beyond the typical age of marriage for women. Fry was twenty at the time she started university; her closest friends were 22 and 27. What work they would do—how they would make the best use of their social and educational advantages, and how

[2] Anne Logan, *The Politics of Penal Reform: Margery Fry and the Howard League* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 32; Mo Moulton, 'Margery Fry: Reflections on Birmingham's Queer Histories', lecture, University of Birmingham, February 2019.

they would give purpose and meaning to their lives—was of central concern to them.[3] In letters to each other in the years after they completed their studies, Fry and her friends discussed lofty ambitions: the law, politics, research academia—all remarkable aspirations in a time when women did not have the vote, could not read for the Bar, and Fry's parents hadn't even let her take the exams that would qualify her to be a schoolteacher or pursue graduate study.[4]

Though their ideas ranged widely, one career that Fry and her friends never considered was marriage. In the 1890s, almost 90% of all British women married at some point in their lives, but only 30% of women university graduates did.[5] For middle-class women at this time, formal paid employment and marriage were considered mutually exclusive. It was not considered respectable for middle-class women to work outside the home, many employers imposed formal 'marriage bars' that required women to resign their positions upon marriage, and (on the other side of the coin) it was those women who did not have husbands who most needed to earn their own livings. To be sure, there were increasing opportunities in this period for married women to assume vocations outside the home, whether through volunteer work, political and social activism, or working together with their husbands in a family business or a common intellectual project.[6] But by focusing their aspirations on professional careers, Fry and her friends were by definition removing marriage—and, therefore, children—from the life possibilities open to them. For some this was merely

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[3] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 34–36; Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College, 1879–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Janet Howarth, "'In Oxford but... Not of Oxford': The Women's Colleges," in *History of the University of Oxford*, ed. M.G. Brock and M.C. Curthoys, vol. 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 237–307. Numerous biographies and autobiographies record life in 1890s Somerville, among them Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Enid Huws Jones, *Margery Fry: The Essential Amateur* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966); Hilda D. Oakeley, *My Adventures in Education* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1939).

[4] Letters between Hilda Oakeley and Margery Fry, 1898–1904, Margery Fry Papers Box 27 Folder 8, Somerville.

[5] Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), 27; Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London: Routledge, 2006), 55–57.

[6] cite

an unfortunate byproduct of pursuing a career, for others the central attraction—but in either case, they became creative, crafting their own networks of intimacy, love, and care.

After she left Somerville, Fry had been languishing at home enduring a difficult relationship with her parents and struggling to work out what she might do with her life, when the Principal of Somerville offered her a job as the college librarian. She jumped at the chance to escape from her parents' house, and in addition to superintending the design and construction of a new library building, she developed a rich social and professional life in Oxford.

After the new library opened, Fry needed help running it, and she gained a new colleague: Rose Sidgwick, history tutor and assistant librarian. Sidgwick was three years younger than Fry, the eldest child of an Oxford academic. Though both Sidgwick and Fry were from affluent intellectual backgrounds, Sidgwick had grown up in an environment much more supportive of women's education and careers—her father was one of the most vocal and hard-working advocates of women's education in Oxford.[7] She had received an excellent secondary education, lived at home through university, received first-class results in her history examinations, and taught at a teacher-training college before joining Somerville in 1903.

We only have Sidgwick's letters to Fry, not the other way around. There is much we do not know about the internal content of their relationship and how they made sense of what they were to one another—a question with which Sidgwick herself sought to grapple. In an undated poem, written in honour of Fry's birthday, Sidgwick wrote that she struggled with how to express her feelings for Fry, when 'To talk of love… does not interest you'. The rest of

[7] Emily Rutherford, 'Arthur Sidgwick's *Greek Prose Composition*: Gender, Affect, and Sociability in the Late-Victorian University', *Journal of British Studies* 56, no. 1 (January 2017): 91–116.

the poem switches back and forth between the language of 'friend' and 'lover': 'take your will', the speaker says about the terminology.[8] Yet, reading through Sidgwick's letters to Fry, a picture emerges of the two women's physical and emotional intimacy, and of a bond unlike their connections to other friends and family. Sidgwick's letters address Fry as 'Dearest', expressing pain when they are apart and a desire to be reunited. In one 1906 letter, Sidgwick says that she cannot quite find the right words to express how she feels about Fry, 'except by saying that 24 hours of you gives me a clearer & wider perception of what is meant by Christianity'.[9] Nor was this only a disembodied, spiritual friendship: in a letter in which Sidgwick told Fry about a time when she went skinny-dipping while on holiday, she wrote, 'I thought at the time that you would like me better if you'd seen me splashing there with nothing on!'[10] Above all, Sidgwick's expressions of love were playful and open-hearted. She signed one letter, 'Yours-that-loves-you-more-every-day-so-that-I-don't-know-where-we-shall-be-in-1950-, R.S.'[11]

We'll find out, by the end of this talk, where Sidgwick and Fry were in 1950. But first, the next step in their careers: a step they took together. Shortly after the new Somerville library opened, Fry applied for, and received, a job as the inaugural warden of University House, the first women's hall of residence at the University of Birmingham. [SLIDE] Though there had been a technical college in Birmingham for decades, in 1900 work had begun on a new, planned campus in the leafy suburb of Edgbaston: Britain's first 'redbrick' and first campus university.[12] Gender integration had always been central to the vision for Birmingham. The university was headed by progressive administrators who sought to offer

[8] 'Poems written by Rose Sidgwick for Margery Fry', Margery Fry Papers Box 29 Folder 3, Somerville.
[9] Rose Sidgwick, letter to Margery Fry, 16 April 1906, Box 29 Folder 5, Somerville.
[10] Rose Sidgwick, letter to Margery Fry, 10 September 1907, Box 30 Folder 6, Somerville.
[11] Rose Sidgwick, letter to Margery Fry, 12 September 1909, Box 29 Folder 6, Somerville.
[12] William Whyte, *Redbrick: A Social and Architectural History of Britain's Civic Universities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

the same academic opportunities to women as to men, while still recognising that women pursuing higher education in this period needed distinct forms of support. While almost half of women university students outside of Oxford and Cambridge in this period lived at home and commuted, others lived too far away, and would not be able to attend university unless they could access safe, respectable accommodation and welfare support designed with women students specifically in mind.[13]

Fry was thirty when she accepted the University House job, and she saw it as a fork in the road. Two years previous, she had turned down a proposal of marriage from an Oxford clergyman and academic. By moving to Birmingham, she perceived herself to be firmly and finally leaving behind the possibility of marrying and having children, instead devoting herself to a life of work that would, she hoped, be socially useful as well as personally satisfying.[14] Her first step in this regard was to turn wardening into a profession. The first generation of wardens of women's halls had been respectable widows who saw their role as keeping house and chaperoning the young women in their care. Sometimes they even refused payment as beneath their dignity.[15] Fry, by contrast, only accepted the job on the condition that she would be able to advise students academically and guide their intellectual development. She negotiated a higher salary and a seat on the university senate.[16] As the students came, Fry undertook to get to know each one personally, finding out about her academic interests and life aspirations. She treated them as adults: replacing long lists of rules

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[13] For statistics on student residency see Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London: Routledge, 2006), 9.
[14] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 45–46; Jones, *Margery Fry*, 67.
[15] Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870-1939* (London: University College London Press, 1995), 100.
[16] Letter from Margery Fry to Charlotte Chamberlain, Chair of University House Committee, November 16, 1904, Margery Fry Papers, Box 31 Folder 1, Somerville.

with a general injunction to respect one's fellow residents, and permitting a fairly wide degree of social interaction with men students.[17]

The year after Fry started at Birmingham, Sidgwick followed. She was hired as a history lecturer: one of the first women in the UK to gain an academic position that was also open to men applicants, though it's tempting also to think of her and Fry as having cleverly solved the so-called 'two-body problem' that bedevils academic couples to this day. She moved into University House too, as did other women administrators and faculty: a philosophy lecturer, two French teaching assistants, a bursar, a deputy warden.[18] Most of the faculty had been educated in the Oxford and Cambridge women's colleges, and they drew on what they had learned there about how to craft residential educational communities. They prized academic success, but also fun—amateur dramatics were a particular focus of their efforts. They established a JCR and encouraged student self-governance within it, but also prized faculty participation in extracurricular life and easy relations between staff and students. In her first term, seeking to get what was at that time a chilly and distant community to relate to one another as friends, Fry led the hall's residents in making a snowman in the likeness of the university president.[19] Candid photographs from the early years of University House show students posing informally, laughing and smiling, offering a glimpse of the culture of this community [SLIDE].[20]

In their early years, women's colleges and halls advertised themselves as 'families'. Somerville's first advertising brochure had called it 'an English family'; Lady Margaret Hall, not to be outdone, advertised itself as 'a Christian family'.[21] To twentieth-century feminist

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[17] Jones, *Margery Fry*, 69, 82.
[18] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 55.
[19] Margery Fry, typescript memoir of the early years of University House, n.d. (c. 1912), UB/HUH/A/9/1, Birmingham.
[20] Photo album (n.d.), UB/HUH/A/8/1, Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham.
[21] cite

historians, this signified the unsatisfying compromises that pioneers of women's education had had to make in order to gain a tenuous foothold on hostile ground. A 'family' seemed to signify the families of origin whom so many women, like Fry, had defied in order to pursue higher education and professional work.

But to dismiss so quickly talk of 'family' as regressive risks blinding us to the ways that University House *was* a family. It was not a normative Victorian nuclear family headed by a stern Christian patriarch and organised around a male breadwinner ideal. But it was a wide extended family, a space of domesticity, informality, friendship and fun. It had pets (a dog joined the household early on); benevolent uncles, in the form of the university's senior male administrators, who dropped in unannounced for dinner; and a commitment to treating everyone from the domestic staff to distinguished visitors with respect, if not reverence.[22] It had a younger generation, in the form of the students whose personal and professional development Fry, Sidgwick, and their colleagues guided; and it had an older generation, comprising several resident senior members—though (I want to suggest) Fry's and Sidgwick's dyadic relationship was at its centre, the heart of what made University House a family and a home.

To explore this further, we need to take the story forward a few years, into the upheaval brought about by the First World War. At the end of the 1913–14 academic year, Fry had resigned as warden. Having inherited money from the family chocolate fortune, she felt that it would be unethical also to draw a salary, and intended to enter local politics. She and Sidgwick rented a house together, while Sidgwick continued teaching at Birmingham. But when Britain entered the war in August 1914, plans changed. Fry joined the Quaker war relief effort, camping just behind the lines of the Western Front, providing food parcels, first aid,

[22] Jones, *Margery Fry*, 75–76, 82.

and childcare to French refugees whose villages had been destroyed. She inspired several University House students to follow her example—but Sidgwick stayed behind, supervising University House's move into rented accommodation after the War Office requisitioned their building.[23]

Sidgwick struggled with guilt at remaining in Birmingham. Most of her friends had taken up war work, and her youngest brother Hugh, to whom she was close, was an army captain. The letters she exchanged with Fry while the latter was in France were filled with uncertainty on both sides. Fry, writing shortly after arriving in France in the spring of 1915, expressed anxiety about 'the vagueness and vastness of what I have to do', and wished Sidgwick could come to France to reassure her that what she was doing was useful.[24] Sidgwick's letters are those of the partner who has been left behind: 'darling, I am thankful you are not a soldier fighting', she wrote in 1915.[25] A 1917 letter accompanied a parcel including home comforts such as powdered shampoo; in the letter, Sidgwick wondered if she and other University House staff should simply shut the hostel for the duration of the war and all join Fry in France.[26] Throughout their wartime correspondence, both Fry and Sidgwick wrote of the difficulty of not being able to talk to each other or to be close to one another, of the limits of what can be said in a letter. Though Fry was 'not a soldier fighting', she was still enduring discomfort and danger, and she and Sidgwick figured their relationship in the paradigm of couples torn asunder by the conflagration. There was an unspoken tension, too, it seems, in their language as they worked through challenging moral questions about whether they and their friends and family were doing enough or the right kind of work.

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[23] Jones, *Margery Fry*, 99, 102; Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 77.
[24] Margery Fry, letters to Rose Sidgwick, April 28 and May 22, 1915, Margery Fry Papers Box 30 Folder 1, Somerville.
[25] Rose Sidgwick, letters to Margery Fry, August 7, 1914, Margery Fry Papers Box 30 Folder 7, Somerville.
[26] Rose Sidgwick, letter to Margery Fry, February 12, 1917, Margery Fry Papers Box 30 Folder 11, Somerville.

One of Fry's closest friends, a Birmingham maths lecturer, was killed in action in 1916. In 1917, Sidgwick's brother Hugh was also killed. Sidgwick and her sisters became close to Hugh's fiancée, adopting her as part of their family as they mourned together.[27] Both Fry and Sidgwick were devastated by these losses, and struggled to ascertain what each other were truly feeling and how best to support each other.[28] But Sidgwick found a new source of meaning in imagining that the war might indirectly enact progressive political change. Drawing on her background as a historian, she lectured on internationalism for the Workers' Educational Association and the League of Nations Union. She wrote to Fry with a renewed sense of optimism about the conversations she was having with other internationalists in Birmingham: 'With the suffrage, & Russia on the way to freedom, & some hope of a League of Nations, one can't help seeing that something has come out of these three black years'.[29]

An opportunity to contribute to the internationalist cause came in summer 1918, when the Foreign Office invited Fry to join a 'British Educational Mission' to the United States. [SLIDE] Since the war had foreclosed the possibility of academic collaboration with Germany for both British and American academics, the British and US governments saw an opportunity to use universities to strengthen a strategic bond with one another. Fry was to join six other academics and university administrators on a four-month tour of dozens of US colleges and universities, promoting awareness of the UK higher education sector and opportunities for international collaboration in research and teaching.[30]

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[27] Mo Moulton, *The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women* (London: Corsair, 2019), 59.
[28] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 84–85.
[29] Rose Sidgwick, letter to Margery Fry, April 2, 1917, Margery Fry Papers Box 30 Folder 2, Somerville; see also June 15, 1915, Folder 8.
[30] British Bureau of Information, *Visit of the British Educational Mission to the United States, October-December 1918* (New York, 1918); "Minutes of the Meeting of the American Council on Education," 3–6 December 1918, Virginia Gildersleeve Papers Box 44, Columbia, 1, 6–7; "British Educators to Visit America," *New York Times*, October 6, 1918, 9; "The British Universities Mission," *New York Times*, October 12, 1918, 12; "The Universities Mission to America. Interview with Professor Sir Henry Jones," *Glasgow University Magazine*, April 30, 1919, DC198/1/27, GUA, 183–185.

Fry had returned from France nine months previous, but her father was dying and she was needed to support her family of origin. She suggested that Sidgwick go to America in her stead.[31] Sidgwick hesitated at first, but the trip was an unmissable opportunity. She scrambled to find people to cover her teaching for the autumn 1918 term, and set sail alongside the Mission's other woman delegate, Bedford College English professor Caroline Spurgeon. At the dock in New York they were met by their American host, Dean of Barnard College Virginia Gildersleeve, at the time the US's most prominent woman university administrator.[32]

Sidgwick, Spurgeon, and their five male colleagues had an ambitious itinerary. They were feted everywhere they went, with ample opportunity to revel in their newfound celebrity status.[33] Sidgwick's and Spurgeon's schedule was especially hectic, necessitating squeezing extra visits to women's colleges in among the main itinerary of men's and coeducational institutions, and involving a bevy of high-society invitations in Boston, New York, and Washington. They also addressed countless non-academic women's organisations, from social clubs to suffrage campaigns.[34] Despite the challenges of the trip, Sidgwick's travel diary shows the excitement with which she greeted the new information she was gleaning about life for women students in the US. She found the campuses 'delightful', 'heavenly', and 'jolly'. She

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[31] Jones, *Margery Fry*, 108.
[32] Rose Sidgwick, letter to Margery Fry, September 8, 1918, Margery Fry Papers Box 30 Folder 12, Somerville; "COLUMBIA HONORS BRITISH SCHOLARS: Educational Mission Members Guests of College--Two Added Delegates Arrive-- To Undertake Extensive Tour," *Christian Science Monitor* October 12, 1918, http://search.proquest.com/docview/510077763/abstract/299A841D1C3C45C4PQ/10?accountid=10226.
[33] "WORD 'SURRENDER' FULLY SATISFYING: Comment on President Wilson's Note to Berlin Is Generally Favorable--Cheers at Dinner of Lotus Club in New York," *Christian Science Monitor,* October 25, 1918, http://search.proquest.com/docview/510099927/abstract/299A841D1C3C45C4PQ/24?accountid=10226; "HAVE DISCOVERED NEW AMERICA, SAY BRITONS: Members of Educational Mission, Speaking at Columbia, Impressed by Country's Soul.," *New York Times*, October 13, 1918, http://search.proquest.com/docview/100174339/abstract/299A841D1C3C45C4PQ/13?accountid=10226; "BRITISH EDUCATORS ARE GREETED HERE: Many College Presidents Attend Reception," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 30, 1918; "Society," *Washington Post*, October 15, 16, 17, and 18, 1918, http://search.proquest.com/docview/145617078/abstract/299A841D1C3C45C4PQ/3?accountid=10226.
[34] For miscellaneous press clippings in Spurgeon's papers see PP7/6/1/4, RHCA.

celebrated the resources Americans were willing to dedicate to higher education, their state-of-the-art facilities and spacious campuses.[35]

While all this was happening, an unusually virulent strain of influenza was circulating in the United States. It had arisen in 1917, probably somewhere in the American Midwest or in Western Europe. As soldiers demobilised at the end of the war, they carried it around the world. It infected 500 million people globally and killed as many as 100 million—6% of the global population—most of them healthy young adults.

Spurgeon and Sidgwick both came down with influenza while visiting New York. Spurgeon recovered quickly, but Sidgwick became critically ill. She was admitted to the Columbia University Hospital, where she spent over two weeks before dying on 28 December 1918. No one had thought to tell Fry that Sidgwick was even ill. She learned of Sidgwick's death on 1 January, when Sidgwick's sister Ethel sent her a telegram—four days later, after an obituary had already run in the *New-York Tribune*. Fry felt consumed with survivor's guilt, feeling as if, in having nominated Sidgwick for the trip in her stead, it was all her fault. She was also angry that no one had told her—that she had been unable to send Sidgwick a telegram saying she loved her before she died.[36] Though no one from the UK was able to travel to New York for the funeral, Ethel came a few months later to see Sidgwick's grave and order a headstone. Fry could only pack up Sidgwick's belongings to send to her family of origin and vacate their house in Birmingham. She moved to London, asking a friend to come sit with her in the last hours before leaving Birmingham because being alone in the empty house was 'unbearable'.[37]

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[35] Sidgwick, 'Diary of US trip', Margery Fry Papers, Box 30 Folder 3, Somerville.
[36] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 88; Moulton, 'Margery Fry'; 'Miss Rose Sidgwick', *New-York Tribune*, 31 December 1918, 11.
[37] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 87.

Despite these ways in which, in death, Sidgwick's and Fry's relationship was denied recognition, there were paradigms available with which Fry could make sense of her loss. In 1918, countless people across all levels of society had lost loved ones—as of course had Fry and Sidgwick themselves, a couple years earlier. And Sidgwick had, after all, been on a diplomatic mission in aid of the war effort. At the high-church Anglican funeral in the Columbia university chapel, her coffin was draped in a Union Jack, and the pall-bearers included senior diplomats, politicians, and American university administrators. The women academics' American host Virginia Gildersleeve later recalled, 'I felt that she had died as truly in the service of her country as had the thousands of her young countrymen who had fallen on the fields of Flanders and of France'.[38] Fry echoed this comparison. Writing to her mother about her regret that she could not have been at Sidgwick's side as she lay ill, she said, 'of course it's what happened to all those soldiers'.[39] If Sidgwick was a soldier, that gave Fry a script through which she could participate in a kind of collective mourning alongside those who had also lost lovers and partners in the war. She wrote Sidgwick's official obituary, and had printed a collection of Sidgwick's poetry and speeches that she could send to former students and other well-wishers.[40] [SLIDE] And we know that she must have saved Sidgwick's papers, including the love-letters and poetry Sidgwick sent her and the travel diary she kept in the US, because those papers today are kept at Somerville, forever interleaved among Fry's own. The faculty and alumnae of University House created a small memorial garden in Sidgwick's honour. Although University House is now part of the

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[38] Virginia C. Gildersleeve, *Many a Good Crusade: Memoirs of Virginia Crocheron Gildersleeve* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 130.
[39] Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 88.
[40] Margery Fry, 'In Memoriam. Rose Sidgwick', 24 January 1919, MS Eng. misc. c. 706 f. 3, Bodleian; Rose Sidgwick, 'Writings', 1918, UB/HUH/A?10/6, Birmingham.

business school at Birmingham, the garden is still there; for the rest of her life, Fry would send money for its upkeep.[41]

Though Fry's and Sidgwick's relationship ended prematurely and in tragedy, it had some important legacies. One was a transnational network of women academics, united under the internationalist principles that Sidgwick had sought to further. Sidgwick's colleague Caroline Spurgeon and their host Virginia Gildersleeve themselves entered into what was to become a 24-year domestic partnership, [SLIDE] and they became the founders and first presidents of the International Federation of University Women, an organisation that mostly organised international fellowship and study abroad programmes but that believed highly educated women were uniquely positioned to solve international relations' most intractable problems. One of the organisation's first acts was to establish a Rose Sidgwick Memorial Fellowship for a British woman to pursue an exchange year or graduate study in the US.[42]

The IFUW had world-historical objectives. But arguably more important, and lasting, were Fry's and Sidgwick's legacies closer to home. The family of University House was not a biological one, but in its own way it produced children. One such child was Marjorie Rackstraw, who came to Birmingham in 1908 to study history and joined the community at University House. [SLIDE] She adopted her history lecturer and the hall's warden as her aunts; when she pursued an exchange year in the US after taking her degree, Sidgwick and Fry wrote her joint letters, addressing her as 'dearest niece'.[43] In 1913, Rackstraw came back to University House as bursar, but on the outbreak of war she followed Fry's example and

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[41] Charlotte Sidgwick, letter to Beatrice Orange, June 28, 1919, UB/HUH/A/3/2, Birmingham; Margery Fry, letter to Julia Friend, 17 October 1955, UB/HUH/A/3/5/1/14, Birmingham; Moulton, 'Reflections on Birmingham's Queer Histories'.

[42] Virginia Gildersleeve, 'How It Started', January 1951, Virginia Gildersleeve Papers, Box 47, Columbia; 'The Rose Sidgwick Memorial Fellowship' pamphlet, Gildersleeve Papers, Box 78, Columbia.

[43] Enid Huws Jones, "Rackstraw, Marjorie (1888–1981), educationist and social worker," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 23, 2004, accessed 28 September 2019 at https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-52396; numerous letters from Sidgwick to Rackstraw, 1912–1918, Coll-705, EUSC.

devoted herself to Quaker war relief, despite not having a Quaker background herself. Returning in 1924 from her work helping famine victims in Russia, she took up the position of warden at Masson Hall, the University of Edinburgh's first hall of residence for women. Here, too, Rackstraw learned from her aunts' example, working to revolutionise the role of the warden within the university ecosystem. In her hiring negotiations she secured a higher salary, a promise to hire an assistant warden, and a vote on relevant university committees. Within six months of beginning her work, she developed a new financial plan for the hall that would allow for expansion, and—in a critical statement of the role's professionalisation—she secured membership in the Federated Superannuation Scheme for Universities, the ten-year-old national pension scheme for university staff.[44]

As at University House, the culture that pertained among Masson staff and students was not only informal, but took a modern approach to supervision of the hall's residents that recognised that they were adults and that the war had altered expectations for middle-class young women's behaviour. Rackstraw's scrapbooks include annual group portraits of the hall's residents: arranged in rows, but candidly, smiling and laughing with their arms around each other. Dogs and babies appear in some of these photos, telegraphing the sense that Masson was a home for students, resident faculty and domestic staff.[45]

Rackstraw remained warden at Masson until 1937, when she was 49. Like Fry, she inherited some money that meant she could pursue volunteer work and local politics instead. Like Fry, she moved to London. While Fry continued to have an illustrious public career, as a distinguished prison reform advocate, higher-education administrator, and public intellectual, Rackstraw worked closer to home, serving as a Labour member of the London County

[44] Minutes of Masson Hall Committee, 1894–1935, EUA GD58/1, EUSC.
[45] Masson Hall Photo Albums, n.d. (c. 1930s), Coll-705, EUSC. On the community of interwar Masson see also Masson Association Newsletters.

Council and advocating in particular for the needs of the elderly. In 1968, a Hampstead housing association that had built a new block of flats for older people wanted to name it after Rackstraw. By this time 80 years old, she initially resisted—but she relented because she realised that it was a way to pass on her family name. [SLIDE] The flats still stand on Primrose Hill Road. There are many kinds of children. Some are council flats made of red brick.

After the Second World War, Fry became a popular contributor on the BBC, at a time when few women's voices were heard on the radio.[46] On Tuesday, 2 December 1952 at 9.55pm, she presented a talk on the Home Service entitled 'The Single Woman'. [SLIDE] Proposing to speak 'as a spinster to spinsters', Fry—radically—spoke openly of the pain and loneliness of going without marriage (by implication, without having sexual fulfilment), and without children; of 'simply watching all the things taken for granted in other lives passing you by'.[47] Seventy-eight years old when she delivered this talk, this sense of having fundamentally missed out is how Fry chose to characterise the entire sweep of her life.

Coming across the transcript of this talk in Fry's papers challenged the view I had built up from the rest of her archival record. It pushed me to rethink the reading I had developed of her life outside of marriage as entirely freely chosen, and of her relationship with Sidgwick as for her equivalent to, or perhaps even better than, an opposite-sex marriage recognised by church and state. It also pushed me to look again at, and really to see, the intimacies with men that she had enjoyed throughout her life: her courtship with the Oxford academic when she was at Somerville, her close friendship with the Birmingham mathematician who'd been killed in the war. How Fry narrated her own life—at least from

[46] Anne Logan, 'Gender, Radio Broadcasting and the Role of the Public Intellectual: The BBC Career of Margery Fry, 1928–1958', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 40, no. 2 (April 2020): 389–406.
[47] S. Margery Fry, 'The Single Woman' (BBC talk MS, 3 December 1952), Margery Fry Papers Box 41 Folder 3, Somerville College Archives.

this retrospective moment in the 1950s—challenges, certainly, any simplistic reading of it as a story of queer fulfilment and self-actualisation. The real pain in her language at having missed out on something she truly wanted is not only an expression of social ostracisation due to having an unconventional lifestyle; it is an authentic assertion that her life did not afford her the kinds of intimacies and relationships that she desired.

So where does this leave us? I'd like to close this story with three morals.

The first is about what academic queer history actually is. As the British queer historian Laura Doan has written, queer history is a *method*, not an object of study.[48] It's a lens through which to view indeterminacies and irregularities, those elements of lives, communities, and feelings that seem—in the original meaning of the word 'queer'—slightly askew. Queer history is what allows us to apprehend how Fry thought about herself as a lifelong 'single woman'; it's what allows us to leave suspended and unresolved the question of whether and how Sidgwick's and Fry's relationship was erotic or sexual; it's what allows us to, cautiously, situate Sidgwick, Fry, and Rackstraw alongside others in their time and place who lived lives against and outside of marriage and the nuclear family. Academic queer history seeks precisely not to come down on one side or another of the 'were they or weren't they' question. As the preeminent queer theorist Eve Sedgwick wrote in 1994, 'That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically'.[49] But the project of queer history can also respect, and sit alongside, the many ways that we, historians and not, construct our own folk genealogies of gender and

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[48] Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[49] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 8.

sexual minority communities, finding echoes and resonances—at times surprising ones—in the lives of those long-dead. Queer history is not in the business of denying people the personal meaning they might derive from relating to historical actors—but it *is* in the business of asking different, and I hope in some ways more sophisticated and less satisfying, questions.

The second moral of the story is—contra to everything I just said about queer history—presentist, and it is political. Since the 1970s, gay and queer politics have been about so much more than staking a claim for the validity of congenital same-sex sexual object choice. Central, among other things, to the demands of radical gay and queer activists has been a critique of the nuclear family as the primary site of affective bonding and personal loyalty. Gay and queer people often experience rejection from their families of origin, and have often not had their most important relationships recognised by the state, religious institutions, or society. Out of this has emerged the space to imagine other possibilities. We don't need to read people in the past as having had dyadic, monogamous, romantic partnerships in order to appreciate possibilities for more multivalent stories about intimacy and connection. Fry's life is a story about at least one dyadic partnership, but also about a strained but ongoing committed relationship to her family of origin; about other close friendships with women and with men; about proteges like Marjorie Rackstraw who became family too. My point in saying this is to ask us, if we think back to the meme with which I began this talk, to take the 'just' out of 'just good friends'—and to appreciate what the gay philosopher Michel Foucault called 'friendship as a way of life' as central to the queer political project. To call people in the past 'good friends' should not be to minimise their relationship, but rather to celebrate the many ways people have found connection and community with one another, often in the face of oppressive social and political structures.

And, finally, the third moral. I'd like to suggest that it's no accident that the story of queer history, community, intimacy, and chosen family that I've told today took place within the context of universities. Ever since the oldest European universities were established as religious foundations whose members were expected to conform to clerical celibacy, residential higher education has afforded possibilities for family and community life beyond or outside of marriage and biological reproduction. For centuries residential collegiate life has offered a refuge to those who could not or did not want to marry, and has also offered a way for those who could not, or did not want, to have children of their own to concern themselves with the care of the young. The queer story I want to leave you with today is not only that of Fry's and Sidgwick's relationship, but that of their care for their student, Marjorie Rackstraw, who followed her adoptive aunts' example and became a warden just like them. [SLIDE]