

Female Husbands: A Trans History

Jen Manion

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Jen Manion's *Female Husbands* explores the history of gender-nonconforming people who dared to be themselves.

Female husbands first entered popular consciousness in eighteenth-century Great Britain. These individuals were assigned female at birth but, for mostly unknown reasons, chose to dress, work, live, and take wives as men, despite the threat of discovery and punishment. Manion spotlights these extraordinary individuals and their legacies.

Manion analyzes contemporary media coverage to trace the lives of female husbands and others who bucked gender norms. Public reactions to outed female husbands were often hostile and mocking. Manion is sympathetic and respectful, according them the humanity they have long been denied.

The media grappled with the existence of female husbands, Manion shows, but the narrative changed over time to make them as nonthreatening to social norms as possible. In addition to discussing matters of gender, sex, and sexual orientation, the book confronts the roles played by race, suffrage, colonialism, and class in the lives and depictions of female husbands.

The book acknowledges that some details are unknowable, including reasons for female husbands' transitions to manhood, wives' reasons for entering into their marriages, and how female husbands might identify today—as transgender, nonbinary, lesbian, and/or something else. This work can only speculate regarding the thoughts and feelings of the people involved.

The meaning of the term “female husbands” was diluted into uselessness by the start of the twentieth century, but this does not diminish the courage of female husbands and their wives, or the weight of their accomplishments. Rather, it serves as a poignant reminder that, no matter how terminology and attitudes have changed, queer and gender nonconforming people have always existed.

Female Husbands is a fascinating LGBTQ+ historical study spanning nearly two hundred years on both sides of the Atlantic.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2020)

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