

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Danielle Scrimshaw, author of *She and Her Pretty Friend: The Hidden History of Australian Women Who Love Women*, and we'll be chatting today about two such women, Harriet Elphinstone Dick and Alice Moon. So would you like to start off with an introduction of these two women?

DS: So Harriet was a swimmer and she was also, she later became a teacher when she migrated to Melbourne in 1875 with Alice Moon, who was her friend, possibly romantic partner, definitely a business partner. They taught swimming at the St. Kilda Baths when they came to Melbourne and later they opened up Melbourne's first women's-only gym and it could have possibly been Australia's first women's-only gym because I haven't heard of any such institution in Sydney around the same time. So they opened that in 1879 and it was originally located on Swanston Street and then later moved to a bigger building on Collins Street and it was quite popular at the time.

AT: And so Harriet became quite well known in Melbourne, like she was appearing regularly in the newspapers and she taught the children of influential settlers. She was sort of a semi-major figure in Melbourne at the time.

DS: Yeah, especially because during this time as well, Australia's kind of like settler population was very small as well and so it wasn't difficult to become quite well known within that population in Melbourne. So she was very active in the community and taught influential people's daughters and everything to swim at St. Kilda. And then later when she and Alice opened the gymnasium, that got a lot of coverage in the media. So they were quite well-known and respected and they taught at public schools as well. So they travelled long distance to teach gymnastics and physical health to children and students across Victoria even. They went to like Geelong and Ballarat. So they were kind of known out of Melbourne as well in the wider colony of Victoria, which is quite interesting.

AT: And they were focused on fitness as a form of women's empowerment.

DS: Yeah, they were quite like early feminists for the time. Especially during this time, there was some early suffragist campaigning around Victoria and the other Australian colonies. So there was white women campaigning for white women's suffrage. And you had this idea of like the new woman, which was mostly kind of like more independent women who weren't so financially dependent on men and wanted to kind of better themselves, both like physically and mentally. They wanted to learn and they wanted to wear appropriate dress so pants and like the divided skirt, which I kind of just consider a skort, I think. I think that's what we call it now. So yeah, they were wearing new clothing, they were riding bikes and they were becoming more intelligent and working on themselves. It was self-care, I think, a time of self-care and women's suffrage.

AT: And so Harriet and Alice moved to the country for a few years, 1884 to '88.

DS: So they met up at Beacon's Field, which nowadays is around kind of Berwick and Narre Warren. Not what we would consider the country, it's kind of like outer eastern suburbs in Melbourne. But at the time, it definitely was country in that it wasn't like a very built-up area. So they had like this property and a big land. They were able to afford both the gym and like the housing from Alice Moon, who had the wealth in the relationship. She inherited a lot of money when her father passed away, he was a doctor in England. So she was able to fund where they lived and their business and everything while Harriet was kind of like the name and the face behind the business. So they moved to the country in upper Beacon's Field in the 1880s. I know that they raised poultry, but I'm not sure what else they did and why specifically they were there, because it did distance themselves from Melbourne where their gymnasium was still being held and they still were travelling to teach at schools. And maybe that's why they didn't live there for very long because they did end up selling that property. And I think it was after they sold that property, they both went their separate ways as well. So maybe there was some kind of argument out in the country. I'm not sure.

AT: Yeah, when we're talking about the, you know, were they just friends? Were they more? I think the fact that they moved together to this sort of remote college where they were still having to commute into Melbourne, which having done that travel, I can tell you, it's still a pain to get into Melbourne from that area even with public transport. And, you know, even more so to go to Ballarat. So for anyone who's not familiar, like from this area to Ballarat is still a couple hours on the train today and they were doing that every Wednesday and then like returning to Melbourne the same night. And it seems like that didn't last very long. But yeah, I just can't imagine unless you're in some form of committed relationship, why else would you do that with another person?

DS: Yeah, you would have to be like very, very close friends. And well, what is the line between very, very close friends and girlfriends, honestly? So yeah, it seemed that for a long period of time, they were very like committed to one another and shared most of their lives together. Like there was, I've read about some instances where Alice Moon traveled to Tasmania without Harriet, with some other friends. But apart from that, they seem to be together most of the time. So what you would kind of consider any sort of heterosexual relationship as well. And they were known as a collective and maybe they did move out to the country to kind of have a bit of space and a bit more quiet and away from, you know, judgment and eyes.

AT: So I'm personally asexual, but I'm not aromantic. So like I'm married, but I'm still asexual. And you know, when we're talking about queer erasure, it's sort of like proving a negative when we say maybe this person was asexual, but we don't like there's really no way to prove that negative. And so looking at a story like this, it's sort of like even if it wasn't a sexual relationship, it still could have been a romantic relationship. And I think that people conflate those a lot of the time.

DS: Yeah, I think that's very much the case, especially when you're looking at historical figures. And if you're trying to rely on evidence like sexual relationship, like if you're trying to find evidence of like, oh, these women had sex together, then you're, well, you're not going to find it

most of the time anyway, unless you're reading about Anne Lister, who had her coded diaries and everything, which were coded for a reason. And that's a very like special case. Like that's not the norm. So if that's what you're relying on, then you're not going to have a very big scope for queer history. And it's also limiting the ways that you're looking at queerness, even like modern queerness is like it's not so tied up in the act, the physical act of sex. You can have a queer relationship without that physical element. So yeah, I think it's quite silly to limit it to that.

AT: I was actually just talking to someone else about, and the Anne Lister diary came up, and the fact that not only was it in code, but it was actually hidden in a wall. After Anne's death, it was found by I believe her great-nephew, someone like that. And he and a friend find this diary and they were able to decode it. The friend was like, oh, you have to destroy this. You can't have this, you know, staining your family reputation. And, you know, fortunately for everyone, the nephew didn't. He put it back in the wall and it was found in a more progressive time, thankfully. But you do have to wonder, you know, how many of those stories were lost in that way. And that's, you know, the people who were confident and protected enough, because of course, Anne had a lot of privileges.

DS: Yes, yeah.

AT: So yeah, the people who were even daring to document it in the first place. But that's that's a whole other tangent.

DS: Yeah, no, but like that's that's the case. And when you're reading about all these women, especially there are other women I wrote about in my book who were quite like academic and like they were lecturers or they had like, they were literate. So I know that they would have had lots of like, they would have wrote letters. They might have wrote papers for their own studies and, or diaries. And just the fact that not like we don't know where any of this is, it just makes me wonder whether like they were purposely destroyed or whether they're just forgotten somewhere. If one of their descendants chucked it out because they thought there was no worth to it or because they, I don't know. Especially when you're when you're kind of like reading about women who didn't really have any like public prominence at the time. So if they were just like your ordinary everyday man, everyday woman, then yeah, they were kind of like forgotten in the past. And if no one thinks that their papers were are worth keeping, then you lose all of that. You lose that archive of material. You can only have his like the history of like things that are recorded and kept, I suppose.

AT: As we're talking about how the stories of prominent people are more likely to be saved and coming back to that fact that Harriet was relatively prominent in their community at the time, it does seem like she was the more front and center partner in the relationship. Like I believe she even had a reputation as a swimmer before they came to Australia.

DS: Yeah.

AT: But I feel like Alice was also quite an interesting person, if not as well known and well documented.

DS: Yeah, definitely. I think yeah, we know a lot more about Harriet now, but Alice seems to be just as influential at the time and very like well known and respected. So she worked alongside Harriet with the gym and everything. But after they, after they parted ways, Alice opened up a restaurant on Elizabeth Street for a short period of time. And then she moved to Sydney and pursued journalism and writing. And she was kind of in this circle of like-minded progressive women. Like a lot of women who worked in suffrage leagues and everything. I think Rose Scott was at her funeral and Rose Scott was like a very prominent first wave-feminist for the time. So it's kind of a big deal. So she moved in these social circles and was quite respected. And then when she passed away, very young, she died at 39. And again, there was like a lot of coverage in the media and people wrote these very like heartwarming words about her and her funeral seemed well-attended. And yeah, I'm sure Harriet was devastated about the news as well when that happened.

AT: I have to say it's something that I found refreshing about their story was that they weren't together for their entire lives because it seems like when we're looking at a lot of queer stories, whether in history or today, frankly, a lot of it is either "we were together for our entire lives until, you know, we died in each other's arms" and that sort of, you know, lifelong relationship or it's, you know, just playing the field and not settling down. So it was sort of nice to see a relationship that I feel is more reflective of a lot of people's experiences of "we had a solid," I mean, 13 years is a long relationship with people even today. You know, it does seem that having this solid, you know, 13-year relationship, that's a good run, but it acknowledges that reality that you can love someone but still have to go your separate ways.

DS: Yeah, exactly. I think they kind of stand out in that way because, yeah, you read about these other couples who are buried together and lived together for decades, which is very, very nice. And I love reading about those couples as well. I think that's great. But yeah, so it was surprising that they did separate, but also I think that's, like you say, it's like very representative of relationships. And yeah, it's hard to tell why they separated. I'm not sure if there was like some disagreement or if Alice just needed to pursue her own life. She obviously had other passions other than the gymnasium and physical health and everything. She wanted to be a writer and she might have thought that Sydney was like a very exciting place to do that. And Sydney was, yeah, I think it was probably the place to go at that time if you wanted to be some sort of artist or a writer. So yeah, I like to think that that was maybe the reason why they parted ways. I'm not sure if there was anything, it's impossible to know because you're just speculating unless like you find someone's diary, who like records it in detail why they actually left, why they parted. It's an outlier for all the other relationships who did stick together. And it's interesting because Alice Moon was buried with other women, but it's so strange. And I still don't know why she was buried with these two sisters who she was close friends with. And one of the sister's daughters, they're all buried together, these four women, and all three of the other women had husbands. And so I'm just like, why are they all buried together instead of with their husbands?

Why are they buried with Alice Moon specifically? Yeah, it's kind of like, is it like a chosen family sort of case? It's very intriguing.

AT: When we're looking at the relationship dynamic, it does seem like Harriet was the more front and center partner in the relationship. And Alice may have been more of the woman behind the woman, so to speak. And it may have been that she was wanting to get out of Harriet's shadow and not just be the support person, but coming into her own. Obviously, I'm extrapolating and guessing here, but that's kind of the vibe I'm getting. And what's interesting about that in particular to me is that when that relationship broke up, Harriet moved to Sydney a few years after Alice did. And I'm sort of wondering if that ties into that whole, you know, when the woman behind the woman leaves, the woman who's out front and center finds herself without that support and may have been chasing that.

DS: Yeah, it is interesting. And you can speculate so many reasons why she would have moved to Sydney after Alice moved there herself. And I don't know for sure if it was directly related to Alice being in Sydney, but it feels like it. It just feels too coincidental, especially because Harriet had such a reputation in Melbourne. And it wasn't that she was like losing business or anything. The gymnasium was still going. She had another assistant after Alice sold her share of the business. Harriet left the Melbourne gym in her assistant's hand, in Josephine McCormick's. So Josephine was looking after the gym while Harriet moved to Sydney. Harriet opened another gymnasium in Sydney on Liverpool Street. I'm not sure how popular that was at the time or like how much coverage it got in Sydney. But yeah, it was very short-lived because she moved there in 1893. Alice died in 1894. So Harriet was in Sydney when this was all happening. Harriet was not left in Alice's will. And yeah, she moved back to Melbourne shortly after Alice passed away. So it kind of does seem that she was only in Sydney for that reason to be close to Alice. And I'm not sure if they had a lot of contact while they were both living in Sydney. It is possible though because they would have, they moved in similar circles in Melbourne. So I'm sure that they would have crossed paths at some social event in Sydney. And whether that was awkward or or not, I don't know. It's all very intriguing. But yeah, as you say, when the woman behind the woman left, it doesn't seem that she was able to kind of maintain this really like strong personality. I don't know. I don't know, because I'm just, like Harriet might have been fine as well. This is all like speculation. Harriet might have been fine and she might have had other reasons for going to Sydney. But because she only she only stayed for a short period of time in Sydney and she left after Alice Moon died. So it feels it feels coincidental.

AT: Too coincidental.

DS: Yes.

AT: And yeah, she was listed as one of the people who attended Alice's funeral as well. So there was still at the very least, you know, some emotional connection on Harriet.

DS: Yeah. Yeah. I'm not sure like how much they were in contact before Alice died. But there

there was still obviously an emotional connection on Harriet's side and Harriet could not move on or let go of Alice so easily, I think.

AT: And so Harriet returned to Melbourne in the late 1890s. And she opened another gym on Collins Street with Miss G. E. Gaunt in 1899. But do we really know much about her in her final years?

DS: Not really, which is a little sad. I don't know much about Miss G. E. Gaunt either or the relationship between her and Harriet. It could have just been a friendship. It could have been more. There's no way of knowing. I might need to fall down a rabbit hole and research Miss G. E. Gaunt just to find out more about her. You hear about all of these like little side characters in your research. And you're just like, oh, I want to know more about this person, but I don't have time. I have a deadline. But yeah, maybe for volume two. So Harriet had this gym on Collins Street. She was still working up until the late 1890s until, yeah, she started to fall a bit ill so she couldn't work any longer. She passed away in 1902 and she's buried in the cemetery at Cheltenham, which is along the coast of Port Phillip Bay on the Frankston train line, which is my local train line. So I pass Harriet's grave site all the time. But yeah, unfortunately, we don't know a lot about Harriet's life post, post-Alice, I guess.

AT: Harriet dies in 1902 at age 50, which for someone who was, you know, a professional swimmer from her early years, like she won fame in England before they moved, by swimming from Shoreham to Brighton in two hours and 43 minutes. I don't know how far that is, but that sounds impressive.

DS: It does sound pretty impressive. Apparently the seas were quite rough as well. So it was quite the effort, but I'm not sure how far it was either. I'm not good at geography, especially international geography.

AT: But you know, we're talking about someone who was quite fit, who was running gyms, who I assume maintained a certain level of fitness. So the fact that her death certificate says that she died of heart disease seems odd when she was only 50.

DS: Yes. And it's interesting because Alice Moon's death certificate also says heart failure as the cause of death. So yeah, I'm not sure why. I don't know. It's very, it's very strange that it, like heart failure for both of them at quite a young age. Obviously people have, you know, genetic. It could have been a genetic thing. There might have been, there might have been things in the family, but it is strange. And I'm not sure why. There might have been some other reason behind it. You don't know, especially relying on medical records from like the 1890s and early 20th century, it's very difficult to know, it could have been some other reason. But heart failure for both of them, apparently. There was an imagined history of Harriet and Alice written by Sue Ingleton. And in that book, she, so she relies on a lot of research in fact. But in the, in the spaces where she can't, where we don't have any records for that, she kind of writes the history of them herself and uses her imagination. And part of Sue Ingleton's theory is that Alice Moon

was poisoned with snake venom. But I'm not sure. I don't know how valid that would be. She draws this conclusion because there was a scientist in Sydney at the time who was researching snake venom and everything. And I think Alice might have known him. I think he was also at her funeral. But just because someone was at your funeral doesn't mean they killed you with snake venom. I don't want to discredit this theory because I don't want Sue Ingleton writing me an angry email. It is a good book, and she does a lot with what she can because there is not a lot of, there's a lot of missing information about Harriet and Alice. And it is curious and a bit strange that Alice Moon died at 39. Obviously, it does happen. People do die young, but of heart failure when they were both physically fit. So maybe the snake venom has some credit to it after all. I don't know.

AT: We can't discount the snake.

DS: WE can't discount it. I just want people to know that it's a potential cause. There is a theory out there. So if anyone wants to go down that rabbit hole, they're quite welcome to.

AT: So when we're talking about your book specifically, because my understanding is that you didn't want to focus on women who have already had their stories told extensively. You wanted to sort of bring these lesser-known, poorly documented stories to light, which I imagine would have been very frustrating as a structure for a project.

DS: Yeah, it wasn't the easiest idea of mine. It was quite difficult, but I thought it was important. And it obviously is important to build on Australia's queer history because there's not a lot. And while I was like at university researching, there wasn't really just this one book that you can go to to find out about queer historical figures in Australia specifically. Specifically for women, because there are a lot of books and articles and everything about gay men's experience throughout Australian history, which is very good and also very important. But there was just less about the female experience, I suppose. And identifying as a woman myself, I wanted to hear about our own history and everything. But yeah, it was very difficult. And there are some women I left out, like Alice Anderson and Edna Walling, who are both brilliant in their own right. But they didn't have their own chapter in the book because they already have biographies written about them. So I wanted to focus on people who don't really have their own biography and aren't that well known, because they deserve to have their stories written as well. And not all of these women that I've included in the book, like we don't know for sure that they would have identified as queer. I think there's no way of knowing that. But I included them because they had these committed relationships with other women. They didn't live their lives in like a heteronormative way. So I think that's why I included them. And there have been other researchers who have kind of written about their lives through a queer perspective. So I'm not like the first person to do this for all of them. It's just a way of trying to build a queer narrative in history and to think about the potential for a queer history rather than just erasing all of these stories because you can't find evidence that they

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had sex.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.