

Outing Auntie Cal: War stories, hidden histories, and family conversations

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Abstract

This personal essay focuses on my great-aunt, Caroline Wise, a New Zealand World War I army nurse. I tell her story, created from family memories and family history research as well as from contextual historical materials. I then describe the conversations that ensued when I suggested to my family that our Auntie Cal was probably lesbian. 'Maiden aunts', remembered fondly by many of my generation, were common in the first half of the twentieth century. Feminist writing about the history of women's sexualities in that era is useful for throwing light on their lives, and so I describe the scholarly work I have utilised in trying to understand Auntie Cal. However, feminist scholarship on historical sexuality has not necessarily had much influence on the way families understand their own histories and so trying to 'out' a member of the family tree, in the absence of overwhelming evidence, is bound to provide an interesting family history journey.

Keywords

World War I, lesbian history, family history, nursing history, sexualities

Introduction

Commemorations are, by definition, all about collective remembering. The centenary of World War I (WWI) has involved public commemorations (for details, see www.ww100.govt.nz) as well as family history research and family conversations about the WWI involvement of relatives. In the public sphere, commemorations have focused on the male experience of war and it is likely to be similar for family histories and the processes of family remembering. WWI can be understood as a global calamity with a profound impact on the women and men of all participating nations, but commemorations usually focus on military events such as Gallipoli. To remedy the neglect of women's voices around WWI and to promote feminist analysis of commemorative discourses that may glorify war, the Women's Studies Association of New Zealand (WSANZ), of which I am convenor, held two events in 2015 on the topic of women, war, and peace. My involvement in organising these events prompted me to think about my great-aunt, Caroline Elizabeth Wise, who served overseas as a nurse during WWI. As a result, I embarked on a family history research journey, looking into her background, WWI service, and post-war life, placing these in social and historical contexts.

I am not really a family history buff, nor am I overly interested in genealogical research, which is central to the practice of family history. I am a researcher in psychology and women's studies. However, there is one scholarly project of mine that no doubt prompted a consideration of my great-aunt's life because of its consideration of women's sexualities. This is *Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict: The kinship of women*, the story of a lesbian friendship between two twentieth-century anthropologists (Lapsley, 1999). Family history, though, is a leisure interest for me, and so this project was not undertaken as part of my academic work. Therefore, I

structured this article as a personal essay, informed by my reading of women's history and WWI history and by my scholarly understanding of women's sexualities. As such, the work did not require approval from any formal ethics body, but as with much biographical research, ethical issues did arise, particularly in relation to privacy. These were considered carefully, and I proceeded with this work in consultation with my family and gained permission from them to quote from their emails, as well as tacit approval to write about my great-aunt, although the interpretation of the materials I gathered is mine alone.

Although I have warm childhood memories of Auntie Cal, I realised that I knew little about her wartime involvement. My understanding was that she was a nurse in a hospital ship off Gallipoli who at some point refused a medal as a protest about nurses being excluded from Anzac Day marches. To remedy this neglect, I began reading widely about WWI, the nursing experience, and New Zealand's involvement, including memoir and fiction as well as historical writing.

At the beginning of my investigation, which developed in a rather haphazard manner, I initiated communications with my brothers and cousins about 'our war heroine'. I asked whether they had any knowledge of the Auntie Cal 'medal' story and what they could recall hearing about her war service. As none of the male relatives we knew when we were young had been in the armed forces during WWI, Auntie Cal held the heroism spot undisputed, and I assumed they would be interested in her because of the current commemorations.

Family conversations

And so a family conversation began. A cousin said that Auntie Cal's medals had been returned in protest after she had been awarded them; in other words, she did not refuse to receive them, as I had initially thought. My nearest brother told me how I could find her army record, since New Zealanders' WWI records are now digitised and accessible, both via the Auckland War Memorial Museum website and directly from Archives New Zealand (2015). He also referred me to a new book on New Zealand hospital ships, *The white ships* (McLean, 2013). No-one had any letters, diaries, newspaper cuttings, or personal effects relating to Auntie Cal's wartime experience, nor could anyone recall having seen anything.

My oldest brother, coming late into the conversation, observed that my query had started 'a conflagration of emails from what seemed like the whole fam damily' (personal communication, December 30, 2013).¹ His memories from the 1950s of Auntie Cal and her sister Ede were evocative. In their retirement, Cal and Ede lived in a large house that had once been a nursing home in the Wellington suburb of Kilbirnie:

I retain fond memories of staying with Cal and Ede ... I never really worked out what the place was but loved having her say when I arrived, have a look through all the rooms and when you find one you like ... move in, it's yours. Corridors of small sunny bedrooms, empty, but with neatly made beds.

They both, with great patience, taught me Canasta sitting at a table in the kitchen deep in the bowels of the building. Home to the biggest fridge I had ever seen. Cal smoked, Ede didn't but bridge was their greatest collective vice. I wasn't allowed to participate but by staying very quiet I could evade notice and fall asleep in the kitchen as the bridge rubbers went on into the night. To wake in the morning in bed as usual. Pretending not to listen when Cal and Ede, partnered by two ex-nurse mates and a side order of whiskey in small glasses, burst into some fairly salty language over hands dealt or bids not made.

Cal returned her medals in white hot fury after some RSA panjandrum said she and all her nursing compatriots would not be allowed to parade alongside the men at an Anzac Day parade in Wellington. I do not remember when this occurred ... A little boy's memory is not reliable at this distance. I simply remember the language and the white hot fury ... when she recounted events to friends across the card table. To my limited knowledge, after the insult she never participated in any RSA activities again (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

He went on to say that ‘Cal’s persona had a loud and crusty carapace but was totally caring inside. Ede was gentler and softer somehow.’ To understand my brother’s fascination with the salty language, whiskey, and bridge, I should explain that our father was a Presbyterian minister and we were taught that swearing, drinking, and gambling were wrong. We were allowed to play poker with matchsticks and Dad did occasionally say ‘Damn!’ when the lawnmower refused to start, indicating that our family was at the liberal end of Presbyterianism. My mother and her sisters loved their aunts in an unqualified manner, so they must have overlooked any unorthodox behaviour.

Meantime, I was searching the net and collecting as much information as I could. Auntie Cal’s record from the New Zealand Army Nursing Service gave me the places and dates of her postings and other useful details, such as periods of leave, illnesses, and a comprehensive intake questionnaire (Archives New Zealand, 2015). Papers Past, the National Library’s digitised and searchable archive of early New Zealand newspapers, was a great help, especially since it contains the early years of *Kai Tiaki*, the New Zealand nursing journal (National Library, 2015). *Kai Tiaki* contained references to the comings and goings of individual nurses and, during WWI, included constant news of the 600 or so nurses who served overseas. Published histories of army nursing and New Zealand campaigns filled in the back story, meaning that I was able to put together a biographical piece with some historical context to circulate to the family. Family history research never seems to stop, and my initial piece immediately became out of date when I found that Barbara Wells of the Nelson branch of the New Zealand Society of Genealogists had prepared a short biography of my great-aunt, containing much extra information, as part of a commemoration project on Nelson nurses who served overseas during WWI (Carnahan, 2015; Wells, 2015).

Caroline Elizabeth Wise

Caroline (Cal) Elizabeth Wise was born in Golden Bay, north of Nelson, in 1883.² She was the third of four sisters, one of whom was my grandmother, Florence Wise. George Wise, their father, was a Welsh miner who arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1870s to prospect for gold, walking from Bluff to Nelson (George Wise obituary, 1934). He made a living from the diggings at Te Waikoropupū Springs near Takaka. I have a brooch that has come down in the family from George Wise, featuring a large gold nugget in ‘goldfields jewellery’ style, of the kind sometimes worn by miners or given to a ‘sweetheart’ (Eldred-Grigg, 2008).

Caroline Grace Munday, our great-grandmother, was Cornish. Her father, Captain Francis Munday, had been a mine agent in the parish of Gwennap, a centre of copper mining near Redruth, Cornwall.³ A dressmaker by trade, in 1874 Caroline Grace immigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand as an assisted single woman. She was in her thirties and her father had recently died, her mother having died many years earlier. Soon after her arrival in Nelson she received an inheritance of £100 from her aunt in Cornwall, quite a substantial sum in those days. George Wise and Caroline Grace Munday married in Nelson in 1876.

George Wise was declared bankrupt in 1891, and the Wises moved from Takaka to Nelson, where he was there employed by a prospecting association to look for coal in the Brook Farm area. Apparently he discovered a fine seam of coal suitable for mining investment.⁴ Cal and her sisters attended Toi Toi Valley School, a publicly funded girls’ school, where in 1896 she distinguished herself by winning a science prize. Of the four sisters, only the youngest, Edith (Ede), was able to attend secondary school, winning a scholarship to Nelson Girls’ College in 1899. Free and compulsory education was available at that time until the end of primary

school, when children were around the age of 12, mandated by the Education Act 1877.

Caroline Munday, the girls' mother, died in 1899, aged 55, when our Auntie Cal was 15 years of age. Her obituary read 'her end was peace', suggesting a protracted and painful illness that may have involved home nursing care, most likely provided by her daughters.⁵

How Cal occupied herself after she left school is not known. Her father remarried.⁶ Her older sisters worked in dressmaking and tailoring, but on the 1905–6 electoral roll, aged in her early twenties, Cal was merely listed as 'spinster' with no occupation given. There was no shortage of men of marriageable age in colonial New Zealand before WWI decimated a generation (Macdonald, 1990), so we can speculate that there were opportunities for marriage and that Cal remained single by choice. In 1911 she became a trainee at Nelson Hospital and passed her nursing exams in 1913 at the age of 30. Aotearoa/New Zealand was the first country in the world to require registration for nurses, who trained on the job for three years before passing a state examination (Rogers, 2003). Cal was in charge of Mrs Hall's private hospital, Westport, when in late 1915 she volunteered for and was accepted into the New Zealand Army Nursing Service.⁷

It was difficult for the nursing profession to persuade the authorities to send New Zealand nurses overseas when WWI broke out. An urgent decision was requested in Parliament in 1914 by Harry Atmore, MP for Nelson and a great friend of George Gordon Stewart, my grandfather (Rogers, 2003, p. 47). Atmore was a 'male attendant' at my grandparents' wedding in 1908 and would have been well known to Auntie Cal. After continued agitation by New Zealand's chief of nursing, Hester Maclean, the New Zealand Army Nursing Service was formed (Rogers, 2003). Though the service was not integrated into the armed forces, given their professional status it was ordered that nurses should be treated as officers. The delay in forming the service meant that New Zealand nurses did not arrive until well after the commencement of the Gallipoli campaign, with its terrible casualties (both in deaths and in wounded), as well as endemic illnesses. Nurses from the first contingent were initially based in British Military Hospitals, then in hospitals established by the New Zealand military in Egypt and also on the New Zealand hospital ships as well as at other bases in the Mediterranean. They nursed the wounded from the continuing Gallipoli campaign as well as from other theatres of war in the Middle East.

By the time Cal joined the second contingent of nurses, to sail on the hospital ship *Maheno* early in 1916, the casualties from Gallipoli had been well publicised in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Her awareness of the dangers of war nursing would have been heightened when the press reported the drowning of ten New Zealand nurses in the Mediterranean after the troopship *Marquette* was torpedoed. In that tragedy, more New Zealand nurses lost their lives as casualties than in the rest of the war (Rogers, 2003).

Caroline Wise was farewelled at a civic ceremony in Nelson, along with four other nurses destined for the second contingent. Each nurse was gifted £10 towards equipment.⁸ They travelled to Palmerston North for screening and induction. Her attestation sheet read:

I, Caroline Elizabeth Wise, do solemnly promise and swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to our Sovereign Lord the King, his Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully serve in the New Zealand Military Forces ... and that I will observe all orders of His Majesty ... and of the Generals and Officers set over me, until I shall be lawfully discharged.

After rousing and patriotic wharf-side farewells in Wellington, *Maheno* left for Egypt on January 23, 1916. Cal was 32 years of age, fitting the profile of New Zealand nurses who served overseas (although for an unknown reason she gave her birth date as 1884, a year later than her real birth date). The nurses' average age was over 30, unlike the image of WWI nurses in recent television drama. They were unmarried and expected to remain so while in service. Cal and many of her fellow embarkees were not actually staffing the hospital ship *Maheno*.

They were passengers, destined for the army hospitals overseas. On arrival at Suez, they would have been surprised and perhaps disappointed to be transferred to the British hospital ship *Devanha*, bound for England. By that time, the Gallipoli campaign was over and the hospitals in Cairo and Alexandria were emptying out, with casualties shipped to England to convalesce or back to Aotearoa/New Zealand with long-term, often permanent, disabilities. On arrival in England on a very cold March day in 1916, Cal's group of *Maheno* nurses were separated and posted to different military hospitals set up for wounded New Zealand troops.⁹ Cal started at Cosham, nursing soldiers from the nearby training camp on the Salisbury Plains. She was later stationed at Codford, an army camp-style hospital and at the much larger Brockenhurst, the No. 1 New Zealand General Hospital, a collection of buildings with surgical and medical wards for wounded troops and capacity for 1,600 patients. During the winter of 1917, as her Army record shows, Cal spent some time in nursing care herself, with bronchitis, at the New Zealand Nurses Convalescent Hospital in Sandwich, Kent.

With the majority of New Zealand troops now on the Western Front in France and Belgium, army hospitals followed. New Zealand's 'stationary hospital' in France was first set up in requisitioned buildings at Hazebrouck and later in a purpose-built facility at Wisques, near St Omer. It was handy to the front, to rail connections, and to the channel ports. Stationary hospitals were a step down the line from the casualty clearing stations where the wounded were triaged after being stretchered from the battlefields and driven by ambulances.¹⁰ If they were fit to travel and needed long-term treatment, soldiers were sent to England. The hospitals in France dealt with the dangerously wounded, those who would recover quickly, and men who were temporarily out of action with infections and other illnesses.

Nursing reports assert that the New Zealand nurses in England were keen to serve in France (Maclean, 1923). When an edict was made that nurses at the front should return to England after a year of service, the opportunity arose for a fresh intake. Auntie Cal's records show that she crossed the channel with a small group of New Zealand nurses in October 1917, arriving in St Omer, France, on October 10, just two days before New Zealand's darkest day of WWI. On October 12, the fighting at Passchendaele resulted in 3,700 casualties for our troops, including around 850 deaths (New Zealand History, 2015).¹¹ The New Zealand hospital at Hazebrouck, France, had been evacuated after it was shelled in August 1917 and relocated to Wisques, where the building of a camp of Nissen huts and tents with planned capacity for 1,000 patients was underway. At the time of the arrival of the new batch of nurses in France, Wisques was not yet ready for them, so they were temporarily placed in nearby British hospitals at St Omer. Before long, they were sent for, joining the workforce of around 40 New Zealand nurses. Given the casualties of October, Cal must have been thrown right into the deep end. I think I recognise her (second row from front, second from left), looking uncharacteristically dazed, in a photo of the Wisques nursing staff grouped under the gateway carved by a Māori patient.¹²

The work and conditions at the New Zealand hospitals in France are well described by Anna Rogers (2003) in her history of New Zealand war nursing. Contemporary accounts, such as those by Hester Maclean (1932), New Zealand's Director of Nursing at the time, are vivid. Western front nurses are also portrayed in fiction by Maxine Alterio (2012), who turned her doctoral thesis research into a lively novel on New Zealand nursing in WWI, *Lives we leave behind*. Australian author Thomas Keneally (2012) has given perhaps the most outstanding literary portrayal of WWI nurses in *The daughters of Mars* and, of course, conditions in the Allied hospitals in France are described in the classic Vera Brittain 1933 memoir, *Testament of youth*, which concerns the experiences of the British women's Voluntary Aid Detachment (VADs) who assisted the nurses. The New Zealand soldiers' experience of the front, including military hospitals, are portrayed fictionally by Robin Hyde in her 1936 classic, *Passport to hell*.



For the New Zealanders serving in the medical and nursing services at Wisques, winters were freezing and the ground was churned-up mud, with duckboards and tarpaulins providing unsatisfactory protection. Nurses as well as patients suffered from ‘trench foot’. The nurses’ hut accommodation was made of packing cases. Bedding was not warm enough, so they slept in their sleeping bags as well, but they made their accommodation homely with rugs, pictures, and even a piano. Complaints about poor food are plentiful on record, but the nurses enjoyed treats like fried bread and golden syrup in their messroom. They made themselves hot drinks on the heating drums in their huts. They earned six shillings and seven pence per day, a generous wage compared with that of the British nurses. They also were given a uniform and laundry allowance, as well as free rations. There was little time off during busy periods, but their schedule theoretically gave them three hours off a day as well as a half day every 10 days. In their free time, they could go out in the surrounding countryside or take the hour’s walk into St Omer. Most of the staff nurses who spent time in France were promoted to Sister (Rogers, 2003), as Cal was in early 1918.

The wounded had injuries of a kind seldom or never seen in New Zealand hospitals. There was horrendous damage to limbs, faces, and internal organs from shelling, bullets, and bayonets, as well as appalling injuries to the skin, lungs, and other organs from mustard gas. There were soldiers with shell shock and brain injuries and with minds disturbed by fever. There were infectious and venereal diseases. Any new offensive resulted in a ceaseless flood of wounded and dying. Nurses managed wards, female VAD assistants (mainly British), and medical provisions, washed and dressed wounds, assisted in surgery, liaised with orderlies and ambulance drivers, carried out procedures, dispensed drugs, cooled fevers, tended to the dying, provided a listening ear, and kept up morale. Although no New Zealand nurses were killed on the Western Front, illnesses were common and a period occurred during 1918 when nightly bombardments in the region disturbed sleep at Wisques and threatened everyone’s safety.

The war ended on November 11, 1918. On that date, Cal was a patient in her own hospital with influenza, caught early on in what was to become a worldwide pandemic. This illness followed a bout of what her records described as ‘trench fever’. She recovered well, but the nurses were ‘deeply distressed to watch men dying of flu after surviving years in the trenches’ (Rogers, 2003, p. 134). As the troops left to march through Belgium to occupy Germany, the New Zealand hospital was disbanded and most staff sent back to England to care for the wounded who had been sent there. Cal left France around Christmas 1918. She probably relaxed in Paris first, since New Zealand nurses were given leave to go to Paris before returning to England (Rogers, 2003).

The fighting may have stopped, but the wounded were still a large population. Cal continued military nursing in England until she returned to New Zealand on the troop ship *Corinthic* in 1920. The ship’s newsletter has her dressed in blackface for a fancy dress competition as the Topsy character from *Uncle Tom’s cabin* and out for two ducks in a ship’s cricket match.¹³ She was immediately posted to Rotorua Military Hospital for returned soldiers after being given, as were all the returning nurses, 28 days’ leave and a 28-day railway pass.

Discharged in 1920, Cal had served in the New Zealand Army Nursing Service for just over four years, from age 32 to 36. She was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, standard issue for those who left their country to serve in theatres of war. After her discharge, she continued nursing in Rotorua for several years, remaining on the Active Territorial List. In 1923, perhaps with itchy feet, she sailed off to San Francisco on an adventure with a group of nurses intent on working in California. On her return a couple of years later, she made her home in Wellington, first as Matron at a private hospital in Lower Hutt and then with her own nursing homes. She ran the Boulcott Nursing Home, initially located in the city, with the help of her two unmarried sisters. Ellen, the oldest, was also a nurse and had been matron of Picton Hospital. Ellen died in the 1930s, so my generation has no memories of her. From the late 1930s, their nursing home was at 39 Henry St, Kilbirnie, which is where we remember Cal and Ede. Ede died in 1954 and Cal in 1964. In her last decade, Cal shared the house at Henry St with her companion, Olive Cleary, who also had a nursing background.

Outing Auntie Cal

Many lesbians like to think there is someone like them that they can liberate from a lonely place in their family tree. ‘Maiden aunts’ are the likely candidates. These women who never married became favourite aunts and great-aunts, just as today many lesbians without children of their own develop particularly strong relationships with nieces and nephews. Out of my three unmarried great-aunts, Auntie Cal was my choice because, although it may seem frivolous to say so, looking back, she was really rather butch.

Although one of the youngest in my family, and growing up in small towns far distant from Wellington, I too have childhood memories of Auntie Cal. I recall the large kitchen painted in somewhat institutional green and yellow tones at Henry St. There, Auntie Cal was the dominant presence, with solid physique and gruff manner. I have a memory of Auntie Ede, who died when I was five or six, as nervous, wispy, and hovering, doing something with jars of preserved fruit in the pantry.

As a nine-year-old, I experienced a temporary nervous upset triggered by my paternal grandmother suffering a heart attack while Dad and I were staying with her one summer. I was sleeping on my own (I was used to sharing a room with my brother) in the spooky middle bedroom of Grandma’s Victorian-era working-class Wadestown villa. It had belonged to Dad’s

sister, Auntie Marjorie, who had died not long before. I awoke to the sound of retching from Grandma's room next door, then ongoing disturbances, but no-one looked in on me as I was supposed to be asleep. I think I got up to see the ambulance men carrying her in a sling up the steep hill to the road, or perhaps Dad told me that was what had happened. In the following days, I would not let Dad out of my sight and, completely uncharacteristically, lost my appetite and complained of feeling sick. No doubt Dad had more pressing concerns than a clingy, wan-looking child missing out on her holiday, so I was sent off to Auntie Cal to be looked after.

Cal incorporated me into her routines. I sat on the stairs at the National Club while she and her gal pals drank and played cards in a side room, with stakes in silver coins stacked up on the table in front of them. She also took me to a matinee, *Tammy and the bachelor*, starring Debbie Reynolds. Despite Debbie Reynolds' later fame as a gay icon, Cal went to sleep and embarrassed me with her snoring, while I was enthralled with the heterosexual love interest.

I felt awkward staying with Auntie Cal, because I knew I was being a bit of a wuss. I sensed that, although she was matter-of-fact and cheerful in her manner, she was not overly sympathetic and probably impatient with me. I was relieved when Dad put me on the daylight train for Auckland and back to Mum, where I was met by Mum and my brothers and taken to our maternal grandfather's house. My nervous lack of appetite and other psychogenic symptoms were miraculously cured at the first sight and smell of Granddad's mince on toast. Mum gave the impression of wondering what all the fuss was about but restrained herself from being critical. And clearly, my nervous upset was not the gravest that Auntie Cal had met during her nursing career.

On another summer trip to Wellington, we visited Auntie Cal at her Waikanae bach, where the boys made deep and dangerous tunnels under the sand and made me promise not to tell. Fortunately, they survived. At a later meeting, after Mum had died and I was around 12, Cal told me off when I arrived from a long car journey wearing shorts rather than a dress; she seemed to be showing anxiety at my tomboyishness. When Cal herself died, I was 16 and had not seen her for several years. She left each of her nephews and nieces £100, enough for me to buy my first motor scooter. She also left her companion, Olive, a substantial portion of her estate.

As an adult coming to a lesbian identity and mixing in lesbian circles, on the rare occasions I thought of Auntie Cal she seemed similar to many of the women I had come to know. Indulging the casual banter that often goes by the name of 'spot the dyke' in lesbian circles, I had from time to time mentioned her as likely lesbian kin. A recent such occasion, when I claimed her as our family war heroine, led to an invitation to speak at the Charlotte Museum Trust, a museum of lesbian history and culture. I was happy to rise to the challenge, but it seemed wrong to out Auntie Cal in public without first letting my family know. After all, they had not realised they were collaborators in lesbian history. So with some trepidation, I sent around an email:

... in Auntie Cal I recognise a woman like me – some of you may disagree, of course. In those days lesbian identity wasn't available, but many women who were single – and perhaps had companions, as I believe Auntie Cal did in later life, a woman named Olive? – would, if they were living in this day and age, probably call themselves lesbian. Of course, this is entirely speculative, as my talk will be! Hope you don't mind me rattling the family closet (personal communication, February 14, 2014).

The email fired off; silence followed. I wondered if I had overstepped the mark, although I assumed that the family would not be too startled at wild-eyed feminism emanating from my direction. Gradually responses came in, the tenor ranging from avoidance of the L-word and the L-issue to direct contradiction from older cousins who argued that Olive's companionship in Cal's later years should be seen as just that:

Olive Cleary came on the scene about then as a housekeeping assistant. A very nice older lady who did become a “companion” to Auntie Cal in the straight-up-and-down old-fashioned sense (personal communication, February 22, 2014).

I always understood there had been a young man killed in the war. My observation of Cal and Olive’s personal interactions didn’t support Hilary’s conjecture. Olive greatly looked up to “Sister” Wise as a successful senior nursing professional and Cal’s loyalty to her seemed to have more of a noblesse oblige property than that of two women in a relationship. I don’t know – another conjecture – but I suspect Cal would have had a bit of a chuckle at our latter day guesses. But who’s to actually know? (personal communication, February 27, 2014)

I was tempted to make jokes at their expense about ‘straight-up-and-down’ and to respond to the notion of a young man killed in the war with, ‘But they all said that!’, but restrained myself. I chuckled at the idea of an unequal relationship featuring a beloved and a devotee, hardly unknown in lesbian circles. At a family get-together some while later, when we were brooding over old photographs, I rather tentatively raised the issue again. Although Auntie Cal’s sexual orientation was not directly debated, two relevant views were expressed by family members. The first was that it isn’t right to speculate about people who are no longer here to tell us their side of the story (nobody quite said, ‘to defend themselves’, which was laudably sensitive of them); the second was a more ribald suggestion that, since I had opened Pandora’s box, perhaps we could speculate about any other skeletons in the family closet. On starting to haul out a few, the cousin responsible for that suggestion was firmly squashed. Given my commitment to family harmony, I did not pursue the subject of Auntie Cal any further on that occasion.

Later, my nearest brother wrote an amusing opinion piece in the *Otago Daily Times* where, after happily describing Auntie Cal as a ‘spinster’ and an ‘old trout’, he made the astute observation that, to a child, she was ‘unknowable, on the simple grounds she was an ancient’ (Lapsley J, 2014). I do think he is right about old people being unknowable to young children. Perhaps all adults could be placed in that category, especially in those days when children were not included in any discussions of adult matters. My brother went on to describe the family piecing together of Auntie Cal’s story in ‘a round of emails, memories, furphies, and old pictures’. For those of you unfamiliar with Australian slang, a furphy, of course, is a tall story, and I am inclined to assume that I stand accused of promoting a furphy.

I had a much more vigorous debate about lesbian attributions with a lesbian friend who has delved into her own family history. She accused me of unfairly putting my own desires onto someone who grew up in an era when lesbianism was not something that most women could even name or think about. I took the point, but hers would be a minority view in the lesbian community, where many of us welcome with glee stories, likely or not, about possible lesbian forebears.

But what does scholarship say? Is it likely that Auntie Cal would have reflected on her sexuality at all, let alone in any way that might approach how we think about ourselves today? I have contributed to scholarship on lesbian history in my book on lesbian friendships between anthropologists in the post WWI era, the period when Auntie Cal was a mature woman (Lapsley, 1999). In that work, I make it clear that sexual identity is a cultural as well as a personal phenomenon. When friendships between women carry an erotic charge, whether this comes to expression in any form of sexual intimacy depends partly, though not wholly, on cultural support for homosexuality. Auntie Cal was well travelled. She knew the intricacies of the human body through her nursing and she knew the human psyche in its bleakest moments through her wartime experience. However, she did not move in the bohemian or intellectual circles of the 1920s and 1930s where homosexual relationships were commonplace and enthusiastically discussed.

Nursing friendships are part of a quite different subculture, but still one of strong bonds between women. Recent work by Laura Doan (2013) on women's sexuality during the WWI era reminds us that ordinary women, rather than bohemians, did not think about themselves in terms of sexual identity until well past the middle of the twentieth century, and that for a woman to indicate that she knew anything at all about sexuality in those earlier times placed her at risk of being considered immoral. Doan offers a critique of transposing current notions of sexual identity onto the early twentieth century, a warning for people like me, indulging in our own longings by searching for ancestral genealogies and hidden histories. Although I had already demonstrated sensitivity to cultural constructions of sexuality through my work on Mead and Benedict, that did not inoculate me against the desire to find others of my ilk in my own family past. Not that Doan is unsympathetic to 'invented legacies' and 'queer yearnings for collective belonging', but she argues that such things will always tell us more about ourselves 'than about how sexuality was made knowable in the past' (p. 199). Oram and Turnbull (2001) and Jennings (2007) also provide interesting material documenting lesbian lives and placing them in historical context so that their differences from today can be understood. Closer to home, Aorewa McLeod's (2013) vivid portrayal of lesbian life and loves during the early 1960s in a community of nurses in Nelson, Cal's home town, drew my attention (Lapsley H, 2014), although this was a later era than Auntie Cal's.

There is a lack of scholarly historical writing about lesbian women in the nursing and other professions in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A proposed oral history research project on New Zealand lesbian nurses of a later era is referred to in an article on heteronormativity (that rather long word describing all the cultural baggage that silences lesbian lives) (Giddings and Pringle, 2011). However, Lynne Giddings, co-author of the piece, told me that the proposed work was not funded and therefore could not be carried out (personal communication, October 2015). Alison Laurie (2003, 2009, 2012) has written extensively about the history of lesbians in Aotearoa/New Zealand, emphasising the secretive nature of women's same-sex passions before the 1970s, despite that lesbianism was never illegal in New Zealand. She refers to 'glimpses' of lesbian lives prior to the 1970s, as well as some well-documented instances. In one such 'glimpse', Laurie describes a community of women, some of whom seem to have been involved in passionate same-sex friendships, based around Eastbourne, a suburb of Wellington, during the inter-war period. We have a family photograph of an Eastbourne house connected in some way with Cal and her sisters during this period, perhaps taken on holiday. Later on, there was a house in Hataitai (near to Auntie Cal) where 'kamp girls' associated with prostitution lived, referring to themselves humorously as 'The Plunket Rooms group', but it is quite likely that Auntie Cal knew nothing about this kind of social world.

But really, this is clutching at straws. The scant scholarship on lesbian lives in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the first half of the twentieth century provides context for professional women with such inclinations or relationships behaving with the utmost discretion and not leaving letters or other personal material lying around. Sadly, I have uncovered no evidence to claim Auntie Cal as lesbian, or even as a woman who loved women in some earlier era when such identity categories were less available. I do keep researching and finding new information, and I might get lucky, but it is not likely. The Nelson Genealogical Society biography (Wells, 2015) helped straighten out a few original errors I had made and put Cal's army nursing career in clearer context. With more names and information from that biographical piece, I looked at any historical material I could find on her nursing colleagues to see if there might have been leads on anyone whose name kept recurring and who might have been special. I identified names of some nurses at hospitals at the same time as Cal was there, and on the shipping list from her post-war trip to California. But no leads pointed to special friends, apart from Olive, her companion in later life.

So I am left with supposition, intuition, and ‘gaydar’ (a colloquialism often used in gay and lesbian communities to refer to the ability to spot those with a similar orientation to our own). Auntie Cal was a woman who grew up and spent her life in female circles. Her personality and manner were distinctive. She played cards for money, swore, and loved a tippie. She was close to her own three sisters and was loved by her nieces, the three sisters of my mother’s family, and her great-nieces and -nephews. Her lengthy and successful nursing career was spent living with and working with women. Her friendship circles were amongst women. She must have been comfortable around men, nursing them in wartime and later looking after those damaged in the conflict. She was proud of her band of war nurses, sending her hard-won medals back when they were excluded from the Anzac parades. My hope for her is that during her life she experienced intimate love and that she was loved in the same way. All I can really claim to be true about Auntie Cal’s sexual orientation is that, born in a later era, she would have fitted splendidly into our communities.

I’ll give my brother the last word about Auntie Cal and our collective remembering process, from his opinion piece (Lapsley J, 2014):

We never heard her speak about the war. There is no Caroline Wise diary. We don’t know what she dreamed at nights. But we remember our Auntie Cal, and wish like hell we’d known her better.

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Notes

- 1 Quotations from family members’ emails to me are held privately and used with permission.
- 2 Information about Caroline Wise and her family background comes from a wide variety of sources. Unless otherwise indicated, source material is referenced from the Barbara Wells biography of Caroline Elizabeth Wise (Wells, 2015). Other sources included family knowledge; records of births, baptisms, deaths, and wills in Cornwall and New Zealand; and research using Papers Past, with a particular focus on the Nelson newspapers of the time. These sources are referenced where appropriate.
- 3 Sources for Caroline Grace Munday are as follows: father’s name and occupation on the Munday–Wise marriage announcement, *Nelson Evening Mail*, vol. XI (259), 29 November 1876, p. 2; Cornish family: United Kingdom Census, 1851, Enumeration District 20m Folio 344, p. 14, accessed at Cornwall Online Census project, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com>; United Kingdom Census, 1871 census, Enumeration District 20m, folio 20, p. 13 lists her as a dressmaker; Grace Munday, her mother, disappears from UK Census records from 1851 onwards; Francis Munday’s death on 20 February 1865 is recorded in Cornwall Record Office’s District Probate Registry for 1865, DRB/WR/8, Item 150, p. 10; Caroline Grace Munday’s arrival in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a single woman assisted immigrant on the ship *Chile* is recorded in the shipping news, *Nelson Colonist*, vol. XVI (1829), 29 October 1874, p. 3; Caroline’s inheritance is mentioned in a private family tree record found at <http://members.iinet.net.au/~kjestew/kitREDRUTHcutdown.htm>
- 4 George Wise declared bankrupt: *Colonist*, vol. XXXIV (7114), 11 September 1891, p. 3; discovers coal in Nelson: M. R. Johnston, Coal Mining Near Nelson City, *Journal of the Nelson and Marlborough Historical Societies*, vol. 1(5), October 1985, pp. 4–18; accessed at http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-NHSJ04_05-t1-body1-d1.html; science prize: *Nelson Evening Mail*, vol. 30 (302), 22 December 1896; Edith Wise wins scholarship, *Colonist*, vol. XLVI, (9380), 17 January 1899, p. 1.
- 5 Obituary in the *Colonist*, vol. XLII (9568), 28 August 1899, p. 2.
- 6 George Wise remarriage: Nelson electoral rolls and burial records show Elizabeth Wise as his second wife; the residence and occupation of Cal and her sisters during the first decade of the twentieth century is also sourced from electoral rolls.
- 7 Cal’s career with the New Zealand Army Nursing Service was tracked through her military records via the Archives New Zealand website (www.archway.archives.govt.nz, WWI attestation number 22/295, record ID R24235473); searches of *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand*, the New Zealand Nursing journal digitised on

- Papers Past; and the online collection of WWI photographs held at the Alexander Turnbull Library. Contextual information on the New Zealand army nurses came from the above sources and from Maclean (1923), Myers (1923), Maclean (1932), Rogers (2003), and Rees (2008); Mayhew (2014) was also a very useful source on healthcare during WWI. Dedicated websites, particularly New Zealand Military Nursing (www.nzans.org) and Scarletfinders provide valuable resources; in particular, a report on New Zealand nurses in France by McCarthy (1919), available on Scarletfinders. Caroline Wise's nursing position at Westport in 1915 is sourced from *Grey River Argus*, 16 September 1915, p. 5.
- 8 *Nelson Evening Mail*, vol. XLIX, 6 January 1916, p. 4.
 - 9 *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand*, IX(3), July 1916, p. 139.
 - 10 Emily Mayhew's *Wounded: The long journey home from the Great War* (2014) gives an excellent account of systems of healthcare on the western front.
 - 11 Passchendaele led to 18,000 New Zealand casualties, including 5,000 deaths, over a short period around October 2017; altogether on the western front, 35,000 New Zealanders were wounded and 13,250 died (half of those who served in France and Belgium became casualties). At Gallipoli, the count was 2,721 dead and 4,852 wounded, and estimates for New Zealand's WWI effort overall are 16,697 killed and 41,317 wounded out of around 100,000 men (New Zealand History, 2015; Wikipedia, 2015).
 - 12 'The nurses at the New Zealand Stationary Hospital, Wisques, France'. 16 August 1918. Alexander Turnbull Library Ref: 1/2-013463-G. No permission required for reproduction. Located at: <https://natlib.govt.nz/record/s/22755284?search%5Bpath%5D=items&search%5Btext%5D=wisques+nurses>.
 - 13 *Corinthic Mail*, Friday March 21, 1919. Digitised in Auckland War Memorial Museum Library's troopship magazine collection, <http://heritageet.al.blogsport.co.nz/2013/09/troopship-magazines.html>.

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