

REVIEW OF**MEREDITH J. BATT AND DUSTY GREEN, *LEN & CUB: A QUEER HISTORY*.
FREDERICTON: GOOSE LANE, 2022.****Craig Jennex**

As I grow older, I find myself increasingly moved by stories of love between young men. It's partly nostalgia—a longing for my own youth intensified by the impossibility of return to those confusing and overwhelming teenage feelings of love and lust. But the greater part of what makes these stories so compelling is that these relationships challenge the most basic tenets of heteronormativity and patriarchy, social systems that have long pushed all of us into conventional ways of being ourselves and being with others. Young love, perhaps especially when it's fleeting, can overwhelm and reconstitute how we think of ourselves and others; when those feelings facilitate alternative ways of understanding and being in the world, they can change everything.

It's a common story: boys, usually members of a larger, boisterous friend group, develop an intimacy that moves beyond friendship to something more—something thrilling—that they nurture and explore through stolen glances and subtle forms of touch. I remember what this process of exploration feels like, that excruciating point where the edge of perfect bliss meets that of unbearable torture. While, at the time, I never articulated something as straightforward as “my desire for my best friend is political resistance to systems of heteronormative patriarchy,” I'm starting to recognize that love between boys carries unique and profound potential. Before expectations of normativity crystallize for the participants, young people construct idealistic queer worlds for themselves.

It's significant, then, that *Len & Cub: A Queer History*, written by Meredith J. Batt and Dusty Green, allows us to travel back in time to early twentieth-century New Brunswick to witness the budding friendship, captivating love, and heartbreaking separation of Leonard “Len” Olive Keith (1891-1950) and Joseph “Cub” Austin Coates (1899-1965). Inspired by an incredible collection of photographs donated to the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick in 2011 by historian John Corey (which were on display at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in 2022) Batt and Green trace the ways that two young men in Havelock grew together and grew apart. This rural community in Kings County seems like an unlikely setting for a gay male love story in the early 1900s, which is one of the things that makes this book so unique and important. Indeed, the story that Batt and Green tell in *Len & Cub* is one of the earliest known stories of queer love in New Brunswick history and among the most well-evidenced we have in Canada from that time.

Despite their age difference—Len was eight years older than Cub—the boys were inseparable in the 1910s and 1920s. As Batt and Green show, the conditions for romance between people of the same gender were rather perfect in Havelock in this moment: segregation of sexes was common, meaning that boys were encouraged to develop close connections with other boys, and the fact that gayness was not yet codified as an identity marker allowed boys to explore feelings for one another without having to name and classify such feelings. Not having language to name someone or something as “gay” is not a bad thing. In his recently published memoir, *Immoral, Indecent & Scurrilous: The Making of an Unrepentant Sex Radical* (2022), Gerald Hannon (another important homo from New Brunswick) writes of his experiences being caught gawking at the naked bodies of his swimming pals being laughed off rather than read as indicative of his desires: “I suppose the good side to a topic's being unmentionable is

that it is, well, unmentionable” (40). Eventually, Len and Cub were expected to fall into line with normative social scripts, settle down, and build lives and families. Cub acquiesced more easily than Len; while he would eventually marry a woman named Rita Cameron in 1940 and relocate to Moncton following the Second World War, Len was outed as a homosexual in the 1930s and forced to flee Havelock in the dark of night.

During their time together in the early twentieth century, Len and Cub took hundreds of photographs. In many of those reproduced in the book, we see the boys displaying physical affection: holding each other in bed, sitting on each other's laps, and cuddling in a field. In one photograph, the boys are laying together in a hammock, limbs entwined; in another, Cub nestles his body into Len's open arms and rests his hand on Len's upper thigh, his thumb grazing the bulge in Len's pants. While these photos are undeniably intimate, the series that Batt and Green describe as “parallel portraits,” in which each boy appears alone, are the ones that I find most intriguing. Len and Cub took turns photographing each other in the same pose, with the same framing, in the same location. These photographs have stuck with me because they embody such a creative form of intimacy. Len would take a photo of Cub, for example, crouched in the woods pouring alcohol into a small mug. Then, Cub would photograph Len mimicking the exact pose, including the gaze. It's rather brilliant: the individual photographs don't read as particularly queer, but when viewed together, they reveal an intimate connection that says *we are one*. Imagine the affectionate ways the boys might've adjusted each other's poses to get it just right.

One of many things I value about this book is that Batt and Green clearly explain the provenance of the photographs, the intergenerational keeping of local history over the past hundred years, and broader social shifts that make their telling of this story possible. Len and Cub were practically neighbours in a tiny village assembled around a crossroads. Len became an amateur photographer during the “snapshot revolution” of the early twentieth century, a moment when cameras and the processes required to develop photographs became more easily accessible to ordinary Canadians. Len also owned a car and a tent, so he and Cub could access remote places and spend time alone. They could nurture their connection away from the watchful eyes of family members and others in Havelock. But their romance was well-enough known that, for generations, many people in Havelock referred to them as “boyfriends” and retold stories of Len being driven out of town in the 1930s for being homosexual. Someone had the good sense to write notes on envelopes holding the photographs, identifying one of the men who forced Len to leave town. For one hundred years, beginning long before the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick existed, these photographs and their contexts were handed down by New Brunswickers. Eventually, Batt and Green acquired them and have contextualized Len and Cub's relationship in the province and the nation more broadly, modelling the rigorous and creative archival work required to read historical records of marginalized populations. As they show, social understandings of same-sex affection have shifted significantly since Len and Cub's time, but the continued dominance of heterosexuality and patriarchy means that this history resonates in the present in gripping ways.

Len & Cub is an important addition to the disciplines of Canadian history, queer studies, archival studies, and histories of photography; so too is it a worthwhile read for anyone interested in LGBTQ2+ histories and cultures in Canada. It's on this last point that the book strikes me as particularly generative: Len's incredible photographs—alongside Batt and Green's rigorous analysis—allow us to learn a story that reminds us that queer intimacy blooms everywhere, even in unexpected locales. As Green argues in the book's preface: “we have always been here...not just Toronto, but even the furthest back roads, in

the most rural and forgotten-about places. Places queer people are told they don't belong" (15). Green writes that while he has felt a closeness with Len and Cub since first stumbling upon their photographs, he didn't anticipate that telling their story would give him such a tangible sense of empowerment nearly a century later. Batt said something similar at an event at Glad Day Bookshop in Toronto when describing the time that they visited the boys' graves and laid carnations: they were surprised by the powerful feelings of kinship they have for the boys. Through the process of learning about Len and Cub's lives and poring over the images that capture their love, Batt and Green feel a profound and moving connection with two boys they have never met. You will too.

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