Passion and Profession, Doctors in Skirts: The Letters of Doctors Frieda Fraser and Edith Bickerton Williams

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Abstract. “Passion and Profession; Doctors in Skirts,” is based on the extensive correspondence between Dr. Frieda Fraser and Dr. Edith Bickerton Williams, two Canadian women who were lovers from 1924 and life partners from 1937, until the death of Dr. Williams in 1979. Dr. Fraser became a prominent researcher and lecturer of Microbiology at the University of Toronto. Dr. Williams was one of the first women in North America to graduate as a Veterinarian. Dr. Frieda Fraser’s medical training afforded her the freedom to foster a same-sex relationship with her partner Edith. Her freedom was constrained however, as women interns were placed in institutions thought appropriate for their sex, and prospects of private practice for a woman doctor were bleak. The letters’ candid accounts of conflicts with male authority, challenges to ideas about sexuality, and the pervasiveness of prejudice, often reinforced by the scientific community, are important to the History of Medicine. The paper demonstrates that the same-sex relationship and identity, developed in the course of the Fraser/Williams correspondence, proved a primary source of strength in the face of the doctors’ tribulations and triumphs as professionals in the medical field.

Résumé. «Passion and Profession; Doctors in Skirts» est basé sur la vaste correspondance entre les Dr Frieda Fraser et Edith Bickerton Williams, deux femmes canadiennes qui furent amoureuses à partir de 1924 et partenaires de vie de 1937 jusqu’à la mort du Dr Williams en 1979. Le Dr Fraser est devenue un important chercheur et professeur de microbiologie à l’Université de Toronto. Le Dr Williams a été l’une des premières femmes en Amérique du Nord à recevoir un diplôme de vétérinaire. La formation médicale du Dr Frieda Fraser lui a offert la liberté d’entretenir une relation homosexuelle avec sa partenaire Edith. Cette liberté était toutefois restreinte, car les femmes faisaient leur internat dans des institutions jugées appropriées à leur sexe, et la perspective d’une pratique privée pour une femme médecin était sombre. Ces lettres, qui rendent compte franchement de

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Something must have happened; Time stood still,
Here is our moment, glowing and alive
It looks so sturdy I’m afraid, it will
Live to be 70 or 75
It can’t be love. Love comes and goes so fast.
What do they call it when it seems to last?¹

Dr. Frieda Fraser and Dr. Edith Bickerton Williams were two Canadian women of the 1920s, who constructed a world and shaped their identity around their affection for each other. They established a life-long partnership, complete with a lease of relationship, and planned for the adoption of children together. The method by which they accomplished these aims lay in letter writing: the act of writing forged and facilitated their desire, and their desire facilitated their identity. Their choice of profession in the medical world made that identity possible to achieve.

Frieda Helen Fraser was born in Toronto on 30 August 1899; her father was professor of languages at the University of Toronto. Frieda was educated at home until the age of 15 upon which she spent three years at Toronto’s Havergal College. She later enrolled in the University of Toronto Medical School. In the summer of 1925 Frieda moved to New York to take her internship at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children and later to Philadelphia for its completion.² She returned to the University of Toronto to teach and to do research. In 1955 Dr. Frieda Fraser was appointed full Professor of Microbiology which she practised until her retirement in 1965.

Edith Bickerton Williams, also affectionately known as “Bud,” was born in Toronto on the 24 June 1899, also into an upper middle-class family. In 1925, Edith was sent to Britain by her family and returned to Canada in 1927. After various employments, Edith decided on Veterinary College and graduated in 1941 from the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph. She was the second woman in Canada and the fifth in North America to do so.

Dr. Frieda Fraser and Dr. Edith Bickerton Williams left a large record of correspondence which roughly spans the years 1925 to 1979, the year of Edith’s death. The existing correspondence began when Edith was sent to England by her family for the dual purpose of aiding her aging aunts and keeping Frieda at a distance. The exchange reveals the growing intensity of their desires as well as the method and determination each woman used in order to fulfill her dreams as a professional in the medical world.
The letters are important on a variety of levels. This paper will examine how these letters have given us a microcosmic look at the lives of two Canadian women doctors who were devoted to each other as life partners. This paper will also demonstrate that Frieda and Edith’s devotion to each other aided in their respective abilities to achieve their goals as women of science, at a time when women doctors in Canada numbered only 2% of the profession.3

This paper will address some of the conflicts posed by gender and sexuality for Frieda and Edith and demonstrate that their same-sex relationship and identity, developed in the course of their correspondence, proved a primary source of strength. In turn their professions as medical women afforded them the freedom to facilitate their personal lives, both in ways financial and spiritual. Their identities as lesbian women who were devoted to one another also provided them with the opportunity to seek out other medical women like themselves for further validation.

The two women’s hopes of a future together were only partially realized, however. The letters are replete with the anguish of separation and the women’s valiant efforts to spend even a minimal amount of time together were achieved at great cost. Familial machinations and Frieda’s professional schedule worked consistently against the two women’s efforts. Even though freedom and independence were products of a medical career for Frieda, the demands on her time as an intern were also in opposition to the development of any but the most tenacious relationship. A correspondence such as Frieda and Edith’s offered Frieda the flexibility necessary for a busy intern in the development of their romance. It was not until 1939, upon the death of Frieda’s grandmother, that Edith and Frieda finally set up house. They lived happily together through the next forty years, until Edith had her first stroke in 1977, and died in 1979. Dr. Frieda Fraser remained in their Burlington farmhouse until 1994; during that year she was removed to a nursing home and shortly thereafter she passed away.

That Frieda chose medicine as a life-long profession was certainly an effect of her family history. Her father, who died when Frieda was 15, had been professor of French and German Languages at the University of Toronto. Frieda’s older brother Donald, eight years her senior was also a doctor who graduated from the University of Toronto. Frieda was able to benefit from her brother’s encouragement, thus entry into the University of Toronto’s Medical School was not such a radical step as a member of the Fraser family. For Edith Williams however, the process of entry into Veterinary College was much later met.

Our existing correspondence begins when Edith was sent to England. Here Edith relayed information about two other medical women who had revealed themselves to Edith that they were devoted to each other. On the Atlantic, the world of medicine and the world of the heart collided as Edith wrote to Frieda from the deck of the Cunard ship “Ascania”: 
Bess [Edith’s sister] picked up the nicest women from the hospital on board—two nurses. Miss Brown and Miss Scadding. They are head nurses at T.G.H. and quite old—about 45! They are Very [sic] devoted to each other which is enough to make me interested in them even if they weren’t such perfect lambs.

Miss Brown and Miss Scadding are as nice as ever—they were telling me today that their families had been awfully against their living together so much when they [were] young but after 20 years they [are] beginning to get used to it. It is an awfully difficult subject to chat about and it would never be approached if I had to do it, but they suddenly began to talk about it today. They seem to agree with all we think about it, and also that there is no use trying to convince any other people about it—they simply can’t see it.4

From the beginning of the relationship between the two women, their personal lives and their professional lives were intertwined. The women sought out professional connections from which to extend their private sphere. In this way, efforts were made to validate their private lives from the sphere of the professional. Second, the existence of other medical women who were devoted to each other, who lived together, and who were successful was pure sustenance for the budding life-long relationship between Frieda and Edith.

Frieda, who was interning at the New York Hospital for Women and Children, answered Edith using a scientific perspective:

I think I have seen Miss Brown if she was head operating room nurse for a time but I can’t picture her precisely. Please tell me more. It is a most extraordinary arrangement this system of partnership. I suppose it shows the adaptability of the human organism. I didn’t realize till lately how much I need you and still, or rather because of it I rely much more on myself.5

The last line provides an indication that Frieda’s reliance on Edith with no source of male financial support in her foreseeable future meant that she would need to depend primarily on herself. But Frieda Fraser depended heavily upon Edith’s spiritual support. New York internship brought with it 6-day weeks of 14 hour days. The days were filled with activity and there seemed to be never enough hours in the day. Here Frieda’s relationship with Bud proved a primary course of strength. Frieda read and reread Edith’s letters in free moments in the wards, and wrote brief sentences while sitting for a few minutes on a break. Thus many of Frieda’s letters to Edith are interspersed with vignettes of intern life—often framed in her affection. While working in tenement houses as part of young mother outreach program, Frieda wrote:

…if you don’t mind noise and dirt the conditions really aren’t bad. It came over me this afternoon as I was pausing to take air on the fifth flight and a admiring a really beautiful star-shaped break in a window that I could be overwhelmingly happy with you in just such a place….There is something I am pining to tell you I don’t know at all what, except that it is nice and just around the corner—rather like sunshine through a window.6
Frieda’s letters are as much a description of her love for medicine as they are a realization of the extent of her love for Edith. It was also within this terrain that both women were negotiating the tricky landscape of femininity, their sexuality and the male sphere of professional life.

The two women were acutely aware that a stigma might be attached to having the news of a woman resident and her woman lover circulate the wards of a hospital. By the following letter, written from Edith to Frieda in New York in 1926, we discover that Edith, who was an employee in the Office of the Government of Ontario in England, typed her envelopes to Edith. That way Frieda appeared to receive her letters in a professional capacity. Frieda and Edith discussed at length whether others might think that one of them had a lover because of the frequency of the correspondence. And also at issue was whether either of them had the more masculine handwriting. In the world of Frieda the intern, it was important for Frieda to have no suspicion of any lover, male or female, cast upon her. In the following passage, written by Edith to Frieda in New York, the idea of throwing the hospital staff “off the scent” is bandied about:

I’m sorry I can’t type my envelopes now, or at least some of them to put the hospital staff off the scent if anyone is interested. You’ll just have to be compromised because I’ll expire if I can’t write to you every time I am took badly. Isn’t it the nicest thing that we like each other? I just mention it for fear that you may not have noticed it! I love you dear.7

In 1927, by the time Frieda was working at the Phipps’ Institute in Philadelphia, Frieda registered considerably less concern regarding rumours about her private life. Upon one of Frieda’s returns to Philadelphia, it was clear that those who were connected with Frieda’s mail were quite familiar with Frieda on unspoken terms: “My Lamb—you spoil me terribly. When I got back to the lab there were several letters from you there—what Miss Westerman calls ‘important mail’ without cracking a smile and a most exciting parcel (a pair of walking shoes).”8 Frieda used her relationship with Edith as a way of collecting information about the state of medicine for women overseas. And Frieda’s questions and comments also give us a brief insight into the state of birth control in Canada to a woman physician of the 1920s. Frieda writes to Edith from Toronto while she was on sick leave:

Do you happen to know the present state of birth control in England? Are there any contraceptive clinics or have they been shut up? For some reason information is damn difficult to come by probably due to the anomalous state of the law and public opinion. Most of my clients have only one complaint against fate and that is too many children. It seems dreadfully unfair. Lewis remarked one day that all the information about contraception she had ever got was from laymen and she has been practicing about 30 years. I think almost anyone would say the same.9
As much as Frieda empathized with women who did not want to have any more children, she was unable to help them. Yet she was open to ideas which circulated around the medical word—and also emboldened by some of the opinions held by other doctors. Frieda openly acknowledged (at least to Edith) her own ignorance of important birth control information. This is both a reflection of selectivity in the dissemination of medical knowledge as well as a portrayal of the legal restrictions on the dissemination of birth control information to the general public. The doctors did discuss birth control at staff meetings, as Frieda explains:

There was a swell discussion at a staff meeting her about birth control. Did I tell you? I felt awfully ignorant. I didn’t seem to know the first thing about whatever—Dr. Baldwin the president of course, takes the ancient view that every child is the blessing of god, etc., up 70X7, but there are others almost as old who don’t share her views; altogether it was most entertaining. One of Ada’s friends, a medical man states that every woman ought to be able to have a baby by the time she’s thirty and no damn questions asked—Isn’t that nice?

There are two very interesting aspects about this letter. The first is that the atmosphere in which Frieda worked was an all-woman medical world. That Dr. Baldwin is a woman president is never remarked upon by Frieda. Yet the division between views become both a matter of generation and gender. Frieda expresses surprise that other doctors “almost as old” as Dr. Baldwin did not share her views, and Frieda needed to tell Edith that there was a medical man who was also modern and almost as old, who believed that every woman should be able to have a baby married or not. Historian Wendy Mitchinson acknowledges that very little is known about what the patient-doctor relationship was like before 1939. She does report that many Canadians fondly remembered acts of kindness. Stories were told of physicians who did not charge for an obstetric procedure when the family could not afford it, or of other physicians who charitably bought groceries for a starving family with a newborn.

Certainly however, doctors were not devoid of the circulation of racist or nativist notions. In the New York Bellevue Hospital for Women and Children, Frieda was exposed to a diversity of patients. In January of 1926, Frieda wrote Edith about her terribly busy day, dripping ether for four tonsilectomies and simultaneously taking care of her patient who was delivering—as she states:

while I cajoled this miserable Hebrew into having a baby to the tune of “it’s all your fault doctor, that I have the baby,” “O my legs I can more, I die, I die,” “Please give me some ether”—she also offered to get off the table and go home because we wouldn’t help her. And more that was even less reasonable....The Jews don’t hold up well under those conditions and eclamptic toxemias and Semitic blood are enough to send you out of your mind.

This letter is indicative of many aspects of Frieda’s professional career. Though the kind of anti-Semitic expression is not characteristic of Frieda
and Edith’s correspondence, this letter does reflect a systemic anti-Semitism that finds its way into the halls of medicine, where a patient’s treatment is shaped by their ethnicity. What Frieda refers to as eclamptic toxemias are potentially life-threatening convulsions brought on by high blood pressure due to the pregnancy—the reference to Semitic blood extends from professional and scientifically endorsed medical education of the time. The second aspect is the negotiation process between the patient and the doctor. The powers that the patient possessed were little but well used. She blamed the medical system that she had the baby in the first place—perhaps this was because she was denied birth control or an abortion; perhaps she was premature and blamed the onset of labour on poor hospital care. As a poor pregnant woman, she demanded pain reliever and in exchange for this she would stay on the table and not exercise her other threats indicated by Frieda.

The third aspect revealed in this letter is that it shows Frieda to be a medical woman who has been siphoned into an area that has been deemed appropriate for women physicians—Children and Obstetrics. Thus, Frieda found herself dealing primarily with tonsillectomies (children) and deliveries (women).

The dilemma of powerlessness felt by interns and how it was compounded with the experience of gender is related by Frieda in the following passage. Though the incident did not happen to Frieda, but to a fellow intern is, nevertheless important. Naturally Frieda put herself in the intern’s place.

Mrs. Boris finally had a nephrectomy (surgical removal of the kidney), thank god, but they threw back the ureter without tying it off—this by a specialist from outside—any fool medical student or anyone at all would know better—apparently they just forgot—Knowlton assisted and was afraid to say anything believing that the man knew what he was about….It is amazing that she didn’t die.  

Frieda acknowledged two significant factors in her colleague’s fear of speaking up when she detected a grievous error made by a superior. The first factor was that the doctor was a specialist and brought in from outside. The second important factor was that the specialist was male and by this the interns accorded him respect not only because of his position as a specialist, but also because of his gender. Indeed, Frieda stated that her friend Knowlton believed “that the man knew what he was about.”

The challenge of real medical practice with real people brought Frieda a real enjoyment of her internship in the hospital. This is all in despite of her surly attitude which she often portrays in her letters, and despite the crowded wards and the long hours. Frieda enjoyed her internship so much so that she contemplated the possibility of private practice, but because she was a woman, and limited by her gendered status, she felt that the likelihood of her conducting a successful private medical prac-
Frieda acknowledged this in the following, both her nostalgia for the hospital ward, and the passing opportunity for her to practise medicine:

This morning was quite like old times, Mrs. Boris and Miss Hund were in the ward again, poor devils. Mrs. Boris is the one whose history I gave you so fully the day you arrived. With a few blood counts on Saturday and filling out chart cards today I felt that it only lacked a delivery to make me feel thoroughly in place again, the hospital is full to overflowing. When I’m there it makes me kinda sick to think that I probably will never practice.¹⁵

After completing part of her internship in New York, Frieda moved to Philadelphia to finish her studies. She was able to transfer to the Phipps’ Institute to train with Dr. McPhedran, a friend of her older brother’s. Her career move to study tuberculosis and to research infectious diseases was not a career choice made in complete freedom; though she was privileged to have help from her brother, she was also acutely aware that women physicians in private practice were not popular choice for the public, even in Toronto. “Two of me would be a great convenience,” Frieda allowed herself to momentarily dream: “The things I like are obstetrics and surgery—both are out of the question, I suppose.”

Unlike Frieda, who did not expect to practice family medicine in Toronto, Edith Williams could and did practice veterinary medicine. Granted, Edith’s entry into the veterinary world took place 12 years after Frieda finished her residency. By 1937, when Edith enrolled, the two women were quite settled in their relationship with each other. Frieda taught at the University of Toronto, while Edith raised poultry on her farm in Aurora. They spent every spare moment together, yet both were prepared to sacrifice the time in order for Edith to attend Veterinary School in Guelph. Edith wrote to Frieda after her first day:

My Darling:

It has been a nice day. Most of this morning was spent in being told that if we all hadn’t come here because we thought we would enjoy a lifetime of this work, we’d better go home now; if we were afraid of animals and didn’t like them, we would be no good, if we didn’t want to work hard there was no sense wasting their time and ours, etc. We were also taught how to use a microscope. In the afternoon, we saw barns and animals to get the general layout and then given a list of books to go out and buy….The other female vet hasn’t turned up yet, but they are quite kind to me.¹⁶

What is interesting about this letter is that it is only at the end do we realize that Edith was the only woman in the class.

In the next account, written one year later in 1938 from Guelph’s Agricultural College, Edith reveals criticism of another woman who attempted to enter their class. Included in the criticism was also the
assumption that because the new student was a woman, she had a weak stomach. Edith wrote:

Another of the first years at OAC (Ontario Agricultural College) thought it would be nice to transfer to us next year, so Jean brought her over to see things today—I don’t think she will come now. There was a very messy horse operation and then our work was stinking to say the least. She is a Greta Garbo looking creature—short long straight hair and looks very disillusioned. After she had left the lab, one of the boys said, “We don’t want her over here—all she is interested in is us—not the animals!” Which I thought was quite bright of them. And their nickname for her is “Aggie-Pants.” Darling I must go to bed. I wish you were here, but I am not having a darling time!

Why was Edith so critical of a female comrade? Edith at least distanced herself from those who ridiculed the woman because she wore pants. The reasons for Edith’s position are perhaps numerous. Perhaps it was a generational issue; perhaps Edith needed to re-affirm her place in class as “one of the boys.” Her remark that “all she is interested in is us—not the animals” clarifies Edith’s position in the class as ‘one of the boys.” In a world where women were still women, men were men and doctors were men, Edith needed to be one of the boys in order to be the doctor.

In conclusion, Frieda and Edith had created an insular world which was bound up personally and professionally. The two women derived intense support from each other on both levels. As medical women, they could empathize, confide, understand each other’s experiences. As a same sex couple, they were able to work out a professional life around their desire. But as the 20th century moved forward, and the walls of intolerance grew higher, it became increasingly difficult for them to allow anyone else into their world.

NOTES

1 University of Toronto Archives (hereafter cited as UTA), Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 010, File 10, Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, Aurora Ontario, 2 February 1935.
2 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036. Archives notes, Frieda Fraser personal correspondence, 1924-70.
4 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 010, File 03, Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, aboard ship RMS Ascania to Belfast, 5 July 1925.
5 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 08, Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, Toronto (on two-week leave from her internship in New York), 17 July 1925.
6 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds, II, Box 036, File 09, Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 7 February 1926.
7 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 010, File 04, Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, London England, June 1926.
8 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 11, Dr. Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, Philadelphia, 18 January 1927.

9 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 10, Dr. Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, New York, 11 November 1926.

10 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds, Box 036, File 08, Dr. Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, New York, June 1925.


12 UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 09, Dr. Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, New York, 6 January 1926.

13 (Quote starting with “Mrs. Boris” ...) UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 09, New York, July 1926.

14 (Quote starting with “This Morning.”) UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 10, New York, 11 November 1926.

15 (Quote starting with The things I like are obstetrics...) UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 036, File 10, New York, 11 November 1926.

16 (Quote starting with “My Darling:”) UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 010, File 11, Dr. Edith Williams to Dr. Frieda Fraser, Guelph, 4 September 1937.

17 (Quote starting with “Another of the first years at OAC...”) Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 010, File 11, Dr. Edith Williams to Dr. Frieda Fraser, Guelph, 17 February 1938.