Introduction

In 1889, in the popular science book *The Evolution of Sex*, the Edinburgh biologists Patrick Geddes and John Arthur Thomson outlined their vision of a new form of intimacy. While the love shared by the 'poet and his heroine' was currently exceptional, 'these rare fruits of an apparently more than earthly paradise of love' would one day become the reality for all.¹ What was required to achieve such romantic and transcendent unions was evolution assisted by a revised sexual ethic, one in which women's influence was manifest. According to the two natural scientists, nature was not 'red in tooth and claw' as the Darwinist Thomas Huxley had alleged but driven as much by female-coded altruism as male-coded egoism. Women therefore had a crucial role to play in the evolution of sexual relations beyond the crude impulses of lust towards the ideal of co-operative, egalitarian and loving partnerships. Young souls would be duly lifted out of 'the moral mud of modern conditions' and higher, purer, ethical standards achieved.²

Five years later, Bella Pearce, a prominent activist for the Independent Labour Party in Glasgow, delivered a strikingly similar message to the readers of her women's column in the socialist newspaper the *Labour Leader*. The future held the real promise of a 'heaven upon earth', when marriage would be 'something very different from now.' For Pearce, its attainment was implicated equally with the progress of the labour movement as with the advance of women's rights, seeing them as 'twin manifestations of the one force which is pressing us forward towards higher conditions of life. Nonetheless, the 'new life' she sought within the parameters of the ethical socialist movement was founded on comparable principles to that of Geddes and Thomson's evolutionary ideal: sexual equality, mutual respect and elevated standards of morality.

Similar intimations of an imminent utopia of transformed sexual relations were being felt and articulated by other educated, politically

radical, middle-class women and men in towns and cities across Britain. In the pages of avant-garde journals, feminist pamphlets and sociological treatises, in lecture halls and drawing rooms, like-minded souls exchanged ideas, consolidated theories and built networks, seeking ultimately to precipitate the dawning of a new, more 'authentic' sexual morality. Concomitantly, some also became intimate with each other, forming passionate friendships, having sex and falling in and out of love. The bold among them embodied their political views in their private lives by choosing not to marry and becoming 'free lovers', or by acknowledging their 'sexual inversion'; the majority confined their reimagining of intimacy to their fictional and non-fictional written work.

Not a cohesive movement, the sexual progressives of the fin de siècle were rather a loosely aligned collective of individuals from diverse and overlapping political, social and spiritual affiliations, including feminism, socialism, anarchism, freethought, theosophy and occultism. What united them was the inequity of current sexual and social conventions, which they perceived as hypocritical, immoral and outdated. The precise targets of their reformist zeal varied. For some, the priority was recasting marriage, an institution denounced in the Westminster Review in 1888 by feminist writer Mona Caird as a 'vexatious failure', one which enshrined the sexual double standard and was entered into by women educated for little else, often motivated solely by their need for financial security.⁵ For others, it was the legions of public, unregulated, female sex workers on Britain's streets, or taboos around the use of birth control, which were the underlying cause of society's myriad ills. For a small minority, such as the socialist and philosopher Edward Carpenter and sexologist Havelock Ellis, a key objective was challenging harsh legal, societal and religious injunctions against homosexual relations.

Whatever the items on their radical manifestos, what was clear to all sexual progressives was the urgent need for change. The existing 'regulative system' was 'no longer fitting for the age', declared Edinburgh feminist freethinker Jane Hume Clapperton, and it was 'more than time that *all* should put their shoulders to the wheel' and formulate a new, 'wide-reaching modern moral code, subserving general happiness.' Critically however, this new code did not sanction amorality; liberation from Victorian bourgeois norms did not mean licence. Instead, the era's sexual rebels sought to replace the strictures of Mrs Grundy, that personification of propriety, with relationships based less on patriarchy, convention and respectability and more on equality, honesty and respect. As Chris Nottingham has demonstrated, the key word here was earnestness. Clapperton was encouraged that the female characters in Henrik Ibsen's

1881 play *Ghosts* spoke about sex with 'a pure, earnest candour', while the Glasgow socialist and 'new man' Charles Pearce was described in the *Labour Leader* as an 'honest, earnest, whole-souled, simple [man]'. His wife Bella Pearce sought out those who were beginning 'to think seriously and earnestly' about female emancipation, while the following conversation appeared in socialist Edith Ellis's fictional, tongue-in-cheek account of an experiment in communal living in London: "Miss Merton" he said seriously, "you were in dead earnest the other night and I've been in dead earnest for months. As for Mr. Renton, he was in earnest I believe, before he was born."

Such assertions of sincerity did little to assuage the fears of the respectable bourgeoisie, however. While the borderlines of class were threatened by the violent clashes of Bloody Sunday in November 1887 and the subsequent strikes by match girls and dockers, the borderlines of sexuality and gender were rendered equally vulnerable by the twin perils of the masculine New Woman and effeminate decadent man. The novelist George Gissing, frustrated by what he called the 'crass imbecility of the typical woman', predicted an impending era of 'sexual anarchy', while in *Punch*, a day into Oscar Wilde's first criminal trial, an 'Angry Old Buffer' blustered over the challenge presented by new models of femininity and masculinity:

WHEN ADAM delved and EVE span, No one need ask which was the man. Bicycling, footballing, scarce human, All wonder now 'Which is the woman?' But a new fear my bosom vexes; To-morrow there may be *no* sexes! Unless, as end to all the pother, Each one in fact becomes the other ...¹⁰

In the extant historiography, the primary setting of these culture wars is depicted as London, the city seen to possess a panoply of unique qualities necessary for staging a sexual revolution. Scholarship by Judith Walkowitz, Elaine Showalter, Lucy Bland, Angelique Richardson and Ruth Brandon has meticulously mapped the 'dense cultural grid' of conflicting and overlapping representations of sexuality produced in the late Victorian and Edwardian period by a range of progressive and conservative constituents: in these scholarly accounts, it is the events, individuals and organisations located in England and the English capital which dominate.¹¹ In addition, in his biography of sexologist Havelock Ellis, Nottingham specifically identifies London as the place in which 'the intellectual leaders

of the anti-Victorian revolt' achieved their 'creative identities', the metropolis providing a central meeting point, a source of cheap lodgings and a place of reinvention.¹² It was here, asserts Nottingham, that 'one could join the "New Age" and avoid the eyes of those who might deride a newly assumed identity, and where 'a provincial girl, could, literally, become a "New Woman", the provinces featuring only as places from which progressive intellectuals escaped or as receptive markets for their ideas.¹³ An alternative impression is given by Sheila Rowbotham, who in a series of works provides detailed portraits of those New Women, 'free lovers' and gay rights campaigners who were clustered in 'dissident networks' outside national metropolitan centres and who migrated between Bristol, Belfast, Dunfermline and Sheffield, as well as Massachusetts and California. 14 Progressive lives beyond the metropole are also explored by Harry Cocks, in his analysis of the fellowship of Bolton men who met regularly to discuss the poetry of Walt Whitman during the 1880s and 1890s, expressing a fascination with homosexuality and developing passionate yet unerotic relationships 'through the substitution of inexpressible spiritual communion for "unspeakable" physical possibilities, and by Roy Foster, who in his account of the revolutionary generation in Ireland between 1880 and 1923 acknowledges their exploration of 'other forms of liberation besides the political and national, including their sexual radicalism.¹⁵

As these studies illustrate, urban centres outside of London were the sites of important and distinctive sexually progressive networks, significant 'constellations', in Matthew Beaumont's words, in the wider 'cosmos' of late Victorian counterculture. 16 This book builds on this work, focusing on Scotland, a nation with a unique moral and religious heritage and in which a pervasive and entrenched Presbyterian religiosity continued to hold sway. Drawing on a diverse array of sources, from private correspondence, memoirs and diaries, to socialist, feminist and avant-garde journals, it provides the first detailed, group portrait of the radical views and intimate relationships of the sexual progressives living and campaigning in Glasgow and Edinburgh between 1880 and the advent of the First World War, including: Bella Pearce (1859–1929); Charles Pearce (1839–1905); Patrick Geddes (1854-1932); Anna Geddes (1857-1917); and Jane Hume Clapperton (1832-1914). With one exception, each has until now been relatively neglected in the historiography. While their published work has been analysed in studies of feminist socialism, New Woman writing, birth control advocacy and secularism, a paucity of contextual information has occluded important connections between their affective lives, political affiliations and written texts.¹⁷ This study endeavours to rectify these elisions, its methodology of collective biography enabling an elucidation of the complex relationship between the radicals' intimate lives and their production of sexual discourse, including the particular conditions necessary for them to 'speak out' about sex. In doing so, it complicates established narratives on radical thought, intimate relations and progressive subcultures in Britain during the period 1880 to 1914, in a number of important ways.

First, studying sexual rebels collectively, as a particular iteration of fin de siècle radicalism, highlights that a necessary precondition of progressive thought on intimacy was the rejection of orthodox Christianity. This revolt from established religion tends to be understated in much existing scholarship yet is brought into sharp relief in a study of Scotland, because of the centrality of religion to the nation's sense of its own moral identity. To reimagine sexual relations, all the Scottish progressives necessarily had to break with the Presbyterian religion of their childhoods, choosing from the multitude of propositions vying for cultural authority during the Victorian 'crisis of faith'. Patrick Geddes became a follower of the positivist 'Religion of Humanity' while also interested in theosophy and the occult; Charles and Bella Pearce were early members of the period's pre-eminent magical organisation the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, although their primarily spiritual allegiance was to the American Swedenborgian mystic Thomas Lake Harris; Jane Hume Clapperton was a freethinker, developing her own form of 'religious agnosticism', one which combined religion's emotional and moral qualities with the scientific principles of evolution. It is clear then, that fashioning a new morality required not unbelief, but rather conversion to a new, heterodox belief system. To state therefore, as Cocks has done, that by the early twentieth century, 'religion had come under suspicion and fallen into decay as one of the principal locations for sexual expressions of all kinds', oversimplifies the case. 18 The Scottish evidence demonstrates instead that at a crucial moment of transition, when old moral certainties were being rethought by progressive individuals in a self-conscious process of modernisation, unorthodox faiths provided safe spaces for sexual transgression, as well rich stores of energising radical ideas.

Second, and relatedly, while progressives may have conceptualised themselves as original, a sense of discontinuity with the past allowing them the freedom to imagine radically new ways of being, the new evidence presented here disrupts the long-standing perception of the era's sexual rebellion as one of generational challenge. Holbrook Jackson, in his 1913 review of the 1890s, described young men revelling in 'smashing up the intellectual and moral furniture of their parents', with 'the snapping of apron-strings' causing 'consternation in many a decent household'. For some English progressives, this will have carried resonance, Edward

Carpenter, for example, recollecting his upbringing in upper middle-class Brighton as a monotonous and vacuous round of shopping, gossiping and socialising, a world he escaped for Whitmanesque comradeship and naked air bathing in a rural retreat near Sheffield.²⁰ In Scotland, however, the adoption by progressives of sexually radical practices and beliefs drawn from spiritualism, positivism, Swedenborgianism and secularism highlights the importance of considering longer-term continuities across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in narratives of sexual change. Furthermore, while these religious heterodoxies may not have been transmitted through the progressives' families, political radicalism certainly was, often providing a pathway to their initial rejection of respectable conformity. For example, the Chartism of Charles Pearce's father and Ruskin Society membership of Bella Pearce's father was formative in both their involvement in 1890s socialism. When ideological dissonance did emerge within the families of Scottish sexual rebels, personal animosity did not necessarily result: while Clapperton clearly waited until her parents' death before publishing her new moral code, Anna Geddes and her mother were able to talk courteously about their differences in opinion on sex and religion, Anna commenting matter-of-factly, 'of course each respected the others opinion & there was no ill feeling.²¹ This relative absence of generational rupture in Scotland may be due in part to another feature which distinguishes them from their English comrades. Nottingham has noted that in London, progressives were united not just by a shared outlook, a preference for the 'new and youthful' over the 'old and established', but by their similarity in age, with Havelock Ellis, Olive Schreiner and Oscar Wilde all born in the mid- to late 1850s.²² In Scotland, by contrast, the confluence in ages was much less pronounced, with Charles Pearce and Jane Hume Clapperton significantly older and neither of them fulfilling the role of 'rogue uncle' Nottingham ascribes to William Morris and Carpenter.²³

Finally, while the rigour with which the establishment pursued its course of moral conservatism is well documented, not least in the period's various sexual scandals – including over birth control (the Besant–Bradlaugh trial of 1877), 'free love' unions (the Edith Lanchester case of 1895), male same-sex relationships (Oscar Wilde's trials of 1895), and male prostitution (the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889) – the evidence from Scotland emphasises the additional regulatory role played by socialist and women's suffrage parties. The discourse of respectability was not limited to the 'unco guid', the Scots word for the religiously righteous, but held real purchase within progressive organisations such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP), with widespread reluctance to reinscribe past associations between political radicalism and immorality. The utopian socialists of the

1820s and 1830s had created an enduring link in the public imagination between socialism and the destruction of the family, Robert Owen in his *Lectures on the Marriage of the Priesthood of the Immoral World* advocating 'marriages of Nature' in his New Moral World.²⁴ In the 1880s and 1890s, any deviation from the appearance of conventional morality was therefore seen within socialism as damaging to electoral prospects, despite its members holding a range of views on issues such as marriage and 'free love'. Ensuring electability required the policing of a strict boundary between public discourse and private behaviour, with intimate relations considered a matter of private conscience rather than party policy.

Sexual progressives in Scotland were therefore required to self-censor their writing. Bella and Charles Pearce, as prominent ILP activists in Glasgow and writers for the Labour Leader, chose in their journalism to reframe their Christian sexual mysticism, removing any reference to Thomas Lake Harris's notorious practice of 'conjugial marriage' and instead providing only tantalising hints of a secret sexual knowledge, writing largely in the idiom of contemporary feminism. Only those on the margins of the mainstream progressive movements, or who eschewed them entirely, were able to articulate explicitly radical ideas, although even then the considerable erudition of texts such as Clapperton's Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness (1885) or the nature metaphors employed by Geddes and Thomson in their essay 'The moral evolution of sex' (1896) projected a convincing air of respectability. Similarly, in the presentation of their intimate lives, all the Scottish progressives appeared conventional. Bella and Charles Pearce married, albeit in an irregular ceremony known as marriage 'before the sheriff', a form valid in Scotland and attractive to those with unorthodox religious beliefs. The exact nature of their relationship is harder to fathom. We know that they had no children together, and may perhaps have been using a sexual technique known as 'karezza', a form of 'coitus reservatus' popular among American sex reformers and possibly used by disciples of Thomas Lake Harris. Patrick and Anna Geddes's marriage followed nineteenth-century companionate and patriarchal lines, the couple most likely spacing the births of their three children through 'marital continence', Patrick expressing profound unease at the sexual misdemeanours of his male students in Edinburgh. Finally, Clapperton, despite championing birth control and female sexual pleasure, and defending those who entered 'free unions', remained unmarried and seemingly celibate throughout her life, although did maintain a close relationship with a fellow neo-Malthusian named George Arthur Gaskell. Scotland's radical voices on the Sex Question may have reimagined new forms of intimacy; living them, however, proved rather more complicated.

In 1889, the poet, literary critic and sex theorist John Addington Symonds wrote, 'We are, all of us, composite beings, made up, heaven knows how, out of the compromises we have effected between our impulses and instincts and the social laws which gird us around.²⁵ This book is an examination of this complex dynamic, as it was played out in the lives of Scotland's hitherto under-researched sexual progressives. Before these composite beings are discussed, however, it is first necessary to provide a contextual overview of the regulation of sexuality in nineteenth-century Scotland, a nation with a moral identity engendered by its Calvinist heritage and in which the influence of moral conservatism was particularly pronounced. Chapter 1 provides this context, delineating the legal, cultural and religious discourses by which the sexual lives of Scottish women and men were policed. The institution which formed the centrepiece of this regulatory regime was marriage, although moral panics over illegitimacy and prostitution, along with harsh legal penalties for sodomy, also provided Scots with powerful incentives to adhere to bourgeois norms of respectability. Alternative codes of morality were in circulation, however, in libertine middle-class settings and fishing, farming and urban working-class communities, while the sexual double standard tacitly permitted men of all classes to enjoy 'twilight moments' of transgression.

The book's subsequent chapters are concerned with plotting the sexual discourse and intimate lives of Scotland's diverse sexual progressives. Chapter 2 focuses on Bella and Charles Pearce in Glasgow, political activists for the ILP whose primary forum for their critique of contemporary sexual relations was 'Matrons and Maidens', a pioneering women's column in the socialist newspaper the *Labour Leader*. The disjuncture between this critique and the masculinised rhetoric and class-based analysis which surrounded it indicates the complex negotiations undertaken by feminist activists working within socialism in the 1890s, in their attempts to simultaneously fight patriarchy and wage war on capitalism. Bella abandoned that struggle in the 1900s with the advent of militant suffragism, finding in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) a renewed source of energy and optimism.

The Pearces' narrative does not end there, however. Chapter 3 explores the couple's involvement in the Brotherhood of the New Life, an organisation of Christian mysticism which had its origins in the experimentations with communal living conducted in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Its leader, Thomas Lake Harris, was a charismatic seer who preached a highly transgressive sexual philosophy based on the practices of 'internal respiration' and 'conjugial marriage', which together allowed followers access to a 'transcendent sexual realm'. The Pearces were

key protagonists within a British network of disciples, running a business importing Brotherhood wine, publishing Harris's poetry and disseminating some of their faith's sexually radical ideas in their socialist and feminist journalism, albeit in an anodyne form.

In Chapter 4 the focus of the book moves fifty miles east, to Patrick and Anna Geddes in Edinburgh. A natural scientist by training, Patrick was an intellectual maverick, spearheading a myriad of social, artistic and civic schemes which attracted a coterie of feminists, artists, writers, scientists and social reformers to his base in the city's Old Town. The nature of his relationship with his wife Anna is discussed, as well as with the members of his bohemian subculture, the chapter ascertaining the extent of their influence on his theories on sex. A revised analysis of his highly influential 1889 book *The Evolution of Sex* and its later companion essay, the 1896 'Moral evolution of sex', reveals Patrick's confused and often contradictory attitudes towards both sexuality and feminism, albeit that the texts were both intended and received as significant contributions to progressive sexual and gendered thought.

Finally, Chapter 5 moves from the wynds and closes of Edinburgh's Old Town to Jane Hume Clapperton and the elegant Georgian townhouses of its New Town. Brought up within a wealthy and religiously conventional mercantile family, Clapperton was able to mitigate the constraints of respectable society by seeking out radical, feminist freethinkers from across the country, forming relationships with individuals including Charles Bray and Sara Hennell in Coventry, George Arthur Gaskell in Bradford and the Reverend James Cranbrook in Edinburgh. Their influence, combined with her considerable erudition, facilitated her development of a new, secular ethical code, one which encompassed the dissemination of information on birth control and the acknowledgement of women's right to sexual pleasure.

Notes

- 1 P. Geddes and J. A. Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (London: Walter Scott, 1889), p. 267.
- 2 P. Geddes and J. A. Thomson, 'The moral evolution of sex', Evergreen, 3 (Summer 1896), p. 81.
- 3 Lily Bell, 'Matrons and Maidens', Labour Leader, 1 December 1894, p. 7.
- 4 Lily Bell, 'Poor Mrs. Fawcett', Labour Leader, 30 November 1895, p. 1.
- 5 M. Caird, 'Marriage', Westminster Review, 130:1 (1888), p. 197.
- 6 J. H. Clapperton, Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1885), p. 12.

- 7 C. Nottingham, The Pursuit of Serenity: Havelock Ellis and the New Politics (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), p. 97.
- 8 J. H. Clapperton, A Vision of the Future based on the Application of Ethical Principles (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1904), p. 104; Lily Bell, 'Matrons and Maidens', Labour Leader, 21 April 1894, p. 7.
- 9 'The Independent Labour Party in Camlachie', *Scotsman*, 28 August 1894, p. 6; Mrs Havelock Ellis, *Attainment* (London, 1909), pp. 136–7, quoted in Nottingham, *The Pursuit of Serenity*, p. 98.
- 10 Letter from George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 2 June 1893, in A. C. Young (ed.), The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz 1887–1903 (London: Constable, 1961), p. 171; 'Sexomania', Punch, 27 April 1895, p. 203.
- 11 J. R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 5; E. Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (New York: Viking, 1990); L. Bland, Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality (London: Penguin, 1995; Tauris Parke, 2002); A. Richardson, Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); R. Brandon, The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Woman Question (London: Papermac, 1990).
- 12 Nottingham, The Pursuit of Serenity, p. 101.
- 13 Ibid., p. 102.
- 14 S. Rowbotham, Rebel Crossings: New Women, Free Lovers and Radicals in Britain and the United States (London: Verso, 2016), p. 3; Dreamers of a New Day: Women who Invented the Twentieth Century (London: Verso, 2010); Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love (London: Verso, 2008).
- 15 H. Cocks, 'Calamus in Bolton: spirituality and homosexual desire in late Victorian England', Gender & History, 13:2 (August 2001), p. 192; R. F. Foster, Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923 (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 116: see in particular chapter 4 on 'Loving', pp. 115–43.
- 16 M. Beaumont, 'Socialism and occultism at the fin de siècle: elective affinities', in T. Kontou and S. Willburn (eds), The Ashgate Companion to Nineteenth Century Spiritualism and the Occult (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 170.
- 17 See for example J. Hannam and K. Hunt, Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s (London: Routledge, 2002); S. Ledger, The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); K. B. Kalsem, 'Law, literature and libel: Victorian censorship of "dirty filthy" books on birth control, William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law, 10:3 (Spring 2004), pp. 533–68; L. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830–1914 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). The exception is Patrick Geddes, who has had several biographers, and whose wide-ranging intellectual endeavours and interests have featured in histories of sociology, sexual science, urban planning, environmentalism and Celticism.
- 18 H. G. Cocks, 'Religion and spirituality', in H. G. Cocks and M. Houlbrook (eds), Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 175.

- 19 H. Jackson, *The 1890s: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Cresset, 1913, 1988), pp. 154, 33.
- 20 Rowbotham, Edward Carpenter, pp. 11-23.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Nottingham, The Pursuit of Serenity, pp. 89-90, 100.
- 23 Nottingham describes this role as those who 'have found insufficient honours with their coevals and so enjoy a sweet revenge as the corrupters of youth' (p. 101).
- 24 K. Hunt, Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 82.
- 25 J. A. Symonds, Memoirs, ed. P. Grosskurth (1889; London: Hutchison, 1984).