

FEATURED REVIEW

Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

Men have always had sex with other men. It makes some people uncomfortable (and others gleefully happy) to say this, but it appears to be true regardless. The real issue for historians then is not *if* such activities occurred but when, where, and how. Over the last two decades, a lot of ink has been spilt answering these questions for the late nineteenth and twentieth century, on determining when and how the modern concept of homosexuality emerged. Peter Boag turns away from the places with which we are most familiar, metropolitan centres like New York and Chicago, and instead brings us a compelling account of sexual history from lumber shacks, mining towns and boom cities of the Pacific Northwest.

In early November of 1912, police in Portland picked up nineteen-year-old Benjamin Trout. This young man's confessions while in custody had profound consequences for the history of same-sex relations in the Pacific Northwest. Trout told of a network of homosexual relations in Portland. He did not just tell of those kinds of men normally associated with such charges (members of the working-class or "othered" racial groups): instead he fingered men who were predominantly white and middle-class. Some of those named were what one might have called "pillars of the community." Trout's allegations led to a widely publicised scandal, with those who were named fleeing the city only to be later picked up as far away as Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia. The 1912 scandal represented the first time that local white middle-class men were associated with homosexuality. It also represented, Boag argues, the emergence of the modern notion of the homosexual, as one whose identity is determined by his sexual object choice (other men) and not by his gender identity (recognisably masculine or feminine).

The obvious question is: why? Why did this concept of homosexuality emerge now and not earlier or later? In *Same-Sex Affairs*, Boag provides some convincing answers. His first task is to tell us where it did not come from: the working-class. Historians such as Kevin White, John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman have suggested that the sexual revolution of the early-twentieth century emerged in part out of the more sexually liberated practices of the working-class. Boag argues against this thesis, telling us that, at least in the case of the emergence of the modern notion of homosexuality, we need to look to the middle- and not the working-class. This is not to say that the working-class did not have same-sex sexual relations. Boag tells us that they did, but he also

argues that these relations followed very different patterns from middle-class folk and that it was out of the latter group that we can trace the emergence of the idea of the homosexual.

The resource-based economy of this region drew huge numbers of single men to work in the lumber and mining industries in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Transience was the key word of these men's experience, as they moved from camp to city and back again in search of work. Back in 1989 the Canadian historian of sexuality, Steven Maynard, called to task some of the historians of Canada's resource economy for failing to account for the history of sexual relations in this area of working-class life. Maynard will no doubt be happy to see the fascinating details which Boag tells us about same-sex relations amongst transient working-class men and boys. The most common type of relation in these communities involved bonds between men (the *jockey* or *wolf*) and adolescent boys (the *punk* or *lamb*). It's not exactly clear how widespread such relations were but the preponderance of commentary which Boag can draw on suggests that it was far from uncommon. We get quite specific details here on sexual practices. Boag tells us that the most common forms of sex were anal and inter-femoral (rubbing the penis between the thighs) and that the men usually performed the penetrative act while boys took on the role of receptor. He gleans this information creatively by literally determining what people were doing when they were arrested and what types of activities they claimed (or were told) to have engaged in. Once in the city, working-class men who had homosexual relations became targets of vice commissions and progressive reformers. But they became targets as members of the working-class and non-white racial groups, those whom the middle-class already viewed as being potentially sexually degenerate in a variety of ways. Such people, according to middle-class commentators, could be counted on to do a number of odd sexual acts of which relations with those of the same sex was only one.

Located only a few city blocks from Whitechapel, the working-class vice district of Portland, an entirely separate sexual subculture emerged in the area in and around the city's central business district. It is in this area that most of those arrested in the 1912 scandal lived and worked in a variety of lower middle-class occupations such as clerks, bookkeepers, accountants, and stenographers. And it is here amongst these types of men that Boag locates the emergence of those who thought of themselves (and were thought of) as gay. These men engaged in a variety of sexual acts including oral sex (not practised, or at least not often, amongst the working-class) and took on a variety of roles including both penetrative and receptive.

The ironic part of this story, if Boag is right, is that there appears to be a direct relation between the emergence of corporate capitalism and the rise of this type of queer identity. Other historians have claimed that the decline of

entrepreneurial opportunities that attended the rise of corporate capitalism represented a threat to ideas of manhood and the self-made man ideal. But Boag claims that some men found real opportunities here. Without the high expectations of gender performance associated with the self-made man ideal, many men could eke out a new existence and a new type of masculine identity in the city. Their relative freedom from parental and community regulation, their high wages, and the cornucopia of urban entertainments allowed for the flowering of new sexual practices and identities, one of which was the homosexual.

Boag is very careful here never to claim that same-sex relations began at this time (thus hopefully avoiding the kind of misunderstood criticism that some direct at works like this); instead he is offering a much more specific and careful argument about the link between sexual identities (cultural ideas, both social and personal, about sex) and the “modernisation” of American society in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The book is careful enough in its research to be convincing and original enough in the specificity of its argument to be worthwhile reading.

In linking the emergence of the homosexual to turn-of-the-century ideas of manliness, however, Boag takes on a larger subject than he can fully address. As he claims, the self-made man ideal seems to have changed at this time, turning away (in matters of sexuality and consumer culture for example) from the kind of self-abnegating, disciplined ideals of the Victorians and embracing the much more sexually promiscuous and consumer-culture oriented values of the twentieth century. A number of historians from Anthony Rotundo and Kevin White to (more recently) Bill Ogersby and Tom Pendercast, have traced this switch in ideals of manliness. Boag’s addition to this literature (quite apart from his contribution to the history of sexuality) provides a whole new angle. There is no gender crisis here; instead there is opportunity. The optimism about this sexualisation of masculinity, however, is a little more disturbing if seen in a larger context. In relations with women, the new masculine gender ideals had a very mixed legacy. Arguably they facilitated greater levels of sexual violence, leading to more rape and instances of abuse. So one wants to know, to what extent did the greater opportunities for sexual freedom also allow for more opportunities of sexual violence? In what ways did these men share in the larger notions of masculine sexual prerogative? When were gay men still men and how did this shape the way they treated each other? There are hints of darker relations throughout the book, but they remain only that, traces of something which might be much larger. The most clear explanation of unequal relations between sexual partners is between boys and men. And although Boag deals with both sides of these relations, surprisingly the boys come out on top, as those who could take advantage of men because of their ability to turn such partners into the police and still escape unscathed because of their

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age.

Perhaps the best part of this book is that which will be least read. In chapter five Boag takes us into the local history of the Pacific Northwest, showing us what happened to two gay men as their involvement in the 1912 scandal came to light. The controversial Portland reformer E.S.J. McAllister received a much rougher ride than did John Gibson, prominent citizen of the small city of Walla Walla, Washington. A variety of matters, including personality, politics and religion all shaped the way local citizens and legal figures treated and interpreted these men's sexuality.

In this turn to local history, Boag gives us the kind of nuance and narrative that we do not find enough of in works on gender and sexuality; he offers the kinds of details that let the reader know not just about sociological categories but also about their lived context. In a way, the whole book is just this type of good local history, bringing us down to the immediacy of person and place, grubby matter and cherished ideal. That this local is also significant on a much grander scale makes *Same-Sex Affairs* an important new contribution to the history of sexuality.

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