



Peter Ackroyd, *Queer City: Gay London from the Romans to the Present Day* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2017), ISBN 9780701188801, 262 pages, £16.99.

Reviewed by

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In Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* (2000), same-sex relationships receive only brief attention, mainly in Chapter 41, 'You sexy thing' (370–80), where there are references to 'male and female prostitutes' in Roman times (370), to the 'thriving homosexual community' in medieval London (371) and to the eighteenth-century 'Mollie houses' for homosexuals and 'Sodomitical Clubs' (375) in a capital that was 'the centre of homosexuality where, under conditions of privacy and anonymity, the elect could pursue their calling' (376). In *London Under* (2011), one of his shorter spin-offs from the 822-page *London: The Biography*, Ackroyd observes that '[i]n the twentieth century Lancaster Gate [tube station] was known as an assignation place for homosexuals' (141–2) but says little about the homoerotics of the subterranean city. *Queer City* is another short spin-off, doubtless intended to catch the market generated by the celebration in its publication year of the half-century that has passed since the decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain, but it moves same-sex relationships from underground to overground, locates 'homosexuality' historically as a relatively recent concept and invention and subordinates it to the once derogatory term 'queer', which Ackroyd says, 'has become the academic word of choice' (1) and which he stretches back to the dawn of city time.

Although *Queer City* shows our nice Mr Ackroyd, whose overall literary persona oozes middle-of-the-road reassurance, venturing more boldly than usual into

subversive and even sordid territory, it has his customary amiable virtues: an infectious fascination with terminology and etymology; a grasp and skillful deployment of a multiplicity of vivid, telling details; a flair for weaving those details into an absorbing narrative; and a sense of broader conceptions within which his material may be interpreted and understood. He starts by declaring '[t]he love that dares not speak its name has never stopped talking' (1) and summarizes the significance and history of a wide range of terms, some well-known and others obscure, deployed to designate gay people and practices: for example, 'ingle', 'pathic', 'catamite', 'Ganymede'; 'molly', 'indorser' (2); 'backgammon player', 'gentleman of the back door'(3); 'Uranian' or 'urning', and 'urnind' (for a queer female) (4). Ackroyd finds some of these terms less felicitous than others: 'Who would want to be called an 'urning'? It sounds like some sort of gnome' (4).

This discussion, while intriguing, establishes a recurrent tendency in the book that somewhat queers its pitch insofar as it purports to offer a history of gay London: it often slips into supplying a general history of queerness in Britain rather than a London-specific one. Of course some of this general history is necessary to an understanding of the London-specific material; but the book is less closely focused on the capital than *London: The Biography* or *London Under*. There is also the sense of an imbalance in its treatment of male and female same-sex relationships, in and beyond the capital: closer attention seems to be given to the former and while this is partly explicable in terms of lack of documentary information, because lesbian relations were never illegal and thus generated less in the way of official records, it also suggests a bias on Ackroyd's part that he does not strive assiduously enough to correct.

Roman London was relatively tolerant of queerness, though '[t]he love between two free men' was censured (9) and could lead to the loss of civic rights. Ackroyd fingers Christianity as the chief early culprit in the repression of homosexuality. 'In the early fourth century the shadow of the cross fell upon Londinium' (13). The advent of the religion of love brought with it homo-hatred. As Ackroyd points out, 'at no time did the canons of Christian law evince the slightest tolerance for same-sex love' (16-7). This intolerance did not, of course, stop it happening and might even have sharpened the intensity of its pleasures by placing them close to sin, danger and death.

Throughout human history, and especially in any complex society, there is always a gap between the pragmatic and prescribed worlds of sex, between what people actually do and what they are supposed to do and not do; at any given period, a gallimaufry of fears, fantasies and neuroses populate this gap and produce attempts to close it by religious and penal codes, which are sometimes relaxed to accommodate actual behaviour (as with the decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain in 1967), but more often tightened by strict and sometimes savage attempts to regulate and punish such behavior (attempts which may themselves satisfy sadistic libidinal desires). It is not surprising that much of Ackroyd's history is a history of proscription and punishment, partly because documentary records in this area are the most likely to be available, and partly because the attitude towards sexual deviance from

whatever norm prevails at any given time is more often than not proscriptive and punitive.

Ackroyd suggests that, in Chaucer's time, there was a 'fruitful confusion of gender roles' (36), as evinced by the figure of the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*; that in the rich flowering of drama in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, 'London was a site of erotic theatre' (47) where 'great London playhouses, including the Theatre and the Curtain, were little better than pickup joints for queer men' (48); and that, apart possibly from Marlowe, 'Shakespeare may legitimately be considered as the greatest of English homoerotic poets, thus tying together drama and buggery with threads of gold' (52). It was the homoerotic – or, in the terms of the time, sodomitical – aspect of theatre which, Ackroyd contends, particularly aroused the ire of the Puritans; Philip Stubbes, for instance, in his *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), evoked 'plays and interludes' which exhibited 'such wanton gestures, such bawdy speeches: such laughing and fleering: such kissing and bussing: such clipping and culling: such winking and glancing of wanton eyes [...] as is wonderful to behold' (qtd 50) and after which 'every mate sorts to his mate, everyone brings another homeward of their way very friendly, and in their secret conclaves (covertly) they play the sodomites or worse' (qtd 50). Homoeroticism pervaded public life in the earlier seventeenth century, in the courts of both James I and Charles I, with the Duke of Buckingham featuring as favourite (in that school history euphemism) to both monarchs.

Ackroyd is aware of the inequitable relations that may prevail in same-sex relationships, especially of a pederastic kind: in the sixteenth century, for example, a 'masculine culture' dominated schools and universities and pupils might be subject to masters pederastically as well as pedagogically: he quotes a boy who wrote 'My master has beat me so naked in his chamber' (54). As Ackroyd sums it up: 'Sex with a younger male was the instrument or expression of that fact [of unequal power]' (54). Pederasty might mean a prison term for a schoolmaster but not the end of his teaching career, especially in that central British institution for promoting homosexuality, the public school. The headmaster of Eton from about 1534 to 1541, Nicholas Udall, both beat and buggered the boys in his care and confessed to the latter practice when summoned to London for questioning: by the Buggery Act of 1533 he had committed a capital offence but suffered only a short spell in the Marshalsea prison before becoming a parish priest and in 1554, two years before his death, returning to teaching in no less a position than headmaster of Westminster School.

As Sir Edward Coke records, however, the ultimate penalty was visited on one Humphrey Stafford, 'a known paederastes', who 'on 12 May 1606 in the parish of Saint Andrew, High Holborn, led astray by the instigation of the devil, did with force and with arms assault' K.B., a youth of about sixteen, and 'have sexual relations' both with him and with R. (65), with whom he 'did perpetrate [...] that abominable and detestable sin of sodomy' (qtd 65–6). Stafford himself acknowledged that he deserved the death penalty but claimed that drunkenness meant his desire exceeded his performance: 'I could not perform mine intention' (qtd 66). This failed to mitigate his

punishment, however, and he was duly hanged in 1608, providing entertainment for 'a great throng and mass of people' (qtd 66).

Although Ackroyd produced, in 2014, a volume on the Civil War as the third of his 'History of England' series, he says little about same-sex love in London during the Civil War and Cromwell's Protectorate. It might be revealing to probe into the matter during a period which would have been ostensibly more hostile to such practices than the previous era – indeed the Puritan perception that court and theatre were riddled with sodomites could have been one of the subsidiary causes of the Civil War—but which might also have offered new outlets in a world that seemed turned upside down and whose internecine conflicts sharpened religious and martial bonding within opposed groups; for example, the close fraternity of Cromwell's Ironsides, at war and at prayer, might have produced some homoerotic stirrings; Colonel Thomas Rainborowe's famous observation, in the Putney Debates of 1647, that 'the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he' (qtd BCWProject) might implicitly apply also to the poorest queer. But substantive documentary evidence for such a supposition may not exist.

After the Restoration and into the eighteenth century, same-sex practices became to some extent more visible and male and female cross-dressing was more evident. In 1691, however, the Society for the Reformation of Manners became active and one of its targets was the 'scourge' of sodomy (97); a legislative change introduced the charge of 'assault with intent to commit unnatural crimes', which might be alleged 'if one man "laid hands" on another' (97). This was partly a response to a new awareness of the 'molly house' in which 'queer men could meet and drink, dance with each other, and bugger each other' (97) — a supposedly safe space that morphed into a danger zone as the law and public vigilance turned against it, for instance, the raid on Mother Clap's in Field Lane, Holborn led to forty 'notorious sodomites' being clapped into Newgate (119), at least three of whom were hanged. By the end of the eighteenth century, in the 1790s, there was a strong tide of public opinion against both male and female same-sex practice, although the latter remained legally undefined.

Executions in Britain for sodomy peaked between 1806 and 1834 when more than eighty men convicted of what was then still a capital crime went to the scaffold, most of them in London. Executions for the offence had ended in mainland Europe by this time – the last took place in 1791. In November 1835, John Smith and John Pratt were the last men in Britain to be hanged for buggery. But the repression of queerness continued in the nineteenth century, culminating in what Ackroyd calls 'one of the most badly conceived interventions into sexual practices that was ever perpetrated by Parliament' (190): the amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act proposed by the Liberal MP Henri Labouchere, and duly passed into law, which stated that anyone who publicly or privately committed, was party to, or tried to procure 'the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person' could be sentenced to up to two years imprisonment with hard labour (191). In 1895, Oscar Wilde's sentence was what Ackroyd calls 'the full Labouchere punishment' (199). His amendment remained in force until 1967.

Wilde's conviction and sentence overshadowed queer life in London at the start of the twentieth century. There was growing anxiety about same-sex love between women as well as men. In 1921, during a debate on the Criminal Law amendment Bill, the MP Frederick Macquisten argued that 'any act of gross indecency between women' should become 'a criminal offence' (209) and cited 'a friend who told him how his home had been ruined by the wiles of one abandoned female who had pursued his wife' (qtd 209). Lesbianism, however, never fell under the power of the law although a novel held to promote it was judged an 'obscene libel' (qtd 210): Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The Director of Public Prosecutions observed that 'a large amount of curiosity has been excited among women and I am afraid in many cases curiosity may lead to imagination and indulgence in practices' (qtd 210). Ackroyd asserts that the 'case against *The Well of Loneliness* did more to fashion the identity of the female queer than any other trial or scandal of the period' and in some ways 'proclaimed the birth of the lesbian in the twentieth century' (210). One wonders about this attribution of such enormous influence to a novel and a court case: it has the air of a rather sweeping generalization substituting for a more detailed and complicated history and feeds into the more general impression we mentioned earlier: that *Queer City's* history of gay men is stronger than its history of gay women.

While same-sex 'practices' between women were never criminalized, Ackroyd suggests that 'in the first half of the twentieth century', 'gays of both sexes were subject to a level of prejudice and intolerance' hitherto unprecedented 'in Western history' (211). The blacked-out, bomb-blasted London of World War Two, its citizens subject to sudden death from the sky, permitted and fostered a new licentiousness – as Quentin Crisp put it, queering Churchill's words on the Battle of Britain, 'never in the history of sex was so much offered by so many to so few' – or, in a variant version Ackroyd deems equally valid, 'to so many by so few' (qtd 215). But after the war the 1950s saw an intensification of anti-queer activities by police and moral panickers. This 'same grey and furtive atmosphere of surveillance and arrests' continued, Ackroyd contends, until the 1960s and early 1970s (211). He challenges the suggestions that 'in the 1960s London became in many respects a sexually liberated place' and claims that before 1967 'it was still cloistered and claustrophobic, a city where queerness was discussed in low voices and where police activity was still eminently visible' (218). This 'lacklustre atmosphere', Ackroyd suggests, 'may well be a testament to the real rather than the mythic conditions of London in the sixties' (218). This contention clearly merits further investigation.

Since 1967, gay London has seen the proliferation of many queer-friendly social spaces, survived, though with many casualties, the trauma of AIDS, and become 'part of the normal world' (226) – which is not to deny that 'violence and prejudice still abound' (231). Ackroyd feels, however, that, in the past decade, 'queerness, with all its panache and ferocity, is in elegant retreat' (230), though a 'possible exception' is Hampstead Heath, 'a *locus amoenus* [pleasant place] for generations of queer Londoners who found the combination of bushes, trees and long grass irresistible. It flourishes still' (230). But in general, Ackroyd suggests, inside and outside London, '[l]egal acceptance' in the UK – including the legalization, since 2013, of gay marriage – 'has bred a certain placidity' (231). Ackroyd's text takes on a faintly elegiac tone here. But he ends with an affirmation of the metropolitan multitudinousness of gender

and sexual identity – the city has always contained ‘many sexes’ – and with a declaration that his book is not only ‘a history’ but also ‘a celebration’ of ‘the continual and various human world maintained in its diversity despite persecution, condemnation and affliction’, which ‘represents the ultimate triumph of London’ (232). In this perspective, *Queer City* is a vital revisionist coda to his compelling biography of the capital.

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