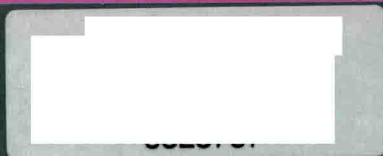


British queer history



NEW APPROACHES
AND PERSPECTIVES



Edited by

Brian Lewis

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New approaches and perspectives

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British queer history

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Brian Lewis
Montreal

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Introduction: British queer history

Brian Lewis

In a 2002 article in the *Independent*, the author and columnist Philip Hensher latched on to a recent government decision about how to refer to gay people in legislation. 'Homosexuality' was to be replaced with 'orientation towards people of the same sex'. Otpotss? 'I suppose it could catch on, given time.' But if not that, then what? What do we call ourselves? Homosexual? Too medical, 'and no one wants to go round with a diagnosis round his neck'. Gay? 'One puts up with it ... dopey as it is, so long as it stays an adjective.' Queer? The brave attempt to reclaim it, and turn it into a political rallying cry, was rather dated; moreover, 'it is one of those words, like "poof", that we cheerfully use to each other, but that we would certainly not want anyone else to use.' Part of the problem, he thought, was that the language of 'orientation' and labels of stable identity had become increasingly problematic, failing to encompass everyone all of the time. In stating his preference for a word with historical resonance, that described what people do rather than claiming to know what they are, Hensher suggested, tongue firmly in cheek: 'sodomite'.¹

Well, sodomite has no more chance of resurrection than otpotss of adoption. But, as Hensher rightly indicates, there has been no shortage of terms nor dearth of controversy surrounding the delicate question of nomenclature – an arresting development for acts or identities that once struggled (at least in official discourse and polite circles) to be named at all: for 'the love that dare not speak its name', for '*peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum*', for the 'nameless offence' committed by 'unspeakables of the Oscar Wilde sort'.² A recent thesaurus gaily mixes together desires, deeds and descriptors in coming up with more than eight hundred synonyms for gay male (from 'A-gay' to 'zebrajox') and 230 for lesbian (from 'Amazon' to 'zamie girl').³ The 'Juliet question' – 'What's in a name?' – is just

as pertinent and unresolved a decade after Hensher wrote; but he exaggerated the demise of 'queer', at least in the academy and upon university campuses, where it remains in robust health.

Of all the possible terms, queer is perhaps the most contentious. Before the rise of gay liberation, queer – as in odd, bent or peculiar – served a dual function as a mode of self-address by same-sex-desiring males and as an expression of hostility and contempt by ill-disposed others. But, for post-Stonewall sexual minorities, queer was the language of oppression and of internalised self-loathing; they abandoned it without regret in favour of gay. Only in the late 1980s did it start to make a comeback. Radical grassroots activists in organisations like Queer Nation and ACT UP (in the US) and Outrage! (in Britain) began to deploy it as a calculated and edgy act of reclamation. It represented a defiant two-fingered gesture to reactionary and stigmatising governments, slow to respond to the AIDS crisis, and to the bile spewed out by many moral and religious commentators in a largely unsympathetic media.⁴ It also reflected a deep sense of alienation from and a challenge to the assimilationist tendencies of the mainstream gay movement. In this it shared some affinities with the work of a new generation of scholars elaborating a queer theoretical perspective from circa 1990 who similarly staked out their opposition to the 'normal'. Historians influenced by queer theory not only dismissed any notion of an unchanging and recognisable homosexual personhood across history (already demolished by a generation of social constructionists) but also stressed the fictitious nature of hetero- and homosexual binaries and identities, arguing for their historical specificity and the fluidity of sexual desire and expression.⁵

Much of this was (and is) controversial. Some older gay rights militants were offended by the rehabilitation of a despised term from an unlamented past. Some feminists saw queer as effacing and demoting the position of lesbians. Some pragmatists wondered how the civil rights of sexual minorities could be defended and forwarded if the categories of gay and lesbian are exploded as unreal 'fictions'. Some progressive community-builders noted that, even if queer had stormed the academy, it had little traction outside, suggesting a huge and problematic disconnect between public and ivory tower.⁶ Still, not only in scholarly discourse but also among student organisations, queer became well entrenched. As the number of subdivisions within the ranks of sexual and gender nonconformists proliferated, and as the LGBT alphabet-soup categories became ever more refined

and ever more complex (yet always falling short of the much-desired inclusivity), queer was co-opted as an all-encompassing umbrella expression. 'Queer McGill' (née 'Gay McGill' in 1972) at my own university, for example, strikes a familiar universalising, politically sensitive note in its mission statement:

Queer McGill is a university-wide support service for queer students and their allies. Queer is a broad term which includes anyone who chooses to identify with it. This includes those who identify simply as queer, and includes – but is by no means limited to – those who identify as queer and/or any combination of agender, ally, ambigender ... [and then all the way through no fewer than forty-nine different permutations to] transgender, trigender, and Two-Spirit. In addition, Queer McGill welcomes any students whose identities do not fit into the Western heteronormative gender binary, whether or not they identify as queer. We operate our services from an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-ageist, anti-ableist, anti-sizeist, pro-feminist and sex-positive orientation.⁷

This collection of essays starts from the premise that, in spite of its problems and limitations, queer is indeed a useful category of analysis for students of modern British history and sexuality, both as a big-tent term and because it builds on a body of recent scholarship that differs in significant ways from the pioneering gay and lesbian history of the 1970s. But, like the 2010 conference on 'British Queer History' at McGill University from which it arises, it avoids prescription, imposes no party line and encourages a thousand flowers to bloom. The conference stemmed from a conviction that historians of sexual diversity in Britain had, since the 1970s, established a distinctive and innovative field of investigation and that it was time to take stock. Anything broadly 'British', 'queer' (however one chose to define it) and 'history' was fair game. The quality and diversity of the papers were impressive, and a selection of them – supplemented by an additional call for papers and individual invitations – now forms the core of two companion collections: the current volume (with its more focused timeframe) and a special queer edition of the *Journal of British Studies* (which stretches back to the early seventeenth century).⁸ As the first collections specifically to focus on British queer history over an extended period, and showcasing challenging think-pieces from leading luminaries in the field alongside some of the most original and exciting research being undertaken by emerging young scholars, together they demonstrate the richness and promise of current British queer historical scholarship.⁹

Each of these authors owes a substantial debt to the seminal work of the sociologists and historians of the 1970s.¹⁰ As historians began to take the 'sexual turn', expanding the remit of social history by examining and integrating neglected groups and topics, the first wave of gay and lesbian scholars attempted to recover a usable past in the service of gay liberation, making use of the critical insight of the social constructionist perspective: that same-sex activities can be understood only in a historical and cultural context. Still, during the 1980s and 1990s, modern British historians tended to cede the territory to literary historians and theorists or to popular and polemical history.¹¹ At the turn of the millennium, a gathering of modern (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) British gay and lesbian or queer historians would barely have filled a taxi and collections such as this would not have been possible. But, since then, there has been a remarkable efflorescence of important, archivally based, theoretically savvy studies. Joseph Bristow has dubbed this the 'new British gay history', Chris Waters (rather more felicitously), the 'new British queer history'.¹²

As Jeffrey Weeks points out, the epistemological rupture between the first and second waves should not be exaggerated nor nuance sacrificed to the thrill of bayoneting straw men.¹³ Nevertheless, the new generation was researching and writing with the queer theoretical notions of the 1990s to heart and after social history's failure of nerve in the face of the culturalist onslaught of the 1980s.¹⁴ Influenced perhaps above all by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, these scholars especially took aim at the key sociological and Foucauldian arguments that modern homosexual and heterosexual categories were 'made' in the late nineteenth century (or, following Randolph Trumbach, in the early eighteenth century), that acts gave way to identities.¹⁵ The trend was away from grand narratives, great explanatory schema and satisfying teleologies towards an emphasis on fragmented experiences, self-understandings, desires and behaviours. Deep burrowing in archives and a theoretical mindset conducive to a bonfire of taxonomies have vastly expanded our localised knowledge of the multiplicity of sexual practices and beliefs but rendered 'our queer ancestors' less knowable. Recent attempts by Rebecca Jennings and Matt Cook to map out *A Lesbian History of Britain* and *A Gay History of Britain* respectively have produced excellent syntheses but – as the authors readily acknowledge – they constantly encounter the conundrum of what 'lesbian' and 'gay' actually mean in the centuries before their

current usage, and raise the question of whether such histories are possible at all.¹⁶ The desire of publishers, the reading public, undergraduates and harried lecturers for a straightforward story and the big picture sits uneasily beside the scholarly urge to complicate, to twist the kaleidoscope.

What, then, does this collection bring to the table? In siding with the kaleidoscope twisters, it aims for complexity (but also accessibility), to give a clear sense of the state of play and to offer pointers and suggestions for the next generation of research. It highlights a considerable diversity of thematic, methodological and theoretical approaches while retaining a strong geographical and chronological focus. It does not claim to be all-inclusive: the intersection of sexuality and gender with race and ethnicity, for example, is barely represented, analysed or even problematised here, reflecting how little work has been done and needs to be done in this area in the British context.¹⁷ And, although all of the authors are comfortable working under a 'British Queer History' rubric, the chapters reflect a real tension between those scholars seeking and finding flashes of recognition and identifiable queer forebears (however hedged around with caveats) and those insisting on the irreducible alterity and foreignness of the past, between those who want to cling to and those who want to disrupt bounded queer subjectivities, between those who register few qualms about and those eager to deconstruct the hetero/homo binary, between the direct heirs of first-wave gay history (for whom 'queer', 'gay' and 'homosexual' are little more than interchangeable synonyms) and those who have put the most distance between themselves and these genealogical roots. This is merely to indicate that there is plenty of scope for continuing debate and expansion of research topics into the foreseeable future in this, one of the richest seams of recent modern British historiography.

Charles Upchurch begins the collection with a topic of concern to all the authors: the effective interrogation of archival sources in pursuit of British queer history. In previous studies of the nature and frequency of the discussion of sex between men in leading London newspapers between 1820 and 1870, Upchurch highlighted the pros and cons of full-text electronic searches of books, periodicals and government documents.¹⁸ Although such searches allowed historians to expand dramatically the hunt for references to same-sex activity, in often unlikely or unpromising places, Upchurch noted that they were