Wolfenden's Witnesses: Homosexuality in Postwar Britain

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Author: Brian Lewis

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Reviewer: Helen Smith

As Brian Lewis writes in his introduction to *Wolfenden's Witnesses: Homosexuality in Postwar Britain*, although the Wolfenden Report is one of the most well known documents pertaining to the history of homosexuality in Britain, the rich material gathered from which to prepare the report has often been overlooked. Although much has been made of such issues as the distinction between public and private that has been foregrounded by many historians such as Frank Mort, the wealth of detail relating to the experiences and attitudes of law enforcement and legal officials, clergymen, medical officials and homosexual men themselves has been lost amongst the interpretations of the ramifications of the report. Lewis's timely and important book does much to rectify this gap. *Wolfenden's Witnesses* is a painstakingly collated and edited collection of documents from within the Wolfenden papers that sheds new light on how those in power and those at the mercy of those in power viewed homosexuality in that contentious period, the 1950s. Not only does it provide an invaluable set of source material for both scholars and students, Lewis' introduction, conclusion, and contextual material provides some interesting and original insights into the history of sexuality in Britain in the post-war period. In fact, these parts of the book are so strong that I would like to see more of them although I realise that this does not necessarily fit into the spirit of the project.

The book is split into three parts: part one being an introduction, part two (the witnesses) being the bulk of the edited material and part three focussing on the Wolfenden Report. The evidence contained in part two gives the reader access to the voices of: law enforcers, medical practitioners and scientists, homosexuals, and finally, Christians, moralists and reformers. The legal and medical witnesses get the most representation here with approximately 100 pages devoted to each and the homosexual men themselves are limited to around 30 pages. This reflects the inherent bias of the process of preparing the report where 'official' opinions and views were privileged above those of the men experiencing their same-sex desires at the time. Each section is briefly introduced by some contextual material and some suggestions by Lewis on how the reader might begin to approach the potentially intimidating selection of evidence that follows. This provides a useful guide to the often contradictory and confusing ways in which people gave evidence about homosexuality throughout the process.

In fact, these contradictions are, for me, the most striking thing about this collection. The impression from

reading all the documents in one go is that there was an immense amount of confusion regarding homosexuality during the 1950s – were men born with a particular sexuality, was it society, mummy issues, childhood experiences or a choice? As Lewis summarises, most of the commentators (including homosexuals themselves) ‘divided his homosexuals [into invert and pervert] and mingled his Ellis and Freud’ (p. 233). Each of these ‘causes’ suggested a different ‘cure’ or response which by their often oppositional nature meant that many of the officials interviewed were in conflict. This must have presented a significant problem for the committee members and it offers a suggestion as to why they struggled to come to a consensus. Much of the evidence also seems unlikely to convince someone from the other camp to a different attitude, particularly as many of the anti-reform arguments defied both logic and scientific proof. This confusion and irrational belief nicely highlights the way in which ‘deviant’ sexualities have been viewed and treated throughout the modern period. A whole range of deeply engrained prejudices and thought processes are foregrounded alongside the many genuine if sometimes troublesome ways in which the people of the 1950s were trying to engage with scientific, psychological and social developments regarding sexuality. Reading *Wolfenden’s Witnesses* from cover to cover is an important exercise in trying to place oneself in the time and place of the report’s conception and the closest that I feel I’ve ever come to understanding the conflicting, sometimes vitriolic and occasionally enlightened views on homosexuality which were beginning to gain currency.

The evidence given by law enforcers highlights a fairly different set of attitudes between the police and prosecutors and lawyers, judges and prison officials. Lewis points out in his introduction that Maxwell Fyfe’s Home Office, Nott-Bower and the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), Sir Theobald Matthew were all adamantly against reform due to, amongst other things, a sharp rise in prosecutions during the 1950s. Such characters remained wedded to the idea that the reason for this was that more men were having sex with each other rather than the more sensible realisation that different policing practices had been employed by individual officers and police districts (such as the West End officers interviewed by the Committee) in order to prosecute more men. The evidence of P. C. Butcher (‘C’ Division) and P. C. Darlington (‘B’ Division) of the Metropolitan Police tells the story of an almost obsessive level of commitment in following men from their workplaces, observing them on the streets to eventually catching them in the act in urinals. This evidence certainly speaks of vigorous attempts to pursue homosexual men in the West End of London but it does not seem to be a part of any official, countrywide ‘witch hunt’ which further supports the arguments about policing sexuality put forward by Houlbrook, Higgins and myself.⁽¹⁾ As well as highlighting the sometimes dubious methods used by policemen to entrap men, this section also offers a couple of enticing glimpses behind the official discourse of disgust to that most elusive realm of sexual practice. Such insights include the fact that ‘guardsmen were being paid quite large sums, they were in the nude and they had a harness on, and these perverts were chasing them around with whips’ and that Coventry Street had been renamed the ‘standard front’ due to the popularity of oral sex (apparently propagated by Americans during the war) in shop doorways (pp. 36–7).

However, some of the judges and lawyers seemed to take a more measured view of homosexual offences with an assumption that policemen should (and did) use discretion in selecting who to prosecute. For instance, Mr Justice McNair, felt that the law should not be changed as ‘it can be left to the good sense of those responsible for instituting prosecutions not to prosecute in the case of gross indecency between adults in private’ (p. 70). Similarly, the Q.C. Richard Elwes who was Chairman of the Derbyshire Sessions responded with some anger to the prosecution of a consensual sexual relationship, ‘It seems to me a most extraordinary procedure to have taken, and from my point of view, I am thankful that the newspaper strike has prevented the facts being reported against these men’ (pp. 62–3). This was certainly not tolerance but it does speak of the pragmatism that kept levels of prosecution, particularly outside of the capital, fairly low throughout the early to mid-20th century.

Running throughout the evidence is the confusion between homosexuality and attraction to minors and a belief in the ‘seduction thesis’. Many law enforcers, clergy and even homosexual men themselves seem to have given credence to this idea. However, while some medical professionals shared this belief, most by this time, seem to have understood a clear difference between same-sex attraction and pederasty. The evidence in

this section points to the fact that invasive ‘treatments’ such as castration, drugs and imprisonment were viewed as pointless and even barbaric by many medical practitioners although psychiatrists were tying themselves in knots in trying to find causes and psychiatric cures for their patients. The press and those in opposition to homosexual law reform made much of the perceived threat of homosexual men ‘corrupting’ boys throughout the 1950s and before. However, from the evidence provided here, it is clear that the majority of medical professionals and psychotherapists did not believe this theory and were actively trying to disprove it. This then, adds an extra layer of vitriol to the way in which newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* and *News of the World* and the legal authorities propagated this damaging and corrosive myth.

Much of the evidence and the report itself was concerned with identifying ‘types’ of homosexual men, consolidating boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality and assigning portions of blame to these ‘types’. This could be as simple as the distinctions between ‘invert’, ‘pansy’ and ‘normal’ or as complex as the astonishing list of 20 homosexual ‘types’ which includes everything from Sodomists and Masturbators to Inadequate Paederasts (pp. 80–1). Underlying this obsession with categorising and considering the ‘causes’ of homosexuality is the anxiety that all men (and women) were open to desiring their own sex. This may have been exacerbated by the recent publication of the Kinsey Report which suggested that 37 per cent of American men had had homosexual contact resulting in orgasm – the report is prominent in the sections which deal with medical and scientific evidence. It may also have been linked to the fact that many scientists believed that ‘man is constitutionally a bisexual animal’. (p. 177) The function of the report then seems to have been to create and formalise a clear sexual binary as the only way that reform could be possible.

Such identities were not only useful for the authorities. The limited evidence given by homosexual men was confined to that of respectable, solidly middle class types such as Peter Wildeblood who had recently been imprisoned for his affair with an RAF man. Wildeblood famously advocated a masculine, heteronormative version of the homosexual identity. The evidence in this section suggests that men like Wildeblood saw themselves as discreet, useful members of society, who disdained effeminacy, unruliness and, tellingly, the act of anal sex. While this stance undoubtedly fed into the limited reforms of the 1950s and 1960s, its effects were felt throughout the later gay rights movements and they linger on today. As Lewis states, ‘the right kind of homosexual in the right type of domestic social environment was going to get the nod, and no one else’ (p. 203).

Interpretations of the Wolfenden report tend to fall into two categories: a liberal narrative that places the report firmly on the road to reform and equality, and a more radical narrative that casts Wolfenden as a repressive measure that cemented the distinction between acceptable, respectable homosexuality and unacceptable, unruly, disreputable homosexuality. The former was equated to middle-class, straight-acting men who wanted to be accepted into society and allowed to live a quiet life and the latter to the usually working-class, effeminate, men who wanted to create their own society and in some instances (like the GLF) tear down the old one for good measure. Lewis’ selection of documents here place the intentions behind the report and the final report itself in more of a grey area than these two interpretations allow. Alongside the usual voices of homophobic army generals and magistrates are discussions around sexual fluidity that are still taking place today and discussions of sexual practice that still have the potential to shock the more reserved reader. There are also repeated references to lesbianism throughout the evidence calling into question the idea that the authorities refused to engage with female same-sex desire – a notion that is often repeated outside the history of sexuality.

Wolfenden's Witnesses adds to the growing historiography which problematises and re-evaluates the 1950s as well as making a vital contribution to the history of sexuality more broadly.⁽²⁾ Lewis has curated a collection of evidence that both reinforces the fog of homophobia and intolerance that hovers over the decade and blows through it with moments of clarity, common sense and strikingly modern thought. It is this challenging level of contradiction that is so vital in challenging us to think again about the report itself and the sexual history of the 1950s. Lewis' own interventions are lucid, thought-provoking and complementary to the source material and I hope that he will publish more of this (alongside this recent blog post) in future.⁽³⁾

Notes

1. P. Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London, 1996); M. Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (London and Chicago, IL, 2005); H. Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895–1957* (Basingstoke, 2015).^{Back to (1)}
2. See: A. Bingham, 'The "K-Bomb": social surveys, the popular press, and British sexual culture in the 1940s and 1950s', *Journal of British Studies*, 50, 1 (2011), 156–179; *Queer 1950s: Rethinking Sexuality in the Postwar Years*, ed. M. Cook and H. Bauer (Basingstoke and New York, 2012) F. Mort, *Capital Affairs: The Making of the Permissive Society* (Newhaven and London, 2010); R. Hornsey, *Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minneapolis, MN, 2010).^{Back to (2)}
3. <http://notchesblog.com/2016/04/14/wolfenden-paederasty-and-paedophilia/> [2]> [accessed 19 February 2017].^{Back to (3)}

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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