

A Little Gay History of Wales

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In January 1988, hundreds of people gathered in Cardiff for a rally organised by ‘Wales Against Clause 28’. Held aloft ‘were signs identifying the places the mainly lesbian and gay marchers had lived and where they were from to disprove the popular notion that “there were no gays in Wales”.’ (p. 125) As literary, sociological, and historical studies have begun to show, queer lives lived in Wales were more ubiquitous and visible than the ‘no gays in Wales’ epithet suggests. Yet the lack of full-scale historical and cultural studies has surely contributed to this sense that queer lives were lived elsewhere.⁽¹⁾ Daryl Leeworthy’s *A Little Gay History of Wales* is the first sustained study of queer history in Wales and is, as its author bluntly states, a book ‘that should have been written a long time ago.’ (p. 141)

Based on a productive range of archival sources, newspaper reports, oral histories, and personal testimony it offers a rich and often surprising picture of queer Welsh experiences. Drawing on paradigms of social history and labour history, Leeworthy foregrounds ‘the role of political activism and liberation movements’, whilst demonstrating his awareness of the insights of queer theory with its ‘stress on fluidity and disruption’ (p. xix). Queer history, with its emphasis on ‘fragment and uncertainty’ offers a ‘kaleidoscope’ as Leeworthy describes it, ‘rather than a telescope.’ (p. xviii).

Concentrating on the 19th and 20th centuries, *A Little Gay History of Wales* offers a brief overview of same-sex desire from medieval times to post-devolution. In his analysis of medieval legal records, Leeworthy identifies an archival ‘gap’ in England and Wales, where prosecutions for criminal homosexual acts were scant compared with some other parts of Europe. This, he suggests, could explain ‘the relative lack of interest shown by historians of late medieval and early modern Wales in same-sex desire’ (p. 14). Perhaps, but scholarly studies of medieval Welsh literature, which has no shortage of erotic and queer content, have been similarly remiss due to what Mihangel Morgan describes as ‘presumptively heterosexual’ readings.⁽²⁾ Leeworthy’s own study is enriched by his inclusion of literature, theatre, film, and other cultural works, as well as his acknowledgement of the ‘rich playfulness’ of medieval traditions (p. 16).

One of the outstanding accomplishments of the study is to complicate accepted views of working-class masculinity and heteronormativity. Leeworthy offers a nuanced portrait of working-class communities in the south Wales valleys via series of deftly drawn sketches and constant recourse to supporting newspaper,

archival, and oral sources. Tom Davies for example, born 1899, was a convincing female impersonator who left his job in fabrics and fashion in the Afan Valley to entertain the troops during the First World War. He performed at the *Folies Bergères* in Paris and in London, before returning to work in textiles at Glyncorrwg Co-op in 1939, taking to the stage locally as Peggy Deauville after the war. He was supported by his father, the 'broadminded' (in his son's words) minister of Caersalem Baptist Chapel (p.3). Born a year later than Tom, Billy Pugh was a cross-dressing bin man from Dowlais who performed in drag, and wore 'lipstick, coloured polish on his fingernails, and women's stockings' under his council-issued boiler suit (p. 52). There is even a glimpse of John Rowlands who in 1897 went to school in girls' clothes, eventually settling on culottes, though he is sadly relegated to a footnote. The unlikely alliance between the NUM in the Dulais Valley and LGSM (Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners) is perhaps the best known example of queer valleys experience, having become the subject of the film *Pride* in 2014. Importantly, the support was mutual and in June 1985, 'Dozens of miners from the South Wales Area of the NUM and their families joined the gay pride march through London... Not only was this the first pride march to feature non-gay people; it was perhaps the largest contingent of Welsh men and women that had yet taken part in gay pride events in the capital.' (p. xiii)

The geography of queer Welsh life, at least as lived in south Wales and some of the university towns, is mapped in considerable and fascinating detail. Leeworthy describes the places people did (or didn't) go, offering a glimpse of gay social life across more than a century, from working-class and disreputable coffee taverns and pubs in the late 19th-century, through to the iconic gay dance clubs of Cardiff and Swansea. This is no small feat as the connections of particular venues with lesbian and/or gay communities, particularly in the 1970s and 80s were generally informal, temporary, and often tenuous. Some of the most vivid anecdotes are drawn from the archives of volunteer organisations such as FRIEND, or the pages of student magazines. In one log, a volunteer records taking a bus driver from Merthyr to one of the gentler gay pubs in Cardiff, the King's Cross. The man was nervous and needed reassurance 'that he would not meet anyone from Merthyr who would know him.' But the volunteer had to record: 'oh dear—the rugby cup final was on and we met the Merthyr mob—he handled it very well and afterwards laughed as they did not know what pub they were in'. (p.79).

In the by now obligatory chapter on the 'Legal limitations' within which gay men existed for so long, Leeworthy charts the uneven application of the law, with a welcome focus on the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In Cardiff and other south Wales docks, for example, it was often visiting sailors or ethnic minority residents who were unfortunate enough to be incarcerated for sex with local men, while the latter do not appear to have been so systematically or harshly prosecuted (p. 29). Welsh politicians played an important role in the Sexual Offences Act (1967) and Leo Abse, Labour MP for Cardiff and champion of reform, has been claimed as a Welsh LGBT ally in some celebratory contexts. Leeworthy challenges that status, presenting Abse's motivations and reservations in more appropriately ambivalent terms. Committed to 'fairness within the legal system and to tolerance' Abse and others were simultaneously outspoken about their distaste for homosexuality (p. 91). Other Labour MPs tended to be supportive only behind closed doors and there was a mixed picture on gay rights adoption amongst the other parties of Wales through the 1970s and 80s.

Activism and its fluctuations are at the heart of this history: its achievements, shortcomings and setbacks over time. Leeworthy is rightly suspicious of narratives of progress: ‘this was not a story of unfolding progress, a great march towards a queer utopia, but one of advance and decline of both civil rights and social attitudes...’ (p. xix). There is, nevertheless, a perceptible sense of disappointment in the description of Cardiff gay culture in the new millennium ‘given over to alcohol and drugs... but absent the political underpinnings of the liberation movement of the 1970s and the HIV/AIDS activism of the 1980s’ (p. 82). Describing Dafydd James’s Welsh-language play *Llwyth* [Tribe] (2010), which reimagines a queer Welsh tradition alongside an authentic portrait of a night out in Club X, Leeworthy remarks somewhat ruefully that it ‘captured the visible and public queer community of the early 21st century: a community which could dance the night away in a small number of venues without ever concerning itself, as earlier generations did, with changing the world.’ (p. 83)

As a history of Wales, Leeworthy is concerned to trace the distinctiveness of ‘Welsh traditions’ (p.xviii) and in particular what it meant to be gay *and* Welsh. English was a minority language in Wales until the 12th century, and one of the most interesting details that emerges from the four hundred year survey in Chapter One is the consideration of popular and legal Welsh-language terms for same-sex activity or genderqueer identification. Not only must we take care not to project contemporary sexual identities onto the past, Leeworthy argues we must beware of anachronistically viewing Wales through an Anglophone lens: ‘Wales, in this period, was a largely, though not exclusively, monoglot Welsh speaking society, so care must be taken in drawing too great an inference from linguistic and written evidence apparent in English.’ (p. 14) While there was a ‘rich and expanding vocabulary’ in the Welsh language for adultery, fornication, prostitution and so on, the early terms for sodomy appear in the course of translating the Bible and in relation to the Buggery Act in the 16th century (p. 14). Thus terms such as *bwggeryddion* (the act of buggery) and *gwrwgydwyr* (the actor; more commonly *gwrywgydwyr*) were used in William Salesbury’s 1567 translation of the New Testament. The more famous translation by William Morgan in 1588 used *sodomiadd*. ‘In the early eighteenth century,’ Leeworthy explains, ‘a fourth term *analladrwydd gyda bechgyn*, indecency with men, appeared’ (p. 15; *bechgyn* is also translated as boys). Bestiality (*llwdngar*)—linked in legal texts with sodomy and viewed as similarly unnatural—was, Leeworthy notes, ‘apparent much earlier’ (p.15; in 1400 according to the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* and *tinhwygo*, meaning anal sex, also dates from that year).(3) As homosexuality was taxonomised and pathologised by sexologists and increasingly prohibitive laws were introduced in the late 19th century, a time when gender codes were also being overtly challenged, popular terms for effeminate or cross-dressing men in Wales included *sioni fenyw* in the south and *cadi ffan* in the north. What mannish women were called is not reported. The *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* gives *cadi fachgen* for ‘a romping girl or tomboy’ and Wales certainly had its share of women of all social classes who defied feminine norms, such as Cranogwen (Sarah Jane Rees, 1839-1916) – Welsh-language editor, lecturer, journalist and poet, who gained a masters seafaring license permitting her to captain vessels of any size. In the 20th century *lesbiaidd* (lesbian) and *hoyw* (gay) were adopted, with *cwiyr*—a homophone of queer which also neatly subverts the Welsh word for ‘correct’ (*cywir*)—making a more recent entry.(4)

The exploration of sexuality and nationality is a large field of study, ranging as it does from the centrality of the reproductive nuclear family, through policing of normative genders, to gender or sexual separatism (as in Lesbian or Queer Nation), to homonationalism. The recurring subtext in this study is whether Welshness and queerness, or more specifically being Welsh *and* gay, are compatible. Leeworthy concludes by addressing the question head on, arguing that ‘historically there has been a sense that homosexuality and Welshness (in all its forms) were at odds with each other’, and more broadly that ‘queer identity and national identity have historically been uncomfortably juxtaposed in most western contexts.’ (p. 129) Leeworthy documents multiple instances in which people feel unable to come out in Wales, or rather to their particular community within Wales, one man even feeling that being gay was ‘part of the “Anglicisation process”’ (p. 129). In Bangor, the coupling of the Welsh dragon with anti-Section 28 campaigns in the late eighties was met by dismay by some university students, though clearly the activists felt it a matter of importance to align their national symbol with the cause.

If the gendered and sexual symbolism of Welsh nationhood and identity broadly follows European models, Wales does present some differences as a nation within a larger state. In the context of specific debates, strategic emphasis of Wales’ supposed difference from England (as a purer and less worldly place, for instance) could result in both greater tolerance and more repression. In evidence to the Wolfenden Committee, the Chief Constable of Glamorgan claimed homosexuality was ‘a vice created in London which little troubled the provinces’ (p. 88) while, in the context of establishing gay rights in the 1970s, the police viewed ‘homosexuality [as] a specifically English problem’ (p. 108). Prosecutions in the early 20th century were indeed fairly low—the police’s interest was elsewhere—but the denial that Wales had a gay population meant there was no need for gay rights or services. This construction of homosexuality as antithetical to Welshness is reminiscent of earlier attempts to portray suffragettes as foreign troublemakers, and feminism as an import. Welsh feminists, however, were keen to claim Welsh national identity, and could portray Wales as leading the way towards equality.

As the cumulative research of queer history and culture in Wales shows, it is of course untenable to attribute to a region, community, or class, (let alone to a nation) a homogenous shared perspective on homosexuality or gender-nonconformity. Though there are some broad generalisations made in the book, Leeworthy’s careful examination of the sources show a much more varied picture than the popular view that there were ‘no gays in Wales’. As John Sam Jones notes, even in the same place at the same time, two wildly divergent attitudes to homosexuality could co-exist:

My eyes are those of a middle-aged gay man who grew up not far from Rhiw Goch – and who, at the age of eighteen in 1975, when George and Reg were running their first successful B&B near Machynlleth, was incarcerated in the old asylum in Denbigh, not fifty miles away, and treated with Electric Shock Aversion Therapy to "cure my deviant sexuality". ... That George and Reg found a welcome and made a home in the same Wales that put eighteen-year-olds in psychiatric hospitals to erase their gayness was both surprising and heart-lifting.(5)

In the face of similar contrasts, Leeworthy negotiates a judicious path between the affirmative narrative of recovery and a strong awareness of local contradictions, geographic variations, and linguistic and cultural differences. These are all vital in constructing a national history, and a theoretically nuanced understanding of sexuality and identity.

Despite its impressive scope and judicious melding of anecdote within a larger framework of social history, Leeworthy’s book makes no claims to be comprehensive (p.xxvi) and the title of the book is chosen advisedly; this is undoubtedly a little *gay* history of Wales. ‘Gay’ is a term that can encompass homosexuality in general, but is more often used to refer to homosexual men; a meaning replicated in the book. Leeworthy states the available archival sources mean that the book is about ‘the historical experiences of gay men and lesbians (in that order)’ (p. xxvii). This is not a new challenge and those in pursuit of lesbian

history have had to be creative in their search for historical traces. Indeed, Leeworthy has elsewhere eloquently argued that lesbian history needs to take as its starting points the structures and movements into which women organised themselves. In this volume, the phrase ‘and lesbians’ seemed occasionally to be tagged on as an afterthought, for instance, at the end of a long section on cruising, outdoor sex, toilets and busy streets, in Chapter 4, which mentions only men. Thus the concluding claim that ‘gays *and lesbians*’ had to find a range of ‘semi private’ spaces into which to ‘retreat’ for same-sex encounters seems unsupported (p. 50, my italics). The ‘and lesbians’ approach is familiar from general histories of homosexuality which appeared in the 1990s, where lesbian history tended to be afforded a chapter or two at best. Its use here reminds us of the contingency and sometimes inadequacy of ‘LGBT’ as a catch-all for minority sexual and gender orientations, and ‘queer’ can operate in the same way, as scholars including Terry Castle have argued. (6) As Leeworthy notes, he identified even fewer sources documenting the lives of bisexuals or transgender men and women, though some of the material read in this book as gay might be reassessed as (also?) trans*.

(7)

Despite the fact that lesbian history seems to happen off stage, played out by largely anonymous actors, like the unnamed Welsh drag kings who ‘mimicked’ more famous English acts ‘to more modest acclaim’ (p. 9), there are many fascinating glimpses in this book that cry out for further study. Leeworthy is aware of the difficulties of approaching lesbian experience via gay history, or indeed lesbian emancipation via gay activism, and in several places carefully notes that women’s lives and priorities did not always fit into the often male-led structures and spaces established during the 20th century. For instance we are told that the appeal of CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality) ‘even in Cardiff, was weaker amongst women’ who, ‘tended to find the atmosphere overly masculine and attuned to the concerns of gay men’ (p. 99) though in the early eighties the social scene in ‘Swansea was generally understood as being more accessible for women than elsewhere’ (p. 73). Women formed their own groups and a number of fascinating initiatives are mentioned in passing, some well-known, others less so. For instance, Lampeter wimmin’s commune (established in the 1970s as part of an international back-to-the land, queer rural movement) and a ‘most unlikely branch [of the Gay Liberation Front] set up by two lesbians in Aberdare early in 1973 as the Heads of the Valleys GLF’ whose ‘activities were focused on social events at the Red Cow in Merthyr Tydfil’ (p. 103). But these glimpses are frustratingly brief. Gay activist, Tim Foskett, is an invaluable source, and I was left wondering what might Ann Beynon—president of Bangor’s student union and NUS Wales’s ‘executive member for the gay rights campaign’ (p. 104), who ‘spearheaded’ the ‘first all-Wales gay rights conference’ in 1974 (p. 103)—have offered to balance this study. In his introduction, Leeworthy acknowledges that ‘The politics of gay identity embraced by men were less frequently the enthusiasm of women who organised their struggles in different ways—through the women’s movement, for instance, or through institutions such as women’s aid, women’s centres and lesbian lines’ (p. xxvi) and that a study focusing on lesbians, bisexual and trans women which began with these organisations would indeed be very welcome.

A Little Gay History of Wales marks a major advance in the project of documenting and analysing gay lives and the cultural, social, and legal contexts in which they were lived in Wales. It offers a vital corrective to ‘British’ studies which ignore national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences within Britain, and a salutary reminder, if one were needed, that class matters in a study of national history. If the arrival of this book feels a little belated, both in terms of being a long-overdue study of LGBT Welsh history, and in the way in which male homosexual experience remains centre stage, it will no doubt be highly influential within the kaleidoscope of studies—historical, cultural, sociological—which are enriching and complicating our understandings of queer Wales.

Notes

1. The first major book on LGBT lives and cultures was *Queer Wales: The History, Culture and Politics of Queer Life in Wales* (University of Wales Press, 2016) edited by Huw Osbourne. Norena Shopland’s *Forbidden Lives: LGBT Stories from Wales* (Seren, 2017) is a series of detailed historical sketches and biographies. Literary studies and biographies of people such as Kate Roberts, Margaret

Haig (Lady Rhondda), Rhys Davies, Amy Dillwyn and others further expand the range of LGBT history and culture.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Mihangel Morgan, 'From Huw Arwystli to Siôn Eirian: Representative Examples of *Cadi*/Queer Life from Medieval to Twentieth-Century Welsh Literature' in Huw Osborne (ed.) *Queer Wales: The History, Culture and Politics of Queer Life in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), pp. 65-88, p. 69[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Morgan, 'From Huw Arwystli to Siôn Eirian', p. 66.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. My thanks to Daniel G Williams for alerting me to the term. Mihangel Morgan has suggested *cadi* (deriving from the woman's name Catrin and thus similar to Molly) as an equivalent term to queer. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Sam Jones, 'Book Review: On the Red Hill', *The Welsh Agenda*, 6 March 2020. Online. <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2020/03/book-review-on-the-red-hill/> [2] (accessed 28 August 2020). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 12-13.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. <https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/> [3] [Back to \(7\)](#)

Additional image on main page: People's History Museum, Manchester / LGSM Archive

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