

Overview of Lesbian and Gay History

This is a brief overview of some aspects of lesbian and gay history to accompany the training programme “*Diverse Cultures*” developed by the Fife Men Project and to be delivered later this year to staff in Fife Council law and administration, registrar service, responsible from the beginning of December for the registration of civil partnerships agreements for same sex couples.

It is impossible to include everything in a handout but surfing the web or looking in the gay sections of larger bookshops would be two possible ways of increasing knowledge in this area. Recent training “*Valuing Equity & Diversity*” should result in library staff throughout Fife having a working knowledge of articles relevant to this course.

This handout relates mostly to UK issues but reflecting impact of key events in European and American history.

Ancient times

Gay men and lesbians have been about since time began. As gay lifestyles have been almost always been disapproved of, early history is hard to find. The work of Sappho the Greek poet from Lesbos was mostly destroyed and many others are presumed to be gay from hidden suggestion in their work or lifestyles. Michaelangelo and Plato are assumed to have been gay as their work expressed love for their same gender. Michaelangelo focused almost exclusively on the male image and declared his love of the male form,

Early 20th Century and the Roaring 20's & 30's

At the end of the previous century, in Victorian times, laws were passed outlawing all sexual relationships between men. Women were considered for inclusion in this legislation but it is said that as Queen Victoria could not accept that such a thing could happen between two women, they were excluded. The concerns of the male politicians of the time was that if lesbianism was advertised by way of creating a law about it then women would find out about it and perhaps indulge themselves. These attitudes colluded to create an invisibility around lesbian relationships that still permeates society today.

Oscar Wilde is well known as one of the early 20th century's most outspoken gay men. He expressed his love for men to the extent that he was goaled and was forced into hard labour, which ultimately affected his health so badly that it lead to his death. In his hey day much of his work made “in” references to homosexuality and one of his most famous plays, “*The Importance of Being Earnest*” is full of “in” jokes that only gay men would have understood at the time, particularly as being “*earnest*” meant being gay.

In the 20s and 30s there were more gay people making contact with each other but this had to be kept secret. To facilitate this, signs only known to gay people were used such as men wearing brown suede shoes, pink shirts and pinkie rings. As some of these fashions became more mainstream, signals had to change. A language was developed known as POLARI, which was used to greet and warn gay people of dangers of being caught out. This was popularised by Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddock in their characters of "*Julian and Sandy*" on BBC's radio programme "*Round the Horne*". However some words have filtered through to everyday use such as *slap, naff and drag*.

Despite the acceptance of campness on the London stage, gay people had to be careful who they told and most kept up pretence of heterosexuality in public. For example Noel Coward's song "*Mad About the Boy*" had to be released by a woman even although it was written for a male voice. Others had marriages of convenience with arrangements for both parties to have real relationships with those of their own gender. Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson's relationship was an example of such an arrangement.

Radclyffe-Hall was the most prominent lesbian of these times. Her books "*The Well of Loneliness*" published in 1928 was deemed obscene as it contained reference to "*horrible practice*" and "*acts of the most horrible, unnatural and disgusting obscenity*" according to the judge who heard a case against her. The legal definition of obscenity is material that has a tendency to "*deprave and corrupt*". In actual fact the banning of the book, mild by today's standards, gave the issue much publicity and alerted women to lesbianism and helped those who thought they were alone to realise that there were other women like them. Copies of the book were available abroad and many in the UK managed to read it despite the court order. During the trial Radclyffe-Hall received 5000 letters from women, only five of which were abusive.

During this era gay people could only define themselves in terms of the heterosexual world: butches and femmes and roughs and bitches emerged as a gay sub-culture. Dietrich cross-dressed and in 1933 was proclaimed the best-dressed women in Hollywood. She had a long-term relationship with Mercedes de Acosta. Quentin Crisp, the archetypical camp gay man did not hide his orientation and was accepted as eccentric.

The majority of gay people were in the closet as such roles were out of the question in mainstream society, Already there was a medical model approach to homosexuality or inversion as it was called. The two main theories as to why people were homosexual were the congenialities and the behaviourist theories, the latter of which believed in treatment that would lead to heterosexuality.

War time & Afterwards

The Second World War saw a major change for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. It was a sexually liberating time for everyone and the movement of people across the UK and Europe and personnel from the armed forces from the USA meant that for the first time people could meet others have relationships and feel freed from society's confines.

This war also brought the Holocaust and history shows that gay men and lesbians were amongst the groups outlawed and exterminated by the Nazis along with Jewish people, gypsy travellers, black people, disabled people to name but a few. Interestingly gay history written about during this time focuses mainly on gay men's experiences further emphasising the invisibility of lesbians. The pink and black triangle symbols used today by gay men and lesbians are in remembrance of the many lost to this hatred.

Post-war has the opposite effect and brought most gay people down to earth with a bang. There was a strong push to return to pre-war society and family values were strongly promoted by the government and churches. Many people who had found themselves in terms of their sexuality had to return to the closet at this time.

In 1948 and 1953 the Government funded extensive zoological style research on the sexual behaviours of men and women. The outcome was the Kinsey reports and showed that 37% of all men had homosexual experiences to the point of orgasm and that 4% were exclusively gay. 28% of women reported erotic thoughts towards their own gender and 6% of unmarried women were exclusively lesbian. From this work a spectrum of sexuality graded from 0-6 emerged. The public were alarmed by these figures.

The 50s saw the condemnation of communism in the Western world and the defection of Burgess and McLean linked the "problems" of being gay and red. The McCarthy witch-hunts in America were aimed at communists and gay people. This was the force of the post-war backlash – the return to family values – heterosexual ones that it! A 1954 edition of "*The Practitioner*" suggested sending all gay people to somewhere bleak and far away like St Kilda.

Arrests of gay men increased threefold and blackmail was rife. Those convicted included a peer (the Montague case) and John Gielgud. Gay men were advised to burn all letters, diaries and photographs that could be used to incriminate them and their associates in a chain prosecution. The genius who broke the "*Enigma Code*" towards the end of the war, Alan Turing was convicted by the obscure route of being a victim of crime himself. When his sexuality was revealed he was arrested and was given a choice of drug "*treatment*" or imprisonment. He took drugs, which left him impotent. He was said to have killed himself by eating an apple loaded with cyanide but no suicide note was found.

During this time through all the court cases the Government recognised that not matter how hard they tried homosexuality was not going away. In 1957 the Wolfenden Committee report recommended the decriminalisation of consensual sex for gay men but it was to be ten years before this was enacted.

The swinging 60s?

So the 50s and 60s continued along the “cures” route. Some people were even put through this ordeal in the early 70s. Drugs to dampen sexual arousal and aversion therapy used emetics or electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) were used. Lobotomies were also carried out in a few instances. Thankfully the latter were illegal in the UK and chemical castration and psychotherapy were preferred.

However, a positive side of gay life started to emerge despite public opinion. Gay pubs, clubs and coffee shops opened, as did private gay parties. Unfortunately many of these venues did not make lesbians feel welcome so some lesbian-only places started up such as “*The Gateways*” in Chelsea made famous by the film “*The Killing of Sister George*”.

Lesbians in those days had to make a choice of being butch or femme – Martha or Arthur! The femmes were even more feminine than their straight counterparts with more revealing clothes and lavish makeup. Doris Day became a lesbian icon. The butches struggled to get employment because of the way they dressed. Those femmes who did sex work often supported their butch partners and friends. Survival skills were something that gay men and lesbians quickly developed and had in common.

The police often raided gay clubs and even though they in themselves were not illegal. This police harassment was an unpleasant part of life. This level of disrespect for human rights ran deeper and affected the outcome of investigations into blackmail and even murder. One man was acquitted of bludgeoning another man to death because he had made a pass at him. On the grounds that this was understandable behaviour.

The Homosexual Reform Society worked tirelessly to change the laws for same sex relationships between men but did not succeed in this until several private members bills had failed. In 1965 decriminalisation was finally debated and passed through the House of Lords but it took a further two years to pass through parliamentary processes gaining Royal Assent of 27th July 1967. “*I wish this marvellous step had come at an earlier age...to feel that one was not a felon and an outcast would have helped enormously*” Sir Cecil Beaton.

This law reform was no use at all to Scottish and Irish gay men as it applied to England and Wales only. The way the law defined privacy meant that sex in a locked hotel room remained an offence. This effectively barred many men from meeting their lover on neutral ground away from other friends and family.

The swinging 60s swept away a lot of people's inhibitions and more gay men and lesbians were out and accepted. In the late 60s lesbians became more relaxed and stopped following the strict butch and femme roles. This was partially influenced by the hippy and women's movements. However, a Women's Liberation Movement group who said that lesbians could not be part of the Women's Liberation Movement and example of heterosexual women feeling threatened by lesbians who usually had a far clearer and therefore more radical idea of women's rights, discrimination and oppression.

The late 60s was the first time the word gay was commonly used to mean homosexual. The early 70s saw a rash of letters complaining that a perfectly good English word has been misappropriated and hijacked. The gay response was to point out that many other words has been misappropriated by the mainstream and used against gay people like pansy and fairy but they did not hear complaints about them.

The beginning of gay pride

Time was ripe for gay and lesbian support groups and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was established on 13th October 1970. This was in response to debates many gay men and lesbians were having in the UK about the way they were treated and also influenced by the Stonewall Rebellion that started on 28th June 1969. These riots in Greenwich Village New York were a reaction to years of police harassment of gay men and women in gay bars generally. It was really the birth of gay pride.

Personal perspectives changed from apologetic to proud. Counter to this was the Festival of Light supported by Cliff Richard, Mary Whitehouse, Malcolm Muggeridge and Lord Longford. They wanted the Government to sort our moral evil as they saw it and that included sex outside marriage, Ken Russell films and open-gay lifestyles. Their rally in Central Hall Westminster was infiltrated by GLF and successfully disrupted. A reference chapter in *"An Oral History of the Gay Liberation Front 1970-1973"* by Lisa Power entitled *"No Bath Plenty of Bubbles"* gives more details of what was my first gay pride protest!

It was not long before lesbians felt that they were fighting a battle within a battle. Many men were in positions of power and did not want to share it or listen to women's perspectives. By 1971 lesbians has forced grass routes changes with the women's movement and put lesbianism firmly on the feminist agenda. By February 1972 many women had walked out of GLF to work separately.

On 1st July 1972 the first Pride UK took place and women arrived under a banner which proclaimed Gay Women's Liberation. However, the factions within GLF were too divided and its demise came after only four years of existence. All was not lost as it passed on legacies to other gay groups and was the founder of London's LGBT switchboard, gay pride and *"Gay News"* the first UK newspaper for gay people.

In 1977 Mary Whitehouse took legal action against "Gay News" under ancient blasphemy laws. The main outcome was to generate huge amounts of support for the paper from all sorts of people and further publicise it.

The 70s was the decade of disco music which originated from black gay clubs in America. Gloria Gaynor and Donna Summer were first heard in these clubs. Cheap flights to America opened up new opportunities particularly for gay men who travelled over there to "do" the scene, many coming back with a new "clone" look: muscles, white t-shirt, Levi 501s and a moustache.

The "gender bender" phrase in the late 1970s helped reach young people who were questioning their sexuality, discarding previous notions of static gender and sexuality. Gay culture moved beyond showing it was okay to be gay and adopted the slogans "gay is good" and "glad to be gay".

The more serious side of politics continued in 1977 the Homosexual Law Reform Society, now still in existence as the "Campaign for Homosexual Equality" (CHE), got an office in London. There were 120 affiliated groups across the country with 5000 members. The main issues continued to be around the limitations of the '67 Act, its definitions of privacy, age of consent, the fact that consensual sex between more than two men was illegal and that sex between men remained illegal in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Minorities Group (SMG), later Outright Scotland which until recent times still campaigned for gay rights, CHE and the Union for Sexual Freedom in Ireland campaigned vigorously on these issues. In Scotland, by the mid 70s there was a tacit understanding that the police would not pursue convictions that would not have been pursued in England. However, in theory, gay men remained criminals in Scotland if they were sexually active. The SMG took this to the European Court and, the UK government realising defeat, allowed a change in the law to go through as part of the Scottish Justice Bill of 1979. It was drafted by a young Scots lawyer Derek Ogg and nearly got through without limitation on group sex. However, this was picked up at the very last minute by the leader of the House of Lords and an agreement reached that it would not be contested in the Lords if it was the same as English law, so that bit had to go. The law was finally reformed in Scotland in 1980 some 13 years after it had been in England.

It took longer in Northern Ireland because of Ian Paisley's "Save Ulster from Sodomy" campaign. They also had to take their case to Europe and law was eventually changed in 1982, a lengthy 15 years after it has been passed at Westminster.

In the late 70s gay people who had been treated unfairly because of their sexuality started to raise unfair dismissal and child custody trials. The first gay lesbian and gay trade union conference took place in '77 and gay groups were established in each major political party to try and instigate change from within. In particular gay men's lifestyle were more visible while lesbians remained invisible. Public opinion was changing and at last people could challenge the stereotypes like John Inman, perpetuated on television. People

were getting to know gay people who were rather effeminate of tortured. Again these images remained almost exclusively male.

HIV Takes Over the Agenda

At the beginning of 1982 gay men in London were being affected by diseases that they should not have normally contracted, all relating to a depressed immune system. The first man to die in the UK was Terrance Higgins on 4th July 1982. by then doctors suspected that it was the same syndrome killing men in the USA but were very unclear about it, initially calling it gay cancer or GRID – gay related immune disease.

When the initial public awareness campaign of posters failed to increase people's knowledge, a blanket national mailing of 12 million leaflets was undertaken. This was the iceberg and tombstones campaign which served to heighten homophobia and the "*gay plague*" headlines were highlighted by the tabloid press. Also in these leaflet the phone numbers of gay organisations had been included, a useful contact if the government who issued these leaflets had adequately resourced services or even informed they of the intention to advertise in this way. Chaos resulted in the Gay and Lesbian switchboard being burnt out and service staff/ volunteers exhausted. Yet, the government continued to refuse financial support for lesbian and gay groups.

AIDS became a household term and gay men were blamed as the source. The campaign used plague metaphors and implied that it was highly contagious through casual contact. Terrance Higgins Trust described the media coverage as "*untruthful, dishonest, inaccurate, incomplete and unfair*". As a result gay men were being discriminated against and treated as social lepers.

It took several years for scientists to identify the virus and establish a test. This also had an adverse affect on gay men or any men who were tested as insurance companies considered men needing a test as a risk even if they were negative. The misplaced reasoning for this was that if a man was tested he must have out himself at risk and therefore would be likely to continue with his risky behaviour and in turn was an insurance risk. This can still be a concern today although it is balanced by some companies who welcome people despite their HIV status.

In the 80's a great many gay men died and those who were left were badly affected by serial grieving. The incidence of queer-bashing went up dramatically and this also took a psychological toll.

Steve Retson, the manager of Scottish AIDS Monitor in Glasgow in the 90s has a vision of a holistic sexual health service for gay men. After Steve's death from an AIDS related illness, such a services was set up and named in his memory. In Fife the Fife Men Project was established initially to establish a helpline and condom distribution, built completely on volunteers, much as it is today.

Modern Times?

With the Conservatives third return in 1987, Mrs Thatcher laid down her target to teach children to respect traditional moral values. This backlash also affected public opinion and by 1987 74% of people were reported to disapprove of lesbians and gay men. This allowed the government to implement legislation against gay people in the form of Clause 2a (also known in England as Section 28) of the Local Government Act. This was a formal attack on the “*promotion*” of gay lifestyles and included a phrase defining gay partnerships as “*pretend family relationship*”. This served to embarrass many Labour controlled Council who had gay affirmative policies and funded gay groups. Fife was an exception to this and stuck firmly to the Thatcherite inspired discrimination, refusing to fund gay groups or provide information within services. A situation which sadly still is maintained within present community services.

This meant that in the UK, where the tightest laws on homosexuality existed, except in Bulgaria, the government explicitly outlined that, although they did not seek to criminalise same sex relationships, they wanted to ensure that they were not seen as valid as heterosexual relationships nor did they merit equal rights.

HIV and Clause 2a resulted in new gay organisations such as “*Outrage*” “*Lesbian Avengers*” “*Granite Sisters*” and “*Act Up*” radical groups with the more conservative with a small “c”, “*Stonewall*” that tended to work within the political establishment in a lobbying role. As the Local Government Bill was debated in the Lords, lesbians abseiled into the chamber and during the debate in the House of Commons, lesbians chained themselves to desks and cameras for the BBC’s 9 o’clock news. Gay men and lesbians united in a way that had not been seen since the early ‘70s.

In the ‘80s the women’s movement had done a complete u-turn and was largely informed by lesbian issues and thus emerged the political lesbian. These were women who chose to live their loves without men and sought women partners rather than being biologically compelled to be lesbian. They actively rejected male values and created women only spaces. Other lesbians simply got on with living their quieter less political lives. One couple organised the restoration of Radclyffe-Hall’s grave.

In the 1990’s the tide began to slowly turn round to acceptance. AIDS was no longer seen as only a gay issue and people infected and affected by HIV were beginning to respond to drug therapy. A great deal more was understood about the virus, how it is contracted and how to control it. There is still no cure but many people do well on therapy and are healthy enough to live full lives.

On the fun side KD Lang was on the front of “*Vanity Fair*” being shaved by Cindy Crawford. Drag Queen Ru Paul and KD Lang made commercials to sell main stream cosmetics. Iconography from gay lifestyles was used in lots of settings from Madonna’s videos to Bennetton adverts.

In February 1994 the age of consent for gay male sex came down to 18 and was finally equalised with heterosexual sex to 16 years on 1st January 2001. Perhaps due to the time of year or other more exciting news at the time, this escaped the media's notice and quietly entered status with little or no comment.

Scotland abolished Clause 2a of the Local Government Act in October 2000 and enacted this when the new guidance on sex education in schools was published in 2001. Unlike the age of consent issue, this attracted militant opposition and resulted in a vitriolic attack on lesbians and gay lifestyles with a national billboard poster campaign bank-rolled by Scottish businessman Brian Soutar. The American's also got on the act with Pat Robinson trying to influence the working of the Bank of Scotland which failed mainly with people withdrawing their accounts from the bank! Despite all this Clause 2a was still abolished but feelings generated by the campaigns created a surge of publicity felt homophobia. The like of which Scotland had not experienced before.

In July 2001 the last piece of unequal law regarding gay male sex was changed with consensual group sex for gay men being decriminalised, again being brought into line with heterosexuals.

Gay Pride has come a long way and has within it many diverse groups across the range of human sexualities and expressions of gender. However, the challenge against homophobia continues. Young gay people need support, as do gay parent and their children and the needs of LGBT people in later years. The fact that the vast majority of institutions or religion continue to be actively homophobic also poses a huge challenge.