



Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957

Matt Houlbrook

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In August 1934, young Cyril L. wrote to his friend Billy about all the exciting men he had met, the swinging nightclubs he had visited, and the vibrant new life he had forged for himself in the big city. He wrote, "I have only been queer since I came to London about two years ago, before then I knew nothing about it." London, for Cyril, meant boundless opportunities to explore his newfound sexuality. But his freedom was limited: he was soon arrested, simply for being in a club frequented by queer men.

Cyril's story is Matt Houlbrook's point of entry into the queer worlds of early twentieth-century London. Drawing on previously unknown sources, from police reports and newspaper exposés to personal letters, diaries, and the first queer guidebook ever written, Houlbrook here explores the relationship between queer sexualities and modern urban culture that we take for granted today. He revisits the diverse queer lives that took hold in London's parks and streets; its restaurants, pubs, and dancehalls; and its Turkish bathhouses and hotels—as well as attempts by municipal authorities to control and crack down on those worlds. He also describes how London shaped the culture and politics of queer life—and how London was in turn shaped by the lives of queer men. Ultimately, Houlbrook unveils the complex ways in which men made sense of their desires and who they were. In so doing, he mounts a sustained challenge to conventional understandings of the city as a place of sexual liberation and a unified queer culture.

A history remarkable in its complexity yet intimate in its portraiture, *Queer London* is a landmark work that redefines queer urban life in England and beyond.

“A ground-breaking work. While middle-class lives and writing have tended to compel the attention of most historians of homosexuality, Matt Houlbrook has looked more widely and found a rich seam of new evidence. It has allowed him to construct a complex, compelling account of interwar sexualities and to map a new, intimate geography of London.”—Matt Cook, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*

Winner of *History Today*'s Book of the Year Award, 2006

Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 Details

Date : Published October 15th 2006 by University of Chicago Press (first published September 3rd 2005)

ISBN : 9780226354620

Author : Matt Houlbrook

Format : Paperback 398 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Lgbt, Glbt, Queer, Sexuality

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From Reader Review *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* for online ebook

Bianca says

Whoops! Finished this book some time ago, but forgot to update my goodreads..

Either way, I liked this, but I probably wouldn't read it again. A lot of quotations by a lot of different people give you a lot of different angles on the whole matter, which is amazing, but it doesn't make for light reading.

It's nice that it gives a largely unvoiced group a voice, though.

Michael Schwarz says

Fascinating and compelling urban history, but unfortunately written in a turgid academic style that sometimes made me want to run from the room screaming.

Sara says

This is a great melding of social and cultural history. Even though it's not my area, I just love reading this kind of history. I think it's because it feels so familiar and yet so foreign. My only critique is that he really didn't elaborate on race. In the end, I only wish I had time to read more of these histories!!! If you're interested, scour the notes, he references a lot of other potential gems. Also, check out George Chauncey's book *Gay New York* ... fantastic!

Hubert Han says

Queer London explores the fascinating intersection between sexuality, functionality of spaces, criminality, morality, and physical geography, constantly discussing the ever-shifting demarcation between the public and private spheres. The most interesting chapters for me were those exploring the subculture of working class bachelors and the need for articulated dominance as a show of 'masculinity' as opposed to queerness.

Houlbrook explores many aspects of homosexuality in London, but he could be more succinct about the impact of urbanity on the psychology and mental classification of queerness. Similarly, by taking a thematic approach, the book often loses any sense of chronology. Like most social and cultural historians Houlbrook is guilty of overusing opaque language to an extent where at times the words become vacuous, see: microgeography, hegemonic, interwove, discursive space, problematic, negotiating space. This is epitomised by Steven Maynard's quote on p222: 'subcultural and discursive formations as existing in a reciprocal relationship, both shaped by a process we might call the dialectics of discovery'. Orwell would be furious!

Amelia says

Really interesting but a bit densely written for the casual non-academic reader.

Stevie Carroll says

This reads very much like a PhD thesis adapted into a book. As such its depth is incredible, but it also suffers a little from having a narrow remit and occasionally showing up authorial biases. I'd been warned about the lack of queer women when I was lent the book, but what irked me and nearly made me stop reading multiple times was the almost complete denial of bisexuality (not necessarily as an identity, but certainly as a concept that could be mapped onto some behaviours). A useful reference, but not one I'll necessarily be revisiting.

Charlotte says

"I have no doubt that we shall win, but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms." - Oscar Wilde.

This book is not an easy read, but puts into perspective a subsection of gay culture during the interwar period.

Danny says

Fascinating take on the multiple queer identities that existed in London during the interwar years and how the antagonisms between them helped structure the terms of legalizing homosexuality in the 1960s.

Nickie says

Loved it! Incredible source material. Really conjured up the exciting, scary, forbidden world of gay London between the wars, and made some surprising points about changing reactions and identities between then and now. In my recent spirit of always accompanying a text with a tune, I bought Flanagan & Allen's *Underneath The Arches* to go with this and found it quite poignant. Even had a bit of a weep, I did.

Nate says

Early on Houlbrook corrects the common misconception that in Britain "being gay" was once illegal and subsequently legalized, noting instead that specific sexual acts between men were criminalized. (19.) Not everyone who engaged in these sorts of acts shared the same identity or understood the acts the same way. This is part of what Houlbrook means by queer, a variety of distinct yet fluid sexual practices and identities. Working class men were not able to afford lodging that offered as much privacy as higher income men, and so were more likely to rely on public parks and urinals for sexual encounters. These spaces were also much

more heavily policed than the private clubs and baths that middle class men could frequent. The differences among these spaces and among those who frequented them forms a refrain for Houlbrook. There was not one common and egalitarian queer community but rather intersecting differences and hierarchies.

Houlbrook sorts the men into a general typology of sexual practice and identity. There were queans - men who behaved in what was considered an effeminate manner and were open about their sexuality, renters or trade - men who had sex with other men, sometimes bragging of their sexual exploits, but who did not think of themselves and were not thought of by others as abnormal, and homosexuals - men who defined themselves by their sexual acts with other men and who were often more quiet and private about their behavior. Houlbrook notes that the third of these categories were men of more privileged status who both maintained discretion in order to preserve their position and who used their resources to access private spaces such as private lodging and exclusive clubs in order to avoid public scrutiny. The first two categories, on the other hand, consisted primarily of working class men who had less access to money and private space which in turn linked with their more public sexualities.

Interestingly, both queans and renters understood their behavior in gendered terms. Queans called each other girls and thought of themselves as woman-like but not as women. Renters had sex with (and sometimes robed) other men who they used called "pansies" and "brown hatters" (166) but still saw themselves as normal (non-queer) men because they saw their sexual partners as like women. Middle class homosexuals, by contrast, defined themselves not in gendered terms but by their sexual attraction to other men. Lack of challenge to gender norms as well as lack of engaging in public sex was part of middle class respectability and discretion.

While Houlbrook takes pains to complicate and nuance his claims throughout - the city is a space of both liberation and despair, the growth of private clubs for queer men both allowed new self-expression and created exclusion - the overall narrative arc of *Queer London* is one of decline or "cultural privatization." (270.) The range of and spaces for sexual expression narrow over the duration of the book. As homosexuality became more legitimate, queerness became less so, particularly the sexual practices of working class queers. There are two notable omissions from *Queer London*, women and trans- people. Houlbrook distinguishes queans from transgendered people, since the queans dressed as women on occasion but did not live as women. Houlbrook mentions one case, Maurice/Mary who sought a "deliberate and complete illusion of femininity" by dressing as a woman all the time and who "saw himself as a woman." (165. I wonder why Houlbrook refers to Maurice/Mary's femininity as an illusion and uses a male pronoun?) Presumably trans-practices are also a type of queer, and more attention to trans- practices might complicate or perhaps support Houlbrook's narrative of declining space for queerness.

Finally, the book is exclusively about men. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this - Houlbrook notes that a book about queer women in London should be written - but it does make some of his story less clear. Women prostitutes appear regularly throughout the book as extras in the background in bars that queans frequented. Houlbrook claims that most renters quit having sex with men as they aged and developed more long term relationships with women. He also suggests that changing access to women in mixed gender bars and elsewhere may have contributed to the over all decline of renters. It is thus clear that queer men had significant relationships with women, as friends, lovers, wives, and mothers. Queer men's attitudes toward the women in their lives and women's responses to male queerness get no attention in the book, leaving an interesting piece of this story unexamined.

Katie says

Fascinating work by Houlbrook - broad, deep research with a much richer analytical framework than previous work in the field. Houlbrook's cultural methodology pulls from anthropological, sociological, and

economic queries that create a compelling argument for the power of space, language, and law to forge personal and public identities.

P.H.G. Haslam says

This is a truly awesome book. A triumph of analysis of urban culture. Houlbrook is clearly obsessed with queer culture in this period in Britain; he really knows his stuff.

Houlbrook proposes so many interesting hypotheses. As sexuality became, conceptually, an entity increasingly defined outside of gender in the years after the Second World War, life for those men who transgressed gender and respectability boundaries became more marginalised. Houlbrook shows a queer world running up to the Second World War that was by no means permissive, but one that was more wonderfully confused than it became after. He explains with great emphasis how varied the people that made up London's queer urban culture: gender nonconforming, 'homosexual', 'bisexual', 'heterosexual'. We should interpret these people and their identities on their own terms, and not succumb to anachronism.

This book asks so many questions, and I'll be stuck with many of them for a long time. Beautiful.

K.J. Charles says

Excellent accessible and fascinating history. Hugely informative and readable. I can't recommend enough.
