

## Queer Britannia

**CULTURAL CHANGE AND INNOVATION** is always something of a mystery. Who knows how or why it became acceptable, almost *de rigueur*, for girls and young women to swear in public like the dockers and longshoremen of old? And, was it simply David Beckham that gave us tattoo studios, rather than “tattoo parlours” and inked skin on the respectable and svelte, as well as on the rough and uncouth? Then there are the manicure desks and counters dealing with cuticles and fitting elaborate artificial nails in markets and shopping streets all over the place. Who knows why that’s occurred? It’s just as mysterious as the rise of *Diana-ism* – the florid displays of public grief with candles and flowers – that now surround the minute’s silence and formal observance of loss in accidents or terrorist attacks. It wasn’t always so.

In a similar vein “Queer” has travelled from being a reference to feeling unwell or odd, to an insulting term for homosexuality. Gradually over the last thirty years “Queer” has won a new and positively respectable position due to its application to the edgy disruption of gender stereotypes, or as a reference to novel, ‘irregular’, or subversive sexualities and sensibilities of one sort or another.

Now, Queer has gone mainstream, stepping out of the academic shadows into the light of day. Most recently in Britain this has been prompted by acknowledgement of the fiftieth anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. This is the act that resulted in the decriminalisation of homosexual encounters taking place in private between men over the age of 21. It legalised what very few men were ever caught for, while reaffirming in practice the use of laws and police entrapment for the repression of all the things

that gay men actually did in order to make contact and form friendships with each other.

Yet the curators and commissioning editors of art exhibitions, radio programmes, and a raft of TV shows, have decided to give great prominence to an anniversary, which at the time passed most of us by. It is true the '67 Act was a good piece of legislation pioneered by the moral welfare council of the Church of England, and lobbied for over thirteen or fourteen years by early gay rights campaigners, liberal-minded politicians, artists, and intellectuals, but the wider implications of this reform took perhaps another five or ten years to dawn upon society at large.

If male homosexuality was acceptable in private, then surely the things that gay men did in order to meet each other must surely be legitimate. Importuning for an immoral purpose, acts of gross indecency, licentious dancing, and the like – the sorts of things heterosexuals got up to all the time in the back seats of the picture houses, in “lovers’ lanes”, dance halls, and chat-ups in pubs and clubs – must surely be OK for homosexuals too? This was the battle that had to be fought. And, it was the battle that was joined by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, by the gay liberation front in London, and by gay liberation groups from Edinburgh to Birmingham, from Lancaster to Bradford and Leeds, from Newcastle to Bristol in the dozen or so years following the 1969 riot in New York’s Christopher Street.

The activity of these groups forced the issue on to the agendas of everything from the conferences of psychiatrists and medical professionals, to the meetings of far leftist groupuscules, trade unions, and labour party wards, eventually on up to the leading bodies of all the major political parties. In 1989, in the context of the Aids epidemic and the ham-fisted and reactionary response of Margaret Thatcher’s government, ‘the great and the good’ of the homosexual world, actors, artists, and politicians, for the first time, broke cover, and ‘came out’ as gay, with the formation of Stonewall, a well resourced and

professionally run lobbying organisation, set up specifically to fight Clause 28 – Thatcher’s law which aimed at preventing the discussion of homosexuality in schools and amongst young people.

With the birth of this campaign the debate about homosexuality became mainstream. Of course it took the efforts of John Major’s wing of the Tory Party, and the governments of Tony Blair and David Cameron to bring the ship home, but by March 2014 homosexual men and women finally achieved full equality with heterosexuals before the law.

In surveying this history one has to acknowledge the difference between lobbying, campaigning, and cultural shifts – the difference between social change and social movements, so to speak. The release of movies like *Victim* in 1961, *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), *Flesh* (1968), *Boys in the Band* (1970), Mick Jagger’s, *Performance* (1970), *Sunday Bloody Sunday* with Murray Head and Peter Finch in 1971, David Hockney’s *A Bigger Splash* (1973), the televising of Quentin Crisp’s *The Naked Civil Servant* in 1975, and the release of *My Beautiful Launderette* ten years later, along with the marvels of Lou Reed, the Velvet Underground, and David Bowie were all signs of the times. Between the publication of James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* in 1958 and E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* in 1971 vast tectonic shifts and disturbance was occurring; very little of it the product of political action, campaigning or lobbying.

It is this that much, or most of the current media output on the anniversary of the 1967 Act fails to grasp. The messy confusions of gay liberation and our radically dysfunctional unity, the points at which this intersected with the initiatives of the proprietors and landlords of gay clubs and pubs, or the broader changes in society which made the improbable, not just possible, but actual.

This is more than Barclay’s or Bacardi financing floats on gay pride parades, or homosexual policemen and women marching in uniform, besides soldiers, and fire fighters at gay celebrations; it is the way

acceptance of homosexuality has become normal, commonplace, embedded in mainstream cultural assumptions throughout society that is interesting.

Witness the current Coca-Cola ad in which an attractive brother and sister tumble over each other get to the fridge in order to be first to quench the thirst of the handsome hunk cleaning the pool, only to discover that they've both been beaten to it by Mum, who stands smugly next to the gorgeous pool boy as he glugs down the refreshing can of Zero she's given him. It is not a problem for us, or the Coca-Cola Company, that the lad is as eager to please the sexy pool boy as his sister; it's a good, almost subliminal joke for the modern consumer.

This takes some explaining, well beyond the sterling efforts of those of us in gay liberation or the conspicuous successes of the grandees of homosexual life in and around Stonewall, Switchboard, or the voluntary sector's Aids network. Fundamental alterations in the way most people live and work, in the nature of our neighbourhoods, our family life, and the organisation of our workplaces, had to take place before it could be demonstrated that homosexuality was neither threatening to the social order, or dysfunctional for the sound operation of the capitalist system.

It is unnervingly true for those of us on the communist and socialist left that it is only in well-developed capitalist societies – in post-industrial capitalist society – that homosexuals have been emancipated to any degree whatsoever. In all other social circumstances vicious repression has remained the order of the day.

The kind of industrial life which arose in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and in which most of our people lived in up to the late nineteen fifties had to be swept away before a freer attitude to sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular could arise. The old harsh discipline of working class life had to be eroded by relative prosperity, by mass consumption, by contraception, by more diverse forms of

employment and workplace organisation, by foreign travel, and much else, before the rigorous enforcement of the gender roles and respectability of working class life, ratified by the state, by the labour movement, and by popular culture, could pass away.

The emancipation of homosexuals and homosexuality, and the possibility of Queer Britannia, is not the product of progressive legislation or of the steady growth of liberal sentiment in society leading us from the dark days of repression to the sunlit uplands of marriage equality.

It is however, the result of the desperate and often destructive processes of economic, technical, and far-reaching social transformations, accompanied by tumultuous politicking and uproarious campaigning, barely captured by focus upon the Sexual Offences Act or upon the leading lights of the lesbian and gay community. It is undoubtedly true that – like swans and icebergs – most of the activity and the bulk of social movement lies below the surface, and it is disappointing that our media folk have not given more attention to the underlying forces at work in this truly extraordinary transformation of our common life.