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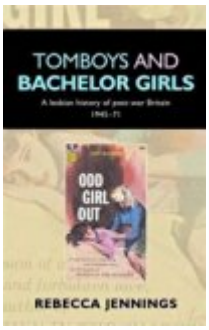
Rebecca Jennings. *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain, 1945-71.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. ix + 209 pp. $74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7544-5.



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Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

Rebecca Jennings's new book *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls* is an historical account of the vibrancy, activity, and complexity of lesbian communities in Britain between the end of World War II and the onset of gay liberation in the 1970s. Jennings has uncovered a range of thriving discursive and social communities that undermine traditional historical dichotomies of closeted vs. visible and oppressed vs. liberated. At school, home, and work as well as in clubs and the pages of early lesbian magazines, women found important opportunities to construct lesbian identities, social networks, and personal relationships and bonds. Jennings argues that mid-twentieth-century women "were able to deploy ambiguous concepts such as the 'career woman' and the 'bachelor girl' to simultaneously indicate and mask a lesbian identity" (p. 4). It was in the undefined spaces and silences of these categories that women could "partially pass," allowing them a degree of security and respectability, but also affording them opportunities to express and explore same-sex desires.

Beginning in her first chapter with adolescence, Jennings explores the category of "schoolgirl" as one such ambiguous space. Educators, regulators, and social commentators were concerned with the danger of schoolgirl "pashes," or crushes, from the late nineteenth century. These concerns became even more prominent with the 1928 publication and trial of Radclyffe Hall's infamous lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*, and later the film *Madchen in Uniform* (1931), based on the German novel *The Child Manuela* by Christa Winsloe (UK translation, 1934). But the subject of female same-sex sexuality was met largely with silence, which ultimately afforded young women the opportunity to explore same-sex desire with a degree of freedom that would be largely unavailable to them in adulthood. By mid century, work and employment could offer similar opportunities, which Jennings explores in the book's second chapter. Employment was another site where ambiguous categories like "bachelor girl" and "career woman," and the silences surrounding deviant sexuality, afforded space to express lesbian identi-

ties. Because of continued silences around the subject of female homosexuality, categories like "tom boy" and "bachelor girl" "were invested with sexual meaning in the immediate post-war decades precisely because of this absence of explicit discussion about lesbianism" (pp. 6-7). Immediately suspect as potentially deviant, these categories, however, made possible work-based models of lesbian identity, which could become the basis of social circles defined by same-sex desire.

Some opportunities to explore lesbian identities and create social bonds were more obviously queer. By the 1950s and 1960s, in clubs like the Gateways just off the King's Road, Chelsea or Britain's first lesbian magazine *Arena Three*, many women found a community and a shared identity. Jennings hastens to add, however, that these sites of social and discursive sociability and encounter were no panacea; rather, they remained fraught spaces where women with differing personal and political identities could come into conflict. ***Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*** highlights the heterogeneity and conflicting goals of Britain's nascent lesbian community in the 1950s and 1960s. Conflicting goals, ideals, and values emerged between organizers, activists, and women exploring social opportunities in this period of still limited lesbian-friendly venues and options.

Some women found a supportive community at clubs like the Robin Hood Club or the Gateways that contributed to a sense of shared identity and subcultural bond. But others, particularly those who might not have identified with the butch-femme dynamics in some clubs, remembered them as alienating and cliquey. Conflict could be intergenerational and political as well. This was true at the Gateways, where younger lesbians of the late 1960s found little to identify with in the codes and behaviors of a butch-femme dynamic, and were instead interested in activism and social change. Club manager Gina Ware sought to maintain the personal and introverted social space of the Gateways away from the radical politics of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), who perceived lesbians in the bar culture of the Gateways as "passive and misguided victims of oppression" (p. 128).

Jennings's discussion of members of the Gateways club and readers of *Arena Three* offers insights into what Chris Waters and Matt Houlbrook have identified as "respectable homosexuality" [1]. Jennings shows us the lives of non-radical lesbians who sought to find housing, raise children, and seek companionship. But these women are not presented as unflawed heroines. Many middle-class and more conservative women had their own anxieties about the lesbian identities they encountered, and expressed their own prejudices against other women. In the pages of *Arena Three* some women expressed concern at the place of butch lesbians at meetings and as public representatives of female homosexuality. Dress, deportment, and politics remained areas of conflict in the magazine, as Jennings skillfully shows in letters from readers.

This book also offers university instructors the valuable opportunity to discuss with students questions of sources and historiographical issues. Whose voices do we hear? Where are the silences and gaps in our histories? Who do our sources actually hide from us? One of the book's strengths is Jennings's use of the Hall-Carpenter oral histories, part of the National Sound Archive at the British Library. This of course offers a wealth of knowledge and experience that would otherwise remain inaccessible. But Jennings is well aware of the drawbacks to this collection, which she describes in a useful and important epilogue. Many interviewees, particularly those born before 1950, who would have been most active in Jennings's story, tended to be more affluent and educated professionals who were active in feminist and lesbian political movements. These were women who were visible and accessible, and whose testimonies could reinforce the importance of a

"politicised, community-based lesbian experience" (p. 181). This of course tends to occlude histories of working-class women, women of color, immigrants, and politically moderate or conservative women.

Scholars of twentieth-century British gay and lesbian history have tended to overlook many of the historical actors that Jennings identifies. Instead, as Jennings rightly points out, they look to the bohemian 1920s, or they highlight the struggles of gay liberation from the 1970s, emphasizing the story of active opposition to entrenched orthodoxies and prejudices, in which many of them participated. Repeating many of the accusations of GLFers against members of the Gateways, this historical approach further positions men and women who participated in more introverted social networks as passive victims, and less worthy of historical investigation. Jennings's book is a welcome contribution to the field with a diversity of voices that remind us just how complicated and muddied history can be.

It is true that gay and lesbian history remains an underdeveloped, but growing, field of inquiry. But more importantly, within our own field, which groups have we neglected? Studies of female same-sex desire, activities, and communities are still more uncharted than studies of male equivalents, to be sure, but so too are the unremarkable individuals who were neither unapologetically public nor steadfastly activist. Sometimes dismissed as apathetic, apologist, or simply just afraid, these unremarkable, but likely representative men and women require further historical investigation, and it is heartening to see their stories appearing here.

Note

[1]. Matt Houlbrook and Chris Waters, "The Heart in Exile: Detachment and desire in 1950s London," *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006): 142-165.

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