

C. Todd White. *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xvii + 258 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07641-1.



Reviewed by Graham Willett

Published on H-Histsex (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

For a very long time, the history of gay and lesbian activism was written as if New York City's Stonewall Riots of July 1969 were the originating moment of the movement for gay and lesbian equality. For many, there had been, before that moment, nothing. For others, dimly aware that there was something before, those years had been a kind of dark ages, marked at best by timidity and at worst by a craven, apologetic assimilationism.

In 1983, John D'Emilio challenged these perceptions with his book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, which revealed and explored an activism that dated back to the founding of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles to 1951. In the years that followed, a steady stream of histories—of organizations, individuals, cities, countries, and regions—has been published. A rich history of the pre-gay period is now well mapped out.

C. Todd White adds to this corpus with his examination of a complex of Los Angeles-based organizations (Mattachine and ONE, and its offshoot groups, the Institute for the Study of Human Resources and the Homosexual Information Center) over a twenty-year period from 1950 to 1970. At the most obvious level, this is a history of the origins, rise, and fall of these organizations, as well as of their ideas, activities, and activists. This is work that, as White states, has been done by a number of scholars.

What White brings to this project, though, is new sources and a deep immersion in them. He has new archival records, extended life-history interviews with many of those involved, and the insights of a participant-observer. White was drawn into his research through his involvement with one of the successor organizations, a chance encounter with one of the founders, and his assistance in helping to manage the papers of another. While he comes to think of the activists as “kindred,” he sees this, rightly, as a strength rather than a flaw in his work. Struck at one point by

how much what he was doing resembled his father's work as a field archaeologist, he writes a story that is part social history and part ethnography.

The role of individuals is central to White's understanding of the history of these organizations, and the movement that they represented. As he argues early on, social and political conditions were clearly conducive to the formation of a homosexual rights organization. Large cities provided a critical mass of people in which outsiders and dissidents might find each other. The political climate in the United States was lively, with both the Left and the Right organizing around strongly contested rights agendas. If Mattachine had not been founded in Los Angeles, something similar would almost certainly have appeared around the same time in New York City or San Francisco. One informant suggested to White that in Los Angeles it was simply a matter of the right people at the right time. But it was the organization that made the difference. When Dale Jennings, a founding member of Mattachine, was arrested for lewd behavior in 1952, he decided to contest the charge in court, not by denying that he was a homosexual, but by arguing that his sexuality was irrelevant to the question of what he had or had not done. The group swung into action, forming a committee, raising funds, and circulating leaflets and flyers. When the jury failed to convict, Mattachine claimed a great victory--and new branches sprung up in Los Angeles, in other parts of California, and as far away as Chicago.

Drawing on his sources, examining the tangible remains of the groups' real-world activities, and asking the kinds of questions that activists are likely to want answered, White generates a rich history of these twenty years. He is especially good on the way in which these groups are part of a movement composed almost entirely of small activities ("pebbles on the mountain," as he puts it). While the Stonewall Riots loom large in any history of gay rights and were undoubtedly im-

portant, White reveals just how significant were two decades of publishing magazines, newsletters, and a journal; setting up a library and an institute; and organizing an annual conference and regular seminars. Alongside these day-to-day activities, threats were seized as opportunities. Jennings's trial is a case in point. So is the successful legal challenge to the postmaster general's ban on the transmission through the mail of the September 1953 edition of the magazine *ONE* on the grounds of obscenity (it was the issue that canvassed the idea of same-sex marriage).

White understands the importance of small facts as well as big events to the telling of the story. For example, the magazine *ONE* was a vital cog in the machine that generated and circulated the ideas of homosexual rights. White's detailed discussion of content tells us what those ideas were. The circulation figures--which rose from 100 in mid-1953 to 500, and then to 6,000 (including 1,800 subscribers) two years later--reveal a rising tide of interest. The reference to the role of newsstand sales and subscriptions provide a sense of how the ideas actually got out there.

For many readers the level of detail in this book will be too much. The golden age gave way to differences of opinion, personal squabbles, and the inevitable (this being the United States) legal battles that in White's words droned on, seemingly forever. This material is invaluable, but despite the rousing language (mutiny, retaliation, heroes, and knaves) that he uses, White cannot really make it interesting. This perhaps is the downside of the participant-observer methodology--sometimes the insider's fascination with the minutiae blinds them to the outsider's need for brevity.

But this is one of the very few criticisms of this book. It is an important story, told from a fresh angle. Its methodologies are likely to be valuable to anyone doing community history where living memory is available and the possibilities offered by ethnography seem fruitful indeed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Graham Willett. Review of White, C. Todd. *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30391>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.