

# H-Net Reviews

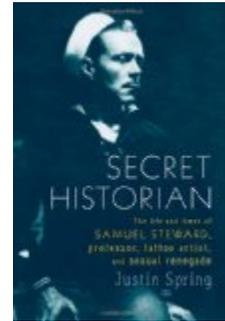
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Justin Spring. *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010. Illustrations. xv + 478 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28134-2.

Reviewed by Barry Reay

Published on H-Histsex (November, 2010)

Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones



## A Secret History?

The work of Alfred Kinsey is usually associated with the famous 1940s and 1950s reports on male and female sexuality and with the quantification (the counting of orgasms) at the core of his questionnaires of tens of thousands of subjects. However, Kinsey also cultivated some long-term suppliers of voluminous, qualitative, sex-related material in the form of letters, journals, mementos, artwork, and photography. One of these informants was Samuel Steward, the university academic, tattooist, artist, and, as Phil Andros, pioneering 1970s homosexual pornographic writer. Justin Spring, the author of this amazing work of historical detection, has assembled a dizzying range of material generated by Steward, only some of which is in the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana. Most intriguingly, he has accessed Steward's own archive, literally moldering away when he died in 1993 (the jacket flap erroneously says 1983), and then moved to his executor's attic. Spring has found the "Stud File," a boxed card-index (remember those!) of Steward's many sexual contacts. The author, whose previous work has included an elegant study of the drawings of the artist Paul Cadmus, has published a separate volume of Steward's art and photography, for, as a tattooist, his subject was an accomplished draftsman. The (literally) graphic nature of his subject's visual art presumably explains its minimal presence in the *Secret Historian* apart from some representation in a cluster of black-and-white images part way through the book, including Kinsey-organized photographs of Steward's apartment wall-drawings, Polaroids of sailors (naked apart from the hat), tattooed

roughs, and male group sex. But it is a missed opportunity; presumably the publisher had reservations (Spring refers to his difficulties in getting his book placed commercially).

It is a remarkable sexual biography of a remarkable man whose life spanned the history of homosexuality almost from the time that it was named: friend of the genteel Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, visiting them in France from the 1930s; English professor at Loyola and DePaul universities; occasional sexual partner of Thornton Wilder; friend of the photographer George Platt Lynes, with whom he shared erotica and sex partners; Kinsey Institute informant and filmed sexual performer; contributor to the homophile magazine *Der Kreis*; translator of Jean Genet's *Querelle de Brest* (1953); early practitioner of Chicago S/M; tattooist of Chicago sailors and then Oakland Hells Angels; pioneering writer of gay pornography, often based (Spring reveals) on actual people and personal encounters; and early exploiter of Polaroid technology—Spring refers to an archive of over three hundred black-and-white photographs of physical sex (p. 129). As the old saying goes, if Steward had not existed it would have been tempting to invent him, but would anyone have had the imagination!

Whether he was a man "who literally spent his whole life pondering the nature of his sexual identity" is debatable (p. xiii). He seems to have been too involved in acts to worry about identities. Though admittedly he

reflected in later life, perhaps imposing a gay consciousness on a less tidy earlier sexual existence, his journals are a relentless counting (like his mentor Kinsey). During a forty-two-day visit to San Francisco in 1953, recorded for Kinsey, Steward had 63 sexual contacts with 38 different people (p. 178). In 1954, at the age of forty-five, he calculated from his file that he had had 1,100 sexual contacts up to the age of thirty-eight and exactly the same number in the mere seven years since then (p. 203). Years later, the total approached nearly 5,000 with over 800 different sexual partners (p. 380). He was an educated man who provided elegant and often humorous accounts of his encounters. Of the previously cited visit to San Francisco, he wrote of the Embarcadero YMCA, “A Christian brothel, a lupanar. Here, under the paternal and indulgent eye of the YMCA, more sins are committed per minute than were in the palmiest days of ancient Rome.” He continued, “Life here like a virus, a disease. When you get away from the place, you keep thinking: ‘Jesus, I ought to get back.’ Like life on the needle.”[1]

The pre-Stonewall period, as it is usually called, the time before the gay identity politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, has produced several recent histories of its sexual richness and variability—Chad Heap’s *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (2009), this reviewer’s *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America* (2010), and now *Secret Historian*. But whether the metaphor of the “closet,” which clearly informs Spring’s account (pp. 211, 410), is appropriate for this rich sexual history is highly debatable.

Nor is this history necessarily best described as a “secret” history. True, Steward’s life story was not published when he was living it, but a life that intersected with so many other lives, that straddled the emerging

worlds both of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and that left so many, many traces in such multiple and varied mediums is hardly secret. It was a sexual world where “trade,” the masculine, potentially sexually accessible heterosexual, was an object of homosexual desire; where sex was easily bought or traded; and where working-class men might engage in what we, though not they, would call homosexual sex. Hence this sexual world resulted in Steward’s numerous encounters with the iconic sailor, sexually available to all-comers, so to speak; the bodybuilder male whores; and various other hustlers and working-class associates. (The tattoo shop was an entry to such untold riches.) Steward contrasted the swish homosexual elegance of what he called a “bitch party” and the honest, muscled, pale-skinned masculinity of the “trade” that he was going to meet and blow after that social engagement (pp. 206-208). “He is the ‘pure trade’—no foolishness, very business-like and matter-of-fact. He comes to see me to get his nuts off, and there’s an end on ‘t.”[2] In another entry in one of the journals in the Kinsey archives, not quoted by Spring, Steward writes disparagingly in 1953 that the next time he hears the word “gay” “I’ll explode, for I hate the word—and paraphrase Gide about being a homosexual, but not ‘gay,’ goddamn it.”[3]

#### Notes

[1]. Samuel Steward, Diary 1953–4, “The Embarcadero Y,” Samuel Steward Collection, Series 2, D, Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, University of Indiana, Bloomington, Indiana.

[2]. Samuel Steward, Diary 1953–4, October 23, 1953.

[3]. Ibid., November 5, 1953.

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**Citation:** Barry Reay. Review of Spring, Justin, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. November, 2010.

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