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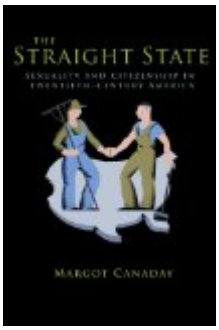

Margot Canaday. *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 296 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-691-14993-6.

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Commissioned by Douglas J. Forsyth (Bowling Green State University)

It is easy to see why Margot Canaday's *The Straight State* is scooping up the major awards in the field of queer history, including a Lambda Literary Award and the John Boswell Prize. This is an amazing work of scholarship, showing how the federal government in the United States grew at the same time as, and helped to shape, the construction of the category of "homosexual." Canaday has undertaken prodigious research in a wide variety of government sources, including court cases and official correspondence, to argue that what we have long considered the post-1945 McCarthyite purge of homosexuals has a longer and more complicated history. She shows how, beginning in the early twentieth century, the arenas of immigration, the military, and welfare grappled with the question of same-sex sexuality in a way that gelled in the postwar period and, in the process, came to define the citizen as resolutely heterosexual.

The organization of the book is ingenious, beginning with what Canaday dubs the "nascent policing" of immigration, the military, and welfare, and then reversing the order in analyzing the "explicit regulation" of welfare, the military, and immigration, bringing the story up to the present. In all of these cases, the tools at hand to weed out those with inappropriate sexual desires in the early twentieth century were blunt instruments. Attempting to detect perverse bodies and practices at the border was indeed tricky business, but even if the authorities thought they had found evidence of same-sex sexual acts or desires, the only legal means they had for rejecting or deporting individuals was if they were deemed likely to become a public charge, which meant that wealthy perverts might slip through the net. As for the military, the same kind of attempt to weed out perverse bodies was part of the induction process, but scandals made clear that soldiers and sailors did in fact participate in same-sex acts. Yet only when same-sex behavior was violent or became public did the military take action. In the process, we can see the shift, which George Chauncey Jr. highlighted in his classic essay about the Newport trials, from a conception of penetra-

tors in same-sex acts as innocent to the modern mainstream notion that both participants in a same-sex sexual act are homosexual.[1] And in terms of welfare, to highlight the difference between old-style hobos and bums, known for homosexuality, Canaday contrasts the untold story of the Federal Transit Program to the breadwinners-in-training of the better-known and more successful Civilian Conservation Corps. Her point is both that these programs were working out what it meant to be a homosexual as a state bureaucracy developed to deal with the problem of homosexuality and that the bluntness of the tools used to police same-sex sexuality allowed for them to be used very broadly.

The second section of the book turns to developments in the postwar period, when the dramatic growth of government facilitated a more explicit focus on policing sexuality. In the realm of welfare, the fear that soldiers would return from the Second World War, as they had from the First World War, and wander about in an unmarried state led to the development of the most massive federal welfare program in U.S. history, the GI Bill, designed to create settled, married, and yes, heterosexual men. Here Canaday tells the other side of the story detailed by Allan Bérubé, Leisa D. Meyer, and David K. Johnson: not the punishment of homosexual women and men, but the rewards allotted to heterosexual men (female veterans, fewer in number to begin with, being shorted by the GI Bill).[2] She also details the military's turn from focusing on public and violent same-sex sex to the notion of "homosexual tendencies," which developed out of a lack of clarity about what constituted lesbian sex in particular. Turning back to the starting point of immigration, we see the crystallization of the notion of a sexual binary, that a person is either heterosexual or homosexual. Immigration policy increasingly defined a person as homosexual based on either acts or markers of psychopathy suggesting the likelihood to engage in such acts as psychiatrists fought lawyers over who should be able to classify a person as a "psychopathic personality," the category under which homosexuals could be excluded. Canaday's point in this section is that, as she puts it, "in making its vague devices work with its explicit prohibitions--prohibitions against being homosexual--the federal government would help to constitute homosexuality. This production occurred not despite but through ambiguous instruments" (p. 173).

Although it is crystal clear how important the government was in creating the homosexual as a person to be excluded from citizenship, Canaday's point about what she calls the "***strategically ambiguous***" nature of government policy--not dishonorably discharging all homosexual military personnel, not explicitly denying homosexuals the right to enter the country--is less persuasive to me (p. 247). The evidence seems to suggest that this was more a case of competing elements of the state: Congress versus the military, psychiatrists versus lawyers. Canaday recognizes that the state is not monolithic. But I am not entirely convinced that "so much more effectively did the state shape the citizenry by letting people in under certain conditions than by keeping them out absolutely" (p. 256). Was this deliberate and strategic? Would more draconian and absolute bans have been less effective? It is, of course, hard to know.

Despite her focus on the state, Canaday does not present a bleak history of oppression. Yes, we see the federal government coming to terms with the sexologists' definition of homosexuality and, as the bureaucracy developed, finding ways to police sexuality so as to define the citizen as heterosexual. But along the way we meet enterprising individuals who challenged the government's judgment about sexuality. One man in a Federal Transient Project camp, for example, posted a personal ad in the camp paper, stating "I am a tall, handsome, and gay brute" (p. 110). Sara Harb Quiroz, one of the few immigrants stopped at the border (because of her short hair and trousers) able to hire a lawyer and who thus made it into the historical record, admitted that she had had

homosexual desires and relations but denied that this made her a psychopathic personality. And there is the female soldier, called before a military board in 1958, who proclaimed, “I don’t feel that I am being treated like an American citizen. I would like to know why” (p. 204). Canaday ends her splendid book with the words, “It was such a simple question, and some fifty years later, from lawmakers, judges, and bureaucrats, it now deserves an answer” (p. 204).

Canaday makes clear how central the growth of the state was to the process of defining homosexuality, without losing sight of the men and women who suffered from, evaded, or achieved victory over the increasingly consolidated regulations designed to make the United States a “straight state.” This is, if I may use such a gendered term, a masterful analysis of the relationship of sexuality and state building that is sure to prove a model for future research in both the fields of political history and the history of sexuality.

Notes

[1]. George Chauncey Jr., “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Dauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 294-317.

[2]. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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