

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Wayne Murdoch, Daniel Marshall, Graham Willett, Adam Carr, eds. *Secret Histories of Queer Melbourne*. Parkville: Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 2011. 172 pp. AU\$40 (paper), ISBN 978-0-646-54940-8.

Yorick Smaal, Graham Willett, eds. *Out Here: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives VI*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2011. xiv + 216 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-921867-00-2.

Graham Willett, John Arnold, eds. *Queen City of the South: Gay and Lesbian Melbourne*. Melbourne: La Trobe Journal, 2011. 200 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 277-600-06-4271-4.

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Queer Histories, Queer Places, Queer Lives

Australian lesbian and gay history is full of interesting characters and lives well lived, from the quiet to the outrageous, artists to activists, private citizens to public figures. Among the pages of these three edited collections, bars and department stores take their place alongside protest marches, theatrical performances, camp clubs, and the intricacies of everyday life. These volumes—*Secret Histories of Queer Melbourne*, *Queen City of the South*, and *Out Here*—trace the social organization of gender and sexuality since the late nineteenth century, but they never lose sight of the women and men whose worlds these were.

Secret Histories of Queer Melbourne is an appealing, wonderfully designed smorgasbord of historical tidbits and in-depth analysis. Its fifty-one entries span the years between the frontier of the 1870s—with its outlaw duo of James Nesbitt and the intriguingly named Captain Moonlite—and the drag king scene of the early 2000s. Subjects include Gordon Lawrence, a frocked-up actor who paraded around the Melbourne exhibition in 1888, winking at the good-looking male passersby; bisexual sex educator Robert Storer who advocated sexual freedom during the 1930s; and Val Eastwood, pioneering lesbian businesswoman and bohemian café owner during

the 1950s. The places—cafés and beats, street marches and magazines—gave gay and lesbian Australia its texture and richness, and their inhabitants laid the groundwork for the social activism that burst into life during the 1970s.

Lesbian lives have been harder to research than those of the queer men who have dominated court files and news media coverage. The editors of *Secret Histories of Queer Melbourne* have made a concerted effort to redress this imbalance, and this volume pays close attention to the less visible worlds of women. “Gladys Moncrieff, Elsie Wilson and the Gallery Girls” and “Flappers, Faculty and the Fast Ladies” are two highly evocative chapter titles, and readers will be fascinated by the story of Monte Pushon, born in 1882, who died an out lesbian in 1989 at the age of 106.

Queen City of the South is published as a special issue of *The La Trobe Journal*, and this collection continues many of the themes of *Secret Histories of Queer Melbourne*. Wayne Murdoch’s chapter examines court records and charts the complex sociability of the city’s interwar male homosexual subcultures. Murdoch suggests that the 1920s and 1930s “mark the emergence of a modern homosexual subculture in Melbourne,” a subculture facilitated by telephones, personal transport, and

expansion of notions of privacy (p. 31). In separate chapters, Bev Roberts and Kate Davison discuss the lives of Anne Drysdale and Caroline Newcomb, a pair who farmed together in rural Victoria during the 1840s. These authors take slightly different approaches to their subjects: Roberts suggests that this was more of a “companionate” friendship than a “romantic” one, while Davison refers to Newcomb as Drysdale’s “life partner.”

Lives and episodes, then, can be appraised differently, a point made in the editors’ introductions to both *Queen City* and *Out Here*. So can urban spaces themselves. *Queen City* editor Graham Willett notes that the history of queer Melbourne is in some ways “the history of the city itself,” and that “iconic places look very different when seen through the eyes of queer folk” (p. 2). Before World War I, for instance, the Vienna Café was a highly respectable venue for those wishing to see and be seen—as well as a place in which transgressive young men dressed up as women. Later, predominantly queer spaces and venues—domestic parties, “Jan’s Dance,” and *William and John* magazine, to name but three—were forged in Australia’s cities.

Unlike the two Melbourne books, which are primarily historical in focus, *Out Here* combines both historical and contemporary perspectives. Gay and lesbian politics feature heavily, as do the intricate negotiations—at both individual and community levels—over HIV/AIDS. Life writing, news media reports, and medical discourses are all significant here. Peter Robinson’s nuanced chapter explores ageism in twenty-first-century gay communities, and concludes that the relationships between younger and older gay men can take a range of forms.

Lisa Featherstone notes that the European sexologists’ enthusiasm for explaining same-sex desire is not replicated in late nineteenth-century Australia. She suggests, instead, that the view of “sodomy” as a universally appealing “habit” lived on well into the twentieth century—as indeed it did in the New Zealand context. Australian homoeroticism, Featherstone proposes, is hidden behind the broader appeal of mateship. Was this a distinctively Antipodean formulation, shared by both Australians and New Zealanders? Or, was the discourse in North America and Europe more complex than has been thus far assumed?

Peter Di Sciascio suggestively offers up women artists’ experiences and explores the possibilities for lesbian life during the early decades of the twentieth century, while Yorick Smaal provides a lively examination of the “complex urban infrastructure” of homoerotic communities during the century’s middle decades. Wartime circumstances, language, and visual imagery combine in his mapping of male homoerotic sociabilities. Like Featherstone, Di Sciascio and Smaal consider the contact points between Australian and international trends, facilitated by travel into and outside of the nation.

This is an increasingly complex field of inquiry, and Australian lesbian and gay scholarship is now well developed. Researchers examine and tie together international, national, regional, and local strands. All three books explore the links between Australian lives and overseas experience. They are accessible as well as scholarly; they draw in the reader while illustrating the differences between past and present.

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