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**JUNE
£1.20**



MARC ALMOND

True Confessions

**1967 & ALL THAT
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FEATURE

1967 & ALL THAT



*This summer marks
the 20th anniversary of
the Sexual Offences Act
which decriminalised
male homosexual
behaviour between
consenting adults
in private.
Jeffrey Weeks assesses
the importance
of the act.*



A friend of mine asked me recently what I thought were the most significant events in recent lesbian and gay history. It didn't take me long to come up with a snappy answer: the 1967 Act, the emergence of

1967 & ALL THAT

gay liberation in the early 1970s, and the devastating spread of Aids since the early 1980s.

Because an answer is glib, it doesn't make it any the less true. What's less easy is to try to measure the relative significance of each event, to weigh in the balance the influence of legislative change against the impact of disease and death.

The Sexual Offences Act of 1967, which decriminalised male homosexual acts, within carefully defined limits, was the least dramatic of these three events. It was passed at the tail-end of the parliamentary session, in high summer, with only just over 100 MPs bothering to vote on the third reading. Some eighty years after the Labouchere amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act had made all male homosexual activities, whether in public or private, illegal; ten years after the Wolfenden Report had recommended a limited reform of the law; after nearly a decade of pressure group activity, and months of parliamentary manoeuvres, the reform slipped through by a majority of 99 votes to 14.

MUTED CHEERS

It all seemed so easy, and so low key. There were no demonstrations or carnivals, just a few muted cheers in the public gallery of the House of Commons. Lord Arran, who had piloted the reform bill through the House of Lords, summed up the characteristic note of those who had brought the change about: 'I ask those who have, as it were, been in bondage and for whom the prison doors are now open to show their thanks by comporting themselves with dignity'. It did not feel like a momentous change, either in intent or in likely effect.

When the bill became law, on July 27th, 1967, I was in a personal limbo, having just graduated from university. I was actually doing a labouring job, in a mining valley in South Wales. I had come out, to myself and my closest friends at least, over the previous three years when I was a student in London. I had got to know a fair bit of the queer scene as it then existed, and had a small circle of 'sympathetic friends'. The reform was, of course, welcome: when you know that every sexual act you do is against the law, something terrible happens to your psyche. I don't think I will ever be able to escape the semi-conscious fear that a nameless THEY will one day barge into my room and destroy my sexual idyll for ever.

But in that long, warm summer—in retrospect I remember it as hot, and certainly it was backbreaking, the only sustained period of physical labour in my life!—it

seemed scarcely relevant to the real conditions of my life, torn between different class cultures, convinced I could never tell my family 'what I really was', probably unemployable. And if I was indifferent, there were others I met in the pubs and cottages of London and South Wales who were actually hostile, nervous that a new legality would ruin their cosily secret double lives. (Years later, when I came to interview gay men in their sixties about their lives and times, I found this was a common theme, at least for those fortunate enough to have cultivated a circle of friends before 1967.)

But I was wrong—and all those cynics and closet cases were wrong. In the perspective of twenty years I can see clearly that reform of the law was of decisive importance, for women who were not directly affected by the legal changes as well as for men, who changes that mattered—as we know, these were very limited, decriminalising male consenting acts in private (narrowly defined) in England and Wales only, excluding the armed services and merchant navy and by no measure legitimising homosexuality.

What counted, then and since, was the symbolic weight of reform. For those on the moral right wing, decriminalisation of homosexuality was the decisive mark of degeneration, a sign of the 'moral disarmament' (a phrase used by a supporter of Mrs Mary Whitehouse, then entering her heyday) that was eating into the fibre of this once great nation. Lords Montgomery and Dilhorne (those are names from a glorious past!) and the Chief Scout inveighed against the sins of sodom which had brought Rome to her knees and would surely do the same for England. For such people, and the not so silent minority they spoke to and for, reform

*1967 was
a turning point
when history
barely seemed
to turn.
But history
has scarcely
stopped turning
since*



IMAGES OF THE 1960s
The new sexual freedoms of the decade were largely confined to homosexuals but the '67 Act was to pave the way for Gay Liberation in the '70s

of the law relating to male homosexuality represented a crucial stage in the public acceptance of moral pluralism, of the fact that there were different ways of being men and women, of living and loving, of being and becoming. They were appalled, and from their narrow, prejudiced position, they were right to be appalled.

MORAL ARGUMENT

Law reform had been argued for from a number of perspectives: practical (wasn't imprisoning homosexuals akin to giving them what they wanted: would you lock an alcoholic up in a brewery?); medical (wasn't treatment better than punishment?); legal (did the law have the right to interfere in the private behaviour of consenting adults, if no-one else was harmed?); even national security (surely, homosexuals were less

