

Book Review

Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris

William A. Peniston

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For all those who have an interest in Paris, homosexuality, the nineteenth century, sociology, history, or working class young men, this is the book you've been waiting for. A single man of homosexual inclinations visiting Paris at the time of the Third Republic could have met any of the young men who people the pages of this book. Indeed an Anglo-Jewish painter Simeon Solomon visited Paris from London in 1874 having fallen foul of the law there and his story is told in this book. He might have enjoyed the charms of Henri-Arthur Lucas, an eighteen-year-old unemployed waiter, who went by the nickname *Le Boeuf à la Mode* ('The Beef Dish') and no doubt would have paid dearly for the experience. Or he may have met Coco, a seventeen-year-old waiter, the lover of Dechatillon also known as *La Mogador*, who together made a little money on the side through prostitution and the odd thievery (stealing a pipe from one unlucky customer and a gold watch from another). And having gained their trust and penetrated somewhat into their quite extensive socio-sexual network, he may have been privileged to witness one of 'the peculiar forms of popular entertainment' for this subculture — if he could have been there on 23/6/1876 he may have joined the crowd outside the Théâtre Guignol on the Champs Elysées to watch Louis-Martin Talbot, a thirty-three-year-old domestic masturbating Charles-Edouard Fanchon, a twenty-six-year-old commercial clerk. Or if he had been in Paris on 26/10/1876, he may have been the man standing next to François-Jules-Adolphe Loy in a pissoir near the Alcazar d'Été, a café-concert on the Champs Elysées, to whom Loy said 'watch how I jerk off!'. He wasn't there on that occasion, but Emile-Arthur Pelletier, a twenty-one-year-old pastry cook was and 'not only watched, but eventually joined in, so that both of them were accused of mutual masturbation'. Sadly, our visiting painter from London, Simeon Solomon was indiscreet long before this, for in March 1874 he was arrested in a urinal near the Bourse for 'obscene touching' with Raphael-Maximilien Dumont, a nineteen-year-old wine clerk, and was sentenced to three months in prison and sixteen francs in fines.

As you can see this is quite a rollicking read, but this book also represents a serious piece of very well researched study. As the astute reader of the above vignettes may have gathered, the stories of the members of this homosexual urban sub-culture all come from the police records of the time. Although homosexual behaviour and sodomy between

two consenting adults in the privacy of a home was no longer illegal under the Code Napoleon, the Parisian police believed that homosexual behaviour (especially amongst members of the lower classes) was a vice, and that those indulging in such behaviour were very likely to engage in all manner of other criminal acts. Interestingly they believed that other criminals were more than likely to commit homosexual acts as well. So the police in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Paris kept active surveillance on suspect members of this sub-culture and compiled a ledger of cases of public offences against decency and other minor offences which they titled 'Pederasts and Others'. By pederasty should be understood not the classic use of the term — the crime of sex between an adult male and an underaged boy, but merely any male-to-male sexual activity which took place in public. Contrary to police belief, the percentage of 'other' crimes in the ledger (including theft, murder, vagrancy, blackmail, resisting arrest, etc.) is small (only 21%) in the overall total of offences against decency. As the author points out, most of these young and not so young men were mainly interested in the simple pursuit of sexual pleasures against the backdrop of the newly modernised open spaces of the city of Paris. True, some resorted to prostitution (but generally this appears to have more opportunistic than as a career choice) and some indulged in petty crime, but predominantly these men were seeking 'sexual partners, usually for brief encounters, but occasionally for short-term or long-lasting affairs'. The 'sub-culture served to alleviate loneliness and to foster cohesiveness'.

The author includes a chapter on the Parisian forensic doctors of the late nineteenth century and their attitudes to homosexual behaviour which will fascinate you. During most of the period the book covers, the opinions of Dr Ambrose Tardieu, Professor of Forensic Studies at the Faculty of Medicine, held sway. Professor Tardieu's specialty was determining the physical signs of the sodomite. An active sodomite had a particularly shaped penis ('either very thin, or...more rarely...very voluminous'). A luckless forty-year-old shoemaker arrested for making 'indecent gestures' in the place de la Bastille, was described by the good professor as having a penis characterised by 'the almost pointed shape of a dog's penis', and as well the classic signs of a passive sodomite — 'his anus opened into a sort of large and deep cavity...which

constituted a sort of infundibulum'. The professor also documented the exterior signs of the habitual sodomite which began: 'curled hair, made-up skin, open collar, waist tucked in to highlight the figure: fingers, ears, chest loaded with jewellery...' Medical science had obviously reached a high point in Paris at this time!

The book is not just an excellent bit of sociological and historical research.

In William A. Peniston PhD, the homosexual working class men of nineteenth-century Paris have found a champion. So sympathetic and imaginative is his study that

the men described by their 'crimes' in the dusty old police ledgers of the time are given new life. More than that, they are given dignity, respect, and even grace. It is impossible to read his work and remain unmoved. I recommend the book unreservedly.

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