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Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. xii + 436 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$104.95 US (cl.). ISBN 0-415-19615-9. \$32.95 (pb.). ISBN 0-415-19616-7.

Review by Rudi C. Bleys, Antwerp, Belgium.

It is generally seen as a sign of maturity when gay scholarship moves beyond a mere self-affirmative search for "ancestry" and develops a critical and historicizing attitude instead. Also acclaimed is an approach that leaves behind the early, elitist narratives, invoked by a one time current notion that stigmatisation ought to be opposed by demonstrations of gay people's extraordinary achievements, socially, culturally, intellectually, and artistically. Robert Aldrich's new study of *Colonialism and Homosexuality* indeed clarifies that a far better understanding of the gay past can be attained by means of a "deconstructive" reading of past texts that is at once skeptical towards the notion of a never changing homosexual "essence" and critical towards the rather defensive idea that gay men are, by nature, immune to and risen above the impact of larger, more general economic, social, or cultural developments and processes.

As opposed to some early accounts of gay men exploring the globe, themselves not exempt from certain nostalgic and "exotic" sensibility, Aldrich's study very neatly demonstrates how the experience of travel, exploration, and colonization by gay men was just as often inscribed within wider paradigms of political and economic exploitation, of pseudo-scientific racism and literary exoticism, of sexism, misogyny and hypocrisy, as was the parallel experience of their heterosexual fellow travelers. Perhaps most revealing is the fact that many a homosexually inclined traveler, explorer or colonialist, was displaying disdain or skepticism towards the gradually developing notion of a homosexual "identity." [1] In fact, quite a few subscribed to rather intolerant attitudes, currently identified as "homophobic," towards a "modern" construction of homosexual identity, while pursuing homo-erotic, or at least, homo-social, friendships below the equator.

In an ambitious and extremely erudite account of the experience of gay men within the context of colonialism, Aldrich convincingly demonstrates that we ought to apply a far more sophisticated and variegated frame of analysis upon an indeed quite complex reality, only poorly grasped in earlier attempts to interpret western gay men's presence in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, South East Asia or the Pacific. The author concludes,

Colonial homosexual connections included both 'platonic' friendships and hotly physical relationships, brief encounters and longer-lasting partnerships. Some European men sought European partners; other preferred 'natives.' There was casual sex and abiding love, consensual pleasure and violent abuse, unreciprocated longing and brazen seduction. There is no simple model of colonial homosexuality (p. 406).

Aldrich continues by saying that imperial circumstances would allow for varied expressions of homosexuality. Homo-social, homo-erotic, or homosexual interaction was further complicated by variables of race, age, and class. Some of these connections were inspired and shaped, intellectually, by fantasies of a classical Arcadia; others were inscribed with the raw opportunism of colonial exploitation. And in between, there were many alternative ways, muddled or hybrid, safe or unsafe, out in the open or secretive and covert.

Aldrich has gathered numerous sources left behind by explorers, captains of empire, colonial administrators, writers, artists, and plain, anonymous settlers, and he goes about picturing the above sketched, complex reality by means of a careful, close reading of often scarce, fragmentary, and coded evidence. This evidence is gathered not only from French sources, but from English, American, and, to some extent, Dutch sources as well. (While I do acknowledge this already gigantic achievement, it is with some regret that I notice that Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, and Belgian sources have remained untouched.) Much of the material is embedded in the colonial experience, but often, too, evidence is drawn from sources related to areas of the world that had already gained independence, such as Latin America, or were about to do so. In fact, Aldrich neatly explains how gay men were often active participants in the development of post-colonial criticism or, for some, in the physical battle against European domination. Attention is paid to this topic in Part III, "The End of Empire," particularly to the works of Pierre Herbart, Daniel Guérin, and Jean Sénac, whose roles in the rise of Algerian nationalism is described in minute detail.

Before the struggle for independence took off, however, many a gay man's coming to terms with colonialism and imperialism was marked by feelings of ambiguity as well. Few, in fact, could pass as the prototypical "agent of empire." Many, instead, felt torn between the formal expectations of the ruling metropolis on the one hand and a genuine interest in the social, religious, and cultural realities of the colonized population, just as they were "negotiating," in a parallel manner, between western notions of sexual morality and western cognitions of sex and sexual identity on the one hand, and alternative, indigenous views of sexuality on the other. Aldrich's book provides us with a marvelous account of how both sensitivities often interfered with one another and how someone's coming to terms with his homosexual inclination was nurtured by new insights in the ingenuity of "local culture" or, vice versa, how one's positioning within the physical realities of a colonial regime was destined to change or shift as a result of empathy, provoked by homosexual attraction.

Indeed, quite a few stories involve colonial officers who "went native." Unlike Richard Burton, however, most of these men simply lived out their newly found happiness within the physical and social realm of life on the frontier. In fact, they counted on getting away with it, just as mostly male, heterosexual colonialists did, entertaining affairs with local women. The adage, *infra equinoctialem nihil peccari est*, "below the equator, there is no sin," remained vivid in the mind of many a nineteenth or twentieth century traveler or colonist.

To characterize the often subtle interaction between someone's search for identity as a homosexually inclined person and as a westerner amidst largely unfamiliar cultures, Aldrich draws the image of a patchwork of highly varying "coping strategies" on the levels of both sexual and cultural differences. Aldrich manages to grasp the complexity of such processes by abstaining from a rather monolithic, all too modern notion of "homosexual identity" and by demonstrating, instead, how the colonial experience allowed for "homo-social," "homo-erotic," or plain "homosexual" scripts. He describes, in parallel fashion, how these interacted with a wide range of colonialist attitudes and positions, ranging from unscrupulous affirmations of cultural superiority to highly empathic and self-effacing trajectories of "going native." Examples of the latter from the realm of French culture are writers such as Jean Genet and François Augiéras, but also the marshal Hubert Lyautey, whose Islamophilia went hand-in-hand with a cult of masculine beauty and homo-eroticism, even if almost exclusively targeting his own men in uniforms. Examples of the former, oddly enough, were mostly British, such as Cecil Rhodes, who preferred the company of his British colonial officers, or Henry Morton Stanley, whose intimate friendship with his indigenous assistant Kalulu was marked by a shamelessly imperialist and patronizing attitude.

Colonialism and Homosexuality does contain a few omissions. The writings of the Belgian writer Conrad Detrez, or the photographic *oeuvre* of Pierre and Gilles, are absent. Guy Hocquenghem's book *Le gay*

voyage, while explicitly addressing the *imaginaire* of gay traveling outside Europe, is sadly missing as well.^[2] Yet, such are minor flaws in comparison to the author's great and encyclopedic achievement. Robert Aldrich's subtle and sophisticated argument, however, make this book into a classic and very instructive work of reference, not unlike his *The Seduction of the Mediterranean*, one of the best studies currently available on the lure of Mediterranean culture for many homosexual men.^[3] The book is elegantly written, with a fine sense of humor at times, and is modestly illustrated. An extensive bibliography and a handy index also make this book easy to use.

NOTES

[1] Here, Aldrich explicitly acknowledges that he builds upon essays by both Joseph Boone and myself (p. 6). See Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behavior Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1995).

[2] Guy Hocquenghem, *Le gay voyage: guide et regard homosexuels sur les grandes métropoles* (Paris: A. Michel, 1980).

[3] Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Rudi C. Bleys
rudi.bleys@sensoa.be

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