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William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. New York: Harrington Park, 2004. xii + 258. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 US (hb). ISBN 1-56023-485-7; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-506023-486-5.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

As part of the burgeoning of the history of gender and sexuality, recent years have seen several fine collections on homosexuality in France, particularly those edited by Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. and by Merrick and Michael Sibalis, which give evidence to the particular interest of what the French like calling ‘Anglo-Saxon’ scholars in the topic.^[1] Christopher Robinson, Vernon A. Rosario, Antony Copley, and Carolyn J. Dean have also published volumes which devote considerable attention to homosexuality.^[2] French scholars themselves have become more interested in the history of sexuality, and, fortunately for many students, several of their works have now been translated, notably Florence Tamagne’s comparative study of France, Germany, and Britain in the early twentieth century, and Frédéric Martel’s history of the gay and lesbian movement, though not Marie-Jo Bonnet’s study of lesbians.^[3] Didier Eribon’s and Louis-Georges Tin’s encyclopedias provide good references (among several other French reference works), and the volumes published by the curiously named *Cahiers Gai-Kitsch-Camp*, in Lille, often forgotten works from the 1800s, deserve greater attention.^[4]

To this already considerable bibliography, William Peniston adds an excellent study of “urban culture and sexual identity in nineteenth-century Paris.” The work, which began as a doctoral dissertation, is based on a series of previously unused police records, “a ledger of arrests for public offences against decency between 1873 and 1879, which they titled ‘Pederasts and Others’” (p. 2). Peniston’s book is cogently organised. The first part, on “the forces of authority”, looks at attitudes towards *pédérastie* in the three institutions which structured policy towards homosexuals: the law, police enforcement, and medicine. In the second part, Peniston explores the homosexual subculture of Paris: the socioeconomic background of those investigated by the police, the venues where they met and had sex, the types of sexual behaviour in which they engaged, and the social relations which they established with each other. The final part of the book looks at three fascinating case studies: a count arrested in 1876 for solicitation of a young artisan at a *pissotière* near the Champs-Elysées; a group of friends, lovers and tricks bound together by sex and sociability (as well as prostitution and petty crime); and the case of a cohabiting couple of men (complete with an episode of murder).

The basic argument, for which the police ledger provides proof, is that although homosexual acts had been decriminalised in France in 1791, laws made it possible for police to carry out arrests for acts considered outrages to public decency—they were vague on what constituted such outrages—as well as sexual assaults and the incitement of youths to debauchery. Law officers, like magistrates and doctors, considered that pederasts were suspect characters, either because their proclivities linked with real or potential inclination to all sorts of criminal acts, or because blackmail, robbery, assault, or some other crime would easily occur in circumstances of public sexual contact. Even if they were particularly concerned about the menace to community life from homosexuals, the lawyers and doctors were far from approving of “vice”, which they continued to see as an abnormality even while social scientists in Germany in the last decades of the 1800s were increasingly willing to view homosexuals as a species of “third sex” or consider homosexual inclinations an innate orientation.

Police were thus able to track, inventory, harass, and arrest homosexuals, and Peniston argues that they did so systematically in the early 1870s; a force of eight male officers was detailed to maintain surveillance on the male homosexual subculture in Paris. Peniston analyses records concerning 779 men (in 330 cases of arrest) out of the total of 1,818 names that appear in the police records for the 1873–1879 period. The majority of those arrested for offences against decency were charged and convicted, with sentencing ranging from a few months in prison to payment of a fine. Most of those rounded up were young men in their twenties and thirties, generally single and of working-class or lower-middle-class background, often provincials who had migrated to Paris. Furthermore, most of them, says Peniston, “perceived their sexuality as different from that of other men” (p. 5), formed networks of friendship, aid, or at least connivance with others like themselves, and thus had some notion of a homosexual identity. “Far from being a random collection of isolated individuals”, the author affirms, “these men knew one another; worked, lived, and socialized together; and formed a distinct community” (p. 67). They did not necessarily share the diagnoses of the doctors, lawyers, and police officers about their “deviance.”

The sample of those about whom the police recorded information spans the spectrum of social statuses, types of partnership, and ages. (The age for consensual sexual relations was raised to thirteen in 1863.) Similarly, sexual practices varied, though since most men were “caught” in public, mutual masturbation and oral sex were the most common activities—indeed, a significant portion of arrests involved people who were masturbating in front of a seemingly appreciative crowd of onlookers. Such public sex took place all around Paris, but particularly in the centre of the city, where sites known as fertile cruising grounds for men seeking sexual companionship included parks, squares, commercial arcades, *grands boulevards*, bathhouses, and public urinals. “Members of the subculture eroticized the city, and this eroticization of the city is another important part of the history of the modernization of Paris”, Peniston concludes (p. 127).

The “freemasonry of vice” (as the head of the vice squad and an authority on male prostitution, Félix Carlier, put it) thrived in the mid- and late nineteenth century, attracting not only the attention of the police but also of social scientists. Each developed his own theories about the origins of pederasty, the ways to identify homosexuality—such as Ambroise Tardieu’s famous argument that a “funnel-shaped anus” was a defining symptom of passive male homosexuality—and categorisation of types of homosexuals. Louis Canler, for instance, found four types of “antiphysicals”: *persilleuses* (“fancy girls”), *honteuses* (“shameful girls”), *travailleuses* (“working girls”) and *rivettes* (girls who got “screwed”), the noun endings indicating popular views of homosexuals as effeminate, though there was little evidence in Peniston’s archives of effeminate or transvestite behaviours. The authorities seldom distinguished between avowed homosexuals and those who occasionally dabbled in the subculture; prostitutes and their clients; law-abiding homosexuals and thieves—lack of differentiation being another example of misperceptions that regularly attended public views about homosexuals. Nevertheless, age disparities between partners and the frequent exchange of gifts or money in return for sexual favours do suggest a sexual culture somewhat different from present-day gay life.

Peniston’s book is not only superb social history, based on careful statistical analysis of his cases, but also an insightful reading of medical and legal texts concerning homosexuality. His work is free of jargon, engagingly written and full of fascinating details; the case studies would make exemplary course reading for units on French history or the history of sexuality. Comparison with other works on the history of homosexuality in the modern world would also be interesting; Peniston points to similarities, for instance, between the milieu he studies and the subculture of *fin-de-siècle* New York investigated by George Chauncey.^[5] Peniston tells readers that he is interested in “ordinary” men rather than the culture of elite cultural figures, yet perhaps some discussion of such men, and of the literary and artistic

traditions of homosexuality in nineteenth-century France, would have provided an even broader picture of pederasty in Paris.

NOTES

[1] Jeffrey Merrick and Byant T. Ragan, Jr., eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and *Homosexuality in Early Modern France: A Documentary Collection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalis, eds., *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001).

[2] Christopher Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Cassell, 1995); Vernon A. Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Antony Copley, *Sexual Moralities in France, 1780-1980: New Ideas on the Family, Divorce, and Homosexuality--An Essay on Moral Change* (London: Routledge, 1989); Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For examples from the empire, see my *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[3] Florence Tamagne, *The History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939* (New York: Algora, 2004); Frédéric Martel, *The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France since 1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Les relations amoureuses entre les femmes du XVIIe au XXe siècles* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, revised ed., 2001). See also Rommel Mendès-Leite and Pierre-Olivier de Busscher, eds., *Gay Studies from the French Cultures* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1993).

[4] Didier Eribon, ed., *Dictionnaire des cultures gays et lesbiennes* (Paris: Larousse, 2003); Louis-Georges Tin, ed., *Dictionnaire de l'homophobie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003).

[5] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

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