

University of Kentucky

From the Selected Works of James M. Donovan

2000

Comic Strips and Books

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/james_donovan/57/

The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures
Volume II

Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia

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Garland Publishing, Inc.
A member of the Taylor & Francis Group
New York and London
2000

C tion and travel memoirs, the latter genre often clarifying an author's varied observations, shifting loyalties, and sexual perspectives. British and European women's relationships to colonialism emerge most clearly in this genre, and writers such as Mary Kingsley and Nina Mazuchelli—describing themselves as “lady pioneers”—aimed to supplement the observations of their male counterparts. As Sara Mills has shown, however, these writers often succumbed to narrative patterns and exoticizing tendencies closely resembling colonial stereotypes. In her *Travels in West Africa* (1897; reprinted Virago, 1965), for instance, Kingsley provides the following observations about African women: “The comeliest ladies I have ever seen are on the Coast. Very black they are, blacker than many of their neighbours, always blacker than the Fans [Fanny Po tribeswomen]” (223). Here and elsewhere, Kingsley's alignment with conventionally male judgments seems to add a “lesbian” dimension to her appraisal of foreign women: “The Fanny Po ladies . . . are not the most beautiful women in this part of the world. Not at least to my way of thinking. I prefer an Elmina, or an Igalwa, or a M'pongwe or—but I had better stop and own that my affections have got very scattered among the black ladies on the West Coast, and I no sooner remember one lovely creature whose soft eyes, perfect form and winning, pretty ways have captivated me than I think of another” (72).

The difficulty facing critics and historians of colonialism stems partly from conservative and radical dimensions of homosexual desire. Desire may confirm—and even derive from—unequal material conditions; it may also undermine them, leading to more democratic arrangements. Critics and readers must neither idealize the desire nor the men and women who experienced and acted on it, but rather analyze homosexuality's complex affinity with—and occasional rejection of—national and cultural identifications.

Christopher Lane

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- See also** Africa: Precolonial sub-Saharan Africa; Boy Scouts; Burton, Sir Richard Francis; Casement, Roger; Friendship; Forster, E. M.; Genet, Jean; Gide, André; Lawrence, T. E.; Mann, Thomas; Rhodes, Cecil; Tourism; Wilde, Oscar

Comic Strips and Books

Mainstream Strips

Two widely distributed strips have highlighted gay men. Lynn Johnston's “For Better or for Worse” spent March 1993 telling of a teenager's efforts to tell friends and family about his orientation. Reaction was vociferous, and she says Lawrence's future appearances will not focus on this issue. No stranger to controversy, Gary Trudeau's “Doonesbury” introduced the first gay comic strip character, Mark Slackmeyer, in 1977, and another, Andy, who later died of AIDS. Liberal Slackmeyer is currently in a relationship with a fierce conservative, and the couple has enjoyed much recent exposure in the strip.

Mainstream Books

D.C. Comics initiated gay and lesbian subtext a half-century ago when readers began wondering about the true relationship between Batman and Robin, or among the Amazons on Wonder Woman's Paradise Island. Perhaps the first overtly gay hero



For Better or W

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For Better or Worse. Courtesy of United Media.

was Extraño, an effeminate Hispanic whose name means "Strange," introduced in *Millennium* (#2, 1987) and continued in *New Guardians*. *New Guardians* was soon canceled, although not before another of its members had died of AIDS.

Element Lad of the *Legion of Super-Heroes* discovered that the woman he loved was actually a man taking an alien sex-change drug (#31, 1992). (Transsexual themes also appear in *Camelot 3000* [1988] and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* "A Game of You" story arc [1991].) A lesbian relationship between Shrinking Violet and Lightning Lass is occasionally implied. These "adult" Legion themes vanished when the D.C. Universe was rewritten following the Zero Hour storyline (#61, 1994).

The other mainstream publisher, Marvel, has been less prolific but more deliberate. Much publicity accompanied the "coming out" of *Alpha Flight's* Northstar (#106, 1992). Introduced in *Uncanny X-Men* (#120, 1979), creator John Byrne confirmed that Northstar was designed from his inception to be gay (see cryptic response from Byrne to this writer's letter in *AF* #18, 1985). But Northstar was never a reader favorite, although we would later attribute his irritating paranoid personality to having been oppressed as a homosexual. Also, revelations that he is half elf (#50) do little to emphasize a message of the acceptability of homosexuality among normal humans. His own four-issue miniseries mentions his homosexuality only obliquely.

Substantive mainstream presentation of gay themes in the future seems most likely in D.C.'s adult-oriented Vertigo titles. Several less-than-mainstream producers have not shied away from overt lesbian content, although their goal seems less the examination of alternative lifestyles than the titillation of the largely male, adolescent readership. Hardly the worst offender, Image Comics' increasingly popular *Spawn*, now getting MTV exposure,

depicts heaven as a male-free but hardly passionless environment, leading the main character to inquire of the angels why they all look like "exotic dancers."

Gay Strips

Many local gay newspapers include a comic strip. For instance, New Orleans's *Impact* features Ron Williams's "Quarter Scenes," which puts a unique local spin on gay and lesbian topics. Formerly the *Advocate* included Howard Cruse's "Wendel" (formally ending in #537, 1989), "Leonard & Larry" by Tim Barela, and work by Donelan. Interestingly, this national news magazine no longer carries any cartooning work, be it comics or editorials.

Gay Books

Gay Comix (later *Gay Comics*) debuted in 1980 and has sporadically appeared through #23 (summer 1996). The title features gay, lesbian, and transgender artists originally emphasizing autobiographical themes, with later expansion to more diverse topics. The series is also an excellent source of notices and announcements leading to other nonmainstream gay-related comics materials. James M. Donovan

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See also Gay and Lesbian Press; Media

Coming Out

"Coming out" borrows vocabulary from the tradition of the debutante ball in which affluent young women, having reached a certain age, are publicly presented. In certain African tribes, "coming out" has described an event in which girls, upon reaching