New Mexico Historical Review

Volume 72 | Number 3 Article 5

7-1-1997

Behind the Zion Curtain: Homosexuals and Homosexuality in the Historic and Contemporary Mormon-Cultural Region: A Review Essay

Peter Boag

"Behind the Zion Curtain" Homosexuals and Homosexuality in the Historic and Contemporary Mormon–Cultural Region: A Review Essay

PETER BOAG

Within the larger Latter–Day Saint (LDS) community exists a considerably smaller one composed of men and women who are engaged in the earth–shaking and potentially heaven–shattering struggle pitting their homosexuality against their Mormon beliefs and the LDS Church. When I encountered this group after moving to the Mormon–cultural region in 1989, its members were the first to introduce me to the metaphor "behind the Zion curtain." It is a metaphor that has particular significance in their lives. It symbolically represents the barrier which prevents the harmonious comingling of their sexual orientation with their religious beliefs and love for the LDS Church. These young LDS men and women have come of age in the last forty years—a period in which, as D. Michael Quinn points out in his book, *Same–Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth–Century Americans: A Mormon Example*, the LDS Church and culture have become increasingly anti–gay.[1] For example, Boyd K. Packer, who is now Acting President of the Council of the Twelve and second in line for the church presidency, has recently encouraged members of the LDS priesthood to attack physically homosexuals (p. 382–83). Some of the gay men I have met have even endured the horrors of LDS sanctioned aversion therapy, which included 1,600 volt shock treatment that Quinn describes in his book (p. 379).

The primary though troubling conclusion Quinn suggests in his new study on same–sex dynamics in Mormon history is that if these same–sex interested LDS men and women had lived in the nineteenth or even in the early twentieth century, they would not have experienced the

Peter Boag is associate professor of history at Idaho State University and has researched and written extensively on such diverse topics as the American West, the Pacific Northwest, Native Americans, the environment, and human sexuality.

mental anguish represented by the "Zion curtain" nor the physical tortures the Saints have meted out in their "therapy" in contemporary times. Indeed, this is the core of Quinn's book. According to Quinn, in nineteenth-century America, and specifically in the Mormon culture, a remarkable openness existed to same-sex friendships whose closeness would (in most places) today raise eyebrows. The nineteenth-century LDS Church fostered such a "homoenvironmental" atmosphere, with "homosocial," "homopastoral," "homotactile," and "homoemotional" institutions, rituals, and leaders. Within such an atmosphere, Quinn concludes, it was easier for those who had homoerotic interests to escape notice. Quinn further argues that when it came to light that certain Mormons engaged in the homoerotic, they were not severely penalized for it. Sometimes LDS leaders turned a blind eye to such activities. Other times they forgave and allowed to remain in the church those known to participate in homosexual acts—sometimes they even elevated them to high office. When LDS religious and civil officials did punish individuals for such acts, they treated the offenders not nearly as harshly as they did those who engaged in extramarital heterosexual acts or bestiality. Quinn accomplishes this journey into the sexual history of Mormons in large part through blowing the lid off the gold mine of LDS records; probably the most meticulously amassed and preserved set of records by any nineteenth-century group. Quinn's feat alone could account for this volume's contribution to nineteenth-century, American, western, and sexual history. Indeed, Quinn is a thorough researcher; his endnotes nearly cover the same number of pages as does his actual narrative.

Same-Sex Dynamics, however, presents a number of problems. In the preface, Quinn explains that he "resigned" from Brigham Young University in 1988 "[b]ecause of a long dispute over [his] academic freedom to publish controversial Mormon history" (p. ix). In 1993 his historical writings resulted in his excommunication from the LDS Church (p. ix). Nevertheless, he is a seventh-generation Mormon and remains, by his definition, "a believing Mormon outside the church toward which" he feels "genuine affection" and for which he maintains "fond hopes" (p. ix). Quinn also states that he is writing at least in part from a Mormon theological bias (p. 7), a perspective which might trouble some historians of homosexuality. It is Quinn's personal history and feelings toward the LDS Church, however, which demand closer scrutiny if we are to try to judge the merits of his historical interpretations. Outside the LDS Church, while still a believing Mormon, Quinn's position is similar to the situation of many LDS gay men and lesbians I have met. These men and women want to remain within the church they love and at the same time deal with something fundamental about themselves their church will not accept. Such a situation has led a number of these men and women to

offer apologia for both their sexuality and their church. Apologia is a term suitably applied to the tone of *Same-Sex Dynamics*. In this light, it seems to me that the volume is a highly personal work of great merit, but from a disciplined historical perspective, the study has problems.

First, there are a number of explicit examples of apology in this work. Early in the text, Quinn offers a cursory review of what others have argued are "causes" for homosexuality. After all this, however, Quinn reveals that homosexual origins are "irrelevant" in any case to his study. Why then devote several pages and notes to this irrelevance? Quinn wants somehow to justify homosexuality to his readers—readers whom he presumes have not experienced homoerotic desires. Certainly, these readers are in part, if not predominantly, other Mormons. Another example of apologia for the LDS Church is Quinn's statement, "Through communication we can gain understanding, even empathy, for an identity or experience that is not ours" (p. 36). Yet another is Quinn's appeal to scriptural authority: while some of the religious claim that "'God does not create homosexuals or allow babies to be born with abnormal sexual orientation'". . . "it is generally acknowledged that God 'creates' left-handedness (which the Bible consistently equates with evil)" (p. 51, fn 19).

Quinn wishes to let today's Latter Day Saints know that their culture and church were historically not so reactionary as they are today when it comes to same-sex issues. One of the major problems with this argument is that throughout most of the nineteenth century, neither Mormons nor the larger American public recognized someone as a homosexual. The prevailing attitude was that a person could engage in homosexual acts, but these were separate from a person's identity. So, trying to make comparisons between contemporary and nineteenth-century Mormon reactions to latter-day homosexuals and earlier-day people who participated in homoeroticism is similar to comparing apples and oranges.

Although some of Quinn's evidence for a more lenient (or possibly oblivious) attitude in the LDS Church and Mormon culture toward close same-sex relationships in the past is compelling, he also presents a great deal of evidence to support the conclusion that nineteenth-century Mormons were not as accepting toward homoeroticism as he would have us believe. As early as 1853, for example, the Apostle Parley P. Pratt condemned sodomy and justified God's destruction of Sodom in part for that reason. Quinn's interpretation of Pratt's pronouncement also serves as an example of apologia: Quinn infers the remarkable conclusion that somehow Pratt's mentioning unacceptable opposite-sex relations before "unnatural lusts" in his statement condemning Sodom somehow makes it clear that the former was more significant for Pratt than the latter (p. 269). A second example of the Mormons' early less-

than-tolerant attitude toward homoeroticism concerns John C. Bennett, who suffered excommunication in 1842 for other reasons. Brigham Young remarked in a phrase that can only be seen as condemnatory that had Bennett "let young men and women alone it would have been better for him" (p. 268). Whatever the significance of Young's reference to Bennett's conduct with young men before mentioning his conduct with young women, however, seems to have escaped Quinn. In a third example, it is for certain that the LDS leaders' separation of two young men in 1876 for "improper connexion" by shipping one off on a mission to Arizona was considerably milder punishment than Packer's recommendation on how to deal with homosexual missionaries one hundred years later; it is also a clear example of punishment nonetheless (p. 273–74). Another example comes from 1882 when Joseph F. Smith instructed local LDS leaders in Richfield, Utah, to excommunicate a group of teenagers for practices he termed "obscene, filthy & horrible" (p. 276). The case of Lorenzo Hunsaker in 1893 also suggests a lack of leniency on the part of the nineteenth-century LDS leadership when it came to homoerotic acts. In this case, Hunsaker's two half-brothers accused him of committing oral sex on them. Instead of punishing Hunsaker, his two brothers were excommunicated "for the 'gross wrong' of making 'such a monstrous charge' against their married brother" (p. 287). That the LDS officials sided with Hunsaker is not nearly so telling as the fact that they considered the accusation of homoeroticism a "gross wrong," "a monstrous charge," and reason enough to excommunicate two church members. One other example comes from 1908 when Mormon officials of Utah's Reform School, with the approval of the Mormon governor, severely punished seven teenagers (five of whom were Mormons) for committing sodomy on other school inmates. The boys were first confined in underground cells for two weeks and fed a diet of bread and water. Then they were lashed across their backs between twenty and twenty-five times until pieces of flesh fell out and they ended up looking like "a roast of a piece of meat" (p. 326). Clearly, that Mormons tolerated and even approved of expressions of same-sex friendship and even platonic love, does not necessarily—as this evidence suggests—mean that they were also somehow open to same-sex eroticism.

On a number of other occasions, Quinn elevates to fact material that can at best be categorized as supposition, offers uncertain evidence, and draws conclusions that the evidence does not warrant. For example, as far as the Lorenzo Hunsaker case goes, Quinn attributes directly to Hunsaker words of others (i.e., from their testimony) and accepts as facts the statements of the Hunsaker brothers when at best their accusations pertain only to allegations (p. 288). Quinn also asserts that he sees changes in college and high school athletic-team photographs dating from the early through the mid-twentieth century. The later the photo-

graph, the less likelihood that athletes would have their arms draped around each other or have an affectionate hand on another's knee. Certainly, this does indicate the increasing unease with physical contact between members of the same sex through the early twentieth century—something Quinn wants to show. There is no evidence to conclude, however, as Quinn does, that "the physical distancing was clearly required by the adult coaches or the photographers. . . .[and] it was more likely a homophobic coach who regulated the pose of his athletes" (p. 96). In another instance of unsound conclusion, Quinn infers that Brigham Young's "reputation for ignoring the emotional and sexual needs of his wives, as several of them attested" was in some way connected to Young's nineteenth-century phrenological reading which rated him considerably higher in same-sex adhesiveness than in opposite-sex amativeness (p. 110–11). A more likely conclusion for Young's neglect, it would seem, was that he was President of the LDS Church and he had something like twenty-nine wives! There is one final point that needs addressing. Quinn concludes that because the three sodomy cases in Utah after the 1895 Oscar Wilde trial resulted in more lenient sentences for the convicts, this coincidence somehow provides clear evidence that while the Wilde case (which took place in England) may have been a negative turning point in attitudes toward homosexuals elsewhere in the western world, in Mormon country it did not. Such slim evidence for such a mighty conclusion is unwarranted.

In a broader context beyond these specific criticisms, since Quinn is more interested in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his study fails to account adequately for what is the more interesting issue that he raises: why did the currently vicious anti-homosexual atmosphere in the LDS Church and Mormon culture arise since the 1950s? One cannot criticize this point too harshly, of course, since it is a question which Quinn did not propose to answer. It is a significant question for us to consider in this essay, however, if only in part because it may help us understand what Quinn does not undertake in his book and especially because, I would propose, it helps us understand better the broader and truer meaning of what he does.

Same-Sex Dynamics early argues that Mormons were very closely tied to greater American society and culture. Notable in LDS tradition, however, is the belief that Mormons have maintained a significant degree of insularity from the rest of American society. This is a belief which in part traces back to the Mormons' original 1847 migration into the heart of the Great American Desert. Here they wished not only to avoid further persecution from the rest of American society, but they also wanted to separate themselves from the corrupting influences of that society in hopes of purifying themselves in preparation for the

Second Coming (an event any number of others at the time also anticipated). The Mormons' past practice of polygamy also gives weight to the notion that these people historically remained aloof from greater American culture.

Quinn, however, would make the case that nineteenth-century Mormons were emblematic of American society, specifically when it came to their reaction to same-sex issues: "Ironically, while Mormons departed radically from the opposite-sex relationships common among nineteenth-century Americans, Mormon same-sex dynamics reflected national patterns" (p. 2). I would not propose that one accept this argument of Quinn's. The reason being is that a culture's opposite-sex relations indeed have a great deal to do with its same-sex relations (but perhaps the Mormons were like the rest of America at this time since both penalized those who engaged in same-sex eroticism). But if one does agree with Quinn on this point, just when it becomes most interesting for him to show how Mormon connection to larger cultural and social trends may have influenced them to become by the mid-twentieth century increasingly homophobic, *Same-Sex Dynamics* narrows its focus in its final chapters, concentrating only on the Mormon story with no broader historical context.

Certainly, American society became more homophobic at this time, as historians such as George Chauncey, Alan Bérubé, and John D'Emilio have shown in their works on New York and America during and after World War II.[2] Quinn's explanation for this phenomenon in Mormon culture, however, is the unsatisfactory, "Reaching adulthood in the twentieth century seemed to be the crucial factor in the decline of tolerance among LDS leaders for homoerotic behaviors and the rise of homophobia within the Mormon hierarchy since the early 1950s" (p. 375). This summation begs for more analysis in another work. On a more personal note to Quinn, if the negative atmosphere that he sees as only having developed in the last half-century within the LDS Church and Mormon culture is the result of outside influences rather than something that developed from within, might it not be worthy to point this out to the LDS Church and faithful? I fear the answer to this, however, is that recent LDS homophobia finds its roots both in greater American culture *and* within the LDS religious tradition.

While the 1950s mark a particularly dark time for homosexuals in the United States generally, it also signaled the origins of the homosexual rights movement. And since the 1970s, gays and lesbians have increasingly become more accepted in American society. For example, more and more large businesses, universities, municipalities, and even some state governments are variously, according to their respective jurisdictions, granting domestic-partner benefits, prohibiting anti-gay discrimination, and allowing gays and lesbians to adopt children. Hawaii has even con-

sidered recognizing the right of same-sex couples to marry. In addition, any number of mainstream churches such as the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Unitarians are making progress on the subject of the acceptance of gay/lesbian members and clergy. The struggle is anything but far from over, as continued high suicide rates for gay/lesbian teens, the rise in gay-bashing, religious fundamentalism, loss of parental rights, Colorado's Amendment Number Two, the "Don't Ask-Don't Tell" policy, the Defense of Marriage Act, and so on attest. Nonetheless, the point is that within larger society generally, there appears to be a growing trend toward acceptance of non-heterosexuals.

In Mormon country, this general liberalizing trend is only somewhat present: the appearance of the magazine *Sunstone*—which deals often and sympathetically with homosexual issues; the rise of the group Affirmation—a Mormon lesbian, gay, and bisexual organization; and publications like Quinn's. Collectively, these magazine groups and books confirm that on the periphery of the Mormon community there is pressure for change. At the same time, their effect on the core of church doctrine, ritual, and the faithful remains negligible at best. Questions remain as to why the LDS Church remains vigorously anti-homosexual. For example, why has the Mormon church followed a more reactionary path than mainstream religious organizations and broader American society and culture? And specifically, Quinn's research leaves wide open the question of why (if it is true) did nineteenth-century Mormon sex-segregated institutions and same-sex rituals make it possible for same-sex eroticism to be more accepted then, while the same institutions and rituals in the twentieth century reject this eroticism, as Boyd K. Packer's advice to the LDS priesthood well demonstrates?

These questions remain unanswered and Quinn's work does not point us in any proper direction. As a personal work, *Same-Sex Dynamics* appears as though it has been richly rewarding to its author as he tries to understand his relationship to a church that he remains fond of but which has excommunicated him. In this sense, the book itself is a significant Mormon cultural document and should be treated as such. Importantly, it also demonstrates the richness and value of Mormon documents and brings to greater light significant yet obscure sources on nineteenth-and early twentieth-century gay/lesbian history. But, as a disciplined and objective historical study of lesbians, gays, sexual issues, and Mormon culture, this volume has serious drawbacks.

NOTES

1. D. Michael Quinn. *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

2. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Alan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1983).