

## The Voiceless Colonizer: The Homosexual Man of Imperialism in Nineteenth Century Britain

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**This paper discusses the paradox of the British man in the nineteenth century as both an imperialist and a homosexual; its goal is to understand the lack of attention to the homosexual man in history in nineteenth century Britain and his inability to maintain substantial power and presence as the championed explorer or imperial officer. Through primary sources, we can analyze the language which reveals the perceived image of the explorer – and his apparently assumed heterosexuality – and, in addition, the laws condemning homosexuality, specifically those of sodomy. Other useful strategies will be to take historical lenses of the theme of homosexuality, such as settings of Greece and Rome, to analyze trends in societal norms in later Britain and, also, to compare these feelings to those felt toward women. Through these many different avenues, we may better understand the complex quandary of the homosexual man to be caused by the perceived violation of an expected gender role – in which the homosexual man is stripped of power and respect because of his lack of traditional masculinity.**

In his essay, written in 1894, called *Homogenic Love, and its Place in a Free Society*, Edward Carpenter says, "...during the last century or two of European life – [homosexual love] has generally been treated by the accredited thinkers and writers as a thing to be passed over in silence, as associated with mere grossness and mental aberration, or as unworthy of serious attention."<sup>1</sup> This essay will attempt to do just what Carpenter says has been lacking: to understand the absence of attention to the publically homosexual man in history in nineteenth century Britain and his inability to maintain substantial power and presence as the championed explorer or imperial officer. In doing so, within the historical context of this essay, the reader will gain insight into the divergent motivations of the individual explorer versus the immense state, the basis of the homosexual man as a historical enigma, and the expectations projected by nineteenth-century British society onto men as a generalized population. Ultimately, however, the reader will realize that these aforementioned topics are directly and perhaps startlingly relevant to the modern society in which we live.

Throughout the study of European imperialism, one may never learn of an imperial officer, an explorer, or a militant who publically identified as a homosexual man. One concession must be made clear: same sex acts have existed all throughout history, but, around the eighteenth century was the first time that men were not just sharing sex with other men, but were identifying as

homosexual<sup>2</sup> – that is, a part of their identity included creating a permanent way of life with another man. In fact, the word "homosexual" did not even exist until the nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>, because the concept that some men were not fundamentally heterosexual was not widely considered. The lack of the homosexual label, then, adds complication to asking why one does not read of publically homosexual explorers or imperial officers. However, according to current national and global surveys, it is estimated that around 5-10% of the global population identifies as homosexual<sup>4</sup>, and it is reasonable to think that this approximation has not changed throughout time. The evidence to support this inference is extensive – as far back as Ancient Greece, same sex relationships were quite common. Most elite men, although in their society presumed intrinsically heterosexual, took boys for lovers.<sup>5</sup> Not far away, in many ancient Near-Eastern countries, one could see homosexual temple prostitutes participating in public processions and celebrations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Laura A. Dunn, *The Evolution of Imperial Roman Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Acts*, (UMI, 2001), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, (Abingdon Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> "Prevalence of Homosexuality", The Kinsey Institute, <http://www.indiana.edu/~kinsey/resources/bib-homoprev.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Laura A. Dunn, *The Evolution of Imperial Roman Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Acts*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> William Naphy, *Born to Be Gay: A History of Homosexuality*, (Great Britain: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2004), 19.

<sup>1</sup> Chris White, *Nineteenth Century Writings on Homosexuality*, (Routledge, 1999), 129.

Circa 850 CE, in India, Jainist philosophical writings described a sexual category called “purumanapumsaka”, which described men “who behaved like [men] but still desired sex with men.”<sup>7</sup> In 1726 CE, a single investigation in London uncovered twenty “molly houses”, private meeting places where homosexual men would meet and engage in sexual acts, within the city limits.<sup>8</sup> The evidence of the constancy of same-sex sexual acts and relationships throughout human history is substantial, so, we will conclude, therefore, that the 5-10% approximation of the global homosexual population has remained constant throughout time, and that there was, in fact, a substantial amount of men who, in the temporal context of this essay, would have identified as homosexual had they not been impeded by the society in which they lived.

In nineteenth century Europe, the explorer was glorified as a hero, championing the identity of his nation into the world. Figures such as Stanley and de Brazza alone seem quite responsible for this task. Although the identities of Britain and France may vary to each person, when one thinks of the explorer, a certain image may come to mind: the portrait of a strong, rugged, aggressive man of the wilderness – garbed in armor and furs. He has a moustache and well-defined muscles underneath his athletic clothing. Perhaps a scar souvenirs his face from battles with Oriental natives or his treks through the unknown. To the public, he is the epitome of masculinity and the standard of virility. Along with this manly image often comes an assumption: the subject of the portrait is heterosexual.

According to scholars, this presumption may not have been valid. Berenson suggests in *Heroes of Empire* that these subjects of our interest often led non-traditional lifestyles, abstaining from marriage or living quite privately.<sup>9</sup> Robert Aldrich, in *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, says, “Explorers often married late and left their wives for long periods of solitude and worry before they came home. Some explorers declined marriage entirely and avoided entangling alliances with women. A few were certainly homosexual. Evidence suggests that others were homosexually inclined or that their most significant emotional attachments lay with men.”<sup>10</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, champion of the Belgian Congo, exemplifies this less-than-traditional lifestyle. In his journal he says, “To me who to tell the truth never was a great admirer

of women, who looked upon them as natural enemies to mankind, idlers of valuable time, pretty excuses for man’s universality, toys to while slow time, heirs to man’s fame, to me who regarded them with that special concern a man should look upon movable talking trifling human beings.”<sup>11</sup> Language like this does not convince the reader that Stanley was prepared to marry a woman or to settle down in a traditional lifestyle.

One could argue that the life of the explorer was ideal for the homosexual man in the nineteenth century. He was able to separate himself from the judgment of European society and the church, freely exploring his sexuality with slaves in Africa, concubines in Indian brothels, or with fellow Europeans in the Congolese jungles. This notion would have been shocking to English society at the time. It completely undermines the commonly perceived image of the heterosexual explorer. Not only were some men homosexual, but the existence of the homosexual explorer may have actually been commonplace, although rarely discussed. There was, however, good reason that the championed explorers did not flaunt their homosexuality to the British metropole; the most obvious reason being the law.

In this context, the severity of intolerance toward homosexuals can be seen specifically in those laws concerning sodomy. In nineteenth century Britain, sodomy was a crime punishable by death, considered such an abominable act that it was not even described explicitly in writing. The best description that can be found in writings vaguely describes it as “a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by man with man, or in the same unnatural means with woman, or by man or woman in any manner with beast.”<sup>12</sup> In this context, to be frank, the law explicitly defines homosexuality as comparable to and as heinous as bestiality. In regards to an 1831 law, one British lawyer writes, “...that dreadful crime [of sodomy], of which the inevitable consequence is death to those convicted of it, besides indelible and lasting infamy to their names.”<sup>13</sup> The mission to crush homosexuality did not stop at writing laws to forbid it or at execution. In addition, the British government went as far as to sanction prostitution, considered an odious vice at the time, for use by soldiers in an effort to deter homosexual practices among them.<sup>14</sup> This was justified by the government, in short, as substituting a lesser evil for a greater one. If the

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, (London: 2003), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>12</sup> Chris White, *Nineteenth Century Writings on Homosexuality*, (London: 1999), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Colley, *Captives*, (New York: 2002), 337.

government itself demonstrates such hostility, then surely the popular opinion must have matched or exceeded it in intensity, considering these laws were accepted and supported. Succinctly, professing one's homosexuality was not an option, especially for men of imperialism.

The risks of publically professing one's homosexuality at this time must be plain – for any man. Homosexuality disgusted the population; however, the daunting reality that some of its heroes too were homosexual was absolutely incomprehensible. One of the great British imperial adventurers, Richard Burton, travelled all across South Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Africa for his motherland. He was described as “the paradigm of the scholar-adventurer, a man who towered above others physically and intellectually, a soldier, scientist, explorer, and writer who for much of his life also engaged in that most romantic of careers, under-cover agent.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, an under-cover agent he was. In fact, he was asked by the general of the British army in India in 1845 to investigate a homosexual brothel where British soldiers were suspected to be frequenting.<sup>16</sup> What would the British people have thought if they discovered that perhaps Burton had been a bit too enthusiastic about this assignment; that he had perhaps even visited these brothels himself? Aldrich says, “Burton seemed to enjoy his assignment to the Karachi brothels, which the average male would have shrunk from. More seriously, it seems a reasonable inference that Burton would not have obtained his detailed knowledge of the more lubricious varieties without participating himself.”<sup>17</sup> Burton's sexual practices were certainly not those of a traditional heterosexual; in his journal, he quotes an obscene quatrain: “The penis smooth and round was made/ with anus best to match it./ Had it been made for cunnus' sake,/ it had been formed like a hatchet.” He himself writes, “The male figure here, as all the world over, is notably superior, as amongst the lower animals, to that of the female. The latter is a system of soft, curved and rounded lines, graceful, but meaningless and monotonous. The former far excels it in variety of form and in sinew.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Burton translated Oriental literature such as *A Thousand and One Nights*, which included homosexual love scenes, and wrote an essay on pederasty, which discusses the validity of sexual relationships between men and boys.<sup>19</sup>

Although evidence heavily suggests it, Robert Burton was never discovered to have explicitly partaken

in homosexual practices or to have identified as homosexual, but there were men of the same imperial caste who did. In fact, according to Aronson in *Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld*, there was a large underworld of military British men and imperialists who were homosexual. He tells of Lord Arthur Somerset, the subject of the “Cleveland Street Scandal” – an investigation by British police of a homosexual brothel that British soldiers were using. Somerset was a client of this exact brothel; he fits perfectly the role of the British hero of imperialism: “... a big man, well over six feet tall, his bald head compensated for by his luxuriant gingery moustache and whiskers. He had a pronounced Roman nose and his bearing was upright, confident, military. He looked every inch of what he was – a much-decorated major in the Royal Horse Guards (The Blues) who had seen service in various campaigns in Egypt during the 1880s.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, when the charges were first discreetly made against him, it seemed so shocking that this type of man could be homosexual that the trial unnecessarily spanned several years – including Somerset fleeing from the country on more than one occasion, evidence being hidden, destroyed, or ignored, and a general attempt to silence the investigation. The Prince of Wales was quoted as saying, “I won't believe it any more than I would if they had accused the Archbishop of Canterbury.”<sup>21</sup> When the Director of Public Prosecutions had been given the responsibility of prosecuting Somerset, the document drawn up was treated so subtly that pieces of paper were pasted over Somerset's name.<sup>22</sup> After a book was found within the brothel with the noblemen's names of whom had used its services, “it mysteriously and conveniently disappeared with certain other papers which passed between police headquarters and the Treasury.”<sup>23</sup> When the monotony and excessive prolongation of the trial finally came to an end, the trial had swelled to an international scandal. The New York Times was writing about the “Cleveland Street Scandal” on a daily basis.<sup>24</sup> At this point, the Director was forced to arrest Somerset, but discovered he had already fled the country as a result of the slander against his name – now held as the most infamous and seething in all of Britain.

This great prejudice toward homosexual men caused a decorated soldier to flee from his home country forever. Countless other imperial men lived their whole

<sup>15</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Theo Aronson, *Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld*, (John Murray Publishers, 1994), 133.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

lives while keeping their sexuality secret – men, perhaps, such as Robert Burton or Stanley. One must ask – from where does this intense intolerance come? This prejudice must have begun growing toward this community of men who were beginning to profess their homosexuality for a fair amount of time to have reached this level. They were stereotyped and largely misunderstood – looked upon as men who hid in the dark, had sexual intercourse with several other men outside of committed and sanctioned marriage (although the government sanctioned prostitution), were always effeminate, and practiced detestable sin in vile gatherings. While these perspectives were largely without grounding, a new school of thought was being envisioned not very far from the setting of our subjects that came to give the British society a vocabulary with which to defend its misconceptions of homosexual men.

This aforementioned school of thought was a new Biblical movement in Scotland, called the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy<sup>25</sup>, which arose within a century of the period when men began professing their homosexuality; this was a new method of reading Scripture which taught that any person could know the truth that lies within the Bible by simply reading the words off the page. It did not require one to think critically, to ask questions, or, most importantly, to take the Scripture within the context of its intended meaning. This was the first time in all of human history that entire congregations of people were reading the Scripture for themselves, and well explains why verses like “Thou shalt not lie with womankind like man; it is abomination.”<sup>26</sup> and “If a man practices homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman, both men have committed a detestable act. They must both be put to death, for they are guilty of a capital offense.”<sup>27</sup> were being used as justifications for this growing prejudice toward homosexuals. Although these verses’ meanings may seem obvious, for centuries and even millennia, homosexuality was not condemned as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Biblically uneducated people began reading for themselves. So it must be concluded that educated and studied Biblical authorities had never seen homosexuality as worthy of public condemnation; it was the uneducated and unstudied general population that used these verses wrongly as a weapon for prejudicial justification, rooting itself into the British culture.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Rogers, *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Lev. 18:22

<sup>27</sup> Lev. 20:13

At the core of this prejudice, underneath the cover of Scriptural justification, was the perceived violation of a gender role. The homosexual man was, in fact, a man, therefore was entitled to power, but held qualities of the woman, and therefore was disintitiled to power. He did not fit neatly into the box of heterosexual explorer or the box of subservient metropole woman. It was this ambiguity of the homosexual man’s gender role that confounded the general population and which bred the misunderstanding, and, ultimately, the great prejudice toward homosexual men.

A gender role, then, in our context, is the set of expected behaviors, determined by gender, based on societal pressure. In order to understand the significance of these gender roles as a constant throughout time, let us examine sexuality in earlier Greek and Roman society. The entirety of the man’s role in an ancient heterosexual relationship was to exert his dominance over a woman; this is quite literally what defined his manhood. The woman’s role, therefore, in its entirety was to submit to the man’s dominance. Now, in ancient Greece, pederasty, or a sexual relationship between a mature man and a pubescent boy, was commonplace. In exchange for spiritual and educational enrichment, the boy would grant sexual favors to the older man. However, in literature from this time period, it appears that the boy was not supposed to enjoy the sexual encounter because he took the passive role in the relationship, or what was, according to tradition, considered normally the woman’s role; he was supposed to simply endure it for the reward he would gain.<sup>28</sup> In addition, he was to insist on an upright position, to avoid eye contact during the encounter, and to insist on intercrural copulation<sup>29</sup> rather than anal penetration.<sup>30</sup> Later, in Ancient Rome, homosexual relationships were acceptable if the passive man were a slave or a freedman.<sup>31</sup>

In all these cases, it appears that the dishonor does not lie in the homosexual nature of the relationships, but rather in a violation of the expected role of each partner. In short, the dominant man in each of these relationships was expected to exert dominance over a boy, a slave, or a freedman, or those who are expected to be passive, just as a man would exert dominance over a woman in a heterosexual relationship. Or as Dunn puts it, “At the root

<sup>28</sup> Laura A. Dunn, *The Evolution of Imperial Roman Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Acts*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Or intercourse between the thighs as opposed to vaginal or anal intercourse

<sup>30</sup> Laura A. Dunn, *The Evolution of Imperial Roman Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Acts*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

of Roman ethics was the idea that a Roman citizen must dominate anybody and everybody. Virility was the myth that governed Roman sexual ethics.”<sup>32</sup>

Because the homosexual man violated his gender role, his dilemma can be better understood in comparison to that of the woman. That is to say that although the place of the homosexual man in gender role classification is not definitive, his inherited outcomes from this system are much more similar to the woman’s than the heterosexual man’s – where he is viewed as submissive, subservient to dominant members of the culture, and unobtrusive – therefore, he is unable to fit the image of the hero of imperialism and ultimately, to maintain respect and power in the upper echelon of imperial hierarchy.

Just like the cruel exploitation in San Domingue or the brutal ravaging in the Belgian Congo, so has the story of the homosexual imperial man in Britain been silenced throughout written history. Perhaps in the same way that Trouillot speaks of San Domingue’s history, the history of homosexual men of imperialism can become more than just a set of distracting footnotes<sup>33</sup>, but rather an independent and worthwhile contribution to the study of history. Resolutely, as the prejudices toward homosexual men begin to fade in our modern world, so must the unwillingness to discover the truth about so many important heroes in British history. In this way, a voice can be given back to those men who had lost it – and the world may take one step closer to fathoming that innocuous thing which is called empire.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>33</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, (Boston: 1995), 107.