**September 6, 2007**

**"FREE THE BUGGERS"--Britain & the Wolfenden Report**

*The following article was written for Gay City News -- New York City's largest lesbian and gay weekly -- in whose new edition it appeared today:*

Britons this week are observing the 50th anniversary of the earth-shaking Wolfenden Report, the recommendation by a government committee that set the UK on the road to decriminalization of homosexuality.

All the major respectable dailies have published a series of retrospective pieces, and the BBC is marking the 1957 Wolfenden Report's birthday by programming an entire week-long cycle of broadcasts under the rubric "Hidden Lives," portraying what it was like to be gay in Britain in the 1950s. (**UPDATE:** *My friend Andy, the editor of* [U.K. Gay News](http://ukgaynews.org.uk/latest.htm)*, wrote me today that "there have been hundreds of complaints received by the BBC over this gay programming.  Most have come from USA and Canada 'Christian taliban' websites which have been urging their  'failthul' to complain about the programmes, helpfully providing the link to the BBC's compalints website.")*  
  
Among the BBC's offerings this week are a new, full-length docudrama portraying the 14 members of the Wolfenden Committee struggling with their consciences toward what the producer of the film calls its "radical conclusions," and the moving film "Breaking the Code," starring Derek Jacobi as Alan Turing, the mathematical genius who played a major role in World War II by breaking Nazi Germany's Enigma code, but was later persecuted for being homosexual, arrested, and forced to undergo male hormone treatments. Turing eventually committed suicide by eating an apple laced with cyanide.

What did the Wolfenden Report say that was considered so radical at the time?   
  
It recommended that "homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence." It found that "homosexuality cannot legitimately be regarded as a disease, because in many cases it is the only symptom and is compatible with full mental health in other respects, adding: "The law's function is to preserve public order and decency, to protect the citizen from what is offensive or injurious, and to provide sufficient safeguards against exploitation and corruption of others. Not, in our view, the function of the law to intervene in the private life of citizens, or to seek to enforce any particular pattern of behaviour."   
  
In the autumn of 1953, British gays were the victims of what they called "The Great Purge"  - a massive police crackdown on homosexuals in which nearly 5,000 same-sexers were arrested in the ensuing months - on charges either of "gross indecency" (the same law under which [Oscar Wilde](http://direland.typepad.com/direland/2005/08/oscar_wildes_se.html) was imprisoned), solicitation, or sodomy. This represented an increase of 850 per cent over the arrest rate for homosexuality in 1938, just before World War II.   
  
  The Great Purge, which took place at the height of the Cold War, was provoked by the defection of the diplomats Guy Burgess, a notorious homosexual, and Donald Maclean to Moscow, and in the climate of the day homosexuality was virtually equated with treason in the minds of the police. (The outrageous Burgess, when posted to the US a couple of years earlier, had been warned by his Foreign Office boss, "Guy, you must remember that in America there are three taboos - Communism, blacks, and homosexuality." To which the insouciant Burgess replied, "Oh, you mean I shouldn't make a pass at Paul Robeson!" A famous African-American singer and actor,  [Robeson](http://www2.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/PaulRobeson/PRBio.htm), of course, had already been blacklisted for his closeness to the Communist Party.)  
  
In the Great Purge, one could be arrested for sitting on a park bench in a known cruising area, or because one's name had been found in the address book of some other gay arrested. There were a number of such "address book" trials, on charges of "conspiracy" to commit "gross indecency," roping together people who had never met each other.  
  
The Fleet Street press had a field day with all these arrests, and even if gays managed to get off with only a fine, their names, addresses, and employers were printed in the newspapers, and their lives ruined.   
  
There was a backlash against the Great Purge when the establishment became disconcerted as many of its members, including the aristocracy, became victims.   
  
Shortly after receiving a knighthood in Queen Elizabeth's coronation honors list, Sir John Gielgud, considered Britain's greatest Shakespearean actor , was arrested on a charge of "importuning" another man. On the charge sheet he described himself as "Arthur Gielgud, 49, a clerk, of Cowley Street Westminster," pleaded guilty, and apologized. He was fined Â£10. He had followed the usual gay practice at the time of giving a false job description in the hope that the press would not pick up on the incident.  
  
Had Gielgud been bolder, he might also have given a completely false name, following the example of another famous actor, Alec Guinness , who, when arrested on a similar charge, escaped the sort of humiliating press coverage Gielgud received by giving his name as "Herbert Pocket," the Dickensian character Guinness had played in David Lean's film version of "Great Expectations." Rupert Croft-Cooke, 50, a novelist, playwright, biographer, travel writer, and book critic of The Sketch, was arrested in his home with his Indian secretary and two Royal Navy cooks he'd picked up, prosecuted for "gross indecency," and sent to prison for nine months.   
  
Edward John Barrington Douglas-Scott-Montagu, known as Lord Montagu, 27, third Baron Montagu of Beaulieu, an old Etonian and ex-Grenadier Guards officer best known for his vintage car museum at his historic Hampshire home, Palace House at Beaulieu, was arrested for "gross indecency" with two teenage Boy Scouts.

In a sensational week-long court case, Montagu was tried together with his cousin, Michael Pitt-Rivers, and Peter Wildeblood, the 31-year-old diplomatic correspondent of the Daily Mail. All three defendants were convicted. Pitt-Rivers and Wildeblood were sentenced to 18 months in prison, and Lord Montagu was given a year.  
  
As the Great Purge continued, the Conservative Party government appointed a   Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution. Named to head it was Sir John Wolfenden (*right*), a private school headmaster and veteran of government committees on education and youth.   
  
Other members of the Committee included a consultant psychiatrist, the chairman of Uxbridge magistrates court, the vice president of the City of Glasgow Girl Guides, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, a professor of moral theology, a High Court judge, a Foreign Office minister, and the Conservative MP for Putney.  
  
The government did not know, at the time of Wolfenden's appointment, that his own son, Jeremy - later a journalist and British intelligence officer in Moscow - was gay. After being named to head the committee, Wolfenden wrote to his flamboyant son insisting "1) that we stay out of each other's way for the time being; 2) that you wear rather less make-up."   
  
The Wolfenden Committee deliberated for three years, meeting in private on 62 days, on  32 of which they interviewed witnesses. Concerned about the sensibilities of the secretarial staff dealing with the material, in internal memoranda they referred to homosexuals as "huntleys" and prostitutes as "palmers." Huntley and Palmers were well-known biscuit-makers.  
  
When the Wolfenden Report recommending decriminalization of homosexuality for consenting adults over the age of 21 was finally released in 1957, the press was, for the most part, outraged. Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mail* called it "legalized degradation," and thundered, "Great nations have fallen and empires decayed because corruption became socially acceptable." And Lord Beaverbrook's *Evening Standard* snarled, "Freeing adult males from any penalties could only succeed in intensifying and multiplying this form of depravity."  
  
It would take another 10 years, an heroic effort by the gay campaigners of the [Homosexual Law Reform Society](http://www.knittingcircle.org.uk/hlrs.html), and a Labour Party government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson, before adult same-sex relations were partially decriminalized.   
  
When I asked ex-pat British journalist Christopher Hitchens (*left*), who was writing about politics for the left-wing weekly *New Statesman* at that time, about the 1967 decriminalization vote, he told me that "the man who doesn't get as much credit as he deserves for it was Wilson's Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, a very right-wing social democrat. Jenkins, who was heterosexual, didn't care about nationalization or economic matters, but he was deeply committed to three things - end the death penalty, free the buggers, and liberalize the laws on divorce and abortion."   
  
Hitchens added, "There was tremendous opposition from the Labour members of Parliament representing the miners. In fact, Matthew Coady, the *New Statesman*'s parliamentary correspondent, wrote a famous article for the weekly in which he denounced the miners' MPs and detailed the widespread homosexual conduct in the coal mines. And, in fact, any miners' MP who claimed he didn't know that many of the lads down in the pits were having it off with each other was telling the most gigantic fib."

In the end, the Sexual Offenses Act of 1967 went only so far.  
  
As the British daily *The Guardian* pointed out this week, under it "the maximum penalty for any man over 21 committing acts of 'gross indecency' (which included masturbation and oral sex) with a 16- to 21-year-old was increased from two years to five years. Same-sex relations were also legal only in private, which was interpreted, as gay rights campaigner [Peter Tatchell](http://www.petertatchell.net/) says, as being 'behind locked doors and windows and with no other person present on the premises.'"  
  
Crucially, as *The Guardian* went on to point out, "While sex may have been legal, most of the things that might lead to it were still classified as 'procuring' and 'soliciting.' 'It remained unlawful for two consenting adult men to chat up each other in any non-private location,' Tatchell says. 'It was illegal for two men even to exchange phone numbers in a public place or to attempt to contact each other with a view to having sex.' Thus the 1967 law established the risible anomaly that to arrange to do something legal was itself illegal."   
  
The situation remained tenuous for more than two decades. Tatchell's research shows that in England and Wales in 1989, consensual homosexual relations between men over the age of 16 resulted in 3,500 prosecutions, 2,700 convictions, and 380 cautions. Between 40 and 50 men served time in prison.  
  
"Most alarmingly," Tatchell (*right*) wrote, "1,503 men were convicted of the gay  consensual offence of 'gross indecency' in 1989, compared with 887 in 1955. In other words, there were over one and a half times more guilty verdicts in 1989 than in the mid-1950s when male homosexuality was still totally illegal and Britain was gripped by a McCarthyite-style anti-gay witch-hunt."  
  
Another decade and a half would pass before the reforms of Tony Blair's government would allow British gays to feel reasonably free from persecution.  
  
*For a full portrait of British gay life in the '50s and the Great Purge, see the autobiography of Purge victim* [*Peter Wildeblood*](http://www.knittingcircle.org.uk/peterwildeblood.html)*,* "Against the Law," *republished this year in London by Weidenfeld*.

Posted by Doug Ireland at 08:22 PM | [Permalink](http://direland.typepad.com/direland/2007/09/free-the-bugger.html)

**Comments**

An excellent article. I would just like to make two corrections, one major and the other minor. Alan Turing was given female, not male hormones: the rationale was to reduce his libido rather than make him more manly. Lord Montague really was Lord Montague it was not a nickname or alias as your phrasing implies.

And of course the "Great Purge" only applied to men as lesbianism has never been criminalized in the UK.

Posted by: [Michelle Appleton](mailto:michelle@sestina.f9.co.uk) | Sep 7, 2007 5:03:58 PM

One of my favorite pieces of political writing is Matthew Parris's column in the London Times in 2000 when the House of Lords was considering the bill to lower the (male) homosexual age of consent to 16, making it the same as the heterosexual age of consent. It may be found on my blog here:  
<http://whateveritisimagainstit.blogspot.com/2000/11/its-buggery-stupid.html>

Posted by: [WIIIAI](http://www.typepad.com/t/comments?__mode=red&user_id=91667&id=81884141) | Sep 6, 2007 9:59:41 PM

Excellent.

It is important to remember that both Gielgud and Guinness were "cottaging" -- or as we'd refer to it today, "Craig-ing."

They of course were great artists.

Craig is a great pile of shit.

Posted by: [David Ehrenstein](http://www.typepad.com/t/comments?__mode=red&user_id=91667&id=81880495) | Sep 6, 2007 9:14:45 PM