

REVIEW: LESBIAN AND GAY LIFESTORIES

David Evans

Cant, B. (ed.), **Footsteps and Witnesses: Lesbian and Gay Lifestories from Scotland**, Edinburgh: Polygon, £10.99, pb, 1993, ISBN 0748661700, 210pp.

'And he said to the barmaid - two pink gins, please - and she said - Ah'll gie ye gin but ah'm fucked if ah ken how tae mak them pink' (p. 52). Just one gem from this rich and, despite its limitations, very valuable oral history of gay and lesbian lives in Scotland. Here's another: 'I have quite a dilemma as a gay woman coming into contact with the majority of gay women who, it seems, are vegetarians. It's terrible because I always feel I have to justify what I do for a living, to some of my friends. It's a 100% beef farm, mainly Aberdeen Angus and quite a lot of Hereford cows. I'm almost a vegetarian but I'll always buy steak because I feel I have to support my own industry' (p. 147).

A lot of us feel we should support our own 'industry', not least the editor, Bob Cant, who by collecting together a series of retrospective autobiographies from men and women of all ages presents a consistently positive perspective on 'we' who, as he claims in his Introduction, 'are for the most part invisible in Scotland, we are Other... we do not belong' (p. 1). In this context, the twenty three respondents whose voices are heard here are somewhat atypical, their stories are given under their actual names, and they do belong ('Apparently Drumchapel is now being called Dykecity' [p. 89]). Almost without exception they claim to have known that they were gay or lesbian in their early 'teens if not earlier ('basically I was always gay' [p. 92]); have reached a *modus vivendi* both with regard to their own identities and lifestyles and those of close non-gay, kin, work-mates, and friends ('The people

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in the Church know about me, and don't condone it but accept me for what I am' [p. 77]); most through political activism of one 'left-of-centre' kind or another: Militant, the Labour party, and SNP. Contact with gay political groups is another consistent feature: SMG of course (Scottish Minorities Group before it became The Scottish Homosexual Rights Group and then OutRight), but also SHAG ('which is a name I still heartily hate; sure it stands for Scottish Homosexual Action Group, but basically I couldn't bear to identify with a group that called itself SHAG' [p. 134]). No, these people are visible, they do belong, largely on their own terms, they are survivors, worthy of our admiration, not afraid to recount the realisation of their gayness frankly and engagingly:

My first real experience was when I was about fifteen and a half. It was a first cousin of mine. He was twenty- one, a big handsome sailor, and he came into the house one night. He had had a few drinks but not drunk by any means. Dutch courage. My parents were away that weekend in Stornoway and after a while he said - would you like to touch this? He must have guessed that I had never seen a grown man's penis in my life - and it was a monster. He just said - come away to bed. And I did and he just entered me and I remember the pain. He was excited and, I think, a bit afraid of what he was doing because I was so young. He did it about twice. He stayed the night and I think he gave me a ten shilling note the next morning. Guilt. I felt it was wrong and yet after about three nights I was craving for it again. But he didn't corrupt me. (p. 74)

In their own terms, such tales are at least diverting, and in many instances a great deal more - moving, life-enhancing - but also one begins to feel after seven or eight of them, just a tad too neat, too moving, too life-enhancing, too 'correct', the style and expression just that bit samey and flat whatever the dialect. As with the last subject, 'guilt' is fleeting, prejudice and discrimination fought and overcome whatever the age or background, and it is not just for this reason that they are not typical. I know it is hard these days to find any Tories in Scotland let alone gay ones, but there must be some, and who knows they might be just as positive about their gayness. Are there no Scottish gay or lesbian racists? Shahbaz Chauhdry, the youngest story teller here assures us that there are '...I've been called a dirty Paki poof' but as we come to anticipate '...I've learned to ignore that' (p. 203) Are there no Scottish gay men who dislike the lesbian, or more generally the female presence in 'their' gay bars and clubs? Are there no Scottish lesbians who are still separatists? Are there no gay men or lesbians in Scotland who cannot come to terms with their gayness, who feel troubled and ashamed? I realise that the

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latter are unlikely to 'come-out' under their own names but that is why, in most exercises of this kind, a greater balance is achieved through guaranteed anonymity. These characters are too 'tidy' in other ways also: there are no transvestites, paedophiles, bisexuals. It is not surprising that a 'sense of pride emerges' (p. 9) therefore, but so does a sense of unrepresentativeness, of certain 'footsteps and witnesses' (the majority?) as potentially interesting, if not more so because more 'hidden', troubled and abrasive, absent, ignored, uncredited.

More problematic from a research point of view is the fact that there is no attempt to draw any analytical conclusions from stories assumed to be true, a dangerous assumption to make. The use of retrospective autobiographies in historical and sociological analyses is important, but for reasons not addressed here, for what is shown time and again is that the life recalled is not 'pure' narrative as we might suppose, but one reinterpreted, rescripted, in order to make sense of, and justify, the present. In this sense this collection brings together a group of men and women who, despite surface biographical differences, have very similar stories to tell, and similar reasons for telling them. I have mentioned 'left of centre' as well as SMG/SHRG/OutRight politics; there is the almost uniform early 'teen 'discovery' of gayness (and I think only one refers to this as a matter of choice [p. 118]); most left home to 'come-out' before returning. All are content with their lesbian or gay status, all seem quite likeable (well, with the exception of one: 'Edinburgh's much more cosmopolitan but Glasgow is a really screwed up, backward sort of place' [p. 203]), all are positive generally, not just about their sexual identities and lives. In these terms they are not Other, so where are the Others?

Normally one would look to an account of the research methods to find answers to such questions, but one does so here largely in vain. How the interviewees were contacted is not revealed. We are told that the editor interviewed seventeen of them, but that three other interviewers were responsible for two each. Were there any differences in interview techniques and atmosphere? What were these techniques anyway? How were the interviewees located and the interviews set up? How and where were they conducted (structured or unstructured?) and recorded (taped, written by the interviewer or the interviewee?), all of which could have had an effect on the results. Were respondents merely left to reminisce, and if so what has been edited out? I have no reason to doubt that all was as is published, but, by the same token, I have no reason to believe it either. At the very least a broad account of such matters would have allayed the doubter's fears.

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What Cant does tell us in his Introduction is that the twenty three men and women include: 'nurses, poets, youth-workers,... teachers. There is a bowling alley manager, a farmer and a taxi driver... four unemployed...There are Catholics and Protestants, people born into the working classes and people born into the middle classes; black people and white people; incomers as well as native born Scots' (p. 7). The Scottish dimension is of potential interest but, common geographical location apart, it is difficult to see any distinct pattern, perhaps because those interviewed are too few and too diverse in age, class, religious and family backgrounds etc..

In total then, a collection of 'lives' worth chronicling and reading, especially for those who in any way doubt the validity and viability of gay and lesbian identities and life- styles. They are uplifting too, not least for reminding us all, but especially young gays and lesbians, that the 'we' who are here now are part of a rich and largely unrecognised and unresearched history. I also salute all those who have bravely appended their names to their stories here, for it still takes considerable courage to do so, which brings us back to the fundamental problem however, the 'brave' here are of a select and narrow type. Cant is right to add: 'There are many more lesbian and gay life stories to be told' (p. 9) but his further comments hint that only those of a certain kind interest him: 'There are stories of struggles and campaigns and networks and love which are not included'. All 'struggles'? All 'campaigns'? I expect covertly gay BNP skinheads 'love' as well as hate. I suspect 'gay' businessmen and women 'love' the increasing opportunities they have to exploit the pink pound, and that gay policemen and women see no contradiction in being both. '(We) are an integral part of Scottish society' (p. 1) for sure, but not always in ways and places that we might find acceptable, reassuring or uplifting. If 'we' are to celebrate 'our' history, 'our' Otherness, we have to be clear about the 'we' we are referring to.

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