

DONALD WEST

Extract 1: 2.34 – 6.52

GAY LONDON in the 1950s. The A&B CLUB, BIOGRAPH CINEMA, SPEAKERS CORNER

D: Yes, well, there was one gay bar called the A&B, the Arts and Battledress was its correct terminology, and that and some others in central London in the West End, rather tucked away unobtrusively.

C: Where was the A&B?

D: I forget the name of the street now.

C: What sort of area?

D: It was in the centre of the West End ...

C: Right.

D: In theatre land.

C: Sort of Piccadilly?

D: Er ... yes. Near Leicester Square I think, but I can't remember exactly.

C: Can you remember what it was like?

D: Oh yes. It was a small place and one had to go up a stairway to get to it, and it was usually quite crowded and there was dancing going on. But in those days erm, I don't think their existence was all that well known to the general public, and I think that the ... the police were tolerant to a good degree of these establishments, possibly because it gave an outlet that prevented gays being a nuisance elsewhere, if you see what I mean. That was my impression. Just as erm ... the cruising places, in particular Hampstead Heath, were very much used by gays, and were what I would call lightly policed by the police. They would, now and then, go there with dogs and shoo people out but generally speaking they left it alone. They could have cleared it out if they'd wanted to. So there was a bit of hypocrisy by the police, and it was my impression that life went on in the gay underworld largely because there was an unspoken tolerance of it.

C: Now, this would have been in the Fifties?

D: Yes ... and I ... well I never completely left London because we did research based in London, but at 1960 I went to Cambridge. But I was ... I became familiar with the ... the gay spots in London during the time that I was working here in hospitals.

C: What other spots were there, apart from the A&B?

D: Well, there was a famous cinema near Victoria station which I've forgotten the name of it ... Biograph, that's it, which was very notorious. Places like that.

C: And would that ...

D: And another place was ...

C: What sort of films would that put on, or I mean ...?

D: I don't think anybody watched the films!

C: Really?

D: More or less, yes. The films were totally uninteresting, but it was ... you went there for ... er ... contacts. Groping went on constantly. The door of the toilet was constantly swinging open and shut, and there was even a distinct odour of the place. But eventually of course it was closed, and now no longer exists.

And another place that I discovered was the Speakers Corner, Marble Arch, late in the evening. People would crowd round in a dense bunch, and there would be groping and getting to er ...

C: Was that when the speaking was going on, or just the area?

D: No, when the speaker was going on.

C: Really? I've never heard that!

D: Because the speakers were rather wild by the time of the ... you know, late on at night, eleven, twelve, and um, at that time the crowd was relatively small and very dense and almost ... well I think pretty well entirely male, and that was another notorious place. But that of course no longer happens. So they were places that I heard about in London, and actually used.

Extract 2: 10.27 – 13.36

THE WOLFENDEN REPORT. DONALD WEST'S BOOK ON HOMOSEXUALITY. PETER WILDEBLOOD.

D: The Wolfenden Report, if I remember, was about 1956 ... and now I should explain something else and that is that when I was a student of medicine I naturally took an interest in erm, homosexuality and what was thought about it and what was written about it, and I became interested in reading about the causes of homosexuality and Freudian theory, and all that sort of thing and while I was training as a psychiatrist in London it so happened that um, I'd er ... got the acquaintance of a publisher, actually Lord Horder, who was running the firm called Duckworth, and so I got the idea of writing a book about homosexuality with the idea of reviewing the literature of what was known about its causes and what gays were like and so forth, and I did indeed write a book called *Homosexuality*, and Duckworth published it just before the Wolfenden Report was published, and they arranged for it to be released through Penguin so it had a wide circulation and it was simply called *Homosexuality*.

And there was only one other book at that time which was available for the general reader which was what you might call a sort of objective survey, and that was Gordon Westwood's book, I think it was called *The Minority*. That was a pseudonym for Michael Schofield who

became as you probably know, quite well known in ... as a supporter of legal decriminalisation and who gave evidence to the Wolfenden Committee. I didn't give evidence to the Wolfenden Committee, but um, I know that the proofs of my book were sent to them.

C: And do you remember reading about or hearing about um, the erm, Montagu Case?

D: Oh yes. Of course everybody read about it. I subsequently met the chap who was sent to prison ... suddenly the name escapes me ...

C: Wildeblood?

D: Peter Wildeblood, yes, because I was working at a ... a psychotherapy clinic at the time and the chief of the psychotherapy clinic was interested in the controversy about homosexuality and asked Peter Wildeblood to come and give a talk to the staff, and that's how I met Peter.

C: And that was after he'd come out of prison?

D: That was after he'd come out of prison.

C: And what was your impression of him?

D: Oh, a very intelligent and interesting character. He was a very competent journalist ...

Extract 3: 16.18 – 19.38

WRITING ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY WHILE HIDING HIS OWN – AVERSION THERAPY

D: Well, I ought to explain that it was thought since very extraordinary that a young psychiatrist er, should write a book pleading for tolerance and decriminalisation, since a large part of the medical profession were of the general opinion that homosexuality was a bad thing, that most homosexuals were psychologically disturbed, and were often bad characters. I mean there were books written about the supposed characters of ... well, gay men. It was all about gay men in those days. And erm, so the general view was very much anti, officially anti-gay, and among the medical profession it was thought to be a serious defect, and I was working in a hospital where there were these famous treatments of deconditioning of homosexuals, electric shocks and drugs and things.

C: Was that at The Maudsley?

D: That was at The Maudsley, yes.

C: Tell me a little about that, if you wouldn't mind.

D: Erm ... I don't think that ... I was not erm ... involved in the administration of those treatments, as it happened, although I might have been. I was working under a well-known forensic psychiatrist called Peter Scott who certainly um, did prescribe hormone treatment for um, gay men and was certainly not in favour of a gay life style, and so it would have been quite impossible for me to say that I myself was gay. I had to pretend otherwise, and one

pretended otherwise by simply not saying anything about it, and when remarks suggesting things against gays ... you would say nothing about it. You would remain silent, and people would assume, or hopefully assume, that you were the same as them in their views.

So, it was taking a risk to do what I did, to write a book. But of course the book had to be written in a very distant style, referring to them instead of we, and that kind of thing, and I was lucky that nobody actually exposed me, otherwise I doubt the book could have been published in the first place.