


---

**BOOK REVIEWS**


Louis Crompton is one of the founders of the lesbian and gay studies movement in history and literature. He is a remarkable scholar whose books have richly illuminated the history and representation of homosexuality. He is also a courageous teacher whose brave visibility as an openly gay academic, at a time when such openness was perilous, has been an inspiration to younger scholars. Homosexuality and Civilization may be regarded as the triumphant culmination of his long and fruitful career. In this masterwork, Crompton has produced a landmark survey of homosexuality from ancient Greece to the European Enlightenment. It concludes in 1,810 when executions for homosexual offenses finally cease in Europe.

*Homosexuality and Civilization* brilliantly summarizes the state of knowledge about same-sex sexuality over an astonishing range of history. Naturally, in a work of this ambition, the author is heavily dependent on the original scholarship of others, which he typically mediates and supplements with his own research and fresh insights. While one might wish that previous scholars were more fully acknowledged and discussed in the numerous but skimpily notes, Crompton’s methodology has the advantage of creating a seamless and eminently readable narrative that assimilates—and on some key points, modifies—the best conclusions of a burgeoning field.

Only in the chapters on China and Japan, which are the least searching and original, does Crompton seem to be so dependent on the scholarship...
This hatred found expression in the legal codes of Europe and led to fanatical persecutions of those suspected of same-sex sexual interests, including periodic waves of barbaric executions in eras as distinct as sixth-century Byzantium, medieval France, Renaissance Italy, Spain under the Inquisition, Calvinist Geneva, eighteenth-century Netherlands, and Georgian England. To look back on the history of homosexuality in the West, Crompton writes, is to view such horrors as the following, all of which are fully documented in the book: "Justinian’s castrated bishops; the dangling corpses of Almeria; the burning of the ‘married’ couples in Renaissance Rome; the priests starved to death in cages in Venice’s Saint Mark’s Square; women burned, hanged, or beheaded on the charge of lesbianism; men tortured and burned by the Spanish Inquisition; Indians savaged by Balboa’s mastiffs or burned in Peru; the deaths at the quemadero in Mexico City; the men and boys of Faan; and the scores of men and adolescents hanged in Georgian England."

Indeed, one of the great contributions of Homosexuality and Civilization is its unflinching documentation of the atrocities committed against homosexuals in the name of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. In calm and restrained language, Crompton recounts—often in gruesome detail—how a religion that preaches love and compassion has so often practiced hatred and contempt.

Despite Christianity’s shameful record of antipathy toward and persecution of homosexuals, Crompton nevertheless expresses a modest hope for the future. Though Christians who advocate justice and love for homosexuals “are still a prophetic minority disconcerting to church officialdom” and “though the controversy [over homosexuality within Christian denominations] will doubtless be long and impassioned,” the author finds hope in the power of knowledge to create change. He concludes his book by challenging Christians to acknowledge the religion’s bloody history: “scholarship has now brought to light the long sad record of oppression and abuse, and men and women who call themselves Christians can no longer plead ignorance or avoid the burden of a deplorable, long-obscured past.” Inasmuch as one of the great historical injustices against homosexuality has been Christianity’s attempt to render homosexuality literally unspeakable, and thereby to silence and censor defenses of the love that dared not speak its name, Crompton may be right to harbor at least a modest hope that in a freer and more rational climate knowledge may lead to understanding.

If Homosexuality and Civilization provides a litany of the suffering of homosexuals at the hands of those who masked their cruelty, violence, superstition, and avarice with protestations of virtue, it also offers an in-
spiring counter history of endurance and even resistance in the face of adversity and persecution. Despite the laws and pogroms of Church and state that branded homosexual relations an “abomination” and a “crime against nature,” the attempts to exterminate same-sex eroticism had only limited success. Thousands perished and many more suffered less dramatically as a result of such efforts, but homosexual love nevertheless flourished even in eras most hostile to it. Homosexuality and Civilization is valuable for documenting these triumphs and acts of resistance and for pointing to the role homosexuality has played in helping shape Western culture. As Crompton’s extensive references to art, literature, and philosophy vividly attest, despite its vilification, homosexuality is integral to the cultural achievements of European civilization.

In this regard, it is noteworthy to observe that Crompton is not only a cultural historian of the first order, but also a distinguished literary critic. Hence, his nuanced readings of literary and historical documents are invariably revealing and convincing. In the course of developing his larger thesis, he examines and probes almost every significant surviving text, both imaginative and documentary, that relates to homosexuality in the periods under review. Although Crompton wears his learning lightly, his mastery of these texts is breathtaking.

Homosexuality and Civilization is also noteworthy for its forceful rejection of what Joseph Cady has dubbed the “new invention” theories of Foucault and his disciples, who until recently held sway in academic discussions of homosexuality, insisting that “the homosexual” is a nineteenth-century “invention.” While such ideas may now seem quaint as well as naive, an extreme social constructionism dominated queer theory (in literary, if not historical studies) during much of the 1990s, and it is a measure of Crompton’s independence of thought that he dismisses such claims: “Michel Foucault and his followers have argued that the ‘homosexual’ is a modern invention, a mental construct of the last hundred years. That is, of course, true, of homosexuality as a ‘scientific’ or psychiatric category. But it is a mistake to presume that earlier ages thought merely of sexual acts and not of persons. Medieval literature speaks not only of sodomy but also of ‘sodomites,’ individuals who were a substantial, clear, and ominous presence. The fact that such beings were perceived from a theological rather than a psychological point of view did not make them any less real, or less threatening.” Crompton illustrates repeatedly that the concept of sexual identity was present in all the cultures he examines.

Crompton is, of course, acutely aware of the danger of anachronism, of inappropriately imposing contemporary culture-bound conceptions of homosexuality on earlier ages and different societies. Indeed, his whole project is devoted to understanding the different meanings that homoerotic desire and behavior have been accorded in different cultures. He knows that sexual categories are always historically and culturally specific rather than universal and invariant. Hence, his practice is to quote texts rather than to paraphrase them in order to keep as close as possible to the language of the documents he cites and he makes every effort to capture the cultural specificities of each era he studies. However, he refuses to estrange the past or to obscure the connections and continuities that link historical periods and sexual ideologies.

In his preface, Crompton makes clear that his emphasis on the connections and continuities of the past and present is an ethical as well as an intellectual position, a rejection of any view that would deny the humanity of those who practiced homosexuality in the past. He discusses the various constructions of homosexuality in the cultures he examines, and finds that “Whatever the vocabulary, two elements are present—the sexual fact and the possibility of love and devotion. For many centuries in Europe, homosexuality was conceived principally as certain sexual acts. This was because it was viewed theologically and in the light of the legal system this theology spawned—that is, as a sin and a capital crime. But we must not be complicit in this dehumanization. These ‘sodomites’ were human beings with whom the modern gay man may claim brotherhood and the modern lesbian recognize as sisters.” He adds: “To divide history in two in 1869 at the moment when the word ‘homosexual’ was coined is to deny this bond. To adopt Michel Foucault’s view that the homosexual did not exist ‘as a person’ until this time is to reject a rich and terrible past.”

Homosexuality and Civilization is one of the most significant works to emerge from the gay and lesbian studies movement. Humane and deeply learned, this book is a dazzling distillation of decades of research and thought by a distinguished scholar. It belongs in the libraries of everyone interested in the history of homosexuality in the Western tradition. Harvard University Press is to be commended for the care it has lavished on the physical production of this beautifully illustrated book.

Claude J. Summers*

*Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. His most recent books are The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts, The Queer Encyclopedia of Music, Dance & Musical Theater, and The Queer Encyclopedia of Film and Television.