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INTRODUCTION

In 1975 I was invited by a student group to speak about homosexuality at the Townsville campus of James Cook University. The local paper reported my talk, which led to hostile questions being asked in the state parliament, where I was referred to as ‘a bare-footed practising homosexual’, and an attack upon me by Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Thirty-five years later I was invited by the vice-chancellor of Central Queensland University to Rockhampton to give a similar talk, chaired by federal Liberal MP Warren Entsch. This time the local paper editorialised its support for the event, and I was a guest on both local radio stations.

My invitation to central Queensland followed a Morgan poll that claimed to show the area was the most homophobic in Australia, with far greater numbers willing to term homosexuality ‘immoral’ than was the case in inner-urban areas. (While that survey suggested the least homophobic areas of Australia were the two territories and Western Australia, other data disagreed, although rural areas, particularly in Queensland and Tasmania, do seem considerably more homophobic than inner cities.) Interestingly, the local gay and lesbian folk I met in Rockhampton seemed less convinced that this was the case, and

were well aware of the distinctions between how people might answer hypothetical questions and how they might actually behave.

Flying north from Brisbane, I was tempted to believe I was entering a different country; the men in the departure lounge – one with a T-shirt proclaiming ‘Jesus Saves’, others with surfers gear and heavy tats – would not have been a common sight back at Tullamarine. But walking around Rockhampton, with its slightly stuffy and old-fashioned downtown area, reinforced my sense that Australia is a remarkably homogenous country, and that apparently different attitudes between regions are more likely to reflect economic status and demography, not some particular essential difference between state cultures.

This was in fact my fourth visit to provincial Queensland to address gay issues. After my first foray to Townsville, I flew to Cairns in 1988 to speak at the public meeting that led to the formation of the Queensland Association for Gay Law Reform. By then, the National Party government was disintegrating under allegations of corruption; within two years of the founding of QAGLR, the incoming Labor government would decriminalise homosexual activity.¹ The Cairns meeting was chaired by the local state Labor MP, and was notable for a speech by local identity Ted Kelk, who spoke of the ‘cold anger’ he had experienced whilst hiding his identity until he could retire from his job as a high-school principal. And at the end of 1993 I first visited Rockhampton for a conference at the university entitled ‘Voices of a Margin’, which brought together speakers from all the predictable indicators of disadvantage.²

Seventeen years later, Rockhampton appeared to have changed little. However, *The Boy From Oz* was playing at the town’s theatre – an interesting reminder that Australia’s two most successful musicals (the other being *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) are, as they used to say, as camp as a row of tents. What had changed was the assumption of a kind of normality around homosexuality, so that the vice-chancellor could joke publicly about his wife’s attraction to the men pictured in a Queensland gay calendar. It was inconceivable that a vice-chancellor would have felt sufficiently relaxed about sexuality to make such comments twenty

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years earlier. Of course, prejudice and hostility remain: a week after I was in Rockhampton, the visiting American author Armistead Maupin encountered blatant homophobia in a restaurant in Alice Springs, when a barman told him the toilets were 'reserved for real men'. Tourism Central Australia was quick to apologise, and the *Melbourne Age* followed up with an apologetic editorial.³

Anyone over fifty in Australia has lived through extraordinary changes in how we imagine the basic rules of sex and gender. We remember the first time we saw women bank tellers, heard a woman's voice announce that she was our pilot for a flight, watched the first woman read the news on television. Women are now a majority of the paid workforce; in 1966 they made up twenty-nine per cent. When I was growing up in Hobart it was vaguely shocking to hear of an unmarried heterosexual couple living together, and women in hats and gloves rode together in the back of the trams (now long since disappeared). As I look back, it seems to me that some of the unmarried female teachers at my school were almost certainly lesbians, although even they would have been shocked had the word been uttered.

In 1955 Princess Margaret had been forced to repudiate marrying a divorced man. Since then, three of Queen Elizabeth II's four children have divorced, and the current heir to the throne is married to a woman with whom he obviously had an affair during his previous marriage. Most of my female schoolmates who went to university were on teachers' scholarships, and would be expected to resign from the department if they married, which not infrequently happened because of unplanned pregnancies. Abortions were illegal but were often performed under appalling conditions; the occasional girl was known to have suddenly made a trip 'to Melbourne' in search of one.

Homosexuals were invisible, at best referred to in guilty jokes that I generally failed to understand. Barry Humphries wrote of this period that 'Poofahs were happily confined to the small hermetic world of ballet and window dressing',⁴ but this was a snide half-truth. (Not surprisingly, Humphries did not appear to think lesbians were even worth a snide reference.) In the same way, our cities were

overwhelmingly racially homogenous: an overt white supremacy was dominant, reinforced through the notorious White Australia Policy and through the legal inequality of Aborigines, and deep prejudice existed against the few non-Caucasians living in Australia. When I was growing up I recall several Chinese-Australian families, but they were regarded as alien and exotic, even though some had been in the country for a century – far longer than the families of many of my classmates, who treated them with contempt.

During the 1970s, when Australia saw the first public affirmations by gay men and women, homosexuality was regarded with deep suspicion – as a vice, as a crime or, at best, as an illness. Sexual behaviour between men was illegal in all states, and very few women or men publically acknowledged their homosexuality. Even if the anti-sodomy laws were rarely applied, police harassment and entrapment, and fear of disclosure to families and employers, maintained a low-level reign of terror sufficient for most homosexuals to spend considerable effort managing constant subterfuge and evasion. The current world, in which there are openly gay politicians, judges and even the occasional sports star, was literally inconceivable. We used to worry about being bashed for walking hand-in-hand. Young queers now worry about wedding planning, even though the threat of violence is still real, and in some areas possibly increasing.

The last decade, in particular, has seen extraordinary progress towards the normalisation of homosexuality across the western world.⁵ Legal protection exists in most jurisdictions against discrimination based upon ‘sexual orientation’, and same-sex partnerships are increasingly acknowledged by civil (if not religious) institutions. Openly homosexual politicians are increasingly evident, and a significant ‘pink vote’ is now courted during elections. No mainstream television series seems to be without its gay and lesbian characters, and there is a well-established targeting of a gay/lesbian market in travel, real estate and consumer advertising. In 2012 the high-rating television station Channel Nine resuscitated the reality show *Big Brother*; the winner was openly gay and proposed to his partner on live television.

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Those of us old enough to remember the period in which a large-scale gay movement began have lived through a revolution, and it is difficult for us to make sense of it. Change occurs at a number of levels simultaneously, and is often contradictory and uneven. Looking back over four decades, one can trace major shifts in the discourse, representation and regulation of homosexuality – all of which terms are open to multiple meanings. Nor does change occur without cost. Many activists find that, as they age, they feel a nostalgia for a remembered past, which seems increasingly preferable to the present. Gore Vidal, of whom I have written elsewhere, wrote a novel that identifies the ‘golden age’ as the decade following World War II, but in effect he is writing about his youth, which is where most of us locate that period.

The changing Australian attitudes reflect a much larger global story, where new images of the self and possibilities for activism circulate increasingly rapidly. The American influence has been particularly significant, and through its media the US has shaped how most of us imagine the world. Americans have been role models and reference points for changing images of sex and gender from Marilyn Monroe and James Dean through to the characters of *Glee* and *Sex in the City*. Our generation lived through a major shift in emphasis from British attitudes and culture to an increasing embrace of that of the United States, a change that paralleled the steady increase of non-British immigration to Australia.⁶ At the same time, the realities of globalisation, in all its diverse meanings, mean that even local stories have to be told through an awareness of the wider world.

Of course, for me it is difficult to disentangle what has changed in the larger world from the realities of my own ageing. As soon as one relies upon personal observation, one has to recognise the extent to which these observations are distorted as well as enhanced by the personal. A friend wrote several years ago on Facebook:

I’ll be in New York this weekend, and it turns out to be the Black Party. That used to get me as excited as when I was a little boy

about to open presents on Christmas Eve. Now the person who could get excited about either seems impossibly remote, barely half-remembered, from another lifetime.

Another friend, browsing recently through a gay bookshop, remarked that *The Joy of Gay Sex* seemed to have been replaced by *The Joy of Cooking*, although it is worth noting that *The Joy of Gay Sex*, originally published in 1977, has been reissued and revised several times by writers drawn from my generation.

For much of my adult life I have travelled frequently to the United States, and my sense of gay community and identity has been shaped as much by that experience as by the much longer periods in which I have lived in Australia. The dogged anti-Communist crusader of the 1960s and 1970s Frank Knopfelmacher once called me an agent of US cultural imperialism. In a sense, he was right: my time in the States influenced me enormously. At the time that people like Knopfelmacher were defending America's war in Vietnam, opponents of that war like me were drawing equally on the United States for intellectual and cultural inspiration. The growth of gay assertion in most western countries owes a great deal to the States, and this impact continues through popular culture and increasing travel. One the major gay discos in Sydney during the 1970s had a large mural of San Francisco, as if to symbolise the freedom that awaited us at the end of the rainbow.

I became a gay activist by accident, largely as a result of living in New York in 1971, when the gay liberation movement was starting. Inspired by the new movement – and determined to become 'a writer' – I developed an outline for a book on gay liberation. After a number of futile attempts to find a publisher, I met Harris Dienstfrey, whose small publishing house, long since vanished, was prepared to take a gamble, and *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* found a home. Thanks to a lukewarm review in *Time* magazine, and a more enthusiastic one by Martin Duberman in *The New York Times*, the book survived its first publication by an obscure publisher to become

a mass-market paperback; it was subsequently translated into several languages.

In Australia, Richard Walsh, then managing Angus & Robertson, acquired the book and published it in 1972. *Homosexual* has a continuing life: in 2011 I went to Japan to give several lectures to mark its publication there, and in early 2012 a two-day conference in Melbourne commemorated its fortieth anniversary.⁷ What struck me most at the conference was how the experiences I had lived through were increasingly being seen as historical events to be researched by a growing number of lesbian and gay activists. The last chapter of *Homosexual* had been entitled ‘The End of the Homosexual?’, hence the title for this book.

To make sense of change requires us to focus on a number of arenas simultaneously. As change occurs, it creates new possibilities but it can also reinforce old patterns – which may be why so many young people today regard ‘hippies’ with distaste. In a familiar cycle, yesterday’s radicalism becomes tomorrow’s nostalgia. So it is with sexuality. The changes over the past forty years have not replaced one mode of being homosexual as much as they have added new ones. The world of hustlers, drag queens and self-denial described in John Rechy’s 1965 novel *City of Night* can still be found, alongside well-dressed professional women and men at gay business fundraisers. The simultaneous existence of old-fashioned ‘queens’ and edgy transsexual ‘queers’ illustrates Raymond Williams’ discussion of ‘residual and emergent cultures’,⁸ whereby new forms don’t necessarily displace as much as they complement existing modes. Drawing on the Italian Antonio Gramsci to develop a cultural reading of Marxism, Williams stressed that while certain cultural forms are dominant, they coexist with varieties of ‘experiences, meanings and values’ that grow out of previous social formations, while others develop either as alternatives to or in active opposition to what is taken for granted by most people.

It is not hard to sit in a clearly gay urban space and see both the past and the future of gay life; what was once shocking is now taken for granted. A casual passer-by on Santa Monica Boulevard in West

Hollywood, for example, can watch go-go dancers clad in the most revealing of briefs, while young pierced and tattooed queers walk by, largely disinterested. Rather like individuals, all cultures have complex and multiple identities, and change often means the incorporation rather than the replacement of old forms. During my most recent visits to that strip – one of the few remaining clearly gay zones in the United States – I saw three generations of queer life, from an elegant lesbian couple walking their matching dogs, to young guys, uneasily still in their teens, half-cruising for money and opportunity. ‘Ghettos’ function as sites for both nostalgia and initiation, and if places like West Hollywood, the Castro and Chelsea have traditionally functioned as spaces to which young queers come from rural and small-town America, they are now increasingly playing this role internationally.

Major changes in the understanding of homosexuality reflect larger social and cultural shifts. One example: it is likely that the invention and spread of the internet has changed patterns of sexual behaviour as widely as did the contraceptive pill forty years ago. In both cases the changes were neither foreseen nor intended, and in both cases the impact of new technologies was partly dependent on political and ideological forces. My own real discovery of the ‘gay world’ – a term popularised by a 1968 book⁹ – came in the mid-1960s in New York City, and my story straddles a number of countries, above all the United States, where I have lived for about eight years of my life at various points. There are many ways of making sense of this story, and this book does so by drawing heavily on my own experiences of the past four decades, and on the very considerable secondary literature now available. Writing this book is as much an exploration of the traps and uncertainties of memory as it is of recorded social and political history.

Memory has suddenly become a major topic in queer circles: in 2012 thousands of people signed up to websites for ‘lost gay’ Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland and so on, while in Brussels a special colloquium was organised to remember the ‘homosexual militancy’ of the 1950s. In some ways, these moves grew out of a number of celebrations of

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the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in 2009. A raid in June 1969 on the Stonewall Inn, a well-known homosexual bar in Greenwich Village, New York, provoked a number of patrons and passers-by to fight back against the police, triggering several nights of riots that have since been mythologised as the founding event of the contemporary gay movement.¹⁰ Much has been made of the coincidence that the riots took place on the eve of Judy Garland's funeral, and Garland's character in *The Wizard of Oz* probably gave rise to the euphemism 'friends of Dorothy' to describe homosexual men. In 1988 Edmund White declared Stonewall to be 'the turning point of our lives';¹¹ certainly the years between 1969 and 1972 represented a major tipping point in homosexual awareness and assertion across the western world.

Books from the early period of the gay movement are now being reissued, and 'vintage' (that is, pre-AIDS) pornography is now widely dispersed through the internet, and in some cases has become collectable. Even so, there are still very few ways in which young people discovering their homosexuality have the means to learn much of the history of their sexuality, and of the ways in which homosexuals have been regarded historically.

Maybe there is something about forty years, which marks the coming to adulthood of a third generation since Stonewall; whatever the reason, I find myself talking increasingly with far younger people, for whom my memories help make sense of their history. Intergenerational friendships have their own particular challenges, involving as they do implicit assumptions about motives and hierarchy; older men, in particular, are assumed to want sex, while younger women and men are usually thought to be cultivating their elders for financial or career advancement. One of the greatest pleasures in writing this book has been the discovery that we learn from each other, and often in ways that seem counter-intuitive. (I recognise this is a somewhat more optimistic view of intergenerational friendships than that of the Australian sociologist Peter Robinson, as reported a few years ago in his study of how male gay worlds were changing.¹²)

Maybe, too, there is a desire amongst younger queers to find an equivalent to the family-tree version of history that is so strong in ethnic communities. This is expressed beautifully in performance artist Tim Miller's account of his own sexual ancestry:

... in my history of tongues, I had sex with David Roman, who had sex with Allen Ginsberg, who had sex with Neal Cassidy. Who had sex with Gavin Arthur, who had sex with Edward Carpenter, who had sex with Walt Whitman: Daddy of our American tongue.¹³

There is something revealing about the very title of the anthology from which this quote comes – *Who's Yer Daddy* – which recalls Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, an art installation of the 1970s which assumed a table set for thirty-nine historical and mythical women, and which for a time was a cult work among many lesbians.

As we age, there is an inevitable move towards both nostalgia for the past and uncertainty about the present, and I realise I was already experiencing this when I wrote my only novel, *The Comfort of Men*, back in 1993. That book ends as the narrator sits in a café on Oxford Street, Sydney's most famous gay strip, watching a passing young man who reminds him of his earlier self, and reflects:

I am touched by feelings of surprising tenderness for his apparent fragility. Young men of his generation rarely strike me in this way; usually I am irritated by their assurance and their sleekness, their sense that all history began when they had their first orgasm. But they have inherited the world we built, and they in turn are continuing to change and develop the world in which we shall grow old.¹⁴

PART ONE

HOMOSEXUALITY BEFORE THE GAY MOVEMENT

In the 1930s and 1940s . . . these monstrous practices, denounced by biblical and traditional common laws alike, were considered not only social but also political crimes against community standards, crimes that had to be obliterated whenever detected. People who had fallen so low as to engage in them must either be cured for their own good, forcibly if necessary, or be put away for the protection of society.

Harry Hay, founder of the Mattachine Society ('Birth of a Consciousness', *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, Winter 1995)