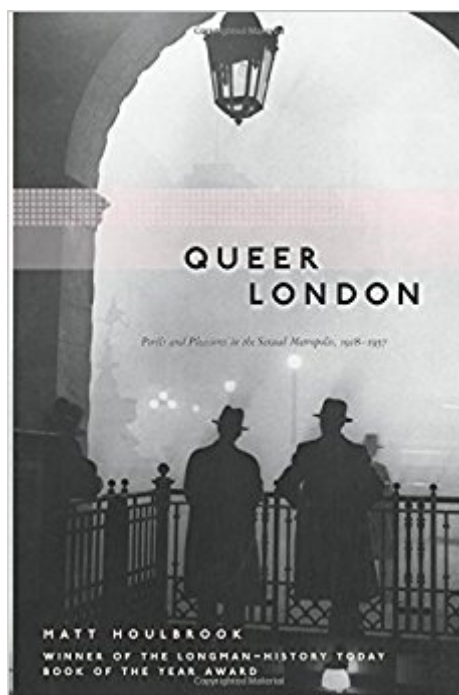




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Queer London: Perils And Pleasures In The Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (The Chicago Series On Sexuality, History, And Society)



Synopsis

In August 1934, young Cyril L. wrote to his friend Billy about all the exciting men he had met, the swinging nightclubs he had visited, and the vibrant new life he had forged for himself in the big city. He wrote, "I have only been queer since I came to London about two years ago, before then I knew nothing about it." London, for Cyril, meant boundless opportunities to explore his newfound sexuality. But his freedom was limited: he was soon arrested, simply for being in a club frequented by queer men. Cyril's story is Matt Houlbrook's point of entry into the queer worlds of early twentieth-century London. Drawing on previously unknown sources, from police reports and newspaper exposés to personal letters, diaries, and the first queer guidebook ever written, Houlbrook here explores the relationship between queer sexualities and modern urban culture that we take for granted today. He revisits the diverse queer lives that took hold in London's parks and streets; its restaurants, pubs, and dancehalls; and its Turkish bathhouses and hotels—as well as attempts by municipal authorities to control and crack down on those worlds. He also describes how London shaped the culture and politics of queer life—and how London was in turn shaped by the lives of queer men. Ultimately, Houlbrook unveils the complex ways in which men made sense of their desires and who they were. In so doing, he mounts a sustained challenge to conventional understandings of the city as a place of sexual liberation and a unified queer culture. A history remarkable in its complexity yet intimate in its portraiture, *Queer London* is a landmark work that redefines queer urban life in England and beyond.

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Customer Reviews

What begins as the story of Cyril L., who, at 20, was married and had a daughter, but discovered he was gay shortly after moving to London's West End in 1932, quickly turns into an overwhelming sprawl of meticulous research that, despite its commendable intentions, is too dense to appeal to anyone other than very devoted scholars. Houlbrook, a lecturer in history at the University of Liverpool, examines London's roles in self-discovery and its inextricable links to gay culture, but often loses the reader within the vast tracts of information he presents in his historic tour of "London's queer geography," which has frequent stops at public urinals ("identified as the locus of sexual offences"), clubs, bathhouses, police patrols (one officer concludes in a surveillance report the two men he'd been observing were "undoubtedly of the Nancy type," while his colleague determined the men were, actually, "West End Poofs.") and courtrooms. Surely, there is no dearth of material presented, but some tidbits, such as public urinal geography and the detailed order of police units detached to apprehend "sodomites," come off as frivolous and detract from what could be an engaging read. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

“Through an extensive trawl of police records, Matt Houlbrook provides an insight into the dangers and excitements of the underground homosexual scene during the first half of the 20th century. Homosexual behaviour was still an imprisonable offence, yet Houlbrook shows how men defined their own spaces in the metropolis, establishing covert places where they could meet like-minded men. . . . This is a well-researched book which adds to recent scholarship in the history of sexuality. The author challenges the rigid views found in current observations of homosexuality extending our understanding by, quite rightly, placing into the broader overall pattern of changing masculinity.” (Julie Peakman BBC History)

“From the dockside pubs and river steps of the East End to the glittering Long Bar of the Trocadero; from the Savoy Turkish Baths in Jermyn Street to the stinking cast-iron urinals on Fair Street in Bermondsey, Houlbrook’s narrative meanders across a capital city as protean as the middle-class men and working-class boys who lived and lusted, loved and (more often than not) loitered and lost within it.” (Peter J. M. Wayne Spectator)

“Queer London explores the relationship between gay sexualities and modern urban culture, revisiting the restaurants, pubs, dance halls, Turkish baths and hotels of London, and shows how municipal authorities tried to crack down on these worlds.” (History Today)

“As Queer London makes it remarkably clear, just a few decades ago, significant numbers of (working-class) young men were not only moving freely between male and female

partners but were happy to brag about it. So long as they were *“out butch”* and active *“or”* claimed they were *“out”* it would merely enhance their reputation with the lads. *“”* (Sunday Independent) Peter Furtado calls it *“not a story of persecution, but a lucid, sane and fascinating account of how gay people negotiated space for themselves within a hostile cultural environment, dealing with policing, housing, geography, identity and politics. . . . It will also make readers think about London and its public spaces differently.”* (Longman-History Today Book Awards 2006-01-10) *“A ground-breaking work. While middle-class lives and writing have tended to compel the attention of most historians of homosexuality, Matt Houlbrook has looked more widely and found a rich seam of new evidence. It has allowed him to construct a complex, compelling account of interwar sexualities and to map a new, intimate geography of London. . . . Houlbrook vividly illustrates the significance of actual places and things in London, and so indicates the importance of material culture to the way men were experiencing themselves and each other. He takes chiffon, suede, lipstick, powder and puffs, urinals, parks, pavements, shops, bars and lodging houses as seriously as sexological tomes and earnest fiction. All of these were, after all, the stuff of everyday life. . . . All this vivid detail is delivered with analytic acumen and theoretical sophistication. We rarely lose sight of the point of stories and anecdotes as they build to illustrate arguments about the city and the plural and shifting understandings of queer sex and affections. Houlbrook reminds us that there was no singular queer type or unified queer scene, and neither is there a seamless queer history telling the story of progressive liberation.”* (Matt Cook The Times Higher Education Supplement 2005-02-17) *“Houlbrook, in this well-researched and fascinating study, seeks to rescue the lives of men who loved other men . . . from the ‘condescension of posterity.’ Drawing upon personal memoirs, novels and criminal records he depicts a population which lived in a very different framework from that of gay men today.”* (Bob Cant The Lecturer) *“This theoretically informed, innovative, cleverly researched, subtle, graceful, brilliant book demonstrates just how good history can be. . . . Although Houlbrook has published some of the material before in well-crafted articles, none of them prepares the reader for the sheer power and delight of this book.”* (Barry Reay American Historical Review) *“Houlbrook weaves together a rich diversity of material *“or”* oral and published memoirs, biographies, newspaper reports and opinion pieces. and a vast range of archival materials *“or”* into a compelling and thought-provoking narrative.”* (Lesley A. Hall Urban History) *“In this ambitious study, Matt Houlbrook shows why for many men coming to London and becoming homosexual were part of the same process. . . . Engaging and well written.”* (Angus McLaren Journal of Modern History) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

As social history, the book is very interesting; Houlbrook delves into newspaper archives and the Public Record Office to create a picture of gay London in the early and mid-20th century. He cleverly uses magistrate court records, local council records, and newspaper archives to describe how gay men carved a niche for themselves in London. As a descriptive account of the period, the book works very well, and I finished with a very good sense of what it was like to be gay in London in the period. But the text is full of sociological jargon, Houlbrook seemingly writing to push his facts into almost every theory of minority group emergence and development in the larger society. That makes a lot of the book a hard read if you didn't major in sociology or political science. So, 4 stars because the book is great as history but the history is buried at times by too much academic jargon.

A dry, technical, and academic look at queer subculture in London between 1918 and 1957. Interesting in that it reduces to a science the rather inexpressible notions and progressions of gay life. There is certainly a parallel to be found between the passive->excluded->marginalized->subculture->pride progression of gays and other social movements. Houlbrook tries to weave in personal stories that humanize the concepts presented, and while he does a good job in those parts, the people reading such a book are in no need of convincing; the parts serve only to make the technical bits endurable. A great book, I'm sure, for academics, but not for pleasure reading. Continued at: [...]

Once I got used to the academic language, this book provided new knowledge and insight. Particularly of interest were the explanations regarding same sex relations between working class men and male sex in public places.

an excellent historical narrative On Queer life in London in that era. It provides insights from diverse perspectives. Fascinating contributions to the literature.

Perhaps it isn't for non-academics. But this book is an invaluable examination of the tension between public v. private and the ways in which queer subculture played out in the metropole of London. With a vast array of sources, Houlbrook challenges the traditional Whiggish history that suggests there was a "coming out" moment for gay men in London. He skillfully recreates the "underground" society of queer culture that emerged in response to police scrutiny and the increasingly private culture of homosexuality in the 20th century. His four main sections on Police,

Places, People, and Politics create an easy to follow structure, and his thread of the public and private practices of queer culture are thoroughly refreshing. This is a must read, perhaps not for the public at large, but for grad students, professors, and those interested in a new interpretation of the progression of gay rights and culture in Europe.

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