

Articles

Adelaide's Flowering Homosexual Culture: 1939-1972

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Abstract

The rise of a homosexual culture in Adelaide by the end of the 1930s has been documented previously. Little has been published on the culture during World War II and up to the 1972 murder of a homosexual university lecturer, Dr Duncan, allegedly at the hands of the police. His death sparked widespread debate, culminating with South Australia becoming the first Australian jurisdiction to decriminalise homosexuality. This paper traces the features and development of that culture during the years 1939-1972. In so doing, the paper draws extensively on a unique oral history collection which has only recently become available to researchers.

This article has been peer reviewed

Introduction

I was fairly typical of gay people in those days: we accepted that we were second class citizens, that there was something morally wrong with us.

John Lee interview with Peter 'B', 19 August 1980

The rules of social engagement endured upheaval during World War II, and no other section in Australian society benefited as much, perhaps, as the homosexual culture. The war's impact on sexual mores in Sydney, explains the historian Garry Wotherspoon, led to 'a widening and deepening of homosexual experiences in Australia.'¹ This conclusion is found in other histories of the homosexual culture elsewhere in the country.² Yet this impact, and the details of life in the homosexual culture during the years that followed, have not been the subject of prior academic review for South Australia.

At the time of the war's end, a surge in 'offences against morality' was anticipated by the South Australian Commissioner of Police, William Johns, due to the ongoing effects of wartime disruption.³ In his annual report to the Parliament in 1946, Johns claimed the anticipated surge had indeed eventuated but that it had been contained due to the superior efficiency, commitment and loyalty of the police.⁴ This situation was reversed by the following year,⁵ and continued to worsen such that, in 1948, Johns lamented to the Parliament, 'I am still much concerned with the increase in sexual offences.'⁶ Johns had every reason to be concerned, for the war's effect on the homosexual culture in South Australia was the same as elsewhere in the country.

It is due to the work of the late historian John Lee that a detailed defence of this claim is possible. Lee's oral history interviews are almost unparalleled in Australian archives for their scope and content on life in the homosexual culture during this period. The interview transcripts are complemented by Lee's associated notations and collection of press clippings, and together these comprise an invaluable resource. I am indebted to Lee's literary executor, Ian Purcell, for access to this material.

The John Lee Interviews

In 1979 an article appeared in Adelaide's gay community newsletter, *Gay Changes*, encouraging men to participate in a project initiated by Lee, a sociology and history graduate of the Flinders University of South Australia.⁷ Lee, who also was a co-founder of *Gay Changes*, intended to write a book on the social history of Adelaide's homosexual community from the 1920s to the 1970s. The need to inform the historical record with lived experience, and to do so with a more sympathetic tone than that of official records and press of the times, is made explicit in the letter Lee prepared for his potential interviewees,

The aim of the project is certainly not to provide anything resembling a sensationalised, scandalous tale for the titillation of non-homosexual readers. On the contrary, I will be aiming for a highly sympathetic, readable, lively, and most of all, accurate account of the various ways in which homosexual people have lived in Adelaide over the 50 year period. In short, as close as possible to the true story of the Adelaide's homosexual community. Obviously information from records such as parliamentary papers, newspaper reports, etc, must be woven into the

story, but it is also clear that this can only be of very limited value in capturing the realities of the homosexual experience. Rather, information must come from the memories of people who have lived through some or all of the years the project will cover.⁸

Lee was later to expand,

Diaries and letters ... are unfortunately not a ready source, because secrecy, until quite recently, has been all important in the homosexual world. Risk of discovery and exposure through a written record, even after one's death, was a pervasive fear. Using oral history, the story of what homosexual life was like in Adelaide begins in 1910, with the earliest recollection available.⁹

During the period September 1978 to October 1980, Lee recorded 36 interviews involving 42 people, being one woman and the remainder homosexual men. As well as his introductory letter, Lee prepared a 'Declaration of Confidentiality' for his interviewees, although there are no signed forms extant.¹⁰ By the late 1980s, Lee had returned home to NSW and presented a paper on his work to the Australian Gay History Project seminar series at the University of Sydney. At the time of his premature death in 1991, Lee had not published his research. An essay on Adelaide's emergent homosexual culture during the early twentieth century up to the Second World War, drawing upon Lee's seminar paper, was prepared by Lee's friends and published in his name the following year.¹¹

Beats, bars, parties and the arts scene are the principal sites which enabled groups of homosexuals to coalesce during the years following the settlement of Adelaide and before decriminalisation of homosexuality and the advent of gay liberation in the 1970s.¹² Adelaide's population in 1921 was 255,375 and by 1933 it had grown to 312,619 – which, Lee explains, are 'hardly numbers that might make for the relatively anonymous, cosmopolitan city in which homosexual subcultures have typically flourished in the Western world.' Even so, Lee's interviews lead him to conclude that, 'by the end of the 1930s, the foundations had been laid for an emerging subculture and a homosexual "way of life" in Adelaide.'¹³

In 2010, thirty years after the recording of the last interview, the complete transcripts became available for further research work. Of the 42 people interviewed by Lee, eight men were actively participating in Adelaide's homosexual culture prior to World War II and recount details of this in their interviews. The greatest detail is presented on the war and post-war years.

A major strand dominating these interviews is the behaviour of South Australia's police force. Police persecution, harassment, verballing and even violence are commonly discussed. The most frequent charges brought by police were loitering, indecent assault and buggery. Public exposure in the courts, especially if reported in the newspapers, would create a drastic impact on family relations, social standing and work-life, not uncommonly leading to ostracism.¹⁴ As Peter 'A' describes poignantly,

There was nothing you could do once you were caught. It was just this frightful fear hanging over your head of being caught. Because of course, as you realise, everybody still did it – you couldn't be unnatural enough not to do it ... but you always had this terrible fear. Oh, it would hang over everybody. 'Cause it wasn't just a handful of people, there were hundreds and thousands of people in Adelaide at that time who were camp.'¹⁵

It is difficult to estimate actual numbers of people affected. By 1945, the male population of South Australia totalled 310,813, and a notional estimate of four per cent suggests upwards of more than 12,000 males may have been seeking to engage with the culture.¹⁶ We can be certain, however, that although very few men believed it possible to comfortably identify and express their personal life in public, throughout the first half of the twentieth century a homosexual culture in Adelaide was forming.

The impact on this emergent culture of dealing with a parochial ambience, a negative moral setting or, for some, adverse publicity surrounding public exposure was problematic. Exposure of homosexuality, from simply being discovered kissing to being reported in the papers was enough for people to lose their jobs and even their families. Suicide is often discussed in the Lee interviews. Alternatively, the interviews testify, men would simply leave Adelaide – some to another Australian city and others even to another country.¹⁷

The Changing Laws around Homosexuality: 1836-1975

Our knowledge about homosexuality in South Australia during the first century following settlement records a shift from individual instances of covert sexual engagements to the appearance of an establishing culture with networks of people.¹⁸ The actions of the state's legislators appear to confirm this understanding, for it seems they also perceived that shift. This is demonstrated in the changes to the criminal code, through which they expanded the proscriptions in law.

The British legal system was imported into all Australia colonies, and laws introduced into South Australia relied upon the English model. In the inherited English law, the focus was on the sexual act of buggery, which referred to the act of anal penetration (whether heterosexual or homosexual) and bestiality (for all of which permutations both women and men could be put to death under the Statute of 1533 issued by Henry VIII).¹⁹

In 1859 the South Australian Parliament passed *An Act for consolidating the Statute Law in force in South Australia relating to Indictable Offences against the Person*. While the penalty for sodomy of capital punishment was replaced with life imprisonment in solitary confinement, the need to prove 'emission of seed' was relaxed such that 'proof of penetration' only was sufficient to secure conviction. Further changes introduced by *The Criminal Law Consolidation Act of 1876* again reduced the severity of the penalty for buggery, but proscribed attempted buggery and indecent assault (including oral sex) specifically upon a male person – in effect broadening the legal definition of unnatural offences between men. Two further amendments in 1925 and 1935 further expanded the proscribed behaviours to include attempting to procure or to commit an act whether in public or private.²⁰

Lee concludes of South Australia's criminal law that by World War II,

[It] had gone far beyond the traditional attempts to prohibit the act of sodomy and seemed to represent a kind of 'over-insurance' about the perceived problem. The laws ... covered not only every conceivable overt sexual liaison between men in every circumstance but appeared to go over some of the same ground twice.²¹

These laws remained in force until 1972, when the decriminalisation of homosexuality commenced and then was fully implemented in 1975 under the government led by Premier Don Dunstan.²²

Homosexuality during the War Years

Sexual adventurism during World War II contributed to the changing social conditions which saw the eventual decriminalisation of homosexuality. This is not to say that the difficulties existing prior to the war years dissipated, as accounts in the Lee interviews reveal. For example, Sid discusses his arrest in 1941 following the accidental delivery by the post office of his correspondence with a pen-pal to the wrong address, thus leading to the exposure of his personal life. During a police raid at Sid's home, the police found his address book and a couple of photos of men with erections. With this limited information, the police visited one of Sid's friends at his workplace and recounted that,

[Sid] had been arrested and confessed to having sex with other male persons ... [and the police] got him to sign this document – which he didn't read – and which made up the case. Had no truth in it at all.²³

On this basis, both men were sentenced to two-and-a-half years for buggery. The risk of arrest meant that one's name would be reported in the avidly-read 'pillory column,' as the daily newspaper court reports were known. In Sid's case, the press, 'made great mountains out of molehills ... they had huge headlines ... [and] inferred in big letters that I had hundreds of addresses and I was the head of an international sex ring.'²⁴ One such report claimed that Sid was part of a vice ring 'threatening the entire Commonwealth [with] "disciples" in every state.' It further noted that Sid's notebooks contained names and addresses of 'scores of men in other states,' which resulted in police action in Victoria and New South Wales.²⁵

The call to military arms, however, meant that the labour force available to police homosexual activity was limited and otherwise preoccupied. In contrast, large numbers of mobilised men were experiencing upheavals in their lives which, for some, offered positive outcomes. Peter 'A' has many memories of American sailors who were stationed in Adelaide following the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942, and recalls that the sailors who could be met any night at a particular hotel were 'terribly friendly

types ... and in no time we found out what it was all about.’ For Peter, this was an introduction to new terminology such as ‘gay’ and ‘fairies’, quite different to the pre-war terms known in Adelaide of ‘arty’, ‘belle’ and ‘camp,’ and the accompanying pejoratives ‘queen’ and ‘poofter’. Peter’s sense was that the Americans made quite an impact on what was a fledgling gay scene, and directly attributes this to ‘an awakening, an awareness’ that subsequently took place in the late forties.²⁶

The popular hotel to meet sailors was the South Australian, while for Air Force personnel it was the Napoleon Hotel. Where before the war the Exchange and the Plough and Harrow hotels were known meeting places, during the war the Gresham and the Red Lion Hotels also became places to meet, the latter popular with soldiers in particular. One particular feature of the Red Lion was the palm tree in the bar, and this became jokingly known as ‘the virgin palm, because a monkey had never been up it.’ In turn, a new phrase was coined for those in the know, ‘I’ll meet you at the virgin palm.’²⁷

The South Australian and Exchange hotels, in the times when public toilets were attached outside theatres and hotels and were accessed by a side lane, are discussed by Len. He mentions one in particular which was frequented by servicemen on leave and locals,

There was a pissoir down the side. A friend of mine had a shop just opposite, and he said it is amazing the sort of people that you saw go in there, well you wouldn’t think that they would be the type to go in there.²⁸

Older men like Peter ‘A’ and Len had prior experience of the homosexual world – as did Graham but, even so, he felt visiting American servicemen ‘taught me a fair bit.’ The war also opened the way for a new generation of young men. Reg was born in the early 1920s and came out during the war in the early 1940s. He explains that people would make use of the city’s parks for private moments, as very few servicemen had a place of their own or a car. Reg had a close experience one night at a park near the River Torrens with a man from the Air Force when they were nearly caught by a police patrol (in those days on a motorbike with a sidecar) which circled the park searching the gardens. Reg’s escapades led him to estimate that, ‘you could have a play with almost fifty percent of the servicemen,’ and he was of the opinion that, ‘the

servicemen got to the stage of thinking that goodness knows what was before them and have fun while they can.'²⁹

Keith was born in 1920 and, while he had always understood his persuasion, it was not until he was sent by the Army to Papua New Guinea for two years in 1942 that he met up with a fellow serviceman, and then 'there were quite a few after I got the taste.' This continued over a ten week visit back to Adelaide, 'I was a bit grown up and decided that I was gay and the South Australian Hotel was going.' Keith subsequently was stationed in Borneo, and describes the 'camp' men in the entertainment corps he met there.³⁰

Similar to Reg, Len describes how men were sent away from their homes to other parts of the country and overseas, creating a mix of people in uncertain circumstances and leading to a sense that they 'were up for anything ... and have a good time while we are here.' Like Peter 'A', Len believes that the general outcome of this was that, 'it loosened the restraints ... [and] the whole moral scene was changed since the War.'³¹

A Post-war Flowering

The nascent culture at the beginning of World War II exploded with new social activity in the years following the war. The change in the moral scene was profound, says Peter 'A',

[T]hey came back from the War with all sorts of ideas and they'd seen such a lot, they'd been out of this little one square mile of Adelaide to see the rest of the world and they'd seen things happening everywhere – normal, natural things They came back with far more knowledge than they went away with ... It's the awakening of ever so many people.'³²

This awakening was enhanced by new books. While some of these were factual, such as Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* released in 1948 (USA) and D J West's *Homosexuality* published in 1955 in England, with an Australian edition in 1968, the fiction of Roger Peyrefitte and James Baldwin, amongst others, also circulated within the culture.³³ Vidal's 1948 novel *The City and the Pillar* was eagerly embraced by the community when it finally became available in Australia, as too was Neville Jackson's 1965 Australian novel, *No End to the Way*. While at least one public

library in Adelaide stocked Kinsey's report, the Mary Martin bookshop – then considered to have a 'very exclusive' reputation – was reputed to stock books of interest.³⁴ Body building magazines such as *Health and Strength* revelled in the male form and, once they had passed censorship control to have belly buttons and other anatomical features blacked out, were hugely popular.³⁵ Through such books and magazines, people were able to recognise and understand a shared sexual identity, and to confirm what they learnt during the war years – that their circumstance was not isolated, not necessarily sinful, and not without scope for offering fulfilment in life.

Following their war-time experiences, an upcoming generation of young men like Reg and Keith were keen to participate in the growing hotel scene. Upon his return to Adelaide after the war, Keith made the South Australian Hotel his regular watering hole. The closing hour of bars at six o'clock meant that there would be a party afterwards, and Keith went to parties every Saturday for fifteen years. In his estimation, the South Australian would hold between 100 to 150 of 'a gayer type, flamboyant,' while the Exchange Hotel which 'was going flat out, too, just after the War [had] a rougher type, more butch.' There were other places to have a quiet drink, such as the Napoleon, but the South Australian was regarded as 'posh' and men would dress accordingly with 'a good suit on and tie, even a hat.' Such was the hotel's reputation in the immediate post-war years that men 'used to come from Melbourne and Sydney just to have a fling in Adelaide.'³⁶

The Imperial Hotel continued to enjoy popularity after the war, as did the Red Lion. Ted, a frequent visitor to Adelaide from Melbourne during and immediately after the war, was transferred to Adelaide in 1954. His friends would meet weeknights after work at the Red Lion for a drink before heading off for dinner. Other hotels started to cater for the growing demand in the 1950s: the Royal Admiral, Eagle, Aurora, Orient, Tattersalls, and the Majestic. Additional venues later emerged with locations beyond the city centre, including the Buckingham Arms in Gilberton, the Arkaba Hotel in Fullarton, and the Coal Hole in Norwood. Rob and Ray note during these years that the hotel and party scene was often a mix of men and women, and that by the 1960s a lesbian scene at hotels such as the Brecknock and the Newmarket had been established, while Roger 'A' adds that the Ambassador and Buckingham Arms, at times, were hotels where men and women mixed together.³⁷

There was a similar transformation in Saturday night parties. People became more confident and ambitious in their social lives. Graham, who as a young man in 1931 used to attend very discreet parties with about six people, in the immediate post-war years started to hold his own parties with about twenty people, some of them arriving in drag. Keith recounts of the immediate post-war period that there were dozens of parties on a Saturday night, with upwards of 20-30 at each. The number of parties each Saturday meant that people could choose their preferred party. Wendy and Roger 'A' explain that their group would peep in the windows at a party to see whether it was likely to be fun and, if not, move on to the next one. Jack 'A' describes the routine of his group,

On Saturday night we would go to the pub until six and find out where the parties were. And Malcolm and Ray had a flat, and we would either go there for tea or we would go into Hindley Street and have a meal, and then launch an attack on the parties on the list. We would just work our way through – everyone else would do the same thing – until we got to the best one or the biggest one.³⁸

Rob and Ray had the same habit, and would check out which of three or four parties on a particular night was going to be the best before making their choice. They recount that 'Angel' became so famous for his parties in the late 1960s that it was not uncommon for 500 people to pass through in an evening. Similarly, John 'B' describes the parties held by 'Anastasia' which also attracted hundreds of people.³⁹

Such numbers of men saw a new approach to parties emerge in the 1950s with venues booked for specific occasions, and marking an increased willingness to be more visible. Entire shows were mounted with titles such as *She's No Lady*, *Playgirls*, *High Heels*, *Red Hot Riding Hood*, *Son of Snow White* and *Boys will be Girls*. While these events started as drag shows in various theatres around Adelaide, they later evolved into the annual Drag Ball held in larger venues such as the Norwood Town Hall or the Burnside Town Hall. The university annual Arts Ball of the 1950s inspired people in the 1960s to set up their own themed fancy dress balls, which were held twice a year. There was a second spin-off leading to even greater visibility, and this was the start of the drag clubs such as the Paprika and the Safari, where groups such as the Gay Deceivers and the Ballet de Grants performed cabaret acts. Shows at these clubs

featuring ‘female impersonators extraordinaire’ targeted a public audience and might enjoy a run of over six months, creating paid employment for the drag artists.⁴⁰

Cultural Diversification

Men were congregating at beats, hotels and parties in ever increasing numbers. The opportunities for physical intimacy outside the home were not limited to parks and beaches, and moments of pleasure could be enjoyed at the city locations of the American Health Studio gym and Squires sauna.⁴¹ The Adelaide City Baths, a public facility with a heated in-door pool, a steam room and a sun deck next to the city’s main railway station, was well-known, as John ‘E’ recounts,

It is surprising just what those straights do when the opportunity arises and they can do it with discretion – and if you know that it is possible to do it, if you are discreet, well, those chances do arise. ... It was a very good cruising spot.⁴²

But by far the greatest effect of the increasing numbers of men wanting to engage with the culture was apparent in the social life, where distinct ‘sets’ of people emerged. In the mid 1960s one group of friends decided to hold a party and, when they realised they had 150 people on their invitation list, they hired a hall at 803 Torrens Road in suburban Alberton. This gave rise to the moniker the ‘803 Club’ which stuck even though later they held parties at larger venues catering for up to 400 people, including the Thebarton Town Hall, the Olympic Hall in the city, and the Lithuanian Hall. The 803 Club approached the Home for Incurables charity in order to use its licence for serving alcohol, and so the parties doubled as fund raisers – although the 803 Club members would laughingly claim that they themselves were the incurables and it was this which led them to donate to the Home for Incurables. Another set of friends set up a similar group, the 1346 Club, being the house numbers of the two couples who originated the idea. Other groups would be identified by a geographic location, such as the North Adelaide and the Glenelg sets.⁴³

By the late 1950s and early 1960s people were becoming more mobile and independent. For a while the use of Vespa motor scooters was a popular means of transport in the community, before men were able to buy a car. By and large, people were still living in the parental home, and sometimes a group of friends would pool

their resources to rent premises on a continuing basis. At various times these included the cellars of a large mansion in the inner-city suburb of Hackney, and facilities in Rundle Street and Franklin Street in the city as well as in Archer Street, North Adelaide. These centres became club rooms, used not only for parties but as a centre to socialise and as rehearsal spaces for the development of new drag shows. Sometimes the rooms would have an on-site mattress.⁴⁴

Variation appeared in the manner of social engagement. While beaches including Glenelg, Escourt Beach and the mangrove swamps between Port Adelaide and Tennyson functioned as beats, by the early 1960s beach parties became popular opportunities for social interaction. Bill 'A' describes such parties numbering between 200-300 men. During the 1960s men hired a boat for cruise parties, departing from Port Adelaide. These were fancy dress events with many of the hundred or so men turning up in drag. The men would dance away the evening to the music of a hired band 'which was usually square.' Another outdoor event emerged in the 1960s with the annual Queens Birthday weekend picnic, usually held each year at a sports oval in McLaren Vale. This started off with 'all sorts of competitions: high-heel [shoe] downhill races, and eating apples off a string, and table decorating competitions,'⁴⁵ and soon incorporated theatrical themes and presentations.

Not everyone had a taste for such events. John 'A' observes the emergence of 'settled people' with their own homes who were more interested in dinner parties. Picnics, generally, became popular, and people gathered on Sundays at a regular meeting spot by the Royal Automobile Association's office in the city before heading off to the countryside to enjoy a barbeque, drinks and companionship. In the latter half of the 1960s new entertainments appeared in various networks, including golf mornings, tennis parties, and long weekends relaxing at rented beach-houses or on riverboats cruising the Murray River.⁴⁶

During the week people would visit each other at their homes in smaller numbers. One group of about 15 men would meet every Wednesday to enjoy an evening of 'knitting and clacking of needles and drinking.'⁴⁷ More usually, people met at cafes, including the Montmartre, the Camille and the Black Orchid of the 1950s, and over the years also at the Brazil, Brown Owl, Taboo, Desert Sands, Las Vegas, Coromandel, Siam, Franklin, Sweethearts, Cavendish, the Can Can and the AC/DC. Not all of these were

operating at the same time; a number of them were opened sequentially by the one proprietor, who might decide to change a venue to avoid hefty rent increases imposed when the owner of a premise understood how successful such cafes were. A cafe could become a de facto community centre, and sometimes a proprietor would simply want a rest from community service obligations. The opportunity for community cross-over was present at the Blue Jamaica cafe where, as Roger 'A' reminisces, 'the Greek men always had the capacity to like you, the young queens especially if you were a bit dolly.' For most patrons, though, cafes were sophisticated places to pass a whole evening where they were introduced to espresso coffee and spaghetti bolognese, and they might even be served alcohol in coffee cups. Robin recalls passing entire weeknight evenings at the Manhattan, where you would always 'find about 30 or 40 camp people ... and you used to drink things like Mint Julep – they were alcoholic.'⁴⁸

Of particular note is the Montmartre cafe, a basement venue in Twin Street, central Adelaide, which was trading during the period 1956-58, just opposite the then Adelaide Hairdressing School. This venue was opened by Ron, who, having learnt of the culture through newspaper reports about police raids on a certain party, decided to move to Adelaide from Broken Hill so that he could 'get into the scene.' It was an immediate hit with the theatre and hair-dressing crowd, as the proprietor recalls,

[T]he place boomed into a kind of pick-up place, and all the camp crowd came in, and all the gay people who I wanted to meet and had come to Adelaide to meet, I didn't have to chase them, because they came to me. ... [A]nd if they were going to the pictures then they would come there first and after the pictures then they would come back to the Montmartre. ... Once I opened Montmartre ... I couldn't get out to serve them, because there were so many people.⁴⁹

The Montmartre was open seven days a week, and became a hub for socialising. From there people would not only meet but also learn about what parties were happening, and so people would gather at the cafe before heading off to a party.

Developing Self-confidence

As with the pre-war period, the wearing of female attire by men continued to be a bold and defiant statement. There were, though, two changes apparent in how fashion, both

male and female, was used after the war. Firstly, some men were willing to wear drag not just behind closed doors in the privacy of homes or at fancy dress occasions where it could be easily passed off as a just a joke. Secondly, a number of men started to use male clothing as a bold and defiant declaration of homosexuality.

Roger 'A' recalls that a group of friends who loved drag and putting on shows would, two or three times a year, present a rehearsed show for their friends, who would find out by word of mouth,

We used to have to hire a theatre – and hide from the law ... otherwise it would be closed before the third item went on. ... We did numbers ... like *Around the World in 18 Minutes*, that was all pre-taped ... and the air hostesses would come, and then we would travel the world ... to the East and to Spain. ... And we did one number that was hysterical that was called *Popping Pandora* – and we had 15 queens in it – it was a whole 19 minute dance routine with umbrellas and ... streamers.⁵⁰

Les recalls how he was one of the first men in the 1930s to wear 'a beret or even sandals,' both regarded as 'shocking and poofy.' By the mid 1950s 'anyone who wore white sox was considered gay.' One young couple chose white sox paired with matador pants and a dash of Old Spice aftershave as their favourite Saturday night get-up.⁵¹ However, Keith in the 1950s, 'wouldn't dare' wear the white socks or suede shoes worn by 'socialites – you wouldn't speak to them because they had those suede shoes on,' and this was a give-away. The 1950s was a decade when suits and ties would still be worn out to the hotels.⁵² Reg asserts, 'It was always the pansies that would wear these suede shoes; square people wouldn't,' while Ted declares, 'Anybody who wore suede shoes in the forties and fifties was a poofster. ... And gay scarves tied at the neck.' Lee himself recalls as a child always being warned by his father not to wear suede shoes, but one interviewee, Len, reveals a mate provocatively started to wear suede shoes, explaining, 'Well, I am camp!'⁵³

Even so, the vast majority of people in the 1950s and '60s would have shared the deeply-held fear experienced by Dennis (born 1936), who recalls in the mid-1960s noticing a school-days friend at the Ambassador Hotel,

I walked into the pub and saw my mate that I used to go to school with, and I was petrified if he saw me ... because [he lived] only two blocks from us. ... Every time that I used to go into the hotel, I used to avoid him. I knew that he was there but I didn't want him to know about me. ... So he confronted me face to face, he came up to me and then we started yakking. ... So from there we ended up being real good friends, and he used to tell me all the places to go.⁵⁴

This concern was not an isolated experience, as Peter 'B' describes,

A lot of people have commented on it since – they have been terrified of being sprung [at a hotel] because if you were, there was no way that you could ever get out of it. If you were sprung then the possibility of losing your job was pretty great, so you had to be careful.⁵⁵

The fear of exposure was so deep-seated that friends could pretend in public not to know each other, especially if one's friends were not straight-acting,

We would go to a party one night, and the next day I would see them in the street and I would ignore them. Well, they were feminine in their ways. ... And if anybody came to visit you where you worked, then you would die. They would say, 'Look at this one. You must be one of their crowd because you know them.' ... I was pretty well-known around Adelaide, and I just didn't want to disgrace my name and my family in those days. It was just one of those things.⁵⁶

Greater numbers of people than ever before were actively participating in the culture after World War II. However, this expanded social scene, and with it the increasing willingness by some members of the culture to be publicly identifiable, existed together with a pressing need for the majority of people to be discreet and hidden.

Managing Discretion

The need for discretion continued to be a dominant feature during this time. As the economy recovered from the war period and people became more affluent, more men could afford to rent a flat of their own, sometimes with another male friend or partner. However, it was not uncommon for men in such instances to give their parents' address as their official address so as to hide their private lives. Lee discusses hearing

this phenomenon from a number of men, and Robin explains how he managed to live with his partner for seven years and continued 'that charade up until '67,' suggesting, 'that is indicative of the social atmosphere.'⁵⁷ Another interviewee recalls being discreet about living with his partner, with whom he took up in 1956,

People look very hard when you put the same address down. I know when we went overseas and we had to do everything, I put the address of my [beach house, and my partner] Keith put this address here, but by God, you could slip up on different things.⁵⁸

Another feature of this private life hidden from the public gaze is the appearance of a vernacular, being the language or phraseology belonging to a particular class, and arguably a marker of an established culture. In this instance, a vocabulary and manner of usage shared exclusively by the in-group served to reinforce and even celebrate the group's identity, while at the same time providing a protective cover.

The war saw the introduction of the English terms 'tea rooms' and 'cottages' for beats come into common usage, as did 'tea room trade' for the men who went to beats for sex. Cottages were given names, such as Larkspur Lodge by the River Torrens in the 1950s, for its garden bed of larkspurs (later the Lilac Room), Canary Cottage, Mary Cottage and Lady Crutchmore – this latter being at Sir Lewis Cohen Avenue. A hangover from the war years was the term 'sailor cake,' and someone returning from an intimate moment might explain that 'I was away having a look at the meat in the window'⁵⁹ or, if oral sex was involved, 'having a chew.'⁶⁰ Later terms describing a person as either 'bitch or butch'⁶¹ reflected a distinction that one would either 'give it or take it,' replaced a pre-war descriptor about 'being stuffed.'

Particular physical gestures were associated with the vernacular. Bill 'A' explains that a handshake with a tickle in the 1950s was code for identifying one's membership of the in-group – something which Lee also recalled from his childhood, but only as a school-yard cautionary tale. Rubbing one's nose slowly on the right hand side indicated a desire for sex. Bill 'A' further describes the use of coded ways of talking with friends in the company of a 'square – they just wouldn't click what the hell you were talking about.' This would be useful in mixed company to let people know whether a man present was 'available' to be engaged in sex, and so 'TBH' (to be had) might be uttered. Alternatively, if someone else had already taken up the opportunity,

then ‘BH’ would be declared to apprise the potential suitor of the ‘been had’ status. Presumably this code was not necessary for the in-group at their ‘bachelors’ parties.’⁶²

A further characteristic of the camp vernacular during that period was word-play using men’s first names only, often associated with pet names as pseudonyms. Commonly these were an alliteration or personal reference, for example, Brian could become Bridget, and Bert could be Bertha or even Big Bertha in recognition of a certain physical presence. The surname Ellis could suggest Elsie, and Greg’s rural hometown Gawler might lead to Gert from Gawler. Alan might have a regal air, lending the name to Anastasia or, less formally with good friends, Anna. Bill’s predilection for cottages could lead to Tilly Toilet.

While such playful naming provided entertainment, less light-hearted was the need for defence from the unwanted and ever-present threat of exposure. This threat affected everyone equally, whether someone had been on the scene for many years or was just new; whether people were out to their friends and perhaps also their families or only to themselves; whether one’s status was single or in a relationship. Bill ‘B’ and Lyall, co-founders of the 803 Club, took care never to show any affection in public over the twenty-five years of their relationship at the time of their interview with Lee, citing ‘only one or two occasions when there has been a little slip-up, like calling somebody “dear” in the middle of a square party.’ When they organised events with the 803 Club, a ‘square’ security guard was employed to ensure that entry was only given to those guests holding an invitation. Bill ‘B’ and Lyall explain their approach to hosting a party in the privacy of their own home,

[B]ut behind it all is ‘remember, go too far, worry the neighbours too much, and they’ll blow the whistle on you.’ They’ve only got to complain, and dear God, once the cops get inside the door, you’re dead. ... So, there’s always been that tiny bit of restraint, unless you’re off in a very, very private place or a very private area. ... We’ve learnt to try and melt into the background.’⁶³

Similarly, Ted, another leading light in the community’s social world, reveals,

I lived a very double life. My business and my pleasure life was quite divorced. Well, it had to be.⁶⁴

Even within a social network, the need to protect oneself from one's friends was strongly felt. Wendy and Roger 'A' explain of this time that for some people 'the only way to survive was to be outrageous,' but at the same time, '[w]hilst they were tremendous fun, [others] were also terrified of them because they were so upfront and outrageous, and they ... would walk a hundred paces behind them.'⁶⁵ Similarly, Jack 'B', who came on to the scene in the early 1950s, recounts,

You lived under a shadow the whole time ... and perhaps would be a little uptight about a few of these things – hate to be seen with certain people because you were judged by the company you kept – flamboyant, screaming, way out. In those days you couldn't wear rings, diamonds and things like that and get away with it.⁶⁶

The use of first names only and pseudonyms thus had another and less innocuous function: it prevented people from becoming informants about their associates when being questioned by police. As Bill 'A' explains during his interview with John Lee,

The reason I can't tell you surnames [is] that back in those days nobody knew me as Bill [surname], they just knew me as Bill or Linda. And say, for instance – you are John, right – and I got pulled up by the police and they would say, 'Do you know John Lee?' and I would say 'John Lee. I know a lot of Johns, but I don't know John Lee.' You could honestly say you didn't know ... [but] you could talk amongst yourselves and people would know who you were talking about.⁶⁷

Today such fear may be difficult to understand. However, it was the callous murder of a legal academic in 1972, allegedly at the hands of South Australian policemen, that finally sparked the necessary public support for the decriminalisation of homosexuality.⁶⁸ This step, fully given effect in 1975, saw South Australia become the first jurisdiction in the country to achieve this significant human rights milestone.

Conclusion

John Lee's finding that, 'by the end of the 1930s, the foundations had been laid for an emerging homosexual "way of life" in Adelaide'⁶⁹ is substantiated in the detail of his interviews. Lee's interviewees offer a unique insight into how homosexual men in

South Australia negotiated their world during a period when such lives were illegal. Experiences during World War II led these men to an understanding and appreciation of their circumstances which set the scene for a flowering homosexual culture during the years that followed. In those post-war years, though, the police intensified their surveillance and controlling activities, and the prevailing need for secrecy became imperative. A major limitation of the interviews is that they contain only scant detail on the lives of lesbian women, and even less insight into cross-cultural considerations with Indigenous peoples and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Lee's interviews are a rich source of material which complements the court records, parliamentary debates and media reports. While police persecution of homosexual men especially during the post-war years is a dominant theme in the Lee interviews, that topic is of such importance that separate, detailed consideration is warranted.⁷⁰

About the Author

Dino Hodge is completing PhD research into Don Dunstan and the politics of homophobia. His published work includes *Did You Meet any Malagas?* on the history of Darwin's gay community, and *The Fall Upward*, interviews about spirituality in the lives of Australian lesbian women and gay men. He is co-editor of a secondary school social studies text on Aboriginal education and careers, *You Don't Get Degrees in Weetbix Boxes*.

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