



Press Release

16 September 2003

History was not written by straight people

Gay and Lesbian history in Britain has long been limited to a few tales of Oscar Wilde, especially when compared to the USA where it is flourishing. This is set to change, thanks to a “how to research Gay and Lesbian history leaflet” published by The National Archives.

As part of Archives Awareness Month The National Archives is also putting a sample of some of the key documents in gay history on its website DocumentsOnline www.documentsonline.pro.gov.uk which provides online access to digital images of historical documents. These can be downloaded free of charge and include:

- the 1957 Wolfenden Report which resulted in the decriminalisation of private and consenting sexual acts between men over 21,
- documents condemning the notoriously banned book ‘The Well of Loneliness’ by Radclyffe Hall, described as ‘obscene’
- the Earl of Castlehaven’s trial for sodomy in the 17th Century.

The National Archives, Kew, which is open for research has produced this in-depth leaflet to help unlock gay and lesbian history in the UK. The leaflet covers key issues like censorship, gay politics and the military. It also has a historical glossary and gives pointers on how to find documents about the relationship between the State and the gay and lesbian community over the centuries, out of the 8 million records held by The National Archives. The leaflet is available on the TNA website www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Matt Houlbrook, the author of the leaflet and lecturer in 20th Century British History at Liverpool University, said:

“These documents are remarkable – and reveal how the British State tried to control the lives and public representation of gay men and women. Although researching gay history is always difficult, these documents are just the tip of the iceberg in what is a very rich resource.

“Doing this research is so important because Britain’s gay and lesbian past is still governed by a set of assumptions – like the idea that that gay men and women did not exist or were invisible before the 20th century.

“Too often it’s assumed that popular prejudice and punitive laws meant that individual lives were blighted by repression, denial, guilt and secrecy. The National Archives collection contains a wealth of sources that challenge the everyday understandings of gay and lesbian history. The files reveal the vibrancy, diversity, visibility and often fulfilling nature of ordinary gay and lesbian lives in the past whilst at the same time pointing to the laws and prejudices against which men and women have struggled. They tell a story of joy and tragedy, of the complexities of ordinary lives.”

-Ends-

Notes to Editors:

- For media enquiries and interviews please contact The National Archives Press Office on 020 8392 5277 or e-mail press@nationalarchives.gov.uk✉
- **The National Archives** (TNA) www.nationalarchives.gov.uk museum and research rooms are open to the public 6 days a week. TNA holds over 1000 years of documents including sources for family history research. **The National Archives** was created in April 2003 when the Public Record Office and the Historic Manuscripts Commission came together to form one organisation.
- This September sees the first ever **Archive Awareness Month**. Over 470 events are being held throughout the UK and Ireland where you can do everything from taste 19th century workhouse gruel to pretend to be a medieval scribe. The month-long celebration is a joint effort of over 200 organisations throwing a spotlight on what archives have to offer you. For further information visit www.aamsept2003.com
- For media enquiries, images, please contact Fiona Cameron on 020 8392 5376 or e-mail fiona.cameron@nationalarchives.gov.uk. Alternatively a selection of press releases is available at www.aamsept2003.com/media.html
- Images of selected documents are published free of charge on Documents Online. **DocumentsOnline** (www.documentsonline.pro.gov.uk) is The National Archives’ digital image delivery website, providing online access to an ever-increasing collection of popular public records, including wills and government documents.
- The TNA file references for the documents online are:
 - HO 345/1- Report of Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (Cmnd 247).
 - CUST 49/1057 - Obscene book imported: condemnation of The Well of Loneliness, author Miss Radclyffe Hall.
 - LCO 2/4705 - Censorship of plays: request for Lord Chancellor's advice on whether plays containing references to homosexuality and lesbianism should be banned.

SP 16/207 - Earl of Castlehaven: an account of his trial (for rape and sodomy) and execution, prepared for publication. Includes the title page, the Earl of Castlehaven's examination, Lawrence Fitzpatrick's first and second examination, a paragraph relating to the law on sodomy), the verdict and the sentence.