

Homosexuality and Civilization

By Louis Crompton

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How have major civilizations of the last two millennia treated people who were attracted to their own sex? In a narrative tour de force, Louis Crompton chronicles the lives and achievements of homosexual men and women alongside a darker history of persecution, as he compares the Christian West with the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, Arab Spain, imperial China, and pre-Meiji Japan.

Ancient Greek culture celebrated same-sex love in history, literature, and art, making high claims for its moral influence. By contrast, Jewish religious leaders in the sixth century B.C.E. branded male homosexuality as a capital offense and, later, blamed it for the destruction of the biblical city of Sodom. When these two traditions collided in Christian Rome during the late empire, the tragic repercussions were felt throughout Europe and the New World.

Louis Crompton traces Church-inspired mutilation, torture, and burning of "sodomites" in sixth-century Byzantium, medieval France, Renaissance Italy, and in Spain under the Inquisition. But Protestant authorities were equally committed to the execution of homosexuals in the Netherlands, Calvin's Geneva, and Georgian England. The root cause was religious superstition, abetted by political ambition and sheer greed. Yet from this cauldron of fears and desires, homoerotic themes surfaced in the art of the Renaissance masters--Donatello, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Sodoma, Cellini, and Caravaggio--often intertwined with Christian motifs. Homosexuality also flourished in the court intrigues of Henry III of France, Queen Christina of Sweden, James I and William III of England, Queen Anne, and Frederick the Great.

Anti-homosexual atrocities committed in the West contrast starkly with the more tolerant traditions of pre-modern China and Japan, as revealed in poetry, fiction, and art and in the lives of emperors, shoguns, Buddhist priests, scholars, and actors. In the samurai tradition of Japan, Crompton makes clear, the celebration of same-sex love rivaled that of ancient Greece.

Sweeping in scope, elegantly crafted, and lavishly illustrated, *Homosexuality and Civilization* is a stunning exploration of a rich and terrible past.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this notable monograph, impressive for its breadth and readability, an early pioneer of gay and lesbian studies attempts the Herculean task of chronicling the history of homosexuality in Europe and parts of Asia from Homer to the 18th century. In a series of short vignettes, Crompton, emeritus professor of English at the University of Nebraska, relates the "rich and terrible" stories of men and women who have been immortalized, celebrated, shunned or executed for the special attention they paid to members of their own sex. Two chapters on China and Japan are a welcome addition to the usual Eurocentric focus. Crompton's comparative study reveals just how anomalous Judeo-Christian aversion to homosexuality seems in the context of world history. On the battlefield with Alexander the Great, in the highest ranks of the Han dynasty in China, in the "bisexual" poetry of Arab Spain and among the samurai in Japan, same-sex male love flourished (lesbianism, Crompton admits, is harder to find). Even among Christian rulers of European countries, homosexual attachments weren't unheard of. Crompton surmises that in 1610, "one `sodomite,' James I, ruled England, Scotland, and Ireland; another, Rudolph II, presided over the Holy Roman Empire; and France had its second homosexual king within a generation." Crompton's vivid and sobering accounts of the persecution of homosexuals under Christian regimes throughout the centuries emerge as the book's undeniable focus. Throughout, Crompton's great intellectual nemesis is the late Michel Foucault, whose *History of Sexuality, Volume I* emphasizes the difficulty of reconstructing the sexual ethos of another culture or historical period and who has inspired a generation of historians, literary scholars and cultural critics to grapple with sexuality in their work. By contrast, Crompton interprets his evidence quotes liberally from primary sources. Read as an anthology of those sources, Crompton's work will be valuable to scholars of all stripes.

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Review

In [this book], impressive for its breadth and readability, an early pioneer of gay and lesbian studies attempts the Herculean task of chronicling the history of homosexuality in Europe and parts of Asia from Homer to the 18th century. In a series of short vignettes, Crompton...relates the 'rich and terrible' stories of men and women who have been immortalized, celebrated, shunned or executed for the special attention they paid to members of their own sex. Two chapters on China and Japan are a welcome addition to the usual Eurocentric focus. (*Publishers Weekly* 2003-08-25)

Brilliantly researched...Crompton, drawing on his immense erudition, contrasts Christianity and its barbaric cruelty toward same-sex love with more benign traditions in Moorish Spain...[He] also discusses the cult of romantic homosexuality in traditional Japan, where relationships of intense loyalty and idealism sprang up between the samurai and their pages. (Edmund White *Los Angeles Times* 2003-11-30)

In Louis Crompton's sober, searching and somber new history, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, homosexuality is associated with the inner workings of civilization itself...It begins in the gladness of early Greece, where homosexuality had an 'honored place' for more than a millennium, and concludes with the madness of 19th-century Europe. In between is what Mr. Crompton calls a 'kaleidoscope of horrors' lasting more than 1,500 years...This is a restrained, careful, clear book of scholarly exposition." (Edward Rothstein *New York Times* 2003-12-15)

Beginning where one would suspect--the ancient Greeks--Crompton puts a particular emphasis on Eastern social history in pursuing his narrative of the evolving place of homosexuality all the way to the

Enlightenment. A key Crompton theme is that while much of Western civilization officially persecuted homosexuals throughout the ages, whatever the hypocrisy involved, in many Eastern cultures--including pre-modern China and samurai Japan--'the celebration of same-sex love rivaled that of ancient Greece.' (*Toronto Star* 2004-01-11)

Even after the explosion of literature on gay issues since the 1970s, comprehensive examinations of homosexuality in history have been few. An exception is Louis Crompton's new *Homosexuality and Civilization*, a sweeping account that was 18 years in the making. Crompton, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska, presents both a catalog of horrific abuse and persecution in the West and a surprising history of tolerance in some Eastern cultures, such as Japan, where homosexuality was 'an honored way of life among the country's religious and military leaders.' (Julian Sanchez *Reason* 2004-03-01)

Based on the best recent scholarship and providing an overview of homosexuality from the Greeks to the end of the 18th century, this levelheaded, easy-to-read volume confirms the fact that homosexuality has had a long history (with periods of greater or less tolerance)...The result is the best historical overview of the topic that this reviewer has read. (V. L. Bullough *Choice* 2004-03-01)

When Europeans first arrived in the Americas they found men engaged in erotic entanglements virtually on the quayside. They responded with the horror their religion had implanted in them, holding out their bibles and shouting 'Abomination! Devilry! Witchcraft!' The problem was they found the same thing almost everywhere they set foot in East Asia. China and Japan both looked on this kind of activity with a cool shrug of the shoulders. But as the Europeans' colonizing push gathered force, the hangings, disembowelment by mastiffs and burnings alive (especially popular) began to appear in these regions as well...This is a major work...It will be the first book future researchers in the topic turn to, and what they will find is a magisterial survey that delivers the fruits of a lifetime's study. Everything in the field is touched on and weighed in the balance. (Bradley Winterton *Taipei Times* 2004-06-27)

Crompton's book is truly the culmination of a lifetime's commitment...Writing a history of homosexuality is therefore a mission to remind the reader of millennia of oppression and resistance. For Crompton, the commonalities of that disparate history of homosexuality lie in two elements: the fact of common sexual practices, and the possibilities of human love and devotion that survived and contested all that history ('their' history) could throw at it. His history is, in part at least, a history of celebration. (Jeffrey Weeks *Times Higher Education Supplement* 2004-09-03)

At last, a comprehensive, scholarly investigation into homosexuality through the ages. In *Homosexuality and Civilization*, Louis Crompton discusses in elevated but readable fashion how gays and lesbians have affected the civilized world from ancient Greece to modern America, and been affected by it. (*Louisville Letter* 2004-09-01)

Review

An encyclopedic survey of homosexuality in Western and non-Western civilizations. Crompton's writing is lively, vivid and refreshing--a pleasure to read. Anyone interested in looking at homosexuality from a comparative and historical point of view will want to own this book. (David Greenberg, author of *The Construction of Homosexuality*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Do you have favorite book? Should you have, what is your favorite's book? Book is very important thing for us to learn everything in the world. Each reserve has different aim as well as goal; it means that book has different type. Some people really feel enjoy to spend their the perfect time to read a book. They may be reading whatever they consider because their hobby will be reading a book. Think about the person who don't like reading a book? Sometime, person feel need book after they found difficult problem or exercise. Well, probably you will need this Homosexuality and Civilization.

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