



BOOK REVIEW

## Justin Bengry, Matt Cook and Alison Oram, eds. *Locating Queer Histories: Places and Traces Across the UK*

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With *Locating Queer Histories: Places and Traces Across the UK*, Justin Bengry, Matt Cook, and Alison Oram offer a valuable contribution to the field of LGBTQ British history in challenging what scholar Jack Halberstam termed “meteronormative” bias. That is, the tacit equation of urban spaces with political and sexual liberation. This exciting edited collection expands readers’ horizons beyond London to register how local and regional developments shaped the trajectory of queer politics and culture in modern Britain. Despite their differing disciplinary approaches, all authors here converge on one central starting point: the meeting of cultural geography and historical method. Central to this effort is an engagement with the ways in which material space actively shaped forms of selfhood and shared culture between queer people outside or on the margins of the capital. For most of the authors, this imperative resulted in small-scale studies that explore sites ranging from swimming ponds to city boroughs, with a focus on small sets of under-explored historical actors. The reader is thus presented with a series of micro-histories that offer much useful insight into how broad themes of queer history were reflected on the individual level. In the introduction, the editors Cook, Oram, and Bengry propose that taken together, these essays trouble a whiggish narrative of British sexual politics, one that neatly leads from repression to liberation. This edited collection’s use of scale, however, means that *Locating Queer Histories* maintains, for the most part, a view of history from the bottom up. Because of this, the collection is more successful in hinting at the great variability of regional queer history, but less so in clearly formulating a view from above and presenting the consequences of this spatial turn.

The intersections of material space and social forces, namely those of class, race, imperialism, and nationalism, animate many of the essays presented here. The legacies of de-industrialization on city spaces across the United Kingdom, for example, provide one reoccurring theme. Alan Butler’s essay shows how Plymouth’s identity as a Navy town produced a contradictory local gay culture that was both highly visible and secretive. Along the same lines, Gareth Longstaff’s exploration of media representations of Newcastle’s nightlife economy in the 1980s shows how working-class masculinity was a significant factor in the North-East’s gay culture. In both cases, queer regionality seems to stand for a rejection of “the closet” as the normative spatial metaphor.

The essays that figure race and imperialism more strongly also highlight paradoxical forms of queer subjectivity and shared culture, ones that do not neatly align with a narrative that moves from repression to openness. They also show how symbolic relations to distant places, those formulated in erotic and political visions, mattered greatly as well. Relying on highly limited source material, Caroline Bressy and Gemma Romain creatively recover the

social worlds of African American and Caribbean performers against the backdrop of rural interwar Britain. Working from the metropole out, other essays demonstrate the impact of Orientalist legacies on the articulation of British queer culture and politics. Such is the case of Dominic Janes' biographical essay about the life and career of botanical writer Reginald Farrer, whose life work in gardening and writing left a legacy of coded homoeroticism. Sean Brady's examination of the effects of sectarianisms on the homophobia of both political sides in Northern Ireland brings to the fore a different sexual legacy of British imperialism. In her study of Florence's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century queer Anglo colony, Rachel Hope Cleves' masterfully highlights the function of "the South" as a largely imagined destination of sexual tolerance.

Other essays in the collection locate queer histories in sites that can hardly claim a status of marginality: Brighton, Oxford, Edinburgh, and London. With the first two, the reader is presented with the most clearly delineated spaces of this volume: Brighton's beach and a pond named Parson's Pleasure in Oxford. Louise Pawley clearly demonstrates how the natural and built environment in Brighton shaped the town's LGBTQ political culture and its national status. George Townsend's impressive examination of one particularly popular cruising spot in Oxford presents the changing discourses around same-sex attraction from Wilde to the present. In the case of the capitals, both essays effectively utilize oral history methods to account for individual experiences of moving to and through city spaces from an LGBTQ point of view. Alva Träbert's study of LGBTQ migrants to Edinburgh is more concerned with the past, while Searle Kochberg and Margaret Greenfields' focus is more on present experiences of Jewish Londoners. These particular articles' engagement with locations so central to queer British history emphasize even more the question that *Locating Queer Histories* takes up as its starting point: how does this challenge settled narratives?

Interestingly enough, two of the collection's editors, Oram and Cook, co-authored a wonderful book precisely about this question. In *Queer Beyond London* (2022), the two scholars recover the histories of Brighton, Leeds, Manchester, and Plymouth as sites of LGBTQ struggle, culture, and leisure. Much like *Locating Queer Histories*, Oram and Cook's study owes much to the sharp increase in LGBTQ public history initiatives, and uses the growing availability of source material to unsettle London-centric accounts. In this edited collection, however, the editors point in their introduction to the fact that the articles presented "only tangentially fit a conventional trajectory of queer history". While this is also a reflection of the varied disciplinary backgrounds of the collection's authors, ultimately, one is left desiring more sustained engagement with the conventional narrative.