

'Not Named Amongst Christians': Debating 'Marginal' Homosexuals in *A Glass of Blessings* and 1950s England

Part 1: Libby Tempest

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The idea for this paper originally came from two different reading groups in Manchester Central Library reading two apparently unrelated books. The first was the Tuesday Evening General Reading Group, who had read (with some encouragement from me!) *A Glass of Blessings*. The second was the Lesbian & Gay Interest Group who had read a book called *Gateway to Heaven*, a collection of oral history reminiscences covering 50 years of gay and lesbian history, edited by Clare Summerskill. *Gateway to Heaven* contains some deeply upsetting material relating to attitudes towards homosexuality dating from the 1950s and it suddenly struck me that this was exactly the same period during which *A Glass of Blessings* was written and published. I'd read *A Glass of Blessings* several times previously and had never thought twice about the attitudes in the novel towards the central gay couple, Piers and Keith, and the delightful and obviously gay Wilf Bason. Wilmet is disappointed when her little 'romance' with Piers is thwarted – but she is NOT outraged, disgusted, or sickened at the reason why: Wilf is viewed with affection, friendship, acceptance, not to mention admiration for his culinary skills – he is NOT ostracised by the community in which he lives.

When I compared the attitudes in the two books, it was hard to believe that they were written with reference to the same period. It occurred to me that, in her usual quiet subtle understated fashion, Barbara actually had some rather radical views for the time, which it would be interesting to explore. When Nick Turner and I got together to discuss this, it seemed logical to divide the paper into two halves, with me researching the historical and legal background to place *A Glass of Blessings* in context, and Nick paying more detailed attention to issues within the novel itself, and to how homosexuality was portrayed in other contemporary novels.

So – I would have to say that the official view towards homosexuality at the beginning of the 1950s could hardly have been more hostile and negative: the title of our paper is taken from an editorial in the *Thames Valley Times* dated 4th May 1949:

It [homosexuality] is a disease which cannot easily be eradicated ... The Victorian policy of pretending that unpleasant things do not exist is out of date ... They do exist, and are likely to become worse unless immediate action is taken.

'*Inter Christianos non nominandum*' means 'not named amongst Christians' and was a term used by Victorian MPs because they could not bring themselves to use words like homosexuality, never mind 'sodomy' and 'buggery', during Parliamentary debates. Such acts carried the death penalty until 1861 when the punishment was changed to life imprisonment.

In 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act became law; this extended existing legislation to cover all forms of sexual activity between men, whether committed in public or private. In addition, a significant new clause was introduced by the backbench MP Henry Labouchere: 'Any male person who, in public or private, commits or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour.'

Virtually as soon as the new Act became law, it was realised that the Labouchere Amendment would provide opportunities for blackmail and corruption – it was actually dubbed ‘The Blackmailer’s Charter’.

It was still the law in the 1950s, and was still being actively enforced: in fact, at the beginning of the decade, there was a huge escalation in the number of prosecutions. What seems to have been behind this was a fear at the highest level that the numbers of gay men in senior and influential positions were increasing – cases like those of Burgess and MacClean contributed greatly to this fear. Other concerns expressed included the corruption of youth theory – the young were perceived as vulnerable and gay men were perceived as predatory: this became one of the most insidious arguments and one still hears it today. During the entire period from 1935 to 1939, 299 cases against homosexual men were brought – compare this to 1952 when, in that year alone, there were 1686 prosecutions – a very substantial and significant increase.

As a balance to the general hysteria, the Kinsey Report was published in 1948. Kinsey had surveyed 12,000 American men and had discovered that the reality was that one third of them had some experience of homosexuality; with unmarried men, this rose to over a half. ‘Kinsey’s investigation showed that the frequency of overt homosexuality was much higher than had been realised at every social level and in every age group, in every walk of life, in town and country, in single and married men.’ Applying Kinsey’s percentages to England and Wales would mean 650,000 men were exclusively homosexual and 2 million had strong homosexual tendencies. ‘Any law which is so remote from the real habits of the people that it turns over a quarter of the male population into secret criminals cannot be said to be fitted to the needs and lives of the men it governs.’¹

In December 1953, the Conservative MP Sir Robert Boothby and the Labour MP Desmond Donnelly made a joint call to the government to set up a Royal Commission on the law relating to homosexuality and to recommend changes in the light of modern scientific and psychological advances. This request was rejected by the Home Secretary Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe and his reply demonstrates the depth of official prejudice current at the time:

[H]omosexuals ... are a danger to others, especially the young, and so long as I hold the office of Home Secretary I shall give no countenance to the view that they should not be prevented from being such a danger.

Then, at the beginning of 1954, a case was brought which not only caused a great scandal but has also been credited with contributing to a sea-change in public opinion which eventually led to a change in the law. On the 9th January 1954, directly using the Labouchere Amendment, Lord Montagu of Bewley (Beaulieu), his cousin Michael Pitt-Rivers and their friend the journalist Peter Wildeblood were all arrested and charged with ‘improper acts and unnatural offences’ against two young airmen, Edward McNally and John Reynolds, by means of ‘seduction and lavish hospitality’. The actual party at which all this was supposed to have happened is described by Peter Wildeblood in the book he subsequently wrote as rather a dull affair and the ‘lavish hospitality’ consisted of a bottle of cider champagne and a pan of scrambled eggs! But this hyperbole was characteristic of how the whole case was handled – the police were determined to obtain convictions of these three high-profile ‘toffs’ and would go to any lengths to achieve their objective. There was an existing relationship between Peter Wildeblood and Eddie McNally which came to light when McNally was questioned by his RAF superiors – this information was passed on to the police. McNally and Reynolds were then bullied/persuaded to turn Queen’s evidence against Wildeblood, Pitt-Rivers and Montagu in return for immunity from prosecution for themselves. There were many incriminating letters and address books, but despite the fact that over 30 other names surfaced during the investigation and both airmen were known to have had previous homosexual relationships, the police were only inter-

ested in Lord Montagu and his friends – theirs were the only prosecutions that resulted from the whole investigation. In March 1954, the case came to trial and resulted in all three men being found guilty – Montagu was given a 12 month prison sentence and Wildeblood and Pitt-Rivers each got 18 months. Wildeblood made history by openly admitting in court that he was homosexual. However, public reaction to the trial was not quite what had been expected: when the three men were leaving court having been sentenced, a crowd had gathered outside – the following is taken from Peter Wildeblood’s book *Against the Law*:-

‘Which one is Lord Montagu? Ah, there he is!’

I thought, ‘Please don’t let them do anymore to him. They’ve had their pound of flesh.’ And then the crowd began to press around us, shouting. It was some moments before I realised that they were not shouting insults, but words of encouragement. They tried to pat us on the back and told us to ‘keep smiling’, and when the doors were shut they went on talking through the windows and gave the thumbs-up sign and clapped their hands.

The reaction clearly took Peter Wildeblood by surprise and this continued after his arrival at Wormwood Scrubs – nearly every fellow prisoner he came into contact with expressed sympathy, and they risked punishment to smuggle newspapers to him so that he could read the reports and opinions that followed his trial. The papers were nearly all critical of police behaviour in the Montagu case and supportive of a change in the law: the leader in *The New Statesman and Nation* was typical:

The methods of the police in getting their evidence will have shocked public opinion... It is hard to decide which is more repugnant, to have the police breaking into private houses, without even a search warrant from a magistrate, and reading men’s private letters in order to prosecute them for incidents in their sex life (which an increasing number of people and newspapers are coming to feel is no concern of the law) or to see that evidence supported by ‘confessions’ of accomplices obtained by a promise of immunity.

This is Rex, quoted in *Gateway to Heaven* (p. 51):

It was in the Fifties that the Home Secretary, David Maxwell Fyfe, famously claimed, ‘We will rid England of the plague of homosexuality’, and he had a bloody good try! He said, ‘Look, the thing holding this country back are these queers and we must do something’ – this basically gave the police carte blanche to do whatever they wanted, to arrest them as much as they wanted, harass them as much as they liked... There was a guy I met when I was 19 and through him I’d met my lifelong partner and we came to London, this was 1951. Four years later, this guy was arrested – it was at that period, just after the Montagu case, and the police, well, they only had to ask around and they’d get my name attached to his. That was the problem in the Fifties.

However, times were changing and in August 1954, David Maxwell Fyfe asked Sir John Wolfenden (Vice Chancellor of Reading University) to head up an enquiry into homosexuality. The leader in *The Times* stated, ‘The crucial question before the Committee is not whether homosexual relations are sinful, but whether the law should punish them as such.’ For the next two years, the Committee read huge amounts of written evidence, interviewed dozens of witnesses (including Peter Wildeblood) and heard the broadest range of opinions.

In the meantime, the police witch-hunt continued and the number of prosecutions rose, peaking in 1955 at 2322 recorded offences of ‘indecentcy between males’, resulting in 1065 men being sent to prison. Gay men at this time lived in a climate of constant fear, in dread of discovery and were often reduced to living the sort of double life Piers Longridge lived, for their own protection. Peter Wildeblood writes movingly of this in his book, *Against the Law*:

I was forced to be deceitful, living one life during my working hours and another when I was free. I had two sets of friends; almost one might say, two faces. At the back of my mind, there was always a nagging fear that my two worlds might suddenly collide: that somebody who knew about me would meet somebody who did not know, and that disaster would ensue.... The strain of deceiving my friends and family often became intolerable.” [This passage could have been written by Piers.]

In *Gateway to Heaven* (p. 172), Jeffrey says:

In the Fifties of course the police were a threat then, because they could bang on your door and arrest you for having sex with your partner. And that did happen on many many occasions... You were dreading that they would notice that there was a double bed and two men were living in one bedsitter. [Piers and Keith!!]

The greatest impact of Peter Wildeblood’s book was its honest and unsentimental examination of the emotional and practical difficulties facing an intelligent man whose sexual preferences made him a criminal:

I am no more proud of my condition than I would be of having a glass eye or a hare lip. On the other hand, I am no more ashamed of it than I would be of being colour blind or of writing with my left hand. It is essentially a personal problem, which only becomes a matter of public concern when the law makes it so.

Essentially what Peter Wildeblood argues for is the basic human right ‘which I claim for myself, and for all those like me...to choose the person whom I love.’

Another ground-breaking but tragic case of the 1950s was that of the mathematical genius and ‘father of the modern computer’, Alan Turing. During the Second World War, Turing cracked the German military code ‘Enigma’ – this gave the Allied forces advance knowledge of German land and sea manoeuvres, enabling the British to win the Battle of the Atlantic. After the war, Turing became a Professor at the University of Manchester where he played a major role in the development of the modern computer. Turing has been described as possessing one of the most innovative and powerful minds of the 20th century – but he was also homosexual. At the end of 1951, he began a brief affair with a 19-year-old youth called Arnold Murray: a month later, a friend of Murray’s burgled Turing’s flat with Murray’s knowledge and Turing reported this to the police. Of course, when the police came to investigate, they were far more interested in the fact that Turing was gay than the fact that he’d been set-up and robbed, and in February 1952, Britain’s foremost mathematician was arrested on charges of ‘gross indecency’. The trial took place the following month and both men pleaded guilty – Murray was conditionally discharged but Turing (as the ‘older man’) was placed on probation, avoiding prison on condition he underwent an experimental medical treatment called organo-therapy. He was to be injected with female hormones for a year in an effort to reduce his libido – the injections also caused him to grow breasts. Manchester University did everything they could to support him, testifying on his behalf and after the trial, appointing him to a specially created position, but unsurprisingly he became withdrawn and depressed. He committed suicide in June 1954, famously through eating an apple dipped in cyanide.

Other similarly barbaric treatments were being forced on to gay men all over the country at this time – this is Bob, in *Gateway to Heaven* (p. 83):

When I was 24, I had aversion therapy. I came out of the RAF and all my contemporaries were marrying, settling down, and I thought, ‘Well, wouldn’t it be so much easier if I did?’ ... You’re taken into a cell-like room.... Before you go in, you’re given an injection of Pentothal, which is supposedly the truth drug, and some other drug.... You have to keep drinking a warm saline solution and in the meantime, the nurse shows you pictures of men doing things and the idea is that you asso-

ciate that with being sick.... I was in there for 5 days and I couldn't sleep and when I did, I was having terrible nightmares.

Bob went on to become addicted to barbiturates and alcohol, and also ended up trying to take his own life – but, unlike Alan Turing, he did not succeed. Ultimately, he did manage to fulfil Peter Wildeblood's hope, to choose the person with whom he fell in love, but only after a great deal of further suffering, pain and sadness.

Against this background, the Wolfenden Report was published in September 1957 and this was its final conclusion: 'We do not think that it is proper for the law to concern itself with what a man does in private unless it can be shown to be contrary to the public good that the law ought to intervene in its function as guardian of that public good.' In the light of all evidence and deliberations, the Wolfenden Committee decided that there was no justification for retaining the existing laws and recommended that all forms of consensual homosexual behaviour between adult males in private should be decriminalised. The compromise was an age of consent to be fixed at 21, compared to 16 for everyone else.

Here began a campaign which would last over the next 10 years, to get the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report made law. Right from the beginning, there was a perceived division between 'the right thing' and 'public opinion': this was reflected by most newspapers supporting the findings of the Committee but at the same time, feeling that the general public still found homosexuality so abhorrent, they would be slow to accept such a change in the law. A letter in *News Chronicle* dated 10th Sept. 1957 thanked Sir John Wolfenden for his sensible, powerful and honest report but predicted that the British public was not yet ready to overcome its own prejudice – in a memorable phrase, the author wrote 'it is like talking metaphysics to a goldfish.'

The Home Secretary was now R.A. Butler and he decided upon delaying tactics as he also felt this was potentially a deeply divisive issue: to the frustration of the campaigners, he consistently said that the time was not right for a change in the law. But there was a full debate in the House of Lords the following December and some extraordinary speeches were made in favour of reform, the bravest being the delightfully named Lord Brabazon of Tara who made his listeners consider gay men as fellow human beings, who can love each other just as much as a man and a woman can love each other. There was no vote, but those supporting reform slightly outnumbered those against it.

In March 1958, a letter supporting reform was written to *The Times*, signed by 33 influential people including Isaiah Berlin, Robert Boothby MP, Julian Huxley, J.B. Priestley, and Bertrand Russell, and this group became the foundation for the Homosexual Law Reform Society which pledged itself to fight for the implementation of the Wolfenden proposals. The following November saw the first House of Commons debate, which Rab Butler opened by stating categorically that the existing law would not be repealed by this government, even though he acknowledged the amount of human suffering being caused – so much for freedom of debate. (Incidentally, in the same week, Ian Harvey, MP for Harrow East and Joint Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, was arrested in St. James's Park for an act of gross indecency with a member of the Coldstream Guards.) The motion to change the law was roundly defeated and in December 1958, a Gallup Poll found that 48% agreed with Rab Butler, 25% disagreed and 27% didn't know – it's even possible that Butler was right and that the country simply was not ready at this point for such a radical change in the law. In the meantime, the appalling police tactics and the prosecutions continued – entrapment had become common practice:

I do know people who went into a loo, were chatted up by a dolly-looking person who turned out to be a police officer, and were then charged, which was just outrageous....if they had an 'agent pro-

vocateur' it was an easy arrest...by the time it got to court, the police would embroider what had happened and then the magistrate would generally accept every word. – Jimmy, *Gateway to Heaven*

In response to such prejudice, the Homosexual Law Reform Society, which had spent the previous 2 years slowly building support through letters to newspapers, journal articles, newsletters, building and growing its membership, made the brave decision to hold its first open public meeting. This inspiring and exciting event took place in May 1960 at Caxton Hall in London and was attended by over 1,000 people, and the success of this meeting certainly contributed to the start of a Parliamentary campaign to reform the law.

In this paper, I have attempted to give the historical context to the culture in which *A Glass of Blessings* was written, and to describe the reality of the lives of the many thousands of men like Piers, Keith and Wilf who were forced to live double lives.

As I have limited my research to the 1950s, here we must leave it – but most of you will know that it took another 7 years (and a lot more campaigning, many further arrests, continued appalling police behaviour and a great deal of heartache and despair) before the recommendations of the Wolfenden Committee finally became law on 27th July 1967.

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