

Age of the Uranians

Douglas Sadownick

Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century

by Graham Robb

W.W. Norton and Company. 342 pages

GRAHAM ROBB'S *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the 19th Century* stands out among recent books for its appreciation of an explicitly gay liberationist scholarly approach to our forgotten but precious past. In his elegantly accessible account of how gays and lesbians lived and loved in Europe and North America in the 19th century, Robb embraces the idea that gay people have always been around and have even been valued members of society.

The book is divided into three lucid sections focusing on the oppression of GLBT people, the journey toward liberation, and the universality of homosexuality in the general populace (as seen, for example, in the stories of the "androgynous and even homosexual Jesuses" and popular detective stories). "Homo and heterosexuality are concepts that bear the imprint of the periods in which they were invented," Robb cogently writes. "But to say that no such dichotomy existed until these terms were coined is to sit on the dictionary and expect it to function as a magic carpet." The Foucaultian idea that homosexuality began in 1870— an idea "which effectively devalues all gay experience before the advent of psychiatry," he maintains—"has been a Trojan horse of homophobia." Of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose exegeses on Greek art fueled the Classical revival, Robb rhapsodizes: "Winckelmann was a hero of the modern mind and the modern world, and his 'unnatural' desires were the clues of a civilization that had been awaiting rediscovery for over 2,000 years." It's fine to notice differences between disparate times and cultures, but it's just bad science to annihilate the similarities.

Robb departs from the post modern dogma that sees the medicalization of homosexuality as nothing but a sign of control and repression. Instead, he finds that the notion of a "case history" emerges as an evolutionarily scientific step "that allowed otherwise silent individuals to discuss their sexuality." While Foucault isn't wrong to highlight the dark side of sexual taxonomies, it's narrow-minded to ignore what happened when science joined hands with the gay liberationist spirit of Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. "The alleged causes of homosexuality (put forward by science)," Robb writes, "stirred the imagination and made it possible for homosexual men and women to view their sexuality as an inherent part of life's pattern rather than as an aberration."

Robb treats his 19th-century subjects with great respect and draws these characters intimately close to the reader—a commendable feat for a scholarly book with voluminous notes and citations. Among the famous people in the book, he documents the bravery of Ulrichs, the first modern activist to come out to his friends and society; the steamy notes taken by Whitman cataloging his Manhattan tricks; the lesbian passions of Charlotte Bronte; the infighting that plagued Magnus Hirschfeld's first attempts at organizing; the way in which Anne Lister made verbal passes to her soon-to-be lesbian lovers (dropping hints about Marie-Antoinette's "lesbian antics"); and the obvious homosexual pairing of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Collectively such profiles amount to an erotically breathtaking collage that will pluck the heartstrings of those who feel that gays are a class of people with a common history and spirit. "The strange race of Uranians," Robb concludes, "seemed to cross social and national boundaries with ease and to thrive in that unfathomable environment, the modern megalopolis. They retained their identity in the face of aggressive conformity." We have much to thank them for.

Douglas Sadownick practices gay-centered psychotherapy in L.A.
