

## MOLLY MARY CHRISTMAS PAST

It's been a good year for queer-gays. After eighteen years of Tory mis-rule, they got kicked out with a cracker bang! The NEW government has NEW, pro-gay policies (probably their only NEW policies). There are more Out, lesbian and gay MP's than ever. Even leading Conservative leftovers, defend gays...

London now claims the world's most exciting gay scene. It's established, growing, and gaining greater public tolerance. Gay Soho has settled – and stopped wetting itself in auto-excitement! Lesbians, black gays and queer diversity, are more visible. This Christmas, we're congratulating ourselves, believing we've created something NEW - unique to London.

Hate to be a party pooper...like old Scrooge. But the Ghost of Christmas Past is knocking on your door. He warns you never to forget, and whisks you off on a journey... Way, way back...three centuries...too molly London - a bigger, more public and promiscuous queer culture.

Flying over Soho, Covent Garden and Holborn...waving bye-bye to Peter Pan...back further... Through the fog and snow, you read 'Ye old Molly House', on a door. Candlelight sparkles through the pebble-glass windows. Sounds of song and merriment come from inside... But you can't stop yet... Back... Angry mobs gather at Haymarket. Sad, tattered men, are locked in stocks, drenched in blood and shit... No, you don't like that scene. Really bad vibes, boys and girls... To discover what's going on, you must fly much further back... All the way to the Court of King Henry VIII, and his Queen – a-head of her time.

The first law against homosexuality, to become statutory in England was Act-25 Henry 8, chapter 6. It was proposed by Thomas Cromwell, in 1533, '*... For the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed by mankind or beast*'. This statute - outlawing buggery, was not intended to serve that purpose. It was a catch-all excuse, enabling Henry to seize wealth from the Church, by prosecuting monks in the civil courts. During subsequent years, it was repealed, amended and reintroduced, several times. Elizabeth I gave it purely symbolic importance, empowering the secular courts. The first prosecution was against Nicholas Udall, headmaster of Eton, in 1541. It was rarely used for another 100 years. But fear of homosexuality and the belief that buggery is immoral, came part and parcel, with Christianity – in the popular Bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The industrial revolution forced mass migration into cities. London became the most densely populated city in the world. Prior to this, homosexuals had been prominent among London's Royal Court echelons. King James I, Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon (Elizabethan privy statesman) and the Duke of Buckingham are the most notorious. Their vice, only became an issue with competing rivals struggling for power. Broadly, public attitudes towards homosexuality vacillated in accord with the regime. But Charles I, passed a proclamation enabling homosexuals to be hanged.

As soon as London was big enough to support social factions, homosexuals sought their ilk in public places. From around 1700, a self-aware, distinct and visible gay subculture was established. What's more, it grew and consolidated when threatened by external hostility.

There are two essential differences between gay subculture then, and today. First, was the introduction of 'guilt' in the 19th Century (which became endemic). Second, the language pertaining to initiates. Then, as now, the subculture evolved its own arcane language - or slang, incorporating euphemism in response to hostile deprecation and bombast...

Today, a 'Molly' is a 'gay', or 'queer'. 'Mollies' referred to themselves as such, for 150 years. The molly

vernacular was known as 'the Female Dialect' (to initiates). Emphasising their separateness from the society that ostracised them, mollies developed a lexicon of nicknames, to casually refer to one another. This consisted largely of Maiden Names, preceded by Miss or Madam. Typical examples include: Miss Kitten, Mrs Girl of Redriff, Madam Backwell, Mistress Anne Page, the clerk at Sukey Bevell's. Or variants from Molly, a common Maiden Name: Pomegranate Moll, Moll King, Flying Horse Moll. Or related Maiden Names: Dip-Candle Mary, Garter Mary, Small Coal Mary. Often the subject's job was incorporated into his nickname.

Despite appropriating 'the Female Dialect', mollies did not generally assume effete characteristics or affectations. The effeminate archetype is a late 19th Century model. (Although it drew from satirical depictions of the scandalous, 18th Century fop, Lord Hervey - the subject of Alexander Pope's poem, 'Sporus'). Jokes commonly drew analogy between women's front, and men's rear conveniences. On special occasions, mollies adorned women's clothes and performed feminine roles. But these ritualistic expressions, were never a significant aspect of lifestyle.

Special, theatrical drag events, were extremely riotous assemblies. During the early 18th Century, molly culture even became popular amongst straight society. Then, as today, mollies were recognised as fashionable trend-setters and artists. Rather than envisaging them from a contemporary Camp/Drag perspective, they are better understood in an anthropological context, as variations of archaic, pagan rituals, indigenous (in differing forms) to early tribal cultures. As such they served a socially cathartic function by breaking taboos, something we have sadly lost today.

Masquerades were the most popular festivals, serving as a cavalcade/ melting pot, for mollies and straights. Something like Pride, today. As Rictor Norton summarises in **MOTHER CLAP'S MOLLY HOUSE**:

*Masquerades flourished in London from the 1720's onward, and took place in assembly rooms, theatres, brothels, public gardens, and molly houses. The commercial masquerades were quasi-carnivals first organised by the impresario John James Heidegger at the Haymarket Theatre from 1717 onwards. His 'Midnight Masquerades' were tremendously successful, and drew 800 people a week. They provided many people with the opportunity to explore fetishism and transvestism. Men disguised themselves as witches, bawds, nursing maids and shepherdesses, while women dressed as hussars, sailors, cardinals and Mozartian boys. [GMP,1992]*

Once everyone of notoriety attended them. A masquerade in 1742, attracted Horace Walpole (British Prime Minister) dressed as an old lady!

Perhaps the strangest Camp ritual, performed in molly houses on 'Festival Nights', is that of mock births, or 'Lying-inn'. A group of mollies, or 'Sisters', would assume women's clothing. One would pretend to be pregnant, while the others acted as midwives. After much screaming and crying, and bowls of splashing water carried to and throw, matron would produce a mock baby, from inside its mother's gown. Then, in the presence of the happy father, appropriate congratulations afforded and the new-born Christened. Sometimes a replica baby was used, but usually anything ready-to-hand would suffice, as noted by James Dalton:

*...A Lying-inn, when one of them is plac'd in a chair, and others attending with napkins, a Bason of water, &c. Susan Guzzle, a Gentleman's Servant, is the Midwife, and with a great Deal of Ceremony, a jointed Baby is brought from under the Chair he sits on. Mrs May was sometimes since brought to Bed of a Cheshire Cheese, Madam Blackwell and Aunt England, standing Gossips.*

**A GENUINE NARRATIVE OF ALL STREET ROBBERIES** [London, 1728]

Molly subculture was largely a working class phenomenon. The rich looked down upon it as vulgar. Records show the major occupations of mollies were blacksmiths, labourers, butchers, soldiers and shopkeepers.

Mollies were never a ghettoised community. They lived and worked with the rest of society, commonly living as molly couples. It was their leisure time, for meetings and pick-ups, that mollies frequented their own patches. There were half-a-dozen renowned patches in London. These centred on the markets, Covent Garden and Royal Exchange. Markets were infamous cruising grounds. But Molly Houses (perhaps the earliest club culture) were the preferred hangouts.

Molly Houses, were a hybrid of inn, brothel, bar and club, but not quite any of these. They were ordinary people's houses – often owned by straights. By converting part of their premises, a landlord/lady could make extra cash, and enjoy the bohemian atmosphere. Owners continued to live-in and joined in festivities. Size and layout varied. Generally there was an open, public expanse, with tables and chairs, and cheap alcohol available. Adjoining this were smaller bedrooms, for couples or small groups. These had lockable doors in case privacy was required. But guests rarely bothered to close doors.

Group singsongs accompanied by fiddlers, were frequent expressions of merriment. Molly houses were bawdy, decadent places. Mollies could meet new friends and after a few slops of ale, retire to bedrooms (cheered-on by other guests). Inebriated mollies might neglect the bedrooms. Alternative fiddling and 'Sit-ons' were partaken or witnessed by all.

None of the reliable historical records (primarily consisting of trial manuscripts) mention or allude to any cohesive lesbian community, as early as 18th Century, London. However, in France, where lesbianism were more stringently defined and regulated, there is evidence of lesbian alliances in Paris, dating back to the late 18th Century.

For the most part, society tolerated mollies. But political factions provoked public prejudice, whenever it proved expedient. Satirists found easy targets in exaggerating homosexual decadence. When these groups found it advantageous to side with Bible Bashers, a powerful, homophobic force evolved...

The Societies for the Reformation of Manners, were founded in 1690. Their initial aim was to instigate a clamp down on profanity, and working class inns and taverns. They were well organised and had influence in high places. No politician - of any faction, dared ignore them. Besides, by pandering to the moralists, they served their own interests. To maintain this status, Societies realised they must pursue victorious legal battles, attracting high public profile. Such cases were not easily forthcoming and often lost – for lack of evidence. So in London, the Societies established an underground network of spies, informants and agent provocateurs. A strategy of entrapment proved successful – particularly since they employed the services of mollies. Sadly, but predictably, treacherous mollies flocked to sell their services. In 1698, they won their first sodomy trial, against Captain Edward Rigby.

Over the ensuing forty years, the number of Societies grew. They amassed extensive information on molly activity, and instigated well-planned raids on molly houses, during the 1720's. However, by the middle 18th Century, public support had waned. The societies declined into oblivion.

Finally, some examples of swift justice meted out to mollies that were busted. There was no uniformity to punishment. Much depended upon the views of the Judge or Magistrate, and the wavering attitude of the public. Often, attempted prosecutions were simply thrown-out by judges, regardless of their validity. However, if you were among the unlucky victims...

Lord Chief Justice Colt, at the Maidstone Assizes in 1702, sentenced four sodomites to execution.

Following London raids in 1707, forty sodomites were arrested. Three hanged themselves and one cut his throat - in jail, rather than face the impending trial and executions awaiting the others.

In 1725, constables surrounded and raided Mother Clap's Molly House, in Field Lane, Holborn. Over forty – 'notorious Sodomites' – were arrested, although none were caught *in flagrante delicto*. Three men were hanged,

and several were imprisoned, fined and exhibited in the pillory.

The following year, William Brown, a married man accused of attempted sodomy, was sentenced to ten marks fine, two months incarceration and the pillory at Moorfields. (Both Mother Clap's raid and Brown's apprehension were thanks to Thomas Newton, a molly hustler turned informer.)

Eventually (August, 1726) Miss Clap – heterosexual and molly house owner, stood trial (after concocting lies and standing bail, to help some of her arrested customers). She got two years imprisonment, fined 20 marks, and stood in Smithfield pillory. She fainted and fell over several times, when (like the mollies she befriended) subjected to the relentless torrent of rotting food, shit, dead animals and sharpened rocks, from an angry mob.

MERRY MOLLY CHRISTMAS ONE AND ALL!!!

**Chris Barber**

(If you're still seeking a Christmas present, for that 'hard'-to-please man in your life, you could do a lot worse than the book, **MOTHER CLAP'S MOLLY HOUSE – the Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830**, by Pictor Norton [*Gay Mens Press, 1992*]. Available from GAY'S THE WORD, for £15.)