

Book Review: Prejudice & Pride: Celebrating LGBTQ Heritage, A National Trust guide

Jowett, A.

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Prejudice & Pride: Celebrating LGBTQ Heritage, A National Trust guide

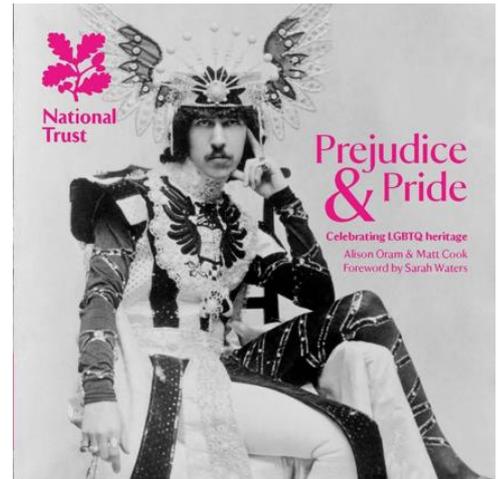
Alison Oran, Matt Cook & Sarah Waters

National Trust, 2017

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Reviewed by Adam Jowett (Coventry University)



Throughout 2017 several of our national institutions have commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act, which partially decriminalised sex between men in England and Wales. Tate Britain held a *Queer British Art* exhibition and the BBC has had a *Gay Britannica* season of broadcasting (see also Milton in this issue). To add to these cultural celebrations, the National Trust has had a *Prejudice & Pride* season exploring LGBTQ heritage. This project hit the headlines in August following staff at Felbrigg Hall in Norfolk being offered duties away from the public after refusing to wear rainbow badges. The Trust quickly responded, making clear that the wearing of such symbols should be voluntary and confirmed that volunteers who chose not to wear one would resume their public-facing roles. The badge fiasco, which appears to have been a well-intentioned albeit ill-conceived move on behalf of the management at this one property, both brought attention to but also possibly overshadowed the broader commemorative project. The season has involved events, temporary exhibitions and a podcast series presented by Clare Balding. You may also have noticed the organisation having a more visible presence in Pride parades across the country this year. In addition, the Trust has produced a souvenir guidebook, available to buy from the National Trust's online shop and National Trust gift shops, which explores the queer past of people connected to the Trust's properties and collections.

The souvenir guide is written by Alison Oran, Professor of Social and Cultural History at Leeds Beckett University and Matt Cook, Professor of Modern History at Birkbeck. There is also a foreword by Sarah Waters, the author of bestselling novels such as *Tipping the Velvet*. The guide begins with Waters' personal memories of visiting Sissinghurst Castle Garden with her first girlfriend. She recounts that 'We went there not for the glorious garden itself, nor the wonderful setting, but because we knew that its one-time owner, Vita Sackville-

West, had many affairs with women...I still recall the thrill we felt at discovering this semi-secret bit of “our” history’ (p.2). She adds that ‘It surely enhances our visit to Knole to picture Vita Sackville-West “stalking” down the gallery “in her Turkish dress” as she flirtily showed off the house to Virginia Woolf’ (p.3). Waters argues that paying attention to the LGBTQ history of National Trust properties is to ‘build a fuller, more fascinating picture’ (p.3) of the nation's historic properties and their previous owners and occupants.

The guidebook is clear that the historical figures featured in the book ‘may not have attached a label or even a sense of sexual identity to their desires and intimacies’ (p.5). As such, they are not claiming to uncover the sexual or gender identities of historic individuals. Rather, the authors seek to trace the queer histories of unconventional same-sex intimacies and gender crossings. In addition to Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf and other figures connected to the Bloomsbury group, well known for their bohemian approach to sexuality, the guide also examines lesser known historical figures.

It sheds light on several male aristocrats who were arrested for public indecency. For example, William Bankes fled his home at Kingston Lacy to avoid prosecution for homosexual acts and lived abroad for the remainder of his life. Meanwhile, Robert Gould Shaw III, the eldest son of Nancy Astor of Civeden in Buckinghamshire, served six months in prison for homosexual acts. However, as the owners of *The Times* and *The Observer*, the Astor family were able to keep the scandal out of the newspapers. Other individuals featured in the guidebook include the same-sex couple Judith Ackland and Mary Stella Edwards, whose summer home and art studio, The Cabin at Bucks Mills, continues to be used as a space for artists’ residences thanks to the National Trust. The guidebook also features a ménage à trois between Edy (Edith) Craig, Chris St John (Christabel Marshall) and Tony (Clare) Atwood at Smallhythe Place in Kent.

The authors are self-aware that in examining the queer histories of National Trust properties they focus almost exclusively on those with money and status. They note that ‘As we wrote about them, we were aware of other queer lives lived around them which left little or no trace’ (p.5). The queer history of working class people, including the servants and workers at many National Trust properties remains largely hidden. There are however, glimpses of working class queer life. For example, the guidebook tells of how in 1957, Vita Sackville-West wrote to a friend about two estate workers at Sissinghurst who were being blackmailed. It appears from the letter that Vita was concerned that rumours of her own same-sex liaisons could lead to guilt by association. She was also

concerned about Sissinghurst 'getting a bad name'. The book also includes the life story of a trans daughter of a chauffeur at Sissinghurst.

At times the individuals' connections to National Trust properties does feel a little tenuous. It includes not only owners and occupants but also famous visitors and artists whose work remain on display in the properties. For example, the infamous cross-dressing diplomat and French Spy Chevalier d'Eon appears to be included because they stayed at Staunton Harold in Leicestershire in the 1770s and because early copies of d'Eon's memoirs are held in the libraries of five National Trust properties. However, these connections remain fascinating.

In addition to 'badge-gate', the National Trust have also been publicly criticised for 'outing' Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer of Felbrigg Hall. Ketton-Cremer doesn't actually feature in the guidebook, but his sexuality was discussed in a short video narrated by Stephen Fry which was displayed at Felbrigg Hall as part of the *Prejudice & Pride* season (East of England National Trust, 2017). According to newspaper reports, this angered Ketton-Cremer's godsons who said that their godfather was discreet about his sexuality and that the National Trust should have respected that. The Trust meanwhile claim that they were not 'outing' Ketton-Cremer as they were able to find many accounts that openly acknowledged his homosexuality. Furthermore, as a renowned biographer himself, Ketton-Cremer would surely have understood that the personal lives of historical figures are an important part of biographical accounts. He would also likely have realised that he himself would be the subject of such biographical scrutiny on bequeathing Felbrigg Hall to the National Trust. Furthermore, they point out that discussing his sexuality highlights the stigma and challenges of being openly queer in the past.

This is a theme that runs through the guidebook. As the authors make clear, the risk of scandal, blackmail and arrest made discretion imperative: 'The habit of discretion was powerful: queer relationships are often understood and experienced in the context of euphemism, tacit knowledge, gossip and rumour' (p.43). The concept of a 'habit of discretion' might be a useful way of accounting for the routine failure to acknowledge queer aspects of our history. Billig (1995, 1999) argues that social life comprises of complex norms and customs that we follow as matters of habit. He also explains that ideological habits of not noticing give existing social relations and inequalities the appearance of being natural. This may explain the persistence of mundane, taken for granted forms of heterosexism in an increasingly tolerant social climate. Details of heterosexual love interests and the married lives of historical figures are routinely included in biographical accounts, but their ubiquity goes unnoticed. Meanwhile, queer aspects of our past are habitually

kept quiet and bringing them to the public's attention is considered 'indiscreet', an invasion of privacy or controversial. This cultural habit of discretion remains powerful to this day and continues to be reproduced through the social practice of 'passing'; for example, many queer people habitually avoid public displays of same-sex affection even when it is (relatively) safe to do so. There has not been an organised homophobic conspiracy to conceal queer aspects of our past (although some descendants of historical figures are known to have burned diaries and correspondence that could have brought shame on their families). Rather, as Billig (2000) notes regarding a failure to acknowledge Jewish influences in historical narratives, it is often 'a story of not noticing and not wanting to be noticed' (p14). However, such social processes need to be understood in a historical context of shame and stigma. The National Trust's *Prejudice & Pride* project is important precisely because historical narratives often fail to acknowledge same-sex intimacies and gender nonconformity. As the authors of the guidebook state: 'If queer people have been viewed as social and cultural outliers, that does not place them outside Britain's social and cultural history, or beyond the purview of our national heritage' (p.55).

I bought my copy of the guidebook during a visit to Plas Newydd, the family home of Henry Cecil Paget (1875-1905), the 5th Marquess of Anglesey. The property is also home to a beautiful 17-metre-long mural by Rex Whistler. The queer aspects of the property's history were not well publicised. While I was already aware that Whistler is thought to have had romantic relationships with both men and women, I didn't see any mention of this in the property's Rex Whistler exhibition. Whistler does feature in the *Prejudice & Pride* guidebook but the only mention of his private life, I saw, at the property itself were love letters by Whistler to Lady Caroline Paget (daughter of the 6th Marquess). And while I had noticed the photographs of Henry Cecil Paget's camp theatrical costumes on display at the property, it wasn't until I read the *Prejudice & Pride* guidebook (which features him on the front cover) that I learnt about his unconsummated marriage and his ambiguous sexuality. So, the queer history of Plas Newydd would likely remain partly hidden to the many visitors who didn't buy the *Prejudice & Pride* guidebook. Like Waters, I too experienced a thrill in discovering semi-secret bits of 'our' history.

The guidebook ends by highlighting queer figures who have worked within the National Trust since it was founded. It also points to the Trust's past work in celebrating LGBTQ heritage. For example, in 2011 the Back to Backs National Trust property in Birmingham (which itself is located in Birmingham's gay village) hosted a theatrical exploration of the history of the local gay community. At just 56 pages

long, the guidebook doesn't go into great detail regarding the historical figures featured but there is enough to whet one's appetite and leave the reader wanting to find out more about some of these intriguing individuals. I am already looking forward to exploring more National Trust properties mentioned in the guidebook and I hope the organisation is rewarded for its efforts with an increase in LGBTQ visitors and members. In the face of venomous criticism from the right-wing press, I also hope the adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity holds true, or as Oscar Wilde once put it: 'The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about'.

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