

Book Reviews

When Brooklyn Was Queer: A History. By Hugh Ryan. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019. Pp. 320 \$29.99

Over the past two decades, Brooklyn has undergone a renaissance, sparking historical inquiry into the borough's unexplored history. In *When Brooklyn Was Queer: A History*, Hugh Ryan, a gifted historian and storyteller as well as the founder of a pop-up LGBTQ museum, seeks to fill a gap in the history of New York City. Ryan, a relatively recent Brooklynite, describes how despite his academic training in the history of sexuality and gender, he stumbled upon the subject matter of his book by chance while working as a reporter in the borough. Ryan's work is in dialogue with and is influenced by George Chauncey's 1994 *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*.⁴²³ However, Ryan's work has a much broader focus than Chauncey's classic work. While Chauncey focused on gay men and culture in Manhattan, Ryan explores the rich, but what he categorizes as forgotten, history of "queer people" in Brooklyn from the mid-nineteenth century to the pre-Stonewall era.

The title of the book is both a play on words and represents a challenge to the contemporary era's conception of sexuality, as well as the repeated foolhardy attempts to impose views on gender and sexuality on the past. Brooklyn,

⁴²³ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

in Ryan's view, was "queer" because it possessed an odd and quirky character that differed from Manhattan. The title's second meaning challenges the contemporary era's notion of the fixed nature of sexuality and its sexual labels.

Despite recent attempts to reclaim the term, "queer" remains a controversial word in the LGBTQ community due to its long history as a slur. Thus, Ryan's use of the term may be controversial for some general readers at first glance. However, Ryan persuasively describes how the use of "queer" is more appropriate than the use of contemporary terms when referring to sexual minorities and gender nonconformists who lived in prior generations. Ryan explains how terms like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual are anachronistic terms when describing men and women in the past, as people in the past did not share current understandings of gender and sexuality. Instead, Ryan uses the all-compassing term "queer" to describe a wide array of sexual minorities and gender nonconformists, including what the contemporary era refers to as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender individuals, as well as a collection peoples who challenge dominant gender stereotypes. Ryan's wide focus allows him to explore people that sometimes fall outside of the traditional scope of LGBT history.

Ryan's exploration of the history of "queer people" in Brooklyn, sheds valuable light on notions of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially of often-overlooked working-class "queer people." Specifically, Ryan does his best work in his analysis of how various forces and events shaped notions of gender and sexuality and how these forces and events

interacted with “queer people” and “queer spaces” in Brooklyn in the pre-Stonewall era. These factors and events include urbanization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Progressivism in the early 20th century, both World Wars, the Cold War, and deindustrialization, as well as demographic changes in the mid-20th century. In doing so, Ryan challenges the contemporary era’s notion of the fixed nature of gender and sexuality.

Divided into seven chapters, Ryan traces the history of “queer people,” beginning with the public emergence of “queer spaces” and “queer people” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, Ryan traces how various events, including the Progressive Era, the roaring 1920s, the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War impacted Brooklyn’s “queer people” and “queer places.” In Chapter Seven, Ryan describes Brooklyn’s “queer history” as erased, in large part, due to the post-World War II era destruction of many “queer places” in the borough. According to Ryan, Brooklyn’s “queer history” was intrinsically linked to several waterfront communities, including Brooklyn Heights, Coney Island, and the neighborhoods surrounding the Brooklyn Naval Yard. The deterioration of waterfront neighborhoods in the middle of the twentieth century due to a host of factors including deindustrialization, changes in the public’s tastes in entertainment, the closure of the Brooklyn Naval Yard, changing demographics, and city planners that destroyed large tracts of waterfront in the city, erased the memory of places previously linked to “queer people” in Brooklyn.

Ryan's book draws heavily on a rich collection of primary and secondary sources. His work is in dialogue with and draws upon insights of prior scholarly works in the field of the history of sexuality, most notably Chauncey’s *Gay*

New York. Moreover, Ryan's book fills gaps in the prior research as he draws upon varied underworked sources, including the memoirs, papers, and interviews of a wide range of "queer" Brooklynites. Thus, Ryan's book not only draws upon the writings of such famous men like Walt Whitman and Hart Crane (most famously known for *The Bridge*) from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also explores the lives of relatively unknown "queer people." For example, Ryan introduces the reader to collection of interesting characters including little-known female researchers and writers, cross-dressing entertainers, muscle boys and bearded ladies from Coney Island, working-class men and sailors who occasionally slept with other men, lesbian steelworkers during World War II, as well as ordinary "queer" people who sought to live and love in relative anonymity in various neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

The book is the product of extensive archival research at various libraries in the New York City area, including at the New York Public Library. Specifically, Ryan's extensive archival research as a Research Fellow at the New York Public Library provided him insight into how various reform groups interacted with Brooklyn's "queer" communities. For example, Ryan explored the activities of groups like the Committee of Fourteen, a Progressive reform group in the early twentieth century, that sought to suppress both commercial sex as well as public sex between men. Moreover, Ryan explored the papers of organizations like the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants that sought to study sexuality in the 1930s. In the view of Ryan, social reformers, as well as the scientific community, played a

significant role in providing the intellectual justifications for what is now referred to as homophobia.

Ryan's extensive research reveals how notions about sexuality in the nineteenth century differed markedly from the mid-twentieth century's rigid division of sexuality into "homosexual" and "heterosexual" camps. In Ryan's view, the nineteenth century was relatively ambivalent towards those people who challenged dominant gender stereotypes. However, hostility towards "queer people" hardened in the early twentieth century as social reformers, the medical community, law enforcement, and courts used the power of the state, science, and the legal system first to categorize and then to criminalize "queer people." Ryan details how the Cold War further played a role in shaping what Ryan describes as the relatively recent phenomenon of homophobia, as homosexuality and sexual difference emerged as both a moral and political threat during the hysteria of the McCarthy era. The Stonewall uprising and the political organizing of the 1960s, in Ryan's opinion, was a backlash to the hardening of homophobia and sexual repression of the 1950s.

Despite the work's many strengths, the book is not without its flaws. However, Ryan's Epilogue directly addresses one of the few possible criticisms of his work, i.e., the book's relatively cursory exploration of "queer people" of color. In addressing this criticism, Ryan persuasively explains how racism in the past that included red-lining and segregation, as well as the lack of primary sources, made it difficult to explore the lives of "queer people" of color in the pre-Stonewall era. Thus, Ryan hints at future research projects for enterprising historians of sexuality, African American, and New York City history who are willing to

take up his call for further study of Brooklyn's "queer people" of color.

When Brooklyn Was Queer: A History is a must-read for the general reader as well as scholars with interest in New York City history and the history of sexuality. Ryan masterfully introduces the general reader to the insights of leading historians of sexuality and New York City. At the same time, he weaves in copious quotes and stories from the famous and ordinary "queer" Brooklynites which shed light on many chapters of Brooklyn's forgotten "queer history." This rare combination renders Ryan's work both an entertaining and informative page-turner for the general reader and the scholar alike. In particular, Ryan's work should also be assigned reading for any aspiring historian. Ryan's work serves as an example of how to write in clear, engaging, and accessible historical prose while simultaneously weighing into heady historiographical debates like the origins of homophobia, the nature of gender and sexuality, and the interaction between various forces, events, and the "queer community."

—James Barney, University of Memphis