



Out in Maggie's Britain

by W.C. McRae

Before W.C. McRae went to the UK in early September, we asked him to look in at *Gay's the Word* for the latest on their fight with Maggie's troops. McRae reports also on the lengths to which right-wingers will go to deny equal access to gays and lesbians in the UK, and the British hysteria surrounding AIDS.

Britain has a long and confused history regarding homosexuality. Many of its most celebrated literary and artistic figures — from Marlowe to David Hockney, Byron to Virginia Woolf — have been gay or lesbian. For upper class young men, exposure to gay sexual experience is almost institutionalized by its tradition of public schools. And Britain, and especially England, to a degree unexpected in a largely secular society, inhibits itself by strictly observed, repressive, and self-policed social stereotypes, but there is within this identity matrix the category of "the eccentric" — "daft Uncle Harry" or "the Misses Dunn and Gilbert at the top of the road" — into which many gay people are funneled to their safety but at cost to their integrity.

The underside of this is the periodic scapegoating of gay figures in a kind of ritual purification — linked to titillation — of the British psyche. Oscar Wilde spent two years at hard labor, for flaunting his relationship with an aristocratic lover. To popular fancy, all British/Nazi double agents are upper class gay men of Cambridge. And in recent years the fall of Jeremy Thorpe as head of the Liberal Party was accompanied by an indecent collective tut-tutting of tongues in sham embarrassment and petty malice.

And, like America, Britain is presently experiencing, through similar political forces, the death, or at least the atrophying, of the liberal tradition of the '60s and '70s. But in many real ways, the situation socially and politically for gay men and lesbians in Britain under the Thatcher regime is much worse than it is presently for American gay people under Reagan.

Gay's the Word

Gay's the Word, the world's second largest gay and lesbian bookstore, had been in op-

eration for five years in Central London, serving the needs of the lesbian and gay community. In a bold, carefully planned, and completely unprovoked move, HM Customs and Excise mounted a full-scale raid on Gay's the Word on April 10, 1984. In its raids, the Crown ultimately seized 141 imported titles (mostly from America) from the bookstore and storage. Criminal charges were filed against the company and the nine individual directors (seven men and two women) for "conspir[ing] fraudulently to evade the prohibition of indecent or obscene material" imposed by importation law. Three individual directors were also charged with being "knowingly concerned in fraudulent evasion on importation of indecent or obscene books." Lastly, all nine directors have been charged with consenting "to the commission of an offence . . . of being knowingly concerned in the fraudulent evasion" of the importation of obscene books. Each of the three charges carries a maximum of two years imprisonment and unlimited fines. The proceedings against Gay's the Word involve both condemnation of the seized titles and criminal charges against the directors.

The case is being decried in all sectors — save the government — as an attack not simply on what gay men and lesbians can read, but as a civil liberty issue, the right to read freely, in a free society, what one chooses to read.

But so anxious were HM Customs and Excise and the Thatcher government to do damage to the gay community, that they failed to do their homework. First of all, through an inconsistency in the law, some of the books that the Crown is seeking to condemn as obscene when imported are in fact also available in British editions, against which no obscenity charges have been brought.

Secondly, the books seized by the Customs agents as obscene were a willy-nilly selection of titles that had nothing to do with pornography and were linked only by their being imported, and, in the bureaucratic mind, by a primitive logic that assumes: *homosexuality + books = pornography*. Authors whose works were confiscated and condemned as obscene include Edmund White, Jean Genet, Oscar Wilde, Patricia Nell Warren, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gore Vidal. Titles seized as obscene include *Directory for Gay Plays*, *Feminism in the '80s*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *The AIDS Epidemic*, and — perhaps most dangerously — *The Divine Cut-Out Doll Book*.

Also, the government, when planning such an all-out attack on what a minority may or may not import to read, failed to realize the extent of sympathy from the "straight" book trade. Active help and support has come from such mainstream sources as Penguin Bookstores, Faber and Faber, Chatto and Windus, and others.

The case will return to court probably early in 1986 with the criminal charges against the directors. The Crown then has the prerogative to move against each title individually, to condemn each as obscene.

Gay's the Word is being charged only under importation laws — only imported titles are being deemed obscene. And with reason. Obscenity, or what the "ordinary man in the street" would think is in "poor taste," under the Customs Consolidation Act of 1876 doesn't allow a "literary" or "artistic merit" defense, whereas a title published in Britain has the relative protection of this defense. It is quite possible, for instance, that a book may be freely published in Britain and would be illegal to import into Britain.

According to Paul Hegarty, manager of the store, the defense will argue the educational and sociological merit of the seized titles, and more largely, the bookstore itself. 20,000 pounds have been raised out of the expected 50,000 pounds it will take to defend the case, and the issue has to an extent not foreseen or desired by the Crown, galvanized the gay/lesbian community and the straight business community.

A London Centre

A happier recent move has been the establishment in London (and Edinburgh) of a lesbian and gay centre. The London Centre, located in the West End, contains a bookstore, bar and buffet restaurant, counseling and advice facilities; provides information about arts and cultural development; and provides free, centralized meeting space for lesbian and gay groups. The Centre has had its stormy days within — one hears stories of battles concerning staffing, gender parity, and political rectitude — all rituals of purification. But funding, not surprisingly, has been its primary outside concern. Established and funded initially by the Greater London Council — the elected central government for the greater London area — the Centre has since its inception been under attack by the Thatcher Government. Short-lived jubilation was felt this year when the GLC funded the Centre to the tune of 134,000 pounds.

But in a move unprecedented in British history, the Thatcher government, for obviously political reasons (the GLC is "left-wing" — dominated by the opposition Labour Party) began to legislate against the very existence of the GLC. Early this summer Thatcher and her Conservative majority in Parliament were able, against great outcry even from within her party, to vote out the existence of the GLC. In a well-researched series of moves, the Conservatives disenfranchised the mandate for a central London government. The GLC will soon no longer exist and London will have no city government save its separate borough councils. Other major cities with Labour councils are now under attack. So totalitarian is the aim of the Thatcher government and such is her majority in Parliament that she legislatively destabilizes or — in this case — destroys the mandate for, any resist a nce or opposition. Even though Britain's only openly gay MP comes from Finsbury and Islington, where the Lesbian and Gay Centre is located, it is unlikely that any one individual borough will be able to fund services for all London.

AIDS in the UK

AIDS is as urgent an issue in Britain as in the US, but expectedly, considering the political climate prevailing in both, programs concerning AIDS have received little government assistance. Given the hysterical nature of the British press and the willfully banal turn of the average British mind, little public education has been accomplished. As in the US, almost all work with AIDS has been volunteered from the gay community itself. But for reasons best known to themselves, there has been little cooperation between these groups and partisan factions divide what services are offered. The medical community, with exceptions, has largely bought into the idea of the "gay plague," and with the recently legislated right to incarcerate a person with AIDS in hospital, is doing little to contravene the titillation that the British populace derives from casting moral aspersions at a minority. And all the more so since AIDS is *foreign*. A medical spokesman for the Health Board of Glasgow blamed AIDS on North American visitors to Britain, establishing polarities of the purity of "our" British blood, as opposed to that of "outsiders." Nothing so excites a Briton as the idea of an invasion, even if it is viral.