



Peyrefitte, Roger (1907-2000)

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As one of the most famous homosexuals in France in the latter half of the twentieth century, Roger Peyrefitte, the best-selling author of both novels and gossipy non-fiction, shaped the public perception of homosexuals in the days before gay liberation. He became an object of ridicule and derision to homophobes and gay liberationists alike.

The French public saw him as a cultured, supercilious, snobby, and waspish "*folle*" ("queen") or "*tante*" ("auntie") who preyed on underage adolescents. And despite Peyrefitte's claim to be serving the homosexual cause, by the 1970s most gay men and lesbians found him something of an embarrassment.

Peyrefitte was born in Castres in southwestern France on August 17, 1907 and educated in Catholic boarding schools in the region. The most lasting effect of this religious education was his life-long hostility to the Roman Catholic Church. He went on to study at the University of Toulouse and the prestigious Sciences Po' (the Free School for Political Sciences) in Paris.

He had his first homosexual experience at eighteen and thereafter led an active sex life, hunting for teenage boys across Europe. He also had occasional affairs with women, whom (by his own account) he introduced to the delights of anal sex.

Peyrefitte entered the French diplomatic service in 1931 and served as secretary at the French embassy in Athens from 1933 to 1938. Forced to resign in October 1940 because of his relations with a fourteen-year-old boy, he was recalled to duty three years later to serve the collaborationist Vichy government in German-occupied Paris.

After the Liberation, France's provisional government dismissed him on suspicion of collaborationism in February 1945. Peyrefitte later appealed his dismissal and the Council of State finally ruled in his favor in 1962, but the Foreign Ministry refused to reintegrate him. He was by then, in any case, a professional writer with no desire to return to state service.

Peyrefitte's first, best, and best-known novel, *Les Amitiés Particulières* (translated into English as *Special Friendships*), tells the story of love between two teenage boys in a Catholic boarding school. The book may have been based on his own experience. Peyrefitte later explained, "I was a young diplomat, and I wanted to show the origin of those things [i.e. homosexuality]: that it was not simply under the influence of a disgusting adult that young boys could feel that sort of attraction."

Critically well-received, the novel won the Prix Renaudot. It caused a first scandal when it appeared in 1944 and a second when made into a movie in 1964.

After François Mauriac (1885-1970), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952, attacked the film as immoral, Peyrefitte shocked the French literary world by accusing Mauriac of concealing his own homosexual tendencies and by taxing the respected author with hypocrisy.

During the making of the film, Peyrefitte befriended a twelve-year-old extra, Alain-Philippe Malagnac, who eventually became the great love of his life as well as his secretary and business partner.

The success of the Peyrefitte's first novel, the resulting notoriety, and his dismissal from the foreign service coalesced to lead him to devote himself entirely to literary pursuits. In the words of fellow writer Yvon Audouard, "He took up literature the way others take up religion."

In the course of his long life (he died at 93), Peyrefitte published dozens of books, including numerous novels, a three-volume fictionalized biography of Alexander the Great, and two volumes on Voltaire (whom he claimed to have been homosexual). He also wrote about Baron Jacques d'Adelsward-Fersen's exile in Capri (*L'Exilé de Capri*, 1959) and translated Greek pederastic love poetry.

Much of his work provoked scandal. In 1965, for instance, *Les Juifs* (*The Jews*), in which he revealed the Jewish ancestry of important people around the world, brought charges of anti-Semitism and a judicial order to excise a page that mentioned a member of the Rothschild family.

Peyrefitte infuriated the Vatican with *The Keys of Saint-Peter* in 1955 (the Church accused him of offending religion and the priesthood); and by declaring in 1976 that Pope Paul VI had once been a practicing homosexual.

He was sued successfully by Marlene Dietrich for suggesting in *Les Américains* (1968) that she had been a supporter of Hitler.

In two volumes of oral memoirs (1977 and 1980), he divulged the secrets (especially sexual) of numerous celebrities, including himself. Among those he portrayed in a negative light were Alain Delon, André Gide, and Marcel Proust.

Peyrefitte clearly valued the commercial success of his books far more than he cared about their quality. An anonymous critic in the magazine *L'Express* commented in 1968, "In the days when he wrote *Les Amitiés Particulières*, he had something to say. He now has only something to sell." The novelist Philippe Sollers described Peyrefitte as "that pig who rolls in his own muck."

"I have been reproached with liking 'to stir up shit,'" Peyrefitte declared in his own defense; "I'm sorry, but this muck exists, it impregnates our society. . . . I attack only imposters, hypocrites, worthless literary or political celebrities and destroyers of our society."

In everything he said or wrote, Peyrefitte insisted, "I try to advance an accursed cause that is dear to me: homosexuality. . . . I'm not a lover of sordid gossip. I am defending a cause."

Peyrefitte was certainly no radical gay liberationist, but he did back André Baudry and his "homophile" review, *Arcadie* (published 1954-1982); indeed, it was Peyrefitte who named the periodical. He also financed a gay nightclub, Le Colony, and Paris's first gay sex bar, Le Bronx, both of which opened on the Rue Sainte-Anne in late 1973.

Peyrefitte reveled in the fame and wealth that success brought him. "Money is the real aristocracy," he declared. "It permits one to distinguish oneself from others (is that not what everyone wants?), to indulge in a certain luxury, to fill one's life with beautiful things."

His political views were deeply conservative: "I have a profound respect for order. . . . I hate all revolutionary movements. . . . I am too bourgeois . . . to approve of . . . the enemies of the bourgeoisie."

In his last years, he came out in open support of the extreme right-wing politician Jean-Marie Le Pen and his xenophobic and homophobic party, the National Front.

Peyrefitte died on November 5, 2000, in Paris, after a long battle with Parkinson's disease.

Hervé Chevaux wrote after Peyrefitte's death that "the tragedy of Roger Peyrefitte was to have had an upper-class upbringing, to have been programmed for a brilliant career and to have failed because he was too obviously homosexual." Instead of challenging the society that scorned him, Chevaux added, Peyrefitte played the role of the superficial homosexual and as a result prostituted his literary talent.

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Michael D. Sibal is Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the history of modern France and has published articles and essays on the Napoleonic police state (1799-1815), the nineteenth-century French labor movement, and French homosexuality. He has co-edited, with Jeffrey Merrick, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (2002) and is currently writing a history of the gay male community of Paris since 1700.