



## Alexandria

by Desmond Ariel

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Located on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, Alexandria has achieved a symbolic resonance far beyond its size and economic importance. Its iconic status is assured, not simply because of the decadent sensibility consistently attributed to it, but also because numerous writers, both gay and straight, have paid it warm tribute, naming it as their city of cities. More often than not they cite the archetypal homosexual poet Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) as its principal muse and presiding spirit.

Cavafy came to be identified with Alexandria through his poetry, which presents readers with a myriad of classical, historical, and scholarly allusions, along with a hedonistic, sensual, cynical, and modern outlook. These mingled influences and perspectives are embodied in Alexandria's culture, which combines elegance and ennui.

For writers, such as E.M. Forster and Lawrence Durrell, the mythic, imaginary, and real-life city all converge on the streets and in the cafes. In his poem "The City" (1910), Cavafy embraces the paradox of the city: it is both a prison and one's means of escape through art. "The city will follow you. In the same streets, you'll wander endlessly."

### **Why Alexandria? History**

Alexandria's history continues to fascinate many. Founded in 333 B.C.E. by Alexander the Great, whose body was returned there after his death, the history of the city is a long one, encompassing numerous religions and dynasties.

From the Ptolemaic dynasty, Cleopatra, who lost the city, is endlessly intriguing as a female who embodied sexual allure with political astuteness. The famous university library gardens of Mouseion, alleged to have been burned by invading Arabs, were in fact burned by fourth-century Christian zealots, who also murdered Greek philosopher and mathematician Hypatia. Alexandria, home to Euclid, the mathematician, witnessed the rise to prominence of new and hybrid schools of philosophy: the Gnostics, Neo-Pythagoreans, Neo-Platonists, Monophysites, and Judaists.

That the city underwent shifts of religious allegiance, also meant that it experienced both dialogue and sectarian clashes of belief. It was conquered by both Romans and Moslems, and in the early twentieth century had a European outlook, housing enclaves of Greeks, Jews, Coptics, and Syro-Lebanese.

### **Famous Visitors**

Gustave Flaubert visited Alexandria in 1849 but disdained it as too European, preferring the ancient temples and camels further south. Somerset Maugham and Noël Coward were also regular visitors at the Cecil Hotel on the corniche. Yet, of all the homosexual writers, initially outsiders to Alexandria but who had personal epiphanies there, none was more indebted to it than E. M. Forster.

During World War I, Forster spent two years in Alexandria working for the Red Cross. While he was struggling with drafts of *A Passage to India* (1924) and *Maurice* (1971), he had his first fully satisfying sexual experience with a young Egyptian tram conductor, Mohammed el Adl, then only 18. As the result of this experience, Alexandria became for Forster a totem that triggered a flood of Proustian nostalgia. In Alexandria, he met Cavafy, whose poetry he admired and was to promote and bring to the attention of the English-speaking world. He later claimed "It was the best thing I did."

Like Cavafy, Forster was fascinated by the city's history. He wrote an account of the actual city, *Alexandria: A History and Guide* (1922), and a guide to the city's unseen aspects, *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923).

### **The Genius Loci: Cavafy**

Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) lived in Alexandria for most of his life. He was a clerk in the Public Works Department. His rooms have become a museum, now housed at the Greek Consulate. While caution was always necessary, Cavafy found solace in Greek youths whom he cruised in billiard halls, cafes, and tavernas. Like the ancient Alexandrian poet Callimachus, famed for his polished epigrams, he had "the disease of loving boys." Both poets wrote accounts of homoerotic attraction and dalliances. In addition, however, Cavafy developed a sophisticated idea of history, one that privileged the ages of decadent Hellenism rather than that of Classical Greece.

### **City of Memory**

Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, initiated by *Justine* (1957), has also created a distinctive impression of parallel but disjunctive aspects, revolving around the sexual ambivalence of Alexandria's inhabitants. "Only the city is real," Durrell declared, meaning that in Alexandria personalities were subsumed to the city's larger influence. The character of Balthazar is said to have been modelled directly on Cavafy.

Durrell also echoed Cavafy's notion of the city, familiar to gay people, many of whom relocated in order to discover and be themselves. He stated that there two cities, the one you are born in and the one of your predilection. For him, Alexandria was that city of mind and memory. He believed that one relationship there could make it become one's entire world.

### **Contemporary Alexandria**

Forster described Alexandria as "The city of the soul." This trope has been echoed by many other writers, including Mark Doty. In his book of poems *My Alexandria* (1994), Doty trades freely on the city's reputation for having annexed an imaginary zone of eroticism, nostalgia, and personal trauma.

However, when Durrell visited Alexandria in 1977 to make a film for the BBC, he was much disappointed at how the Islamic influence had turned Alexandria's outlook away from Europe and towards Mecca. This tendency has accelerated in recent years.

In recent years, in fact, Alexandria has been off the gay tourist map because of Egypt's vaguely defined laws on "debauchery," which penalize both sexual behavior and attempts to organize political campaigns in support of glbtq rights. Thus, Alexandria now eschews its rich past as a haven for homosexuals and its tradition of tolerance. Indeed, even doctors in Cairo declare that the cure for homosexuality is castration.

Moreover, in contemporary Egypt police operate a system of entrapment by agents provocateurs and arbitrary arrests of citizens on vague charges of immorality. A gay boat-party in Cairo in 2001 saw hundreds arrested and imprisoned. This scandal drew international attention to Egypt's hostile courtrooms where hooded defendants are forced to stand in cages. As a result of such persecution, homosexuals have been driven underground.

Alexandria has little in the way of new building, its now-faded cosmopolitan chic looking ever more dusty and bedraggled. It remains a good destination only for those intent on enjoying its between-the-World-Wars atmosphere or for those who wish to savor its history or to see the city through the lenses of Cavafy, Forster, and Durrell. Unfortunately, the city may never again recapture the particular sensibility that so fascinated those writers.

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### **About the Author**

**Desmond Ariel** is a Briton who writes fiction, essays, and reviews. His short story, "Twelve Days in a Week," appears in *Foreign Affairs: Erotic Travel Tales*, edited by Mitzi Szereto (2004, Cleis Press). His memoir, "Shushalooza Meyl: Johannesburg to Capetown," will appear in *Looking for Love in Faraway Places: Tales of Gay Men's Romance Overseas*, edited by Michael Luongo (2006, Haworth Press).