



Boswell, John (1947-1994)

by Matthew D. Johnson

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John Eastburn Boswell was one of the late twentieth century's most influential historians of homosexuality and author of one of the first book-length histories on the subject.

Born in Boston in 1947 into a military family, Boswell earned his undergraduate degree from William and Mary. A gifted medieval philologist, he received his doctorate from Harvard University in 1975, whereupon he joined the Yale University history faculty; he was made full professor in 1982. In 1987, Boswell helped organize the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale, which is now the Research Fund for Lesbian and Gay Studies. He was named the A. Whitney Griswold Professor of History in 1990, when he was also appointed to a two-year term as chair of the Yale history department.

Boswell's first book was a well-received revision of his Harvard dissertation entitled *The Royal Treasure: Muslim Communities under the Crown of Aragon in the Fourteenth Century*, published in 1977. He later remarked that, given the academic climate of the 1970s, he felt it was necessary to earn his credentials as a "mainstream" historian before he could turn his attention to the subject that most engaged him, the emerging field of gay studies.

In 1980 Boswell published his second book, the volume destined to make his reputation: *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Its radical argument--that homosexual behavior between men was tolerated, even at times celebrated, by Roman Catholics prior to thirteenth-century church reforms--drew the ire of both gay studies scholars and conservative critics even as it guaranteed Boswell a large and enthusiastic popular readership.

Many historians of gay life regarded Boswell's history of "gay people" in European antiquity as anachronistic, especially since it stood deliberately at odds with a growing scholarly consensus that social identities grounded in sexual practice had their origins only in the late nineteenth century. Boswell was frequently painted by his colleagues in the field as the essentialist *par excellence*. Many claimed that he rejected the idea that human sexual identity was shaped by social constraints on desire, though Boswell never explicitly affirmed or denied such a claim in his writings.

Other critics insisted Boswell, a practicing Catholic, was an apologist for the mistreatment of homosexuals at the hands of the Catholic Church, while some Catholics found his writings nigh heretical.

Yet the response of his gay non-academic readership was overwhelmingly positive. Carolyn Dinshaw has analyzed fan letters sent to Boswell in the wake of the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and speculated about the extent to which such correspondence between reader and author served to consolidate a growing sense of gay community. Despite the accusations of "interpretive excess" leveled against it, Boswell's narrative provided gay men, in particular, a history in which they could unambiguously imagine themselves, a powerful tool in advancing the cause of gay liberation. The book was also crowned with the American Book Award for History in 1981.

The attention accorded this work by both gay and mainstream media in the United States catapulted Boswell into the influential position of acting as effective spokesman for gay history, as well as his subsequent position as a book reviewer for *The Atlantic* and *The New Republic*.

Following a third book on the history of child abandonment in medieval Europe, Boswell returned to the history of homosexuality with *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. In this work, published in the final months of his life, he described Christian ceremonies performed by priests that celebrated relationships between two men or two women and mirrored marriage rites in many of their particulars. The book was at once an elaboration on his earlier writings as well as a subtle polemic advocating the solemnization of same-sex unions in our own era.

Like *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Boswell's final book also met with both scholarly and popular controversy. Critics on both the left and the right disputed whether the relationships identified by Boswell were specifically sexual or even emotional in nature.

Sadly, Boswell did not survive to respond to these challenges. He died of complications from AIDS on December 24, 1994, at age 47. He was survived by his partner, Jerry Hart, as well as his parents, Colonel Henry Boswell, Jr. and Catharine Boswell, a sister, Patricia, and two brothers, Wray and Henry Boswell, 3rd.

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About the Author

Matthew D. Johnson holds a Masters Degree in Anthropology and History from the University of Michigan. He is currently Cataloging Assistant in the Brooklyn Museum library.