



## Denmark by Dag Heede

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Denmark, the little Scandinavian fairy tale country of Hans Christian Andersen, has a reputation for sexual liberation, tolerance, and progressive social policy in regards to glbtq issues.

### **From Sodomy to Homosexuality**

Historically, the crime of sodomy was harshly punished. During the Middle Ages, it was dealt with as an ecclesiastical matter. After the Reformation, it became the province of the secular courts. However, almost all cases involved sex with animals. Until the 1830s, very few men were officially punished for having sex with a man or a boy.

As part of the idea that sodomy was the sin not to be spoken of by Christians, government policy was to keep instances of same-sex sexual activity from public knowledge. Rather than prosecute them in the courts, authorities would unofficially warn rumored participants in same-sex sexual activity and then ban them from towns and provinces if such activity persisted.

By 1860, after Copenhagen had experienced a period of rapid growth and achieved the size necessary to sustain a sodomitical subculture, a section of the ramparts surrounding the city had become a cruising place for men.

However, most Danes during the nineteenth century regarded same-sex sexual attraction and activity as a foreign phenomenon. Influenced by developments in Berlin, where a medical model of congenital homosexuality emerged and a large homosexual subculture thrived, many Danes, both homosexuals and their detractors, looked to Germany for guidance. In 1905, in reaction to recurring homosexual scandals involving prostitution, Denmark adopted a statute making male homosexual prostitution illegal.

### **Homosexuality Becomes Public**

In the 1890s homosexuality began to be sensationalized in the tabloid press. Scandals in the period from 1906 to 1911 led to mass press coverage, homosexual roundups, flights into exile, and suicides. Homosexuality was recognized as a local phenomenon and regarded as a moral problem. In 1907 experts estimated the number of male homosexuals in Denmark at several thousands. By 1912 the moral panic had died down.

The earliest public homosexuals in Denmark were literary critic Clemens Petersen (1834-1918) and actor Joakim Reinhard (1858-1925). Both fled to the United States to avoid scandal.

The most important homosexual public figure in Denmark of the early twentieth century was the writer and journalist Herman Bang (1857-1912), who was forced to leave the country for years. Bang shaped and embodied the modern concept of male homosexuality, with its connection to aristocracy, art, nervous degeneration, refinement, exhibitionism, tragedy, and suicide.

After Bang's death, his friend and colleague Christian Houmark (1869-1950) replaced him as Denmark's public male homosexual. Houmark was the first to discuss homosexuality in literature, especially in his

debut novel of 1910. There were no prominent and public lesbians at the time.

The sentencing to prison of a number of men for sodomy in 1907 provoked a debate about the decriminalization of homosexuality. Medical experts, who regarded homosexuality as a congenital medical problem, and members of the legal establishment argued that sodomy, which was punishable by a year in prison if between adults and up to four years with boys under the age of 15, should be removed from the criminal code. The Royal Commission on a New Civil Code, in a report issued in 1912, recommended that sodomy be abolished as a criminal category. The new Code would not be adopted for some time, however.

Before World War I, no pub or restaurant catering to a predominantly homosexual clientele was known to exist. The earliest such establishments date from the period between the two world wars.

### **Cultural Radicalism and Backlash**

The 1930s saw the founding of cultural radicalism, a movement working for sex education, gender equality, abortion, contraception, and tolerance toward sexual variation. The movement was an important voice in debates over sexuality.

When the new civil criminal code was finally adopted in 1933, homosexuality was decriminalized. The reform extended to Iceland, which at the time was part of the kingdom. The code established eighteen as the age of consent for homosexual relations, as opposed to fifteen for heterosexual relations.

In 1941, the first explicit lesbian novel appeared under the pseudonym Agnete Holk.

After World War II, Denmark experienced a homophobic backlash. The country had developed into a modern, industrialized society. Homosexuality was portrayed as an evil consequence of modernity, urbanization, and decadence.

Police intensified efforts to control homosexual activity, employing agent provocateurs (the so-called masturbation patrols) who arrested homosexual men for sex in public. Age of consent laws were stringently enforced; sex with "boys," including those who could give consent to heterosexual relations, was severely punished, often with castration or aversion therapy.

As a reaction to the growing repression, a homophile organization was formed under the nondescript name "The League of 1948." The organization downplayed the sexual elements of homosexuality and employed discreet lobbying to win compassion and understanding. In 1954, it founded the magazine, *Pan*, which is now the oldest, continuously published homosexual magazine in the world.

### **Transsexuality**

The world's first transsexual was the Danish painter Andreas Wegener (1886-1931), who in 1930 underwent sex change operations in Berlin and Dresden. As a tribute to the latter city, Andreas changed his name to Lili Elbe, named after the river running through Dresden. Elbe's memoir, *Man into Woman*, was translated into English in 1933. It became a transsexual bible. In 2000, the Elbe story was retold in David Ebershoff's novel, *The Danish Girl*.

Another series of sex change operations took place in Copenhagen in the years 1951 to 1953. George Jorgensen, an American of Danish descent, became Christine Jorgenson (1925-1989). Jorgenson became an international celebrity, and used her fame to educate people about transsexuality.

### **Gay and Lesbian Liberation**

With the rise of radical feminism, lesbians and gay men in the 1970s challenged the apologetic politics of

the homophile movement and protested openly against patriarchy, capitalism, and sexual oppression. Gayness was flaunted as a progressive and revolutionary life style, especially by the Gay Liberation Front.

Many lesbians, tired of the male dominance of the homophile movement, chose feminism as their arena. Radical lesbians founded the Lesbian Movement. Debates in the lesbian community focused on the ethics of "woman-identified women," who considered lesbianism primarily a way to fight patriarchy, and "the bad girls," who experimented with older forms of role playing (butch/femme), penetration, and S&M. Pop star Anne Linnet (born 1953) left mainstream music and caused a stir by dealing with S&M and lesbianism in her band "Marquis de Sade."

### **Assimilation**

The League of 1948, now renamed "The National Association of Gays and Lesbians," integrated elements of both the Lesbian Movement and the Gay Liberation Front in the 1970s. Yet its politics were assimilationist rather than subversive, an approach especially suited to Denmark's tradition of accommodation.

Like other Nordic countries, Denmark has a political tradition of consensus and discussion. That, together with the country's remarkable cultural and ethnic homogeneity, explains why homosexuals never became a "minority," but rather an "interest group" in Danish politics. This explains also the surprisingly small subcultural manifestations of glbtq life, even in the major city of Copenhagen. Danish queers typically see themselves as Danes before anything else. They do not feel alienated from the larger society, but see themselves as a part of it.

### **Homosexual Marriage**

Denmark's liberal attitude towards sexuality resulted in the decriminalization of pornography in 1969, an event that made the country a leader in the international sexual revolution. Since then, Danish laws and policies in the area of sexual expression have been notably progressive.

Perhaps because of the Danish tradition of liberalism in sexual matters, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s did not lead to an increased level of homophobia. National information campaigns about the disease were closely coordinated with homosexual community leaders. Tourists were surprised to see huge condom ads on the sides of city buses.

In 1987, the Danish Parliament adopted a statute forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In 1989 Denmark became the first country to introduce the "registered partnership"--also known as "gay marriage"--that granted same-sex couples most of the financial benefits and civil rights of heterosexual couples. Skeptics argue that the bill merely demonstrates that the institution of marriage is now a hollow category. Still, the symbolic impact of the bill is hard to ignore; it clearly signals the country's commitment to equality for its glbtq citizens.

In 1997, the dominant Lutheran state church began blessing homosexual partnerships. Many politicians and other public persons are now openly queer.

In March 2009, Danish lawmakers, over the objection of the government, approved a law granting gay couples equal rights in adoption.

Current debates concern artificial insemination and the predicament of queer second generation immigrants from Muslim families.

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