



## Ulrichs, Karl Heinrich (1825-1895)

by Hubert Kennedy

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Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.  
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Nineteenth-century German activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was the first modern theorist of homosexuality. A tireless campaigner against injustice, he directed early sexologists to the subject of homosexuality.

Ulrichs was born on August 28, 1825, in Aurich (Kingdom of Hannover), Germany. His father, an architect in the civil service of Hannover, died when Ulrichs was ten years old. Ulrichs and his mother then lived with her father, a Lutheran superintendent.

After studying law in Göttingen and Berlin, Ulrichs joined the civil service of Hannover in 1848. In 1854, however, his homosexual activity came to the attention of his superiors. He resigned in order to avoid being disciplined, for although homosexual acts were not then illegal in Hannover, as a civil servant he could be dismissed.

Ulrichs then earned his living as a reporter for the important *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Augsburg) and as secretary to one of the representatives to the German Confederation in Frankfurt am Main. He also received a small inheritance from his mother on her death in 1856.

Using the pseudonym Numa Numantius he published in 1864-1865 five booklets under the collective title *Forschungen über das Rathsel der mann männlichen Liebe* (Researches on the Riddle of Male-Male Love). They set forth a biological theory of homosexuality, the so-called third sex theory, which he summed up in the Latin phrase *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa* (a female psyche confined in a male body).

Ulrichs coined the term Urning for the male subject of this condition; he variously called the female counterpart Urningin, Uranierin, Urnin, and Urnigin. (The term "homosexual," coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny, first appeared in 1869.)

Using his real name in his next booklet, Ulrichs described his appearance at a Congress of German Jurists in Munich, where on August 29, 1867, he urged repealing the anti-homosexual laws. He was shouted down and not allowed to finish, but this was the first time that a self-acknowledged Urning/homosexual spoke out publicly for his cause. Thus Ulrichs was not only the first theorist of homosexuality, but also the first homosexual to "come out" publicly.

Ulrichs's series of twelve booklets continued until 1879. His goal was to free people like himself from the legal, religious, and social condemnation of homosexual acts as unnatural, and for this he invented a new terminology that would refer to the nature of the individual and not to the acts performed.

Ulrichs's impact on sexology was more significant for directing medical researchers' attention to the subject of homosexuality than for changing their view of it. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, for example, whose book *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) established the medical view of homosexuality, was first interested in the subject by Ulrichs's writings.

Twice imprisoned for his public protests against the invasion and annexation of Hannover by Prussia in 1866, Ulrichs fought not only for the equal rights of homosexuals, but also for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as for the rights of women, including unwed mothers and their children.

But his one-man campaign against the legal oppression of homosexuals was unsuccessful. Indeed, the harsh Prussian anti-homosexual law was extended to the unified Germany in 1872.

Ulrichs left Germany in 1880 for voluntary exile in Italy, where he devoted the last years of his life to promoting Latin as an international language through the publication of a little Latin journal (*Alaudae*) written entirely by himself. He died on July 14, 1895 in Aquila, Italy.

Ulrichs's original biological theory of homosexuality has since been abandoned, but for more than a century some form of biological determinism has prevailed, both in the popular mind and in scientific circles; it has been adopted by both homosexual liberationists and their enemies.

Ulrichs will be best remembered for his courageous stand for the equal rights of all and, as Magnus Hirschfeld wrote, "as one of the first and noblest of those who have striven with courage and strength in this field to help truth and charity gain their rightful place."

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### **About the Author**

**Hubert Kennedy** has published in several fields and several languages. Among his books is a biography of the German pioneer of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He has also translated the gay novels of John Henry Mackay.