

***Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain.*** By Deborah Cohler. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. xxii + 296 pp. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

This book is profoundly unsettling. At its best, it unsettles conventional assumptions about the emergence of lesbian identity in twentieth-century Britain (and beyond). Marked by meticulous scholarship and clear historical purpose, the book convincingly argues that a public lesbian identity was not exclusively dependent on sexology and ideas about gender deviance, as is commonly supposed, but rather emerged somewhat fitfully from a nexus of discourses, including those of gender, eugenics, empire, and most importantly, nationalism. Cohler's analysis, moreover, contrasts the delayed appearance of a recognizable lesbian identity until post-War England to the abrupt emergence of male homosexuality in the 1890s, and she carefully

traces the complex relationships between male and female homosexuality, showing them to be “mutually productive and related, yet distinct, strands of discursive history” (xviii).

Indeed, one of the most unsettling aspects of this book is that it reveals an almost complete absence of references to female homosexuality prior to 1918 in the discursive sites we most expect to find them: the debates over the New Woman and the Decadent; the fierce rhetoric for and against female Suffrage; and the lively exchanges between readers of Dora Marsden’s *The Freewoman* and *The New Freewoman*, journals that encouraged a robust discussion of a variety of sexual topics, including “free love,” contraception, and male homosexuality—but not female homosexuality. According to Cohler, what linked these various contests was not so much a dependence on discourses of gender and sexology, but rather questions of national identity and citizenship. Thus, for example, she discovers in the gender deviance of the suffragists and suffragettes not the nascent or even unconscious homosexuality assumed by most historians, but rather self-conscious attempts to wrest citizenship from the state by emulating aspects of male behavior. Indeed, a major component of Cohler’s argument is to establish that the link between gender deviance and sexual deviance for women was not cemented in the public imagination until mid-century.

But this book unsettles in other, less laudable ways, beginning with the title, which does not accurately reflect the book’s most important contribution to studies in sexuality: revealing the ways that discourses of nationalism, broadly conceived, rather than war, contributed to the formation of the “lesbian” in popular discourse. It is true that Chapters Four and Five make a strong case for the Great War as enabling the emergence of lesbianism as a recognizable sexual identity. In Chapter Four Cohler discovers the first clear evidence of a public understanding of female homosexuality in three texts produced in (or about) 1918 —Rose Allatini’s 1918 novel, *Despised and Rejected*; the newspaper accounts of the 1918 libel suit, *Rex vs. Pemberton Billing*, in which Maud Allen sued Billing for implying, through the phrase, “The Cult of the Clitoris,” that she was a lesbian; and Parliamentary debates in 1921 about the possibilities of criminalizing female homosexuality. Cohler makes it clear that both the novel and accounts of the trial situate lesbian sexuality in relationship to concerns about sedition at a time when defeat seemed imminent and national identity was under extreme pressure. In Chapter Five she analyzes three novels published in 1928—Radcliffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness*, Compton McKenzie’s *Extraordinary Women*, and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*—showing not only how each depends on understandings of the nation for its depiction of lesbian desire, but also how contemporary critics read the novels as manifestations of the burgeoning gender and sexual deviance that followed the war. But to demonstrate that the Great War in some way enabled the appearance of a coherent

public discourse and understanding of female homosexuality is not quite the same thing as to pinpoint relationships between war more generally and lesbian identity. The “Afterward,” which treats Leslie Feingold’s twenty-first century novel, *Drag Queen Dreams*, makes up some lost ground here: as Cohler remarks in her introduction, Feingold, writing during a time of war, attempted to incite anti-war protests by drawing a direct link between the co-option of the radical suffragettes during the Great War and the silence of queers during the Afghan and Iraq Wars. Yet whereas the “Afterward” provides a rationale for the book’s title, it simultaneously gestures towards a transhistorical understanding of lesbians that threatens to undercut the very fine historical work of the foundational first three chapters.

The somewhat puzzling transhistoricism of the “Afterward” underscores an even more unsettling aspect of an otherwise rigorously historical book, the several lacunae Cohler creates in her historical account. Three in particular seem significant. First there is the surprising lack of discussion of how the war altered discourses about sexuality during the years 1914-1917. A section on reproductive imperatives, eugenic anxieties, and homosexuality on the home and battle fronts would have helped bridge the gap between her discussions of (mostly) pre-war women writers in Chapter Three, “A More Splendid Citizenship,” and Chapter Four, “Around 1918”—or at least help to establish that the emergent lesbian identity of the later texts was in fact completely new. Equally significant is the leap from the end of Chapter Four, which ends with a somewhat confusing discussion of parliamentary debates over a Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1921, to Chapter Five, which discusses three novels published in 1928. It seems that if Cohler really wanted to argue the Great War was a necessary precondition for the emergence of lesbian identity, she might have taken up a greater array of texts produced between 1918 and 1928, subjecting them to the same careful reading style she employs to such great effect in Chapters One through Three. The last historical lacuna this book instantiates is a rather large one, as Cohler leaps from 1928 to 2006, from Woolf’s *Orlando* to Feingold’s *Drag King Dreams*. (It is also, I should note, a geographical leap as well, from Britain to the United States). This particular leap does serve Cohler insofar as it helps to “suggest an application of the method developed in [*Citizen Invert Queer*] for the intersecting fields of queer theory and transnational feminist studies” (198), but it does so at the expense of other more relevant topics, including the ongoing struggle to articulate lesbian identities throughout the interwar years and a much-needed discussion of how a single trope, Radcliffe Hall’s “mythic mannish lesbian,” came to be the dominant model of lesbian identity in Britain during (or perhaps after) the interwar years.

Cohler’s neglect of any texts produced in Britain between 1921 and 1928 or after 1928 draws attention to an even more vexing lacuna: while Cohler gives considerable explanatory force to the sexological theories of

Havelock Ellis, first published in 1897 and percolating into the popular imagination during the post-war years, she barely mentions the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, which became available in English in 1921, and surely informed elite if not also popular understandings of human sexuality in the interwar years.

As I think through this book's strengths and weaknesses, I keep returning to Chapters Three and Four, which respectively epitomize what is most and least satisfying about it. Chapter Three seems to me to be the strongest. Cohler has chosen her texts with care; her readings are clear and her claims impressive. Especially admirable is her ability to read (into) rhetorical gaps without giving the impression that she is making silence mean whatever she wants or needs it to mean. Chapter Four is another story. At the same time that it does useful work, establishing among other things the uneven relationships between discourses of female and male homosexuality, it also takes what seems to be an inordinate amount of time and space to make one very important point: that as late as 1918 the British were still struggling to imagine and articulate lesbianism as a sexual identity. Allatini can do so only through the older mode of the schoolgirl crush and by placing her lesbian protagonist into a kind of proximity to male homosexuality, but not through an actual sexual encounter with another woman. The records of *Rex vs Pemberton Billings*, seem similarly unable to recognize sexual desire as a key component of lesbian identity, which they weirdly discover in a host of other things, including an anatomical object (the clitoris), social and political practices (cults and sedition), and extreme sexual behaviors (sadism and necrophilia). Intent on parsing out the ways that discourses of the nation inform these "lesbian" representations, Cohler does not give as much attention to this particular gap in the British imagination as I think it merits—merits first because it might help to explain the excruciatingly slow emergence of a discursively coherent understanding of the lesbian and second because it abuts the very myth her study so compellingly disproves: that from the beginning, lesbian identity has been constituted almost exclusively in relationship to sexological discourses. Apparently, once the British were able to recognize sex as an attribute of lesbians, sex eclipsed everything else a lesbian might be.

—Christina Hauck, Kansas State University