



Selected Transcripts

From “Before Homosexuals: From Ancient Times to Victorian Crimes”

Directed by John Scagliotti

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Freedom to Study Controversial Subjects
Backlash and Effects of Fundamentalism
Art as Inspiration to Future Generations

Louis Crompton (LC), interviewed by

Betsy Kalin (INT)

March 2009 - El Cerrito, CA

Scholar, professor, author, and pioneer in the instruction of queer studies, Crompton received an M.A. in mathematics from the University of Toronto in 1948 and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Chicago in 1954. After teaching mathematics at the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto, he joined the English department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1955, retiring in 1989.

In 1970, Crompton taught a gay studies class at UNL, the second such course offered in the United States, an action that raised LGBT awareness in academia, Nebraska, and the nation. In the early 1970s, Crompton became the faculty advisor for the Gay Action Group, predecessor of today's UNL Queer Ally Coalition, and also helped found the UNL Homophobia Awareness Committee, which became the Committee on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns. In 1974, Crompton co-founded the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the Modern Language Association.

Crompton received many awards and honors during his career, including the Bonnie Zimmerman and Vern L. Bullough Prize of the Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality award for 2003 for his book *Homosexuality and Civilization*, which covers 2500 years of world history.

After his death in 2009, a scholarship was established at UNL in Crompton's name for students working toward "a more just, inclusive society for the LGBTQ community".

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Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-century England (University of California Press, 1985)

Shaw the Dramatist (University of Nebraska Press, 1969)

INT

Thank you so much Louis for letting us come and interview you. And my first question is about priests. And you mentioned Greek achievements in literature or architecture, how they set the norms for the western world for two thousand years. Yet there's one aspect of Greek life that the students of antiquity long chose to consign to the category of the unmentionable. But there's abundance of the accounts of homosexual love that overwhelm the investigator. Why was this so hidden? Can you give us a short description of how abundant it was?

LC

Well there are documents on the subject “poems” - philosophies, biographies, histories - which stretch from about 500 BC to about 500 CE, that’s a thousand years. And there are also many ceramics, which are devoted to beautiful young men. Their names are on them. One man has his name on forty-five vases. So the evidence is there. The reason it hasn’t been studied until quite recently was simply the taboo against talking about the unmentionable sin. So the British courts suppressed a book in the 1890s and it wasn’t until 1979 that Sir Arthur Wilson published the first book on the subject. Incredible.

INT

And, like you said, there was so much same-sex account that existed at this time. What do you imagine would have been different if people had a more realistic understanding of the sexual diversity, and a real sense of how abundant, the same-sex accounts of the Greeks, if it had been more widely reported?

LC

Well, I think with respect to same-sex relations, the opposition in Christianity to any discussion of this has set the subject taboo. This was the horrible crime not fit to be mentioned among Christian men. So, that did it.

INT

Great. Thank you. Well, this kind of leads me to my next questions. It seems that the revival of early Greek culture during periods of history – the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the early Napoleonic period, the Age of Enlightenment, etc. – they had all called upon the revival of the Greek and somewhat the Roman worlds. Does Greek culture give a little give a little bit of cover to mention and talk about same-sex situations?

LC

Well, that’s a rather complicated question. The Renaissance certainly looked back to the Greeks and they learned from the Greeks and they found out about Greek life and the role that same-sex love played there. But during these other periods there was not that much concentration on this aspect of Greek society. I’d like to read you a passage from Plato’s Symposium, which was written about 385 BC. And this is a drinking party where young men are invited to give speeches in praise of love. Now here’s how the first speech begins:

“I know not any greater blessing to a young man who is beginning life, than a virtuous lover; or to a lover than the beloved is. For the principal ought to be the guide for the man who would live nobly, that principal, I say, neither kindred nor honor nor wealth nor any other motive is able to implant as well as love. If there were only some way of contriving a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their loves, they would be the very best governors of their own city, abstaining from all dishonor and emulating one another in honor. It is certainly un-exaggerated to say, that when fighting at each other’s sides, though a mere handful, they would conquer the world”

Well, this seems a very extravagant claim here. Particularly the statements, “they make the best statesmen, the best politicians.” But if you actually look at the history of the city of Athens just before