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"King James and the History of Homosexuality" IWU Historian Authors Book on 17th-Century English Monarch Published by New York University Press

"The case of James practically cries out for attention. It offers a unique opportunity to combine older political history with newer cultural history in a way that is mutually illuminating."

Michael B. Young in his new book
"King James and the History of Homosexuality"

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—Although the King James Version of the Bible often is quoted to condemn homosexuality, James himself had a lifetime pattern of sexual relations with other males.

That's among conclusions drawn in a new book, "King James and the History of Homosexuality," authored by Michael B. Young, professor of history at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"I'd like readers to know that James had these sexual relations," Young explained. "It's not a part of history to be denied or covered up—but accepted."

"I also want readers to reflect for themselves," he added, "on what the implications of James's story are for their views on homosexuality and homophobia at the start of the 21st century."

"A book of this sort," Young said, "has implications for the present—although I didn't write it for that. I find the story in and of itself interesting. However, I've been forced to ponder its contemporary implications after completing the book."

Allegations of homosexuality made against King James, in his lifetime (1566-1625) and in the generation afterwards, shook the political world of early Stuart England. Young's book documents the existence of James's homosexual relationships and analyzes the hostile reactions of contemporaries.

"James was also the most prominent man in early modern Britain,"

Young wrote, "who had (or was suspected of having) sexual relations with other men, yet few historians have treated this subject well, and no one has studied it in depth."

King James Background

James I of England, the first Stuart king of England (1603-25), was also king of Scotland as James VI (1567-25). James was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Henry, Lord Darnley. On his mother's forced abdication, he was declared king and brought up by several regents. When James began to govern for himself, he gave offices and honors to his "favorites."

While Young's book focuses on James's sexuality, it was not his chief or defining characteristic. Young describes James as "an intelligent and complex man," adding that the king was a poet, arts patron, and the author of learned treatises on politics, religion, and other subjects.

"There are many solid reasons why James's reputation has steadily risen in recent years," Young wrote, "but this rehabilitation has been achieved by emphasizing his talents and accomplishments to the exclusion of controversial topics such as his sex life and the generally scandalous nature of his court."

King James and the Bible

The first edition of the King James Bible was published in 1611. However, Young points out in his book chronicling the monarch and his times, that by then, "James had already been involved in a love affair with another man so controversial that it provoked a rebellion in Scotland, was currently involved with another male 'favorite,' and was about to lure his most famous lover, the Duke of Buckingham, into bed."

The King James Version of the Bible was an outgrowth of an early 1600s conference, where James played the role of peacemaker and conciliator in bringing together contentious factions of the Church of England. James sponsored the project to write a new English-language version of the Bible, which appeared in 1611 and was dedicated to him.

Ironically, Young said, "The King James Version often is quoted to substantiate homophobic views, but it can be shown that King James was homosexual, so people might think twice about citing the King James Version to condemn homosexuality."

The book combines research on the history of homosexuality with fascinating political history. Young's treatment of homophobia, effeminacy, manliness, and sexual politics in Jacobean England probes the repercussions of James's homosexuality on the reign of his son, Charles I, who was executed after a bloody civil war with his own subjects. It also shows how other historians have mishandled the subject of James's homosexuality and underestimated its political consequences, including the civil war that engulfed his son.

Political Consequences

Another political consequence of James's homosexuality concerned England's foreign policy toward Spain.

"The problem for Queen Elizabeth," Young wrote, "had been to prove that she was enough of a man to command respect and lead the nation in wartime. As the Spanish Armada sailed towards England, she is reputed to have said, 'I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king.' When James succeeded Elizabeth, he immediately terminated the war against Spain, pursued a peaceful foreign policy and allowed effeminate favourites to dominate his court. It soon became a commonplace comparison that Elizabeth had been more of a man than he was. Effeminization of the court contributed to a growing concern that Englishmen in general were becoming effeminized and the nation was becoming soft." James was eventually driven back into war with Spain against his own better judgment because Englishmen wanted to reaffirm their manhood.

Yet, another consequence of James's homosexuality was the trading of sex for money and power. For example, George Villiers, a "favorite," became the Duke of Buckingham

"Buckingham," Young wrote, "was so rapacious, garnered so many offices for himself, piled up such stupendous wealth and wrecked the political process so badly that he was eventually called by one Member of Parliament 'the cause of all our miseries' and 'the grievance of grievances.'"

James and Homosexuality

Young explores James's behavior in the context of the history of homosexuality. A turning point in that history appears to be around 1700, when homosexual practice became more common between adults. Previously, in James's time, homosexual partners were more commonly adolescents and adults.

According to Young's research, James's homosexual behavior fits the age-differentiated model.

"When he [James] was an adolescent," Young said, "his first major love affair was with a much older cousin in Scotland. His two most famous relations in England were cases where James switched roles—he was the older male and his partners were adolescents or near adolescents."

Young concluded that, "King James loved other males," but also asked, "did he have sex with them?"

"It must be admitted at the outset," Young wrote, "that we cannot answer this question with absolute certainty. There is no incontestable proof, no physical evidence, no DNA. Such evidence as does exist is more circumstantial than direct. Much of it is hearsay.

"Nevertheless," Young added, "there is enough evidence of sufficient credibility to leave little doubt of the fact."

Young based his conclusions, in part, on two key letters—one written by James to the Earl of Somerset, the other written by the Duke of Buckingham to James—apparently referring to sexual relations.

"The evidence for James's sexual relations with other males is most plentiful and conclusive," Young wrote, "with respect to Villiers or, as he was soon known, Buckingham. In the first place, James gave striking displays of his affection for Buckingham in public, which gave rise to

rumours. Sir Simonds D'Ewes recorded several of these in his diary."

James married Anne, Princess of Denmark, in 1589. Commenting on James's marriage, Young wrote, ". . . James's affairs with his favourites were hurtful to his wife," adding, "Time and again Anne lost the battle for her husband's affection to a youthful male favourite."

Messages to Readers

Young believes the book contains key messages for various groups of readers. For political historians, he said, James's homosexuality had significant political outcomes.

"For historians of homosexuality," Young explained, "they have a real, living, breathing homosexual figure as a test case for their theories."

However, Young notes that James is "not a good martyr and role model since he was not overtly persecuted. He elicited a homophobic reaction, but he wasn't a suffering victim of homophobia."

Young was motivated to write the book, he said, because, "I've always been appalled by prudery—it gets under my skin. People are most prudish on sex—and historians aren't immune to this."

Summing up the experience of researching and writing the book, Young said: I just wanted to get the facts straight. I wanted the facts to speak for themselves."

Young, who joined the IWU faculty in 1970, is a native of Red Lion, Pa. He is an alumnus of Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pa., and received a master's degree and doctorate from Harvard University. He also is the author of a study of Charles I, James's son.

About Illinois Wesleyan University

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,070 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. Construction is underway on a \$23-million library and a \$6-million student center. Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine ranks Illinois Wesleyan University 12th among the nation's top 1,600 private colleges in providing a top-quality education at an affordable cost. Also sharing IWU's rank are Princeton and Dartmouth.

Editor's Note: "King James and the History of Homosexuality" by Michael B. Young is published by New York University Press. It is available in hardcover at \$40 per copy.

