# Historian explores gay activism in Australia in Before Mardi Gras



Historian Graham Willett has just released Before Mardi Gras, which focusses on a pivotal era of activism that predated the iconic Sydney Mardi Gras, looking at the struggles and triumphs of the LGBTQ+ movement in Australia from 1969 to 1978.

Speaking to QNews, Willett said, 'Before Mardi Gras is the first eight chapters of a book I published in 2000, called Living Out Loud. I started to feel that we’ve forgotten so much and history has been overshadowed by Mardi Gras. So it was worth reprinting that part.' His research pushes the assertion that the actions taken by members of the LGBTQ+ community in the years leading up to the first Mardi Gras were instrumental to the freedoms enjoyed today.

In trying to throw light on a decade of activism that is often overlooked, Willett details how individuals began actively championing issues of equality and liberation long before the celebratory atmosphere of Mardi Gras emerged. The momentum began with demonstrations, lobbying efforts, the distribution of leaflets, and the creation of newspapers and radio programs. Willett remarked, 'Without that decade before 1978, Mardi Gras wouldn’t have happened. None of what we achieved would have happened.'

He recalled how, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a small group of determined individuals began to voice their dissatisfaction with societal attitudes and legal restrictions: 'In 1969 and 1970, a handful of people said, "this wasn’t good enough" and "something must be done".' This community effort, he says, laid the groundwork for the inaugural Mardi Gras, which turned into a riot, an event spurred by a violent police crackdown.

Reflecting on the parallels between that period and contemporary issues, Willett says, 'Even back then, there were lots of different ways of tackling the problem... The idea that there are different ways of tackling the problems that are presented is still true today.' Modern responses to anti-trans demonstrations are an example of the continuity of activism, emphasizing the importance of both protest and dialogue in pushing for change.

The work also addresses the evolution of societal attitudes and legal reforms. In a discussion about the broader implications of the activism from that era, Willett noted, 'Activism and advocacy lead to people standing up and refusing to let the police push them around.' He pointed to successful campaigns for police accountability and critical legislative changes, such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Canberra following activist influence in the 1970s.

In Before Mardi Gras, Willett chronicles the evolution of LGBTQIA+ activism ten years prior to the now-celebrated event on Oxford Street, saying that while societal issues may seem to persist, the lessons of the past are crucial for understanding and confronting contemporary challenges. 'Sometimes the past doesn’t change no matter how much we look at it, but it always remains relevant,' he stated.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://backwaterbooks.com/book/9780648641629> - This URL supports the claim about Graham Willett's book Before Mardi Gras, which focuses on lesbian and gay activism in Australia from 1969 to 1978. It provides details about the book's release and content.
* <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/before-mardi-gras-graham-willett/1146424820> - This URL confirms the availability of Graham Willett's book at bookstores and provides details about the book's release.
* <https://www.harvard.com/book/9780648641629> - This link offers further confirmation of the book's existence and accessibility, noting its focus on lesbian and gay activism in Australia.
* <https://noahwire.com> - Although the specific article isn't directly available, this URL is associated with the source of the information about Graham Willett's book and the historical context it provides.