# 'Quite simply, this book is a work of genius' - a memoir of gay life in London



As celebrations erupted across Britain marking the end of the Second World War, photographer John S Barrington found his own unique way of joining in the revelry. Amidst the exuberance in Piccadilly Circus, he took it upon himself to spread joy through kisses, making his way through the throng of soldiers, sailors, and airmen. His night culminated in a more intimate celebration as he decided to take a sailor back to his office for an unforgettable encounter.

This vivid scene serves as the launchpad for Some Men in London, an intriguing anthology edited by Peter Parker, that captures the lived experiences of gay men in mid-20th century London. This collection includes diaries, letters, newspaper clippings, and literary excerpts that together narrate a story often overlooked in polite society. The anthology's title is inspired by a sardonic declaration from the News of the World, which acknowledged that while homosexuality existed across England, its “black rotten heart” was found in the vibrant centre of London.

The era depicted in this anthology was fraught with contradictions. Despite the increasing public profiles of gay men, largely amplified by high-profile incidents such as actor John Gielgud's arrest in 1953 for making advances towards men, societal perceptions remained harsh and often hostile. Terms to describe same-sex attraction were varied, ranging from “homosexualism” to derogatory labels like “pansies” and “perverts,” reflecting a broader societal discomfort with the topic.

Amidst this struggle for acceptance, personal narratives emerge. An anonymous letter penned to the New Statesman poignantly expressed the anguish of living without love, while novelist James Courage wrestled with his feelings towards a much younger partner, lamenting the foolishness often inherent in love across generations.

However, the anthology does not shy away from the more absurd aspects of the period. One particularly entertaining piece from the People newspaper in 1950 mused on why notable bachelors like Ivor Novello and Terence Rattigan were still searching for love, while a later article lamented a supposed campaign against homosexuality in British music.

The quality of the writing featured in Some Men in London is exceptional. Prominent figures such as Denton Welch and JR Ackerley provide stunning insights through their prose. The anthology's editor, Parker, exhibits a deft touch in sequencing the materials; contrasting light-hearted anecdotes with the serious realities faced by working-class gay men. The historical context is enriched by Parker’s thoughtful commentary, highlighting the ironies and contradictions of the legal and social landscapes of the time.

The Wolfenden Committee's 1957 report, which recommended the decriminalisation of consensual same-sex acts, marks a pivotal point in the anthology. While the recommendations would not come into force for another decade, they signalled a significant shift in public discourse about homosexuality. Parker’s upcoming second volume promises to delve into this transformative era, promising readers more invaluable insights into the evolving narrative of queer life in London.

**Some Men in London: Queer Life, 1945-1957 is published by Penguin Classics**

## References

* <https://cdn.penguin.co.uk/dam-assets/books/9780241370605/9780241370605-sample.pdf> - Corroborates the scene of John S Barrington celebrating the end of the Second World War in Piccadilly Circus and his interactions with soldiers, sailors, and airmen.
* <http://newzealand.shafaqna.com/EN/AL/1373355> - Supports the description of John S Barrington's celebration at the end of the Second World War and his actions in Piccadilly Circus.
* <https://blog.bobmizer.org/the-daring-double-life-of-john-barrington> - Provides context on John S Barrington's life and work, although it does not directly address the specific celebration scene.
* <https://cdn.penguin.co.uk/dam-assets/books/9780241370605/9780241370605-sample.pdf> - Details the anthology 'Some Men in London' and its content, including diaries, letters, and literary excerpts.
* <http://newzealand.shafaqna.com/EN/AL/1373355> - Mentions the anthology 'Some Men in London' and its focus on the lives of gay men in mid-20th century London.
* <https://cdn.penguin.co.uk/dam-assets/books/9780241370605/9780241370605-sample.pdf> - Discusses the societal perceptions and terms used to describe same-sex attraction during the era.
* <http://newzealand.shafaqna.com/EN/AL/1373355> - Highlights the societal contradictions and harsh perceptions towards gay men despite increasing public profiles.
* <https://cdn.penguin.co.uk/dam-assets/books/9780241370605/9780241370605-sample.pdf> - Includes personal narratives such as an anonymous letter to the New Statesman and James Courage's writings.