

BOOK REVIEW

Diverse Communities. The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland. By Kieran Rose. Cork University Press, Cork, 1994, 84 pp.

Reviewed by Harry Oosterhuis

The Irish nation has a reputation for being conservative, even reactionary in sexual matters. Contraception, abortion, divorce, feminism and homosexuality, more or less accepted in other Western European countries, still raise strong opposition, not the least because of the notable presence of the Catholic Church, and in Northern Ireland also of the Protestant Church. Nevertheless, radical changes have taken place in recent years, especially in government policies and law. In *Diverse Communities* Kieran Rose, a prominent Irish gay activist, sets out how male homosexuality ('buggery') was decriminalized in Northern Ireland in 1982, and in the Irish Republic in 1993. He puts forward that the Irish progress in sexual reform and equality legislation can be explained by the impact of international developments, new social, cultural and economic forces of the 1960s onwards as well as, ironically, certain traditional Irish values that are rooted in the nationalist, anticolonial struggle against British domination.

Among the new social and cultural forces, Kiernan focuses especially on the lesbian and gay movement in the Irish Republic; in fact, its twenty years history is the main theme of this book. According to Rose, the strength of this movement was that it connected sexual reform with the struggle for social equality and civil rights in general. In this way links were forged with other social movements, in particular the women's movement and trade unions. In the 1980s the Church and lay New Right groups delayed law reform, to be true, but they were not able to halt change. Rose offers a detailed account of the law reform campaigns in which the homosexual movement successfully challenged the Victorian and originally British anti-homosexual laws, first at the European Court of Human Rights and then in the Irish government and parliament.

As a participant in this history, Rose highlights the role of homosexual activists as well as individual politicians, such as Mary Robinson who became president of Ireland in the early 1990s. However, social and cultural developments favouring sexual reform, are underexposed, and the same holds good for the part played by the Church. Rose raises the impression that the attitude of the Catholic Church had become somewhat more moderate in the early 1990s, notwithstanding the uncompromising homophobic teachings of pope of John Paul II. Why did Irish clerics, just like Irish politicians, become more tolerant on homosexuality in a relatively short period of time? Was the new policy facilitated by European integration, the overall modernization of Irish society, or the growing influence of the science (medicine, psychology and sociology) vis-a-vis traditional religion? Rose does not really provide a scholarly based answer. His interpretation tends to emphasize the impact of homosexual activism and the force of moral arguments. His contention that gay rights were a sign of renewed commitment to older Irish ideals that inspired the freedom struggle against Britain, is not providing the reader with a satisfactory explanation. Rose's commitment to equality and emancipation is well-intended, but it is not a suitable point of view to keep a proper balance between objectivity and involvement. As Rose acknowledges himself, the first, scholarly and social history of homosexuality in Ireland has still to be written. The questions that he raises, suggest that such historical research might be rewarding.