



GALHA NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GAY & LESBIAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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GALHA condemns Vatican attack on LGBT rights

The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has condemned a statement by the Vatican's observer at the United Nations, which criticises a declaration against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The declaration, which originated from negotiations between the French government and the International Day Against Homophobia and is now officially supported by the European Union, is due to be presented to the UN General Assembly between December 15TH and December 20TH.

In the statement Monsieur Celestine Mighore, the Holy See's permanent adviser at the UN claims that if the anti-discriminatory laws are adopted "they would create new and implacable discriminations".

GALHA's secretary, David Christmas described the statement as "ludicrous". He continued "The accusation that it is in some way discriminatory to attempt to counteract

the prejudice and hatred which exists in over 80 countries that outlaw same sex relations, would appear to be yet another example of the Vatican turning logical thinking on its head. Mr Christmas pointed out that in nine countries or regions of countries the mandatory punishment for homosexuality is death by execution. "Isn't the Vatican supposed to believe in the right to life", he asked?

A GALHA spokesperson pointed out that in 2009 the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association will be marking its 30th anniversary:

"That's 30 years of counteracting the religious intolerance which does so much to impair the progress of LGBT Rights in the UK and around the world.

"The appalling bigotry of the Vatican as highlighted by this statement can only motivate us to redouble our efforts in this regard, added the spokesperson."



Angela hangs on to her award with the help of GALHA Chair, Andrew Copson.

GALHA Lunch: The Eagle is Candid!

Over 50 people enjoyed a fine lunch at the Café Des Amis and heard an impressive and well received speech by Treasury Minister, Angela Eagle.

Ms Eagle was presented an award for her services to humanism by GALHA Chair, Andrew Copson. Andrew pointed out that she had been a strong advocate for the Equality Act (sexual orientation) regulations and had steered through this legislation despite strong objections from the religious lobby. In her speech Ms Eagle provided some interesting anecdotes about her life as a minister and her personal lobbying and effectiveness in bringing about change. She told of a row with the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who was suggesting that the proposed goods and services legislation should be watered down, and the time when she was attacked by John Redwood who argued that the legislation could result in men being forced to wear

dresses! Ms Eagle heckled Mr Redwood saying "he would look gorgeous in a dress" and evidently this intervention was not appreciated by the Leader of the Conservative Policy Group on Economic Competitiveness! Ms Eagle outlined the progress which had been made with LGBT issues, argued that these advances had to be protected, and agreed that more had to be done to support LGBT Rights worldwide. She also committed herself to fighting discrimination of all kinds.

After her speech, the minister answered questions, and then went walkabout talking with diners at each of the tables. (Ms Eagle's full speech will be on the Internet soon-watch out for announcements)

Subsequently, GALHA Secretary, David Christmas reported that he had virtually been "bombarded" with positive reactions to this event. - Adam Knowles



Angela Eagle talks to Sue who must have been impressed as she joined GALHA a few days later!



LGBT Worldwide Watch

It's very easy to feel gloomy when looking around the world at the plight of LGBT people, so this month I will try and bring you some festive cheer.

Firstly let's raise a glass to Louis George Tin and his fellow IDAHO campaigners who have managed to get a declaration against homophobia and transphobia to the General Council of the United Nations.

Don't go dancing around the Solstice Tree yet, dear readers, for there's a long way to go until world decriminalisation occurs, but it's an important and historic step in the right direction. Meanwhile let's look in on GALHA's old friend, Nicolai Alexeyev in Moscow. Nicolai doesn't have time to mope around the place-he's too busy with his perennial battle with the homophobic Mayor of Moscow.

Next year our resilient campaigner is planning a Baltic Pride to coincide with the Eurovision Song Contest, which is due to be held in Moscow.

We can only hope and um pray that the Mayor finally meets his "Waterloo" as it's clear that Nicolai will try "All kinds of everything" to get Gay Pride to be held in Moscow.

Now let us continue our worldwide journey of hope in Turkey. An attempted ban on a LGBT organisation has finally been overturned by a Turkish court. This follows a determined campaign by our VP, Michael Cashman, who forcefully and successfully argued that Turkey's application to join the European Community would have to be rejected unless the ban was overturned. So cheers to Michael and his colleagues.

Some of you may remember that Sunil Pant, IDAHO campaigner in Nepal spoke very movingly about the horrific plight of LGBT people in his country when he spoke at the first IDAHO conference in London in 2006. Well now two and a half years later Nepal's highest court has finally granted equal rights to the gay community. Sunil tells us "Reading this decision my eyes were filled with tears".

So at this time of year let us remember there is always hope. And this Queen will end his Christmas message by saying "GALHA bless you all!"

GALHARAMA

See www.galha.org for more details

Government Submission: GALHA Secretary, David Christmas has responded to an independent review of personal and social health education instigated by the UK Government. In his submission on behalf of GALHA, David argues that personal and sex education must not be watered down even in schools of "a religious character" and that LGBT students who happen to attend such schools must not have their needs compromised. In particular children must not lose out on receiving this form of education "because of the prejudices of their parents". Overall it is argued "resources should be developed to meet the needs of children and young people, not to reflect the ethos of the school".

Manchester Meeting: Paul Allen has arranged a meeting of GALHA and some Greater Manchester Humanists to talk about GALHA's mission and purpose, and the role of other secular/humanist groups. One outcome of the meeting could be the development of a local LGBT humanist group. This meeting follows the very successful Manchester Pride GALHA stall

which Paul arranged with local humanists last summer. Many congratulations to Paul on this brilliant initiative and we look forward to hearing the outcome of this meeting.

Human Rights at the UN: Derek Lennard attended an event at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to mark the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The meeting was addressed by Foreign Secretary David Milliband. Derek attended a session on "promoting LGBT Rights internationally". The speakers included the Head of the Human Rights Division at the Commonwealth, the co-director of "Arc International" and an advisor to the Commissioner for Human Rights. While the Foreign Office was praised for its work on behalf of LGBT people around the world and for arranging this session, it was felt that its work was undermined by the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK. Derek asked a question about the UN motion on decriminalisation and the speakers expressed their support for this initiative.

GALHA WINTER SOLSTICE EVENT

FRIDAY 11th December, 7.30pm. Admission £5. Conway Hall Library

To mark the Winter Solstice, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association cordially invites one and all to an evening of atheist, secular and humanist cheer with a generous helping of blasphemy and a seasonal, shared understanding that religion is crackers.

We are proud to present the first ever "Secular Just a Minute" based on the Radio 4 panel game. There will be no hesitation, repetition, but hopefully plenty of deviation.

The members of the panel are:

Terry Sanderson - National Secular Society President and Marlene Dietrich Impersonator.

Andrew Copson - Responsible for education and public affairs at the British Humanist Association, and dead ringer for Arthur Clennham, in the BBC Series, Little Dorrit.

Robert Mills - Member of Gay and Lesbian Thespian Association and Quiz Cult Hero of the GALHA Weekend 2009.

As if this isn't enough you can enjoy mulled wine and mince pies!

So come all you faithless and join us on Friday 12th December, 7.30PM at the Library in Conway Hall.



Pearls of Wisdom

GALHA ANNOUNCES PROGRAMME OF PUBLIC MEETINGS TO MARK 30TH /PEARL ANNIVERSARY IN 2009.

"The pearl is the queen of gems and the gem of queens".

Meetings at Conway Hall Library starting at 7.30pm unless otherwise stated.

9TH JANUARY. Film: "For the Bible Tells Me So" directed by Daniel Kerslake.

For 30 years GALHA has illustrated again and again the misery and desperation caused by the intrinsic homophobia and bigotry of religious institutions around the world. This film, which will be introduced by NSS President Terry Sanderson, tackles these issues as they affect Christianity and in particular how religious people handle the realisation of having a gay child or family member.

SeattleTimes: "Offering healing, clarity and understanding to anyone caught in the crossfire of scripture and sexual identity, this landmark film boldly takes on a loaded topic and examines it both intellectually and emotionally: the result may well leave you blinking away a few tears".

13th FEBRUARY. SPECIAL DARWIN DAY FUNDRAISING EVENT.

3 plays, and a buffet supper for your delectation. 7-9.30PM Admission £10

GALHA has been marking Darwin Day since 2003 and we are particularly happy to mark the 200th anniversary of his birth. At a time when we learn that a third of all UK teachers want to teach creationism—we need to remember and appreciate the work of Charles Darwin more than ever. Since 1999 Fire and Brimstone Productions have been performing plays based on events in humanist history. This evening we present some of the best Darwin performances to date.

"Sea Change"—A historic voyage of discovery for Darwin on HMS Beagle. An epic tale of rationalism versus superstition and the strong feelings they can evoke.

"Mrs Darwin at home"—The great debate is looming and Mrs Darwin grapples with her pro religious views while being interviewed by a journalist from the Times.

"The Debate that changed the world"—A dramatisation of the debate between Thomas Henry Huxley ("Darwin's Bulldog") and the Reverend Samuel Wilberforce ("Soapy Sam"), which took place in 1860 in front of 700 people at Oxford University, and which led to the widespread acceptance of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

MARCH 13TH—Squatting In Brixton—The Brixton Gay Community of the 1970's. A talk based on new research by Dr Matt Cook, Senior Lecturer in History, Birbeck College FCE.

GALHA has earned its place in LGBT History. Some aspects of the origins of the radical gay movement in the UK may still cause surprise to some of us, however. Tonight Dr Matt Cook reveals all "The Brixton Gay Community of the 1970's formed around the UK's first Gay Centre and a series of nearby squatted houses. Between 50 and 60 men lived in these squats for anything from a week to 10 years, and in oral testimonies many of them describe how their experience shaped their politics, their ideas about sexual identity and community, and their creative lives. The South London GLF, the journal Gay Left, and the Brixton Faeries are each linked to the squatting community, which in the mid 80's, was absorbed into the Brixton Co-op. The houses—and the communal garden that connects them—are still reserved for gay and lesbian tenants: a tangible legacy of the earlier community. This talk describes the genesis and contours of the community, and explores the attempt by those involved to live differently."

APRIL 17TH. Islam, Human Rights and Homophobia.

A talk by Maryam Namazie.

No issue has caused more controversy than the homophobia and apparent disregard of human rights associated with Islam. Maryam Namazie is a rights activist, commentator and broadcaster on Iran, the Middle East, womens rights and secularism. She is also spokesperson of the Council of Ex Muslims of Britain. Tonight she will address the issue of whether Islam can ever be reformed to respect human rights.

MAY 15TH: EUROPEAN ELECTIONS QUESTION TIME

A special event to mark the International Day Against Homophobia.

For a long time GALHA organised question time sessions involving representatives from political parties who were candidates for parliamentary or council seats. However as more and more of what we wanted has been achieved, and a consensus amongst the parties has emerged concerning basic LGBT rights, there is a risk of these discussions becoming sterile and pointless. But this is definitely not the case in Europe. Here there are worrying signs of increased homophobia and a community not always focused or respectful of LGBT Rights. Religion is certainly a key issue. In preparation for the European Elections on June 4th and to mark the 5th International Day Against Homophobia (which GALHA proudly introduced to the UK in 2005), we question political candidates about their commitment to LGBT Rights in Europe.

JUNE 12TH: THOMAS HARDY-PART OF OUR HUMANIST TRADITION?

GALHA meetings have often discussed whether authors, film directors, actors and politicians could be considered humanist or secularist. Tonight your programme coordinator who has at various times in his life had an active interest in the life and work of Thomas Hardy (and once actually attended a "Far from the Madding Crowd" cheese and wine party!) considers what Hardy's novels say about his world view, and whether they have anything to teach us about humanism. Was he a pessimist or a nihilist or a fatalist? Or just a miserable old git? Derek Lennard considers the evidence.

JULY 10TH: GALHA 30TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS AT THE BISHOPSGATE INSTITUTE. (www.bishopsgate.org.uk) 6.30-8.30PM, THE GREAT HALL.

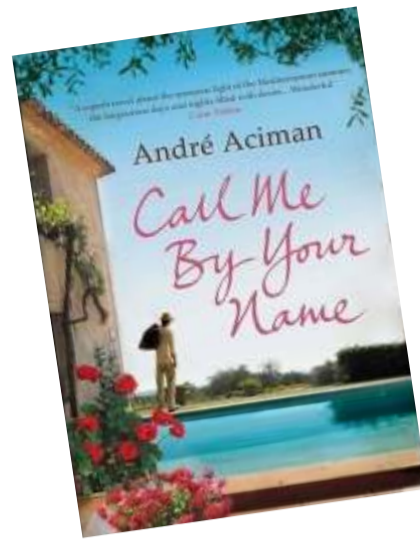
A very special event to celebrate GALHA's 30th Anniversary. The launch of an exhibition about GALHA's history and a reception with speeches by prominent GALHA supporters including Human Rights campaigner, Peter Tatchell. The evening will also include a brief dramatisation based on the Gay News Blasphemy Trial, which was associated with the formation of GALHA. The Bishopsgate Institute, which is a fascinating Grade 2 listed Building situated opposite Liverpool Station, contains GALHA's archives and there will be chance to see its historic free thought/secular collection.

SEPTEMBER: GALHA WEEKEND.

DECEMBER 11TH: CONWAY HALL-A CELEBRATION

Another 30th Anniversary event—this time— to celebrate the public meetings which have been held at Conway Hall. Readings from some of the speakers who have kindly given us talks during the years and surprise guests. Plus of course mulled wine and mince pies. (More details to be announced).

BOOK REVIEWS



Call me by your name

By Andre Aciman

Atlantic Books

£10.00 / 256pp

The Italian Riviera. Summer. 1980s. An intellectually precocious 17 year old lives indulgently with his professor father and family. Every summer an academic guest arrives for six weeks to assist to assist the father and to prepare work for publication.

When a 24 year old American arrives to fill this role the younger man is immediately on sensual and sexual alert. However, he is drenched in doubts about possibility of reciprocation. He, as narrator, reveals his every emotional nuance as he tries to understand the responses, or lack of them, of the other. Like many 17 year olds, he is intensely aware of every shimmer of his own feelings, and this one has the intelligence to analyse them, yet his awareness of what might be going on inside his desired Oliver is very limited. When Oliver touched his bare shoulder (much time is spent in swimming gear) in company he squirms in disgust, having no idea until much later what is in Oliver's mind.

One of the sadder aspects of the novel is the combination of the youth's intense awareness of his sexuality and of his overwhelming desires with his unwillingness to show this in any way. This to the extent of toying with the affections of a local girl and trying to attach Oliver to a girl. His father is clearly understanding and loving, and hints at things in his own youth, but young Elio is terrified of sharing any sliver of his feelings with him; it is only after the father's death that he is properly appreciated. Yet this is not told to us sentimentally. We are simply told that Elio travels to deposit the father's ashes in places significant to his life.

We are told that Oliver and Elio are both Jewish, but this is simply told as a fact; it does not form a theme. Aciman is Egyptian by birth, but now teaches comparative literature at the City University of New York. He has written extensively on the experience of exile and is a director of the Proust Project. This is his first novel.

It is a stunning debut. The relationship is conveyed through very convincing detail of action and emotion, with striking imagery. The prose style is a pleasure to experience. We see how this precious first love of Elio's develops, and we see the damaging consequences of the continual stigma widely attached to homosexuality even in recent decades.

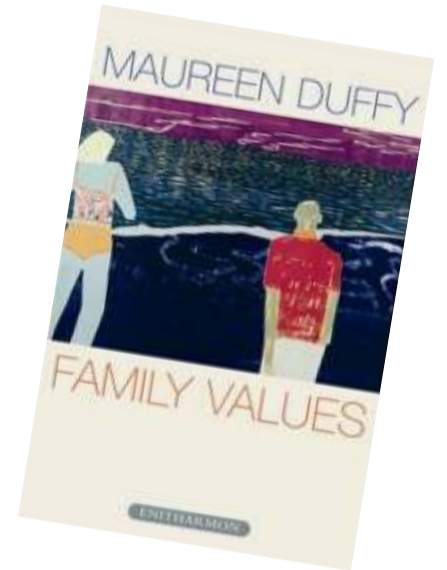
Despite the brilliant and entrancing writing, which has shades of Nabokov and Proust, whilst being more modern and muscular than either, there are some weaknesses. Elio's musical and intellectual precocity is rather strained, even though he says he is the son of a professor and has been brought up without television. This aspect, and Oliver's work on Heraclitus, can seem pretentious. There are also a couple of artistic gatherings where one occasionally thinks, *Oh, dear.*

However, this should not put you off a very intense and life-affirming read. The quality of the writing is superb; the raw honesty about emotions experienced is

exhilarating; the electric charge of each moment of the 17 year old's existence as his life develops new depths is laid before us to be enjoyed. Plus I have not mentioned the sly humour.

If reading this takes you back to a time in your life when every moment had such an electric charge and leads you to ask, "Where did that go?" – if, indeed, it has gone, –maybe it has served part of its purpose. It is also a wonderful reading experience.

- Tony Challis



Family Values

By Maureen Duffy

Enitharmon

£8.95 / 64pp

The last three words of this volume are – "poetry still matters". Maureen Duffy in this collection of her poems demonstrates vividly that poetry still matters.

Maureen Duffy has been President of GALHA for nearly all of its thirty years, to be celebrated next year. She has been very active in gay rights, playing her part in bringing about the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in 1967. She has written poems, biographies, plays, but above all novels. While editing The Freethinker, I was very pleased to publish her The Ballad of the Blasphemy Trial in 1977 on the occasion of the blasphemy trial against Gay News. I think The Microcosm was a pioneering work in the creation of lesbian literature.

As might be expected for someone in her seventies, a major theme in the poems is mortality and loss. What is remarkable is that along with the recognition that we all go into the dark there is a sense of the joy of being alive. There is a telling quotation: "Why do we feel/ (we all feel) this sweet/ sensation of joy". Anniversaries depicts the countryside in all its colour and concludes "It's not over yet; rejoice".

Her landscapes are both urban and rural – birds and coloured stones delight her. A visit to Nova Scotia brings a feast of colour and water. The wordplay enhances the poems: The poem Waiting for the Barbarian (shades of Cavafy) concludes "He will come/ in his own bad time." And of a Wessex farmer it is written: "he'll come no more landroving".

Duffy links the past and the present, the loss and the realisation of fullness. A blind beggar on the tube with his whistle links back to her schooldays. She is often reminded of her family and her early life.

But there is no getting away from it, death and loss are ever present. A poignant sense of loss comes when someone becomes aware that the task of washing up is no longer a task when "one washed and one dried". The concluding poem is one of the best about death. The man who was "fucked to death" and now lies "your flesh like a child's pearly and smooth/ your face gone back to tender jailbait". And yet the dying man went on naming things and places and taught how poetry matters. I've no idea how far GALHA members read poetry, but perhaps they should and they could start here, because it is a book in which "matters".

- Jim Herrick