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LGBT

Scandal: Infamous Gay Controversies of the Twentieth Century Infamous Gay Controversies of the Twentieth Century

Marc E. Vargo
Harrington Park Press
978-1-56023-411-1
(January 16, 2003)

Reinaldo Arenas, a supporter of Castro's revolution against the corrupt Batista regime, suffered torment by the Castro regime for his writing, which was smuggled out of Cuba and published in Europe. Arenas's books were labeled as counterrevolutionary and he was put on trial in 1974 after being caught having sex with two young gay men. Arenas was a source of thought that ran counter to Castro's rhetoric, so his homosexuality was used as a means to marginalize him and discredit his views.

"Castro, on more than one occasion, stated unequivocally that those who were homosexual were incapable of becoming true revolutionaries and genuine communists," writes the author, who is a psychological associate at the Hammond Developmental Center in Hammond, Louisiana. During the Batista era, he explains, homosexuality was accepted: both female and male prostitutes were in abundant supply to tourists visiting Havana. Persecution of gays grew once Castro came to power. Arenas escaped from Cuba as part of the Mariel Boatlift in 1980, and eventually committed suicide in the throes of AIDS.

This book examines the stories of seven gay men and lesbians from the twentieth century who, according to Vargo, were "ensnared by these events, penalties that included censorship, imprisonment, deportation, and death."

Another man profiled, Roger Casement, was hanged in the Tower of London in 1916 when his "Black Diaries" were used in a trial that exploited his gay encounters to punish him for his support of the Irish fight for independence from England.

Other stories include the persecution of gay cohorts of Kaiser Wilhelm II in Germany in the early 1900s, the British banning of Radclyffe Hall's famous book The Well of Loneliness in 1928, and the trial of the British spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean in the early 1950s, which lead to harassment of gays in Britain.

Vargo traces gay scandals through the twentieth century and provides historical perspective to the hardships faced by gays and lesbians. Their homosexuality, in the midst of political and social unrest, was used as an excuse to persecute them. Scandal's central contribution is the history it provides of notable gay men and lesbians whose harassment served as inspiration to the gay rights movement that exploded during the last third of the twentieth century.

John R. Selig