

Obituaries

John Boswell, author of *Same-Sex Unions*, succumbs at 47

John E. Boswell, a Yale University historian who authored two groundbreaking and controversial studies of Gays in medieval culture, died December 24 at the Yale infirmary in New Haven, Connecticut. He was 47 years old.

Boswell died of complications associated with AIDS, said his friend, Jerry Hart.

"He clearly was one of the Gay intellectual giants of our age," said University of Chicago historian George Chauncey, who studied with Boswell at Yale and went on to author this year's much-praised *Gay New York*.

Boswell's first major title, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, "really established the legitimacy and scholarly bona fides of Gay history," said Chauncey. "Also, he was regarded as one of Yale's great teachers. Undergraduates flocked to his courses."

Boswell made news most recently with *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, which examined dozens of church manuscripts from the Middle Ages and concluded that by the 12th century, Christian authorities had established rituals for the blessing of a "voluntary, emotional union" between two persons of like gender. These rites, Boswell insisted, were quite similar to heterosexual marriage.

Same-Sex Unions was a work of "prodigious scholarship," wrote Peter J. Gomes, Harvard University's Plummer Professor of Christian Morals, in a review published in the *Blade*.

Boswell, who claimed fluency in more than a dozen ancient and modern languages including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Church Slavonic, was "at home in a premodern past virtually inaccessible to anyone less well equipped," Gomes wrote, and *Same-Sex Unions* cast "new light upon a neglected and misunderstood past ... a world much more diverse, complex, and pluralistic

than our simpleminded images of it..." *The New York Times Book Review* recently named it one of the year's 10 best titles.

Not everyone agreed. In a tartly worded review for *The Washington Post Book World*, the iconoclastic scholar Camille Paglia wrote that Boswell "lacks advanced skills in several major areas, notably intellectual history and textual analysis." Paglia went on to accuse Boswell of "slippery, self-interested scholarship," and judged that "speculative reasoning is not his strong suit."

In a published response, Boswell's editor at Villard Books said Paglia "rail[ed] against positions Boswell did not take and distort[ed] the author's points," and questioned whether she was qualified to critique *Same-Sex Unions*. Meanwhile, however, *The New Republic* printed a review by a Canadian historian who dismissed the medieval religious ceremonies Boswell cited as more analogous to "ritualized agreements struck between members of the Mafia" than to marriage rites.

The debate over *Same-Sex Unions* moved out of academia's ivory tower and into coffeehouses and office lunchrooms across the country after a character in Garry Trudeau's *Doonosbury* strip discussed Boswell's claims. Two newspapers refused to publish the sequence, inciting a spate of news articles examining the book, its conclusions, and the comic-strip controversy.

By this time, Boswell was no stranger to criticism. He had become something of a celebrity among historians and the focus for much outraged debate among theologians in 1980, with the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. In that work, Boswell questioned the widely held notion that Christian religious beliefs bear the primary responsibility for the rise of intolerance toward homosexuality in



John E. Boswell

Western societies. Indeed, he argued the reverse: that politics and other secular societal forces had influenced Church dogma.

Though a number of secular and ecclesiastical scholars disputed Boswell's findings, the book drew praise from the philosopher Michel Foucault, who lauded its author's "unfailing erudition." *The New York Times Book Review*, moreover, said the book set "a standard of excellence that one would have thought impossible in the treatment of an issue so large, uncharted, and vexed," and *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* was eventually honored with an American Book Award for history.

Boswell's second major work, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, had no Gay-specific themes. Still, Joseph Gordon, dean of undergraduate studies at Yale and a

friend of Boswell's, said that a common thread linking that book and the two Gay histories was the author's interest in "the idea of the families we form as well as the families we're born with. In some ways, all his work was interconnected."

Boswell "was more of a political activist than was generally recognized," George Chauncey said.

"He was deeply concerned about contemporary Catholic anti-Gay policies, and was a major advocate of the Church's rethinking its stance on homosexuality. He spoke to countless Catholic groups, Gay and otherwise, and provided powerful intellectual ammunition to Gay Catholics fighting for their place in the Church."

Boswell "was an extremely hard worker," Jerry Hart noted, but "he had a childlike side as well.

"He was an extremely kind and gentle person; one of his favorite things to do was to go to places like Disney World. We had a good 24 years together, traveled a lot together, and I don't think he ever met anyone he didn't like."

Boswell, a native of Boston, studied at the College of William and Mary and at Harvard. He joined the history faculty at Yale in 1975, and when seven years later he was made a full professor he was one of the youngest persons ever to hold that position at the university.

He was among the organizers of Yale's Lesbian and Gay Studies Center, which has since become the Research Fund for Lesbian and Gay Studies. In 1990, Yale appointed Boswell to an endowed chair, naming him the A. Whitney Griswold Professor of History. At the same time, he began a two-year term as head of his department.

He is survived by his parents, a sister, and two brothers.

—Trey Graham