

Tom Warner. *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. 430pp. Ill. Index. \$95.00 (Cdn). ISBN 0-8020-8460-2.

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Contrary to common perception and government newspeak, Canada's record as a guardian of human rights is neither long nor particularly clean. As any minority group can readily testify, bigotry and intolerance, injustice and oppression have been a constant element throughout most of Canada's history. Tom Warner's *Never Going Back* is the story of how one of the most tenaciously victimized groups — those who love, and make love, differently from what a heartless majority perceives to be the norm — organized and learned to fight back. This enormously important study, written by one of Canada's most experienced gay activists and cofounder of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario, chronicles the complex history of queer activism and organizing on a national scale, covering a period of over thirty-five years. In contrast to the title of his book, Warner deliberately avoids the use of the term *queer*, using instead the more limiting phrase “lesbians, gays, and bisexuals” throughout his near encyclopedic account of what he calls the “lesbian and gay liberation movement.” The author does, however, show an extreme sensitivity to the many different needs voiced by individual sexual identity groups, and he makes every effort both to include and debate the range of issues that have informed queer activism in Canada over the past three decades, particularly in terms of race, religion, class, health status, and location.

Never Going Back is well structured, well written and highly readable. In thirteen chapters, grouped into three main parts each reflecting distinct historical periods, Warner investigates the ongoing struggle of sexual minority groups to achieve positive recognition, liberation, and equality. The book begins with an analysis of the emergence of lesbians and gays as a visible and identifiable community and culture prior to 1975, covering the social transformation in the 1960s prior to Stonewall, the amendments to the Criminal Code in 1969, and the growing consciousness and community building in the early 1970s. The author continues with

an exploration of the conservative backlash during the following decade, caused by the rapid expansion of lesbian and gay communities in many parts of Canada, and with an examination of the dissent raging within activist groups over such central issues as the promotion of queer sexuality, social and political strategizing, and the perpetuation of sexism. This part also tackles the early impact of AIDS and the subsequent radicalization of queer activism and politics. The final section focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on the ongoing challenges of provincial human rights legislation to include sexual orientation in nondiscrimination clauses.

Recent studies on lesbian and gay advocacy have mostly concentrated on the barrage of legal challenges that have been launched since 1985 and sought to analyze individual equal rights achievements. David Rayside's *On the Fringe: Gays and Lesbians in Politics* (1998), Kathleen Lahey's *Are We 'Persons' Yet? Law and Sexuality in Canada* (1999), Miriam Smith's *Lesbian and Gay Rights in Canada* (1999), and Bruce MacDougall's *Queer Judgments: Homosexuality, Expression and the Courts in Canada* (2000) may first spring to mind, but others could easily be added to the list. What sets Warner's work apart here is his unbending focus on crucial liberationist issues, including among others the fight against recurring state repression in the form of ongoing police harassment, targeted censorship, and pornography legislation. Convinced that equality-seeking as a strategy for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals has nearly run its course, Warner argues persistently that it is necessary to continue with sexual liberation activism, which has fallen short in recent years in favor of the struggle for nondiscrimination and equality legislation. In Warner's eyes, equality-seeking activism has downplayed, if not negated, "the very real differences that exist between heterosexual and homosexual sexuality and relationships" (235). But successes on the equality issues front have not succeeded, the author warns, in eradicating homophobia and heterosexism precisely where both are most dangerous and pervasive — namely, in the domains of state regulation and law enforcement. Positive acceptance of same-sex sexuality "as a natural and normal alternative equal in all respects to heterosexuality," Warner concludes, "continues to be very much a minority view" (355) that has not yet infiltrated society at large.

The book's shortcomings are few, though some of them are truly annoying while others may merely alienate a few overly picky

academic readers. The weakest part of the study is Warner's badly flawed historical sketch in the very first chapter of section one, "From Oppression to Liberation: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in Canada Prior to 1975." In a truly spectacular, horrendously imprecise historical sweep, the author goes back to Roman times in order to dig out the very roots of (sexual) oppression. Unfortunately, this time-lapse from Justinian civil law to thirteenth-century measures against lesbianism in France to Victorian notions of sex and marriage does little to enlighten the reader; at best, it perpetuates a number of false perceptions concerning same-sex sexuality in terms both of its cultural significance and of its history of repression, views that linger stubbornly in the gay and straight presses alike and that tend to muddy contemporary debates on human sexuality and sexual liberation. Furthermore, Warner often remains vague where precision would be essential, and goes into lengthy detail where a brief summary would have sufficed. Important court challenges are inadequately annotated, making it difficult to read up on the subject. Leading civil rights victories on the international front, such as same-sex marriage laws in Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, are reduced to "consenting-adults amendments ... in some European countries" (57), leaving readers ignorant about significant changes affecting civil liberties policies of the European Union. The history of the continuing internationalization of queer activism and the forged connections between Canada and countries other than the United States are completely disregarded, creating the impression that Canadian queer activism operates in a vacuum. At times, senior political and religious leaders who fought against queer activism are identified only by their title or position (e.g., "a liberal candidate, later a senior cabinet minister, who told ..." 76) and are quoted from secondary or even tertiary sources, making it difficult to verify the accuracy of their (usually venomous) statements.

Granted, Warner is not a historian, and we should not forget that he writes deliberately from the standpoint of an activist who was and still is an integral part of the movement he sets out to describe. Taken as a whole, *Never Going Back* is both a timely tribute and an invaluable resource, as well as an urgent reminder that queer activism is as important today as it has been in the past.
