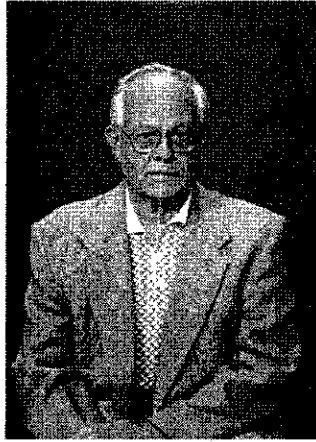


## Vern L. Bullough (1928- ): Making the Pen Mightier Than the Sword

John P. De Cecco



As editor in chief of the Harrington Park series on gay and lesbian studies, I want to explain why Vern L. Bullough was selected as editor of this collection, and why I feel his biography should also be included, despite some opposition from him. Bullough has been a longtime supporter of the gay liberation movement and helped launch and sustain the field of gay and lesbian historical studies. It is an extraordinary example of how scholarship can be used without being compromised to further political freedom and equality.

In my visit in the summer of 2000 to his home in Southern California, besides the *de rigueur* swimming pool, the patio, and the garden off the living room, the first things anyone would notice are the books. Vern's home, which he shares with Gwen, his new wife and also a retired professor, is virtually encased in books, neatly shelved and lining the walls of the living room, the dining room, the entrance way, halls, and his study. These are not all the books he has owned in an academic life stretching over six decades. Many he has given away to universities and other collections, particularly the library associated with the Center for Sex Research at California State University, Northridge. The section of his library that contains books on homosexuality, particularly those that are historical in substance, shows that he is remarkably current with the burgeoning literature in the field of gay and lesbian studies.

Books, his own and others, have been Vern's loves of a lifetime. Writing comes easily to him. He has enjoyed it since he was a teenager. His style is clear, smooth, and unadorned, increasingly rare attributes in modern academia. He believes the writer/historian should tell a story as it emerges from documents before engaging in postmodern flights of interpretation. He

writes for three or four hours every morning. This is followed by his daily swimming dishabille, the tiniest and only hint of impropriety that I detected in my weekend visit. I should add that the garden where the pool is located shields him from his neighbors.

Vern's interest in homosexuality was sparked by the mother of his late wife and lifelong collaborator, Bonnie Bullough, with whom he worked over a period spanning five decades. Bonnie's mother had abandoned her, her stepfather, and their two children (Bonnie's half brother and half sister) early in the 1940s to enter a long-term relationship with another woman, Berry Berryman, which lasted over thirty years. Within a couple of years, however, she reestablished relationships with her children.

Vern and Bonnie, who began going together in their midteens, often visited the two women and much of their early conversation dealt with homosexuality, particularly lesbianism. Vern says he was the goggle-eyed teenager finding out about life from them. They gave Bonnie and him books to read and introduced them to other lesbians and gays at parties. Both became intensely interested in the subject. Berry, who had done an early study of lesbians, however, did not let them read her study because she said it was unfinished. Shortly after Berry's death, Bonnie's mother sent them the still-uncompleted manuscript, which Vern and Bonnie then published in a scholarly journal, identifying Berry as the original compiler and their relationship to her.

As an undergraduate at the University of Utah and later as a graduate student in history at the University of Chicago, Bullough read any books on homosexuality he could find in the library that his mother-in-law did not have. Knowing that his professors would frown upon his interest in studying sexuality—horrible dictum homosexuality—he never revealed to them the subject matter of the books he assiduously searched for and read. This clandestine ferreting of the few volumes he could find on homosexuality, usually in the section that housed books on sexual perversion, is not an unfamiliar experience of many gay and lesbian scholars in the period before libraries and bookstores opened their shelves to gay and lesbian studies in the late 1970s. At the University of Chicago, Vern earned a doctorate in late medieval/early modern history, with an emphasis on the history of science and medicine, subject matter not entirely unrelated but still a closeted distance from sexuality.

While still living in the Midwest, Vern published a review in the *Humanist* of a study of the Wolfenden Report, which had been issued in 1957 by a committee of the British Parliament charged with the responsibility to study "homosexual offenses and prostitution." One of its major recommendations was the decriminalization of homosexual acts occurring in private between consenting adults ages twenty-one and older. A publisher, impressed with

Vern's review, asked him to write a book on one of the two topics. After considerable soul-searching and with Bonnie's encouragement, he decided to do a study on prostitution, although he feared it might well end his academic career. He admits that he, at that time, avoided writing on homosexuality because of the possibility of being stigmatized as a homosexual—yet there was little fear of being labeled a prostitute. Only later when his academic status was secure did he feel confident enough and less worried about what others might think to write publicly about homosexuality.

Active in the American Civil Liberties Union as a graduate student in Chicago, when he moved to Ohio to teach at Youngstown University he became a member of the state board of the Ohio Civil Liberties Union and unsuccessfully urged that the affiliate adopt a policy to decriminalize homosexuality. He had a long talk with the then-national director who said such a policy would be enacted only over his dead body. Fortunately, that director later left his position.

After Vern moved to Los Angeles in 1959, and feeling more confident in his ability to withstand any labeling, he became more directly involved with the gay and lesbian community. He quickly became a member of the board of the ACLU of Southern California and began planning with then-executive director Eason Monroe to change ACLU policy on gays and lesbians. The Southern California affiliate was the oldest affiliate of the ACLU, having been established early in the 1920s, and had considerable independence from the national union. The Southern California ACLU was noted for its attempt to expand the scope of the issues with which the ACLU dealt, and Vern and Eason Monroe agreed that homosexuality and sexual identity in general was an issue that involved civil liberties. Still, it took a two-year campaign, with several draft statements, to get the board to acknowledge this civil liberty, which they did unanimously. Closely involved in the campaign were Dorr Legg and Don Slater, as well as representatives of DOB. As part of the campaign to get the ACLU involved in the issue and the subsequent adoption of the statement, Vern spoke widely to chapters of the ACLU, as well as service organizations, and participated in public debates on the decriminalization of homosexuality in public forums, on radio, and on television. The Washington, DC, affiliate, at the urging of Frank Kameny, soon followed the Southern California ACLU, as eventually the national itself did. Most of the legal staff members, however, came to be centered in Los Angeles where they remain today. As Vern later found out, a couple of the board members were then closeted homosexuals who were supporting him in all his efforts.

Vern also became involved in ONE, Inc., and in the Homosexual Information Center. He became vice president of the Institute for the Study of Human Resources, the tax-free foundation set up for ONE, Inc., by Reed

Erickson, who chaired it. Because Erickson almost never attended meetings, Bullough usually acted as chairperson. He was involved in most of the activities associated with both ONE and the Homosexual Information Center until he left Southern California at the end of 1979 for Buffalo, New York. One of the more vivid memories is his and Bonnie's participation in the auto caravan, organized by Don Slater and others, which paraded through the streets of Hollywood and West Hollywood in the mid-1960s demanding that gays be drafted to serve in Vietnam, a war that Vern strongly opposed.

He wrote articles and book reviews for *ONE Magazine*, published in *The Ladder*, the magazine of the Daughter of Bilitis, the lesbian organization founded by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, and also wrote for *Tangents*, the magazine Don Slater established after the break from ONE.

With a little prompting from me and with wry smiles Vern recalled some of the movement pioneers he knew, particularly their motley array of political allegiances and their inevitable factionalism, which in his marginal status as a straight man he was mostly able to avoid. He described Harry Hay as a mystic who tried to build "cells" within the Mattachine Society after the fashion of the Communist Party. He knew screenwriter Dale Jennings, one of the founders of the society, a person he believes was never comfortable in the gay movement. He recalled with admiration, however, Jennings' coming out during his trial on a charge of soliciting in West Hollywood, one that ended in acquittal. He described Jim Kepner as always gathering materials for what has become one of the core collections in the gay and lesbian library at the University of Southern California. Kepner, who was never outspoken, kept peace with all factions, writing for *Tangents*, the offshoot of *ONE Magazine*, and pursuing his interest in science fiction. Then there was Don Slater, the anarchist, who would not pay his traffic tickets. Dorr Legg was the conservative, the prototypical Log Cabin Republican and the indefatigable founder of ONE who kept the organization, if not its publication, going at all costs. It was through Legg that Vern met Reed Erickson, who had established the Erickson Foundation and who provided him the financial support for his major study, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (1976). Bonnie and Vern, but mostly Vern, spoke for decriminalization of homosexuality before gay and straight groups all over Southern California.

Vern also knew Evelyn Hooker, who, after her pathbreaking studies on gay men, had been appointed as head of a task force by the National Institute of Mental Health that was intended to frame policy and initiate research on homosexuality. Evelyn invited Vern to be the task force's historian (he had to decline because he was living in Egypt at the time). Vern and Bonnie were among early members and consultants of the newly organized (and still-thriving) Parents and Friends of Gays in Los Angeles (two of their five children, three of whom were adopted, are gay—a son and a daughter). With

colleagues at Northridge, Vern founded the Center for Sex Research early in the 1970s, which in 1999-2000 underwent a state auditor's investigation after holding conferences on prostitution and pornography. The Center for Sex Research was recently officially granted a new charter. After Vern moved to Buffalo to serve as a dean and later as a distinguished professor of the State University of New York, he served as a consultant to William H. Gardner, the attorney who successfully filed the suit that struck down New York's antisodomy statute. Interestingly, for a person who felt he was going to be ostracized from academia for his sex research, particularly that on homosexuality, Vern later found that several members of the selection committee which chose him as dean were gay, and he was probably chosen *because* of his research, rather than despite it.

Vern has undoubtedly led the way for gay and lesbian studies. Before I became editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 1977, he had published two articles in the very first issues in 1974. The first article, "Homosexuality and the Medical Model," appeared the year after the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association. The article described how this decision marked the reversal of a trend that began in the latter part of the eighteenth century and had gradually transformed a moral conception of sexuality into a medical one that pathologized all forms that were not procreative. His conception of the "medical model" and its relationship to homosexuality preceded the related publications of Michel Foucault (1976) and Jeffrey Weeks (1977), whose views have become so influential in the field of gay and lesbian studies. In this article Vern introduced to this new field the name of the pioneer par excellence of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. This article was followed by another, "Heresy, Witchcraft, and Sexuality," which appeared in the second issue of the journal (also in 1974). It described the association of heresy and witchcraft with sodomy—how religious and political dissent was tarred with the brush of "deviant" sexuality. It is an association that dramatically reared its ugly head during the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s in which communism and disloyalty to the flag were associated with homosexuality.

The topic of homosexuality remained central to Vern's research and writing well into the 1970s. In 1976 Garland Press published *An Annotated Bibliography of Homosexuality*, which was mostly based on a bibliography that Vern had compiled but included major contributions by Dorr Legg and James Kepner. It appeared in two volumes and contained about 13,000 entries. In that same year he published a magnum opus, *Sexual Variance in Society and History*, a study of attitudes toward sexuality. Homosexuality received much more attention than any other sexual variation. After Magnus Hirschfeld's work, to which I refer next, *Sexual Variance* is probably the first cultural history of the subject; it preceded by several years the work on

medieval homosexuality by John Boswell, *Christianity and Social Tolerance*, published in 1980, and by other gay and lesbian historians.

As editor of the Prometheus Press, Vern has been energetic in supporting the English translations by Michael Lombardi-Nash of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century work on homosexuality by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld, both German pioneers of the gay and lesbian movement and of gay and lesbian studies: Ulrichs' *Riddle of Man-Manly Love* (1993) and Hirschfeld's *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1991) as well as his *Homosexuality of Men and Women* (2000). In his introduction to the latter book, Vern points to the biological reductionism inherent in Hirschfeld's conception of homosexuality and that current notions have gone beyond his "monism" in both causation and typology. We now speak of *homosexualities*. Vern describes his present position on the issue of "causation" as "interactionist"—one that includes both biological and environmental factors. Since we can confidently assume that all human erotic states, preferences, behavior, and attitudes are an indistinguishable complex of body, mind, physical environment, and society, any singling out of the "causes" of homosexuality has an inescapable whiff of the old medical pathology that he so clearly described in 1974.

Vern has had several identities, all of which have come into play in his contributions to gay liberation and gay and lesbian studies. His primary professional identity is that of historian of human sexuality, an identity that he ranks higher than "sexologist." He takes pride in the fact that in the American Historical Society he pioneered sexuality as a serious, acceptable area of research and teaching. His interest in the field extends well beyond homosexuality although he was one of the founding members of the gay caucuses in both the historical and sociological associations. He has written or edited about fifty books, about half of them on sex or gender topics, from contraception (the subject of his latest writing) to prostitution and transgenderism, from pornography to sadomasochism to a history of sex research. He jokes about the fact that as he publishes on each new sexual variation, there are renewed speculations about his own "true" sexual and gender identity—e.g., is he a cross-dresser, transsexual, or simply a closet gay? Regrettably, I must report, he is not a transvestite, neither is he gay nor bisexual.

The issue of his gender identity arises as a kind of a guilt by association. He has had a long friendship with Virginia Prince, a transvestite man who publicly always appears cross-dressed. Prince was the pioneer leader and organizer of the transvestite movement. Vern, who might have been hesitant early in his career about being identified with stigmatized sexual groups, is clearly quite comfortable in his gender identity—comfortable enough to go back to college to get his nursing degree to gain greater clinical experience.

Nursing was Bonnie's primary professional affiliation, to which she later added a doctorate in sociology, and the two of them wrote extensively on nursing. His advocacy of women's rights has been a continuing commitment throughout his career in his research, writing, teaching, and political action. This includes women's right to engage in prostitution, to work in the pornography and stripping industry, and to employ various forms of contraception.

His political identity, of which he never makes an issue, is that of the classic liberal, in the mode of John Stuart Mill. He has cultivated fundamental respect for individual rights and individuality, particularly of those persons and groups whose lives fall outside of conventional sexual and gender norms. He does not impose his values on others; he avoids the tyranny of political ideology. He does not harbor grievances or injustices that lead to severed relationships. In the field of sexology, he is one of the few professional people who has not been swallowed up in controversy and ambition and manages to keep a civilized relationship with individuals in all factions. Although many of the pioneers of the gay movement whose biographies appear in this book, and others, ended up not speaking with each other, Vern has managed to remain connected with most of them.

Considering that he was born in the bosom of the Mormon Church, which he left in his teens, his work delights with a subterranean puckish, irreverent edge. Whereas Mormonism has been to this day a bastion of procreative sexuality, almost all of Vern's work and advocacy have dealt with the nonreproductive forms. He acknowledges that studying the "forbidden" forms of sexuality and gender, although still working well within the boundaries of scholarly respectability, provides an illicit frisson for his work. He can write and speak about forbidden forms of sexuality and gender with a very straight voice and steady voice.

His scholarly achievements and respectability, combined with his open-mindedness, have over the years provided a crucial link between gay and straight communities. Although several of the gay and lesbian homophile pioneers were well-educated and articulate people, their credibility and authority were clouded under stigma from the start. It would take two more decades before we as gay and lesbian students and advocates of gay liberation could find our own voices and draw support from our own communities. That independence, however, would not have been possible (and still is not) without the contributions of scholar-advocates such as Vern Bullough, who lent their reputations and shared our struggles long enough for us to gain the confidence to take them on for ourselves. As editor in chief of the Harrington Park series on gay and lesbian studies, which this volume now joins, I wish to express to Vern Bullough the deepest gratitude of our gay and lesbian scholarly community for all the work he has done these past forty years on our behalf.

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