

# The Gay News Blasphemy Trial, 1976

*Rictor Norton*

Even though I never played a direct role in the *Gay News* blasphemy trial, the blame for publishing James Kirkup's poem "The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name" in the issue for 3–16 June 1976 probably rests squarely on my shoulders.

When I came to London in September 1973, one of the first things I did was to pick up a copy of the fledgling *Gay News* (which had been founded in June 1972), and I was surprised to find that they had ripped off a copy of my article on Sir Francis Bacon (one of the "great queens of history") that had been published in the American gay periodical *The Advocate*. I went to the *GN* offices and met with the editor, Denis Lemon, who was as surprised to see the author of the article as I had been surprised to see its unauthorised reprint. The upshot was that *GN* not only paid me a nominal sum for the article, but bought four other articles on gay history and literature that I had thoughtfully brought along with me. Thus began an important part of my career (basically, turning academic research to popular account).

When Denis Lemon came into my office towards the middle of May 1976, I had been working full-time at *Gay News*, as both typesetter and research editor, for two years. *GN* relied more on my typesetting skills than my literary skills, but I salvaged my ego by reminding myself that Walt Whitman had also been a typesetter. In any event, I was delighted at the many opportunities I had to write articles on gay history and literature, and I enjoyed polishing the work of other contributors. Denis did not have confidence in his own judgement on literary matters, and he valued my opinion because I had published a book on the history of gay literature, had a PhD and had edited the first all-gay issue of an academic journal, and was skilful at reshaping what others had written, while Denis was fearful of altering so much as a comma.

On this day, Denis had a contribution to show me, about which he seemed doubtful. He showed me a copy of Kirkup's poem. I read it and gave my report: the poem appeared to be sincere and serious rather than

deliberately provocative; it had genuine poetic qualities; and it was written by an internationally recognised poet. I reassured Denis that, although the poem was in many ways shocking, it clearly was not pornographic because it was not obscene simply for the sake of obscenity. I recommended that it be published.

Denis was pleased with this recommendation. To tell the truth, several of us at *Gay News*, including Denis, were always happy to annoy gay Christians, or “Jesus queens”, as we called them. We felt that it was impossible for someone to be a good Christian and a good homosexual simultaneously. We felt that Christian apologists undermined the work of gay liberation, because the Christian church was the major single cause of gay oppression. In 1975–76 I had written for *Gay News* a series of articles on “The History of Homophobia”, which some people characterised as being anti-Christian (and anti-Semitic too, as far as religion goes).

Denis’s decision to publish Kirkup’s poem was made without consulting Richard Creed, the co-owner and director of GN, who was a practising solicitor. Creed represented the more conservative reformist position in *GN*, and would have advised against publishing the poem, which may be why Denis, representing the more radical position, decided not to seek Creed’s predictable advice. Creed criticised Denis for not consulting him when he saw the poem in the paper, and other members of the staff also resented Denis’s unilateral decision to publish the poem. But I don’t think anyone at that time had the slightest idea that such a thing as “blasphemous libel” existed on the law books. I have always been grateful that, subsequently, Denis accepted full responsibility, as editor, for publishing Kirkup’s poem, and never passed off any blame upon me for encouraging him to publish it.

When letters of complaint began to stream into the *GN* offices, we realised that we had given great offence to a significant number of our readers. We had stepped too far across the boundary of good taste. Had it ended there, within the gay community, perhaps with an apology for insensitivity and a promise to act more responsibly, all would have been well. But, when Mary Whitehouse began her private prosecution in October–November 1976, it was the beginning of the end of *Gay News*.

For several years, from late 1976 through mid-1979, work on the newspaper was regularly disrupted: from appealing for donations to the Fighting Fund set up in December 1976, through preparation for the trial,

which resulted in a guilty verdict in July 1977, to the appeal to the Court of Appeal (lost in March 1978), the appeal to the House of Lords (lost in February 1979), and eventually the appeal to the European Commission of Human Rights (lost around May 1982). The directors and main editors were constantly travelling and speaking at rallies and meetings. I was not much involved in this, though I did participate when *GN* was invited to address the Oxford Union. There was constant work on fundraising as well as the preparation of legal documents and getting together people to testify in our defence (in the event, none were allowed to testify, not even Denis himself). After the rush of excitement of the first trial – the novelty of being reported in all the media and being talked about by everyone – wore off, the aftermath of the trial dragged on, and on.

On many occasions during 1977, the daily decisions necessary for the actual fortnightly production of a newspaper were regularly postponed or insufficiently considered, because the decision makers were at a meeting, or busy preparing for a meeting, whether with legal consultants or gay organisations. My memory is of frequent comings and goings, copy for publication always arriving late, people working late into the night to meet deadlines.

The pressure of work increased, tensions increased, tempers flared. Denis was just as authoritarian as Mary Whitehouse, and not good at dealing with personnel matters. Many of us were seriously overworked and got little sleep. Perhaps Denis felt that our self-sacrifice was necessary at this time of crisis. Partly as a result of physical strain, my right lung collapsed and I was in hospital for a while (OK, smoking didn't help). Denis Lemon had also become a Celebrity, and became less accessible. The Art Director, Jean-Claude Thevenin, was Denis's lover, and their domestic quarrels increasingly brought work in the production department to a standstill. The break-up occurred in 1979, not only of Denis and Jean-Claude (though they continued living together), but of the newspaper.

I had decided that Denis was a petty tyrant, and in autumn 1978 I resigned with effect from 1 January 1979. An incident deemed to involve a betrayal of trust occurred in December 1978, and Richard Creed, co-owner of *GN*, formally resigned as director with effect from 1 April 1979 and Denis bought out his shares to become sole owner. But having a single person as sole proprietor, editor and publisher, with no trusted adviser, was not a formula for success: effective administration of the paper

became impossible. Michael Mason, a director and the paper's news editor, resigned in November 1979, and Keith Howes, features editor, resigned in December that year. We realised that the lapel badge "Gay News fights on" (endearingly printed beneath a picture of Mary Whitehouse) finally had to be unpinned, in more senses than one.

For several years during that period, *Gay News* was often the main subject of *Gay News*. In some issues, a good half of the news reports, features, and letters were focused on *Gay News*, to the detriment, I think, of the wider gay world. Subjects that normally were irrelevant to the development of gay awareness and gay liberation often dominated the paper – notably the interminable discussions about the nature of blasphemy.

An unhealthy hypocrisy and anxiety pervaded the offices of *GN* after Mary Whitehouse began her prosecution. The religious issue was not our chosen cause. We did not want to become experts on blasphemy. We had to declare that we were not blasphemers when in fact we felt we had every right to be blasphemous if we so wished, and that blasphemy should not have been illegal. Did we want to undermine Church and State? Well, yes! – at least as they were presently structured to the detriment of gays. The public line had to be "the poem is not obscene but has literary merit", though the personal feelings were "sure it's obscene – but so what?" We did not relish defending a poem that we frankly realised was rather sick (however sincere). (Many years later, Professor Kirkup himself renounced the poem. Considering the trauma that *GN* had endured on his account, this was the real blasphemy!)

*Gay News* was losing its feisty independence. It had begun as the progressive teacher of the gay community, but steadily became merely a "gay community newspaper", a follower rather than a leader. Alison Hennegan, who joined *GN* as literary editor and joint features editor in June 1977, remembers the uneasy feeling that everyone was engaged in self-censorship. In fact the censorship was overt. Each day, already-typeset copy was submitted to Richard Creed for his scrutiny and approval before being pasted down. Potentially libellous references to public figures were amended, and potentially obscene passages in articles were deleted. Always willing to irresponsibly push at the margins, I began a series of articles on "A History of Homoerotica" in 1977, but I had to stop because censorship made it impossible to continue.

*Gay News* had become more widely known to the general public, and our hypersensitivity to the threat of further legal prosecutions was understandable. We were always desperate to achieve distribution through channels such as W. H. Smith, for which our respectability had been severely tarnished. And we became fearful of further betraying the trust of the gay community. I think that Denis was reconceptualising the paper as a responsible servant to the community, in acknowledgment of the fact that innumerable gay people through the Fighting Fund really were supporting our existence, and we ought to be accountable to their sensibilities. Part of *GN*'s community service included the publication of long listings of gay groups (even an international section now) and numerous supplements of gay information. As the typesetter, I was very conscious that the paper was steadily increasing in size.

*GN* did not actually lose money by defending itself against Mary Whitehouse's prosecution, because the GN Fighting Fund, kept entirely separate from *GN*'s income, did in fact cover the legal expenses directly connected with the trial, leaving a small surplus, which was distributed to various gay causes when *GN* reached the end of the appeals road in spring 1982. The publicity of the trial in fact led to an increase in subscriptions, but the paper never quite managed to sell more than 18,000–19,000 copies per issue. The revenue of the paper really depended on display advertising rather than on copies sold. The increasing public awareness of *Gay News* did not lead to more advertising revenue, because only gay businesses (basically, pubs and clubs) advertised in *Gay News* and they already knew all about *Gay News* long before it received any mainstream publicity. The struggle to recruit non-gay advertising (e.g. for cars or vodka) invariably failed. In addition, the recession was reducing the number of gay companies able to advertise.

Even at the best of times, the paper could not quite pass the threshold of commercial success. Increasing the number of pages to give better value for money resulted in increased production and labour costs (though the staff received very low wages, and unpaid volunteers were relied upon for many distribution jobs), which were not matched by increased advertising revenue. The newspaper throughout all of its life barely made a profit, and its demise was perhaps inevitable. However, the Whitehouse prosecution struck it a body blow from which it never recovered.

Though I continued to write reviews for *Gay News*, from 1979 I was no longer a staff member, and my knowledge of later events is limited. The years 1980–82 seem to have been a period of confusion and a struggle to survive. Administration was separated from editing, two new editors were successively appointed, and in January 1981 Robert Palmer was brought in to help reorganisation. Denis became ill in mid- or late 1981, and he sold Gay News Ltd to Robert Palmer Marketing Ltd in February 1982. There was a series of disputes and legal bills over this sale, as it became clear that expected revenue was not sufficient to pay Denis the agreed price. The size of the paper was reduced to save costs. The premises at Normand Gardens were sold off to pay the loans raised to pay Denis. Six or seven out of twenty employees were sacked. In October 1982 three more were told they would be made redundant, and six were told they would be put on half-time; there was a series of union disputes. The female staff of *GN* in November 1982, led by Alison Hennegan, formed the Visible Lesbian Collective within the paper to fight against its “male hierarchy”. A couple of issues were published by “the workers” acting independently of the owner. Some people called for Denis to relinquish his financial demands and for the paper to be “returned to the people”, harking back to *GN*’s cherished myth of origins. It is true that a “collective” had initially planned *Gay News*, but by the time the first issue was published it was produced by a limited-liability company. It had always been privately rather than collectively owned. That could not be legally unravelled, except in the ordinary way of business. The paper straggled on with a declining readership until it folded in 1984. Many of us who lived through that era still lament its passing, for it was undoubtedly important for the development of the gay community at the more serious levels beyond “the scene”. For its broad cultural coverage and depth of analysis, it has never been matched.

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