

## **Must we believe the words that killed them?**

In June 1727, the VOC ship *Zeewijk* wrecked in the Abrolhos Islands, off the coast of Jambinu (Geraldton) in Western Australia. The survivors lived on the islands for 9 months, eventually building a new vessel from salvaged timbers and mangrove wood. This boat, known as *Sloepie*, eventually got 82 of the 208 people originally on board safely to Jakarta (then Batavia).

Two young boys, Adriaan Spoor and Pieter Engelse, survived the wrecking but never left the islands. In December 1727, they were accused of '*the gruesome sin of Sodom and Gomorrah*' and sentenced to death. In their world, sodomy was a crime so serious it risked the lives of the entire crew. The authorities feared divine judgement. Unless the boys were punished they faced destruction, like the two cities burned by God for tolerating immorality.

Todd Fuller's *1727 - Pieter & Adriaan* is a beautiful speculation on this awful history. It tells a story of romance that begins in fleeting moments on a ship, and ends with an observed kiss on a beach, under a summer night sky. Out of a story of gay hate, Fuller has chosen to tell a story of gay love.

Their known historical story spans just two days, recorded in two journals: by Steijns the skipper, and Graeff the understeersman. They detail the accusations made by two quartermasters and a sailor: Franz Feban, Dirk Janse van Grieken and Hendrik Armanse, who claimed that the previous afternoon they had seen the boys:

*"committing with one another in god-foresaken way the gruesome sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, which cries out to heaven and gave the skipper and the rest of ship's council a pang through the heart"*.

They swore it was true, and provided a written statement to be included in the journal. Adriaan and Pieter were interrogated and tortured, but never confessed. The following day, they were placed on separate islands and left to die of thirst. No further mention of them is ever made.

There are two more known journals, both derived from the originals at a later date. An anonymous one remarks only: 'Monday 1, the wind S, topgallant sail's force, distribute 11 kegs of butter, complaints about 2 young men'. The other is a version of Graeff's journal that Steijns copied and submitted as his own, changing an important detail: he revised the course of *Zeewijk* by about 68 miles. During an investigation, this falsification was noticed, and it became clear he was hiding a purposeful decision to sail too far east, which led to the wrecking. He was convicted of negligence and banished.

So with just a few pages, how do we know these boys were gay? That they loved each other? That they kissed? This is a familiar problem when reconstructing queer histories. The true relationships are often unwritten – cast as a shadow made of accusation or rumour. Often the details we need are not there to be found. The words we read today are filtered through the societies of the past and present. People write what they choose to write, and keep the records they choose to keep. These choices are a record of power, and often those powers were not kind to gay love.

To believe these boys were gay, we must believe a sketchy history on three levels. The first is that we must believe the accusations were even made, and that the trial went as recorded. Given that Steijns falsified his journal to hide his negligence elsewhere, this isn't a given. In this case though, Graeff's journal is consistent. For both, there is a clear belief that swift and harsh punishment would reinforce law and order. There is also a clear incentive for it to be seen as decisively and competently handled, and to be recorded as such for their superiors at the Company.

Secondly, we must believe the accusers. We must do this knowing that the purpose of such an accusation would be to kill them. It was the act of sodomy that was a crime, rather than homosexual desires or identity. Maybe the boys just seemed gay, and the others chose to cruelly exploit that by making up a story? Maybe there wasn't even that much to it, maybe the accusation was just convenient. We must also not believe Adriaan and Pieter, who refused to confess. During their trial, they obviously didn't want anyone to think they were gay.

Thirdly, assuming the accusation is true, we must believe that homosexual sex is proof of homosexual identity. In some contexts, sexual acts between two men are often understood as not homosexual – think prison, the navy, or months marooned on an island. Maybe this is denial, but it probably reflects a complexity separating actions from identity. In addition, queer identity is never simply categorical, and the 300 years that separate us means their experience of queerness was very different to ours today, in ways we could never fully understand.

So after consulting the archive, we are left with a nagging sense of doubt. That's normal! Anything less and you're missing the point. Now, what do we do with all these fragments of problematic evidence? Fuller has an answer, and that is to pick up the pieces and to tell a gay story. It is a cruel twist that for us to recover a story of love, we must believe the very words that killed them. But what is the alternative?

On a case-by-case basis, there is often a desire to 'play it safe'. This is especially strong in museum and academic contexts, where we must 'stick to the facts'.

Historians do of course always read between the lines, and museums challenge

dominant ideas, that's the whole job. But it's always tempting to decide evidence is too doubtful, and retreat to believing a story is too complicated to tell. When gay stories always have this challenge, we risk a history that is heterosexual by default.

Fuller's work is a radical rejection of such a boring world. The medium of intimate moments painted over historical maps is beautifully sympathetic to the subject matter. The previous frames are often incompletely erased, so scenes fill up with ghosts. This is a perfect illustration of how human stories can be drawn from historical documents. It's a familiar impulse, to build something new from what can be salvaged, and to escape.

We need more art like this in museums and a greater engagement with this sort of speculation. It should be seen as a complement to stricter narratives, rather than a threat or a replacement. Audiences are smart enough to discern between the two, and deserve richer, gayer histories.

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