

# THE STONEWALL

## REVOLUTION:

50 years of LGBT liberation



“

*The only  
duty we owe  
history is to  
rewrite it.*

OSCAR WILDE

”



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# THE STONEWALL REVOLUTION:

50 years of LGBT liberation

28th June 2019 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, a pivotal event in LGBT history. The riots at the gay pub, the Stonewall Inn, on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, New York, were sparked by one too many instances of harassment by the police, who were a relentless presence of persecution towards the LGBT community. This was a significant event in the struggle for equality for LGBT people both in the USA and the whole world, because it ultimately led to the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected category in the civil and human rights movements. It marked the beginning of the reversal of millennia of oppression against the lesbian and gay population.



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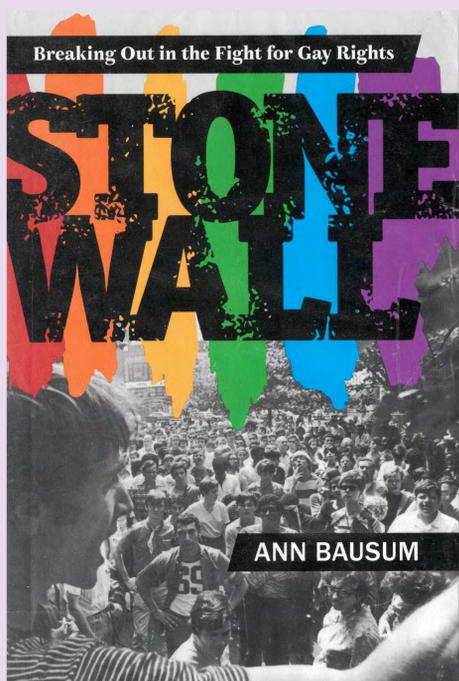
50 years of LGBT liberation

### BEFORE STONEWALL

Life for LGBT people in the USA in the 1960s was very difficult. They were seen as “perverts”, and those in relationships could not show affection towards their partners in the street because it was not safe to do so. Society and prejudice gave the police many reasons to persecute homosexuals. It was a criminal offence to wear clothes of the opposite sex, except at Hallowe’en. Local law stipulated that persons had to wear three gender-appropriate articles of inner and outer clothing at all times, and this interfered with the wardrobe planning of cross-dressers. Bars that catered to members of the gay community did not necessarily prove to be a safe haven for them. Local authorities interpreted state laws to mean that homosexuals were inevitably disorderly and therefore could not legally be served alcohol. Some bars put signs up outside stating “If You’re Gay, Go Away”. Police officers would often enter gay bars undercover, pretending to be gay in order to trick gay people into showing themselves. They would then arrest unsuspecting gay people, as it was also illegal to be gay at that time. Homosexuals were treated as social outcasts. They had to resign themselves to “living in the closet”, as this was the safest option for them; they kept their sexual orientations private except when they could be sure that they were surrounded by like-minded people. This denial of their own identities felt like a fate worse than death to some, and suicide rates were high among the LGBT population.



Craig Rodwell



Ann Bausum book cover

The ongoing repression of the LGBT community created opportunities for corruption at a time when organised crime, spearheaded by the Mafia from its bases in Italy and New York, intersected with many segments of commerce. New York’s Mafia operatives realised that the city’s homosexual community represented an untapped commercial market. The Mafia seized the opportunity and began to open gay bars. These bars, including the Stonewall Inn, were unlicensed and contained stolen goods, from cigarettes to alcohol, and this is why they were vulnerable to raids, but the Mafia used a wink-and-nod system with corruptible members of the city’s police force. These members of the police ignored the illegal pubs as long as the Mafia diverted a share of the proceeds to them. This was a double victimisation of the LGBT community: no-one wanted to open gay bars due to the derogatory perception of LGBT people, and the exception to this rule was the Mafia – they held a monopoly to these businesses. However, the Mafia did not have the interests of the LGBT community at heart; they only cared about their own financial interests. This deepened the secrecy and unhealthy attitude surrounding LGBT people, because these pubs sold alcohol illegally. The Mafia controlled their customers and paid off the police, but when the police carried out raids, the Mafia did not care if customers were beaten up outside. The Stonewall Inn bar’s one-entrance layout made it a catastrophic fire trap in an emergency, but the one-entrance layout was attractive to LGBT people, because they needed somewhere they could hide.

Gay activism had already started well before the Stonewall riots. A male gay group called the Mattachine Society was formed in 1950, primarily to assist men who had been arrested as “sexual deviants”, and later, it focused on attempting to bring about acceptance of gays into society. Not long after the Mattachine Society was formed, a group of lesbians met in San Francisco and established the lesbian group, Daughters of Bilitis, to assist women. These groups participated in demonstrations which promoted homosexual equality at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. A gay New Yorker called Craig Rodwell organised these protests on 4th July every year, beginning in 1965.



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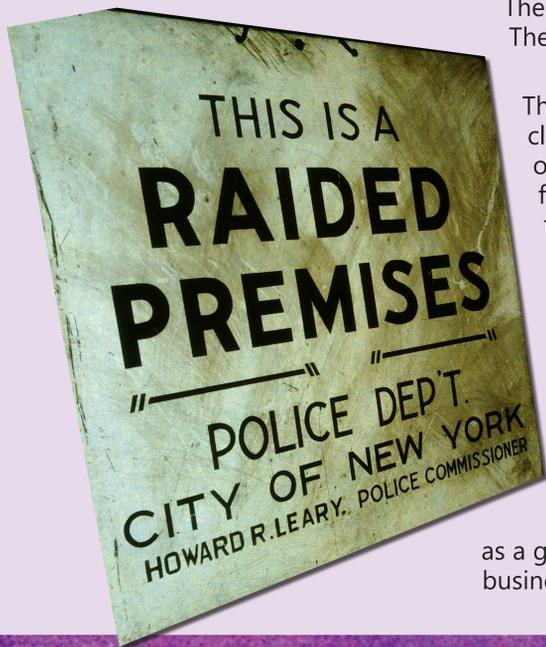
50 years of LGBT liberation

### THE STONEWALL RIOTS, 28TH JUNE, 1969

The fight for LGBT rights which was set in motion during the Stonewall Riots was heavily influenced by the African American civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties. The events of 28th June 1969 were as momentous for the LGBT community as the Montgomery bus boycott and Rosa Parks' role in it for the African American population.

Inspector Seymour Pine of the New York Police Department received orders in June 1969 to close down the Stonewall Inn, as it was an unlicensed premises and purported to be a source of corruption. On 28th June 1969, Inspector Pine and his colleague Detective Charles Smythe raided the Stonewall Inn for the second time in one week, with the aim of shutting it down. They thumped on the door and shouted, "Police! We're taking the place!" They then moved Mafia employees and cross-dressers to the back barroom in preparation for arrests. Other customers moved to the door to have their IDs inspected and were released if they produced proper identification. Instead of dispersing, the released patrons began to congregate outside. A police van arrived, signalling that arrests were going to be made. Police were manhandling lesbians; officers groped at least some of them and treated them discourteously and roughly. One lesbian was hit on the head and thrown into the police van. Her head was bleeding. The brutality of the police pushed gay people to the very edge. They had endured too much prejudice, violence and harassment. They were now being threatened with arrest and violence in the one place they felt they could retreat to – a sanctuary of sorts - and they felt they were now being invaded. Craig Rodwell, a gay activist, was passing Christopher Street while this scene was unfolding. He was overwhelmed with anger at the raid of yet another gay bar, and, improvising on the "Black power!" slogan of the African American civil rights movement, he shouted at the crowd which was gathering in front of the Stonewall Inn, "Gay power!" A few others echoed the idea of protest by singing the civil rights anthem "We shall overcome". The crowd's mood darkened when it became clear that all cross-dressers were being arrested. Inspector Pine was having problems: there were now more people being arrested than would fit in the police van, and Pine lacked manpower. This was when the police faced something they had never seen before; gay people were never usually a threat. People in the growing crowd outside started throwing coins and bottles and screaming. The police retreated into the Stonewall Inn because they viewed it to be safer than the street. This served to deepen the anger felt by the crowd outside, because they felt that the pub was the only place they could be themselves, and they had to reclaim it. A parking meter was pulled from the ground and thrown at the door of the Stonewall Inn, where the police had barricaded themselves inside. The crowd then began throwing makeshift fire bombs and dousing the bar's window frame in flammable liquid and setting it alight. There was no backup for the police, and there was now a mob of over 2,000 rioters outside. No-one had ever made the police retreat before. No-one was killed in the riot, but some police were injured. The biggest casualty was the bar itself. Its demise looked complete. The riot wound down at around 4am, 3 hours after it had started.

The Stonewall Inn reopened the next day. More traditional and closeted gay people felt unsettled and worried about the exposure of the riots. Younger gay people, on the other hand, realised for the first time that they were not alone. Craig Rodwell had been waiting for the spark that would ignite a widespread gay rights movement, and this was it. The next evening, on the 29th June, there was another riot; the LGBT community attempted to take control of Christopher Street, chanting "Christopher Street belongs to the queens". The next 3 nights after that were quiet, but the *Village Voice* newspaper provoked another riot on 2nd July due to its homophobic coverage of the previous riots that week. The Stonewall Inn fell victim to the very movement that it inspired. It closed a few months after the Stonewall Riots. The bar's name lived on, and other establishments have capitalised on the fame of the spot and opened bars at its location. It functions as a gay bar today. It was the riots sparked outside it, however, not the business itself, which has earned annual commemoration.



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### STORMÉ DELARVERIE

Although lesbians shared the same concerns as gay men, they faced additional barriers due to enduring patterns of discrimination against women. Black lesbians faced even more discrimination because they belonged to three minority groups.

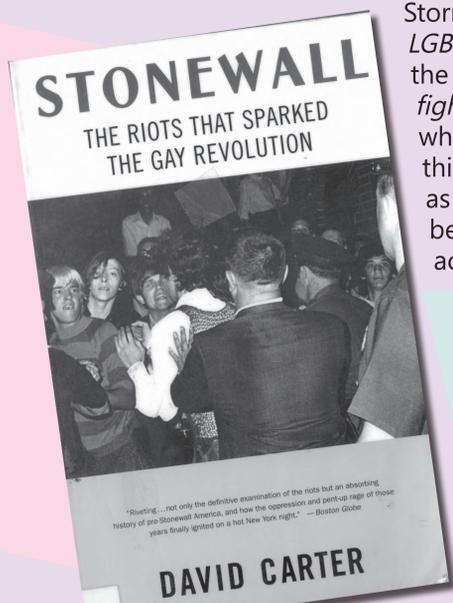
Stormé DeLarverie was a black lesbian. She was a well-known drag king at the Jewel Box Revue, the first racially integrated drag show in the USA. She was born in New Orleans but moved to Chicago as an adult because she feared she would be killed for being black and gay if she remained in the South. Stormé was a campaigner for the LGBT community and for victims of domestic violence throughout her life.

It was a lesbian's struggle with the police that ignited the Stonewall Riots. A butch lesbian in men's clothing was arrested for not wearing the three pieces of clothing correct for her gender, and she was brought out to the police van during the raid. She complained to the police, either because they were rough with her or because her handcuffs were too tight (reports differ on this). She fought the police and attempted to go back into the Stonewall Inn several times, whereupon an officer picked her up and threw her into the police van. Her head was bleeding from having been hit with a billy club by the police. As she was pushed into the van, she urged the gay men watching her ordeal to help her, asking, "Why don't you guys do something?" It was then that the tension of that night and of lifetimes of abuse erupted. Gay and lesbian people felt that the police were being unnecessarily brutal, and they reacted in fury.



Stormé DeLarverie

The identity of the lesbian who triggered this important event in LGBT history is disputed. David Carter states in his book, *Stonewall: the riots that sparked the gay revolution*, that Charles Kaiser, author of *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996*, asserts that this woman was Stormé DeLarverie. However, David Carter disagrees with this, adding that all the witnesses he interviewed for his research describe the woman in question as Caucasian, and Stormé was African-American. Nevertheless, Amy Lamé affirms in her book, *From prejudice to pride: a history of the LGBTQ+ movement*, that it was Stormé de Larverie whose brutal treatment by police and whose anger at the police sparked the Stonewall Riots. Ann Bausum describes the lesbian's scuffle with police in her book, *Stonewall: breaking out in the fight for gay rights*, giving a similar account to that of David Carter, but she does not mention the name of the lesbian who changed the course of history by reacting against the injustices she was experiencing. Other accounts declare that this significant person "may have been" Stormé DeLarverie, and Stormé has been identified by some, including herself, as the woman who fought back against the police that momentous night. As all the accounts differ, the truth cannot be confirmed. Nonetheless, Stormé's considerable and important contribution to the gay rights movement should be acknowledged and held in high regard.



David Carter book cover

“ In the civil rights movement, we ran from the police, in the peace movement, we ran from the police. That night, the police ran from us, the lowliest of the low. And it was fantastic. ”

John O'Brien,  
participant in the Stonewall riots, recalling the scene on June 28, 1969



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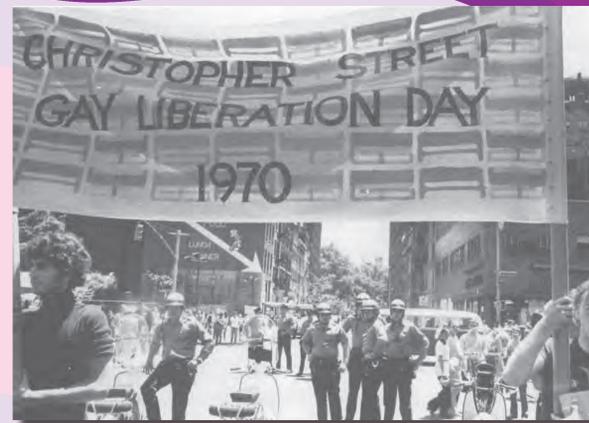
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### AFTER STONEWALL

One of the positive outcomes of the Stonewall Riots was that LGBT people who had felt oppressed their whole lives now felt empowered. At the annual 4th of July protest organised by Craig Rodwell in 1969, couples held hands in public for the first time. Craig Rodwell realised that this would be the last 4th of July Annual Reminder protest – from then on, there would be an annual commemorative march in honour of the Stonewall riots, on the date they had taken place. On 27th July 1969, 500 or more people protested in Washington Square Park to celebrate the previous month's unrest with speeches about LGBT rights. On 28th June 1970, the first Christopher Street Liberation Day march took place, exactly one year on from the Stonewall Riots. Those participating in the march had hoped for more than 10 people and feared there would not even be a crowd of 10, but there were actually thousands who took part, and the parade stretched for fifteen city blocks. By the tenth anniversary, the parade had doubled in length. By 1984, 25 cities in the USA were commemorating the Stonewall Riots with the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade.



Many gay activist groups were formed after the Stonewall Riots. To name a few, there was the Gay Liberation Front, the Gay Activists Alliance and the lesbian group, Lavender Menace. These groups put pressure on politicians to stop using derogatory language with regard to homosexuals, to take gay rights seriously and to stop police harassment of LGBT people. By the time of Stonewall, there were 50-60 gay groups in the country; a year later, there were 1,500. Things were gradually improving for the LGBT community. The medical community withdrew its diagnosis of homosexuality as a mental illness. Bars were opened which were not run by the Mafia. Surgery became available for transgender people.

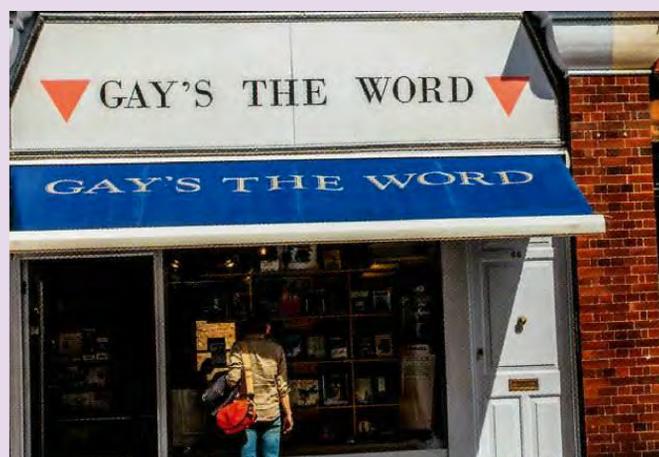
Despite the many positive steps that had been made with regard to LGBT rights, the struggle was far from over. The AIDS crisis brought with it further prejudice; when gay men became sick with AIDS, people said that this disease was a just punishment for unnatural behaviour. Harvey Milk was assassinated in 1978. Milk was a gay rights activist and the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California as a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

President Bill Clinton was very supportive of the LGBT community. His government spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the study and treatment of AIDS, and deaths from the disease peaked in 1995; thanks to funded research, effective medical drugs had been identified which halted the progression of the illness. During this same period, the U.S. Supreme Court began considering LGBT rights. It took until 2003 for the sodomy law to be made unconstitutional, and it was only then that homosexuality ceased to be a crime



Harvey Milk

in the USA. In 2009, Congress passed the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which made it a federal crime to commit violence due to the gender or sexual identity of a person. In 2011, under Barack Obama's presidency, discrimination in the military on the basis of sexual orientation was made unlawful. In 2014, same-sex marriage became legal in a majority of the United States. The 1969 Stonewall Riots were the catalyst of an arduous and impassioned struggle for equality for the LGBT community in the USA.



Above: the Gay's the Word bookshop, London, which was founded in 1979. This bookshop hosted the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners group (LGSM), which raised money and campaigned with coal miners striking in Wales in the 1980s. Their story was retold in the 2014 film, *Pride*.

**“ If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door. ”**

Harvey Milk



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### IRELAND'S STRUGGLE FOR LGBT RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

Like the USA, Ireland's achievement of equality for the LGBT community has been gradual. It is hard to believe that last year was the 25th anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland. Serious LGBT activism in Ireland began slightly later than in the USA, in the 1970s, when law students formed the group, Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform, whose aim was to campaign for the decriminalisation of homosexuality. David Norris was one of the most prominent leaders of this group. Norris brought an action against the state for the first time in 1977, arguing that the part of the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act which outlawed homosexual practices was unconstitutional. Mary Robinson, legal advisor to the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform, took this action to the Irish Supreme Court, which did not accept that there were grounds for a change in the law, claiming that the state retained the right to legislate on moral affairs. Mary Robinson then went through the lengthy process of taking David Norris's case through the European Court of Human Rights. Norris won his case there in 1988, and, five years later, the Irish Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1993, which decriminalised homosexual behaviour between consenting adults, was implemented.

During the years of Senator David Norris's legal battle for decriminalisation, Ireland was an unsafe place for LGBT people, and acts of homophobic violence were widespread. David Norris states in his autobiography that he knew eight people who were murdered simply because they were gay. One of the eight people David Norris refers to, Declan Flynn, was kicked to death in Fairview Park in 1982. His killers were convicted of manslaughter and given suspended sentences, but when one of them was convicted a while later for stealing a car, he was sent to prison for six months. That a car was more valuable than a person's life at the time shows the attitude towards gay people in the 1980s. Norris also describes in his autobiography how muggings and physical attacks by "queer basher" gangs were frequent, and that he was attacked and beaten himself in one incident. Following Declan Flynn's death, Ireland's first Pride parade took place in March 1983, to highlight the problem of violence against LGBT men and women.

In July 2010, the Civil Partnership Bill was passed. This bill gave gay and lesbian couples almost all of the legal rights and obligations of civil marriage, but it did not change the law relating to children of these couples.



Senator David Norris

On 18th January 2015, then Minister for Health Leo Varadkar came out as gay on national radio. On 23rd May of that year, Ireland made history by becoming the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote. The referendum results of 62% in favour (1,201,607 Yes votes) to 38% against (734,300 No votes) spoke volumes about the change of attitude that had taken place in the past 40 years and about how Irish society had not only become more tolerant and accepting but also more supportive of LGBT people. Senator Katherine Zappone and her wife Ann Louise Gilligan were instrumental in bringing about the marriage equality referendum. They had been married in Canada, and they wanted to have their marriage recognised in Ireland. However, this was not possible under Irish law, so they took a High Court case in 2004 to change the legal restrictions regarding marriage. This was what ultimately led to the marriage referendum 11 years later.

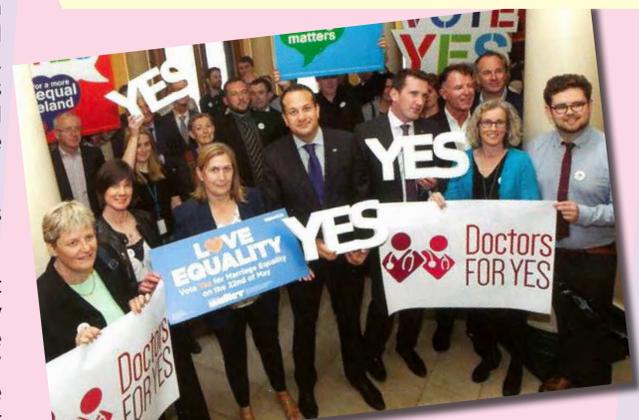
The Gender Recognition Act was passed in July 2015. This law enables someone who is transgender to have their preferred gender recognised by the state by means of a Gender Recognition Certificate.

In June 2017, Ireland made history once more when Leo Varadkar became the country's first openly gay Taoiseach.

In June 2018, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan both issued a public apology to members of the LGBT community for the suffering and discrimination they had endured from the Irish state prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality.



Katherine Zappone and her wife, Ann Louise Gilligan at Dublin Castle just after the marriage referendum results were out



The Yes Equality referendum campaign. Second photo from the top: then Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, among others, advocating the "Doctors for Yes" vote.



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### CONCLUSION

The Stonewall Riots of June 1969 took place at a very turbulent time in world history, when many minority groups were beginning to demonstrate against injustices and fight for equality. People were protesting in the USA against the Vietnam War. African Americans in the USA were standing up against racism and campaigning for civil rights. Women were striving for equal conditions to men, in work as well as in their everyday lives. Catholics in Northern Ireland were also making a stand against injustices they were enduring in comparison to their Protestant counterparts.

The Stonewall Inn received National Monument status on 24th June 2016. It is the first US National Monument dedicated to LGBT rights and history. The USA and Ireland are both much safer, fairer and more equal places for the LGBT community today, but Northern Ireland is still campaigning for marriage equality. It is the only part of the UK where same-sex marriage is not allowed. The work of LGBT activists has changed society in so many positive ways, but the fight for equality and justice is ongoing.



Plaque outside the Stonewall Inn bar, declaring its US National Monument status.

“ You could hear screaming outside, a lot of noise from the protesters, and it was a good sound. It was a real good sound to know that, you know, you had a lot of people out there pulling for you. ”

Raymond Castro

a Stonewall Inn patron being detained inside the bar during its siege

#### Further reading

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