

The Grassroots of *Urningtum*

Review of Douglas Pretsell, *Urning: Queer Identity in the German Nineteenth Century* (Toronto–Buffalo–London: University of Toronto Press, 2024)

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Although he was not first to advocate the decriminalisation of same-sex desire, German lawyer and journalist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895) is often called the “first theorist” of the subject due to his neologism “urning” and the model of the “third-sex” for same-sex-attracted men. There has been some excellent work done regarding this crucial period in the history of sexuality, such as *Ulrichs: The Life and Works of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Pioneer of the Modern Gay Movement* (1988) by Hubert Kennedy, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (2000) by Harry Oosterhuis, *Peripheral Desire: The German Discovery of Sex* (2015) by Robert Deam Tobin, *Vita Sexualis: Karl Ulrichs and the Origins of Sexual Science* (2016) by Ralph M. Leck, and *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860–1914* (2016) by Scott Spector, to name a few. Many scholars usually focus on prominent scandals and “elite writers” of the period and, as a result, little has been said about the grassroots of this modern gay movement in the nineteenth century. It is this lacuna in criticism that a new book *Urning: Queer Identity in the German Nineteenth Century* (2024) addresses based on indispensable primary sources published in *The Correspondence of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, 1846–1894* (2020) and *Queer Voices in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing, 1883–1901* (2023), both translated and edited by the author of the monograph under review here, Douglas Pretsell.

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It has become almost customary to start a book like this one with notes on terminology when writing about various nineteenth-century neologisms and their respective theories to avoid the troublesome anachronism in light of our contemporary understanding of gender and sexuality, often incomparable with pre-Stonewall sexology. As indicated by the title's use of the German term "urning" instead of the English "uranian," this monograph puts sexological terms back to their historical context and builds the narrative from the ground up. This does not mean that Pretsell disregards or shies away from acknowledging and addressing domineering terminology and criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Also indicated by the title, the book makes use of the term "queer" in a genealogical and more expansive sense, and the introduction addresses Foucault's *History of Sexuality* head-on. Evidently, prior criticism also had to face Foucault one way or the other. For instance, Oosterhuis pointed out a problem in Foucault's narrative, namely, that the people behind the case studies of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* were not merely passive patients internalising the notions of *Scientia sexualis*. Tobin intelligibly, though with somewhat undue modesty, tiptoed around Foucault as if walking on eggshells, and Leck in the afterword to his monograph virtually attacked Foucault, which was extremely thought-provoking but may have been done with dubious vehemence. Pretsell, on the other hand, by carefully contextualising both the ontological turn in the nineteenth century and Foucault in the twentieth, elegantly accommodates the French philosopher's findings in his own introductory material. What follows is divided into two parts: the first is about Ulrichs's active years until 1870, and the second discusses the newfound agency of the urning community between 1871 and 1897.

Chapter 1, "The First Uurning: Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, 1825–1895," offers a short biography of Ulrichs and details how his coinage "urning" came to be that was followed by the development and expansion of his theory. The next chapter, "From Page to Personhood: The Transmission of *Uurningtum*, 1864–1868," gives an account of the grassroots responding to Ulrichs's pamphlets. It is a simple and logical yet largely overlooked step in the narrative regarding the nineteenth-century history of sexuality: thanks to Ulrichs, there was an intense network in the making, and Pretsell provides three defining characteristics to the urning identity and a nine-fold character typology of *Uurningtum*, "the totality of the urning world" (33n*): the ordinary urning, the consummate *Weibling*, the discreet professional, the isolated

urning, the married man, the social cross-dresser, the ambient *Mannling*, the soldier, and the blackmailer.

The third chapter, “Two Trials: Sensation, Horror, and the Urning in the Public Sphere, 1867–1870,” turns to two urnings who were the first, after Ulrichs, to identify themselves as such in public, although with troublesome public ramifications, given their scandalous trials. Chapter 4, “Sins of the City: Karl Maria Kertbeny and the Social Cross-Dressers, 1865–1880,” focuses on Ulrichs’s pen pal (and competitor?), Károly Kertbeny, who coined the term “homosexual,” and correspondents in London and Vienna who wrote to Ulrichs about cross-dressing in these large cities. The design of the chapter is clear: it is about men who did not receive Ulrichs’s ideas without reservations, given their own sense of gender and sexuality. The chapter, nevertheless, leaves a few things to be explained or desired. Kertbeny championing his masculinist approach and his notion of super-virile homosexual men socialises rather awkwardly with accounts of cross-dressing on page. Also, his role in the history of sexuality seems to be somewhat downplayed. A few more paragraphs would have been appreciated, comparing Ulrichs’s and Kertbeny’s strategies in detail and outlining that the two most probably had different understandings of what was at stake when writing about same-sex desire in 1869. However, it is also clear by chapter 4 that Pretsell would not deliberately neglect a more detailed account of these questions if not by design, which suggests that it is only the purpose which the chapter serves in his narrative that did not allow him to elaborate further, and there are publications to come concerning the subject for which the readers should keep their eyes peeled.

Part 2 starts with the extraordinary story of Jakob Rudolf Forster who studied under Ulrichs, took what he learned back to Switzerland, and tried to build an urning community in Zurich despite all adversities and adversaries. Then chapter 6 revolves around the new classificatory science of sexualities in *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the people behind the book’s case studies, and these urning men’s “agency in the psychiatric engagement” (116). Although this agency has been established in criticism with different words to the same effect, the analysis that enfolds here quantifies the weight of—what Pretsell calls—dissenting autobiographies in shaping, if not almost redefining, Krafft-Ebing’s views on same-sex-attracted men over the many editions of his pivotal study. The chapter concludes that “[t]his was the result of a continuous campaign started by Ulrichs in 1864 and extended by his followers to 1892” (133), which might suggest to some readers that

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it was Ulrichs who set the wheels in motion, although it might be safer to say that he oiled the wheels.

The next chapter, “Belling the Cat,” changes the standard narrative about the Berlin police which is thought to have miraculously reformed itself against blackmailers *vis-à-vis* urning men between 1878 and 1897. The chapter argues that it was the campaign tactic and police liaison of Adolf Glaser, a secretive and elusive figure of the archives, that changed the game. Chapter 8 discusses another example for the transnational promulgation of Ulrichs’s ideas, and focuses on English poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds and his struggles with reconciling his sources (Plato, Whitman, and Ulrichs) so that he can arrive at a sex-positive view of his sexuality. The concluding remarks of the monograph close its narrative with the end of the urning age when, in 1897, Magnus Hirschfeld’s Scientific-Humanitarian Committee was founded on largely masculinist ideas.

It would not do justice to *Urnig* if it were called another “welcome addition” to literature about Ulrichs and the history of sexuality. Especially since, despite that there has been rather extensive criticism about the subject, the monograph takes the risk of presenting a narrative that might seem introductory at first sight. But this risk pays off especially well and serves the purpose of the book, which has much to offer for both novice and more advanced readers about the nineteenth-century history of same-sex desire. The former will enjoy the intelligibility and ease with which the monograph builds its narrative from the ground up, despite the puzzling complexity of the subject matter at hand, based on its carefully selected, evaluated, and analysed primary sources. And the latter will definitely learn a lot about the largely overlooked grassroots of this modern gay movement in the nineteenth century, and chapters 5 and 7 in particular will colour this picture of the period for them with nuanced and riveting stories that changed the game. I am absolutely positive that Douglas Pretsell’s *Urnig: Queer Identity in the German Nineteenth Century* is a must-have in libraries and university syllabi on the history of sexuality, and that this monograph will be a cornerstone in criticism about same-sex desire in the nineteenth century for many years to come.

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The AnaChronisT. He defended his doctoral dissertation, *Wilde, Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson: Homophilia and Hungarophilia in Fin-de-Siècle Literature*, in March 2022. Currently, he is working on the new scholarly edition of *Imre: A Memorandum* by Edward Prime-Stevenson in the Oxford World's Classics series.