



Sagarin, Edward (Donald Webster Cory) (1913-1986)

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Edward Sagarin is the Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde of the American homophile movement. As Donald Webster Cory, he was the author of influential books that prepared the stage for the gay liberation movement; as Dr. Edward Sagarin, Professor of Sociology and Criminology at the City University of New York, he was the movement's great apostate.

Early Life

Sagarin was born in Schenectady, New York on September 18, 1913 to Russian-immigrant, Jewish parents. His mother died when he was five years old. When his father remarried, the family relocated to New York City, where Sagarin was to reside for the rest of his life.

From birth, Sagarin suffered from scoliosis, a curvature of the spine, which produced a noticeable hump on his back. This mark of difference no doubt made Sagarin sensitive to the misfortunes and stigmas suffered by others and may help account for the academic interest he would later develop in social deviants of all kinds, from homosexuals and dwarfs to schizophrenics and anti-war protesters.

After Sagarin graduated from high school, he spent a year in France, where he met André Gide and perfected his French. Upon his return, he enrolled at City College of New York, but with the Great Depression he was soon forced to drop out of college.

In 1934, Sagarin met Gertrude Liphshitz, a young woman from a large Orthodox Jewish family, who shared his left-wing political interests. Despite Sagarin's sexual attraction to men, they married in 1936 and soon produced their only child.

Sagarin supported his family by holding a variety of jobs, but eventually established himself in the perfume and cosmetics industry, becoming something of an expert on the chemistry of perfumes.

Donald Webster Cory, Homophile Activist

In 1951, Sagarin published *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, under the name Donald Webster Cory, a pseudonym chosen to allude to Gide's *Corydon*. Although published by a small and somewhat disreputable press, Greenberg, *The Homosexual in America* was the first widely read non-fiction book in the United States to present knowledgeably and sympathetically the plight of the homosexual as told from the inside rather than the outside.

Although conceived independently of the Kinsey report on *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), and a more personal and anecdotal work, Cory's book benefited from the recent publication of Kinsey's findings, which had reassured gay men and lesbians in the late 1940s that they were not alone, that they in fact belonged to a group of considerable size.

Cory went beyond the scientific detachment and dry statistics of the Kinsey report to provide a sense of what it meant to be a homosexual in 1950s America. Moreover, he argued more boldly than anyone previously for the rights of homosexuals as a group. He described the persecution and discrimination visited upon homosexuals in almost all aspects of their lives, considered (though he did not dispute) the "sickness" theories of homosexuality, and indicated the vast diversity of homosexuals.

Most significantly, in *The Homosexual in America*, Cory presented homosexuals as a despised minority. "We are a minority," he declared, "not only numerically, but also as a result of a caste-like system in society . . . our minority status is similar, in a variety of respects, to that of national, religious, and other ethnic groups; in the denial of civil liberties; in the legal, extra-legal and quasi-legal discrimination; in the assignment of an inferior social position; in the exclusion from the mainstreams of life and culture. . . . On the other hand, one great gap separates the homosexual minority from all others, and that is its lack of recognition, its lack of respectability in the eyes of the public, and even in the most advanced circles."

In his conclusion, Cory struck a visionary note: "In the millions who are silent and submerged, I see a potential, a reservoir of protest, a hope for a portion of mankind. And in my knowledge that our number is legion, I raise my head high and proclaim that we, the voiceless millions, are human beings, entitled to breathe the fresh air and enjoy, with all humanity, the pleasures of life and love on God's green earth."

Cory, thus, called for the change of consciousness and the collective response among homosexuals that would not fully materialize until after the Stonewall riots of 1969.

The book was a tremendous success. *The Homosexual in America* was reprinted several times in the 1950s and translated into French and Spanish. It was particularly popular among members of the budding homophile movement of the day and immediately made Cory a hero in homophile circles.

Sagarin's employer somehow found out that he was the author of the book and summarily fired him. Still, Sagarin persisted, using the Donald Webster Cory pseudonym to issue other books, including most prominently, *Twenty-One Variations on a Theme* (1953), a pioneering anthology of short stories dealing with homosexuality by authors as varied as Sherwood Anderson, Paul Bowles, Christopher Isherwood, Denton Welch, Charles Jackson, and Stefan Zweig.

In 1952, using the large correspondence he received as the author of *The Homosexual in America*, Cory established the "Cory Book Service," a subscription service that selected a gay-themed book each month, usually literary works of high quality.

Cory accepted membership on the editorial board of *ONE*, the magazine published by the Mattachine Society of Los Angeles, and regularly contributed to the journal. He also joined such organizations as the Veterans Benevolent Association and the Mattachine Society of New York and encouraged the formation of Daughters of Bilitis chapters.

Sagarin as Academic

In 1958, Sagarin returned to college. He entered an accelerated program at Brooklyn College and completed his B. A. in the same class as his son. Then, at age 48, he entered the M. A. program in sociology, writing his thesis on "The Anatomy of Dirty Words."

Sagarin then entered New York University's Ph. D. program in sociology. He graduated in 1966, having submitted a dissertation on "Structure and Ideology in an Association of Deviants," which was in fact a study of the Mattachine Society. He accepted an assistant professorship at the Baruch College campus of the City University of New York, where he would rise through the ranks, gaining a reputation as an excellent teacher, and ultimately achieving national prominence as a specialist in deviancy.

Cory as Conservative

In the 1960s, however, Cory became one of the most conservative members of the "old guard" of the Mattachine Society, opposed to the radicalism of such activists as Frank Kameny, who were eager to launch a civil rights movement on behalf of homosexuals. He particularly opposed the rejection of the "sickness theory" of homosexuality by the new wave of homophile leaders.

In Cory's view, perhaps reinforced by his friendship with psychologist Albert Ellis, homosexuality was "a disturbance" that probably resulted from a pathological family situation. His publication of a book, co-authored with John LeRoy (pseudonym of Barry Sheer), called *The Homosexual and His Society* (1963), which claimed that there was no such thing as a "well-adjusted homosexual," only exacerbated the distance between his positions and those of the new activists.

In 1965, after a bitter fight for control of the Mattachine Society of New York resulted in a decisive victory by the militants, Cory left the organization in disgust. Some of that disgust he poured into the dissertation he submitted under his own name for his Ph. D.

Sagarin as Critic of the Gay Liberation Movement

Although homosexuality was not the only topic of Dr. Sagarin's academic publications, he nevertheless became a conspicuous critic of the gay liberation movement of the early 1970s, despite his continuing to pursue an active homosexual sex life, particularly with hustlers whom he would meet in Times Square and other New York City cruising sites.

In his liberal academic publications, Sagarin argued that homosexuality should be decriminalized and that the manifest injustices homosexuals suffered should be redressed. However, he continued to characterize homosexuality as pathological and homosexuals as disturbed, frequently urging them to seek therapy and to attempt to become heterosexual.

He especially attacked the new psychological and sociological studies of Evelyn Hooker, John Gagnon, and others who presented homosexuality as a natural sexual variation and homosexuals as well adapted.

At the 1974 convention of the American Sociological Society in Montreal, Sagarin, appearing on a panel entitled "Theoretical Perspectives on Homosexuality," proceeded to attack the liberationist scholarship as special pleading.

In response, Laud Humphreys, author of *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1970), like Sagarin a married homosexual who came to academia late in life, subtly but dramatically exposed Professor Sagarin as Donald Webster Cory. Humphreys, in a carefully calculated and rehearsed gesture, repeatedly made deliberate "slips" in referring to Sagarin, calling him "Cory."

The confrontation, which reportedly ended with Sagarin slinking away in tears, led to the formation of the Sociologists' Gay Caucus.

Following his exposure as Donald Webster Cory, Sagarin withdrew from the controversies concerning homosexuality. He died of a heart attack on June 10, 1986.

Although Edward Sagarin became a truculent foe of the gay liberation movement that he helped inspire, Donald Webster Cory is warmly remembered as the author of his era's most radical and most prescient book on homosexuality, one that exerted a powerful influence on the American homophile movement.

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About the Author

Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.glbtc.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.