Slamming the Closet Door
By David J. Garrow
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A fight that led to self-acceptance, if not always victory.

OUT FOR GOOD

The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America.
By Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney.
Illustrated. 716 pp. New York:
Simon & Schuster. $30.

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THIS is a rich and valuable book, a history of gay political activism since 1969 that unearths many previously little-known stories about organization building and political involvement on the local level during the 1970's. But Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney's emphasis on the years from 1969 through 1980, and their decision to effectively end their narrative in 1987, mean that they do not deliver the inclusive overview of gay politics that their introduction promises.

Clendinen, who writes editorials for The New York Times, and Nagourney, a metropolitan reporter for The Times, have done yeomen's work in researching important stories from places like Minneapolis, often not even mentioned in gay histories. But their insistence on beginning with 1969 and the Stonewall rebellion in New York City means they risk understating the importance of events predating that now-historic response to police harassment. Other histories, like African-American history, have moved beyond this kind of dissociative interpretation to expositions that underscore deeper connective currents not always readily apparent on the surface. Clendinen and Nagourney's approach may strike experienced readers as naïve.

Still, the richness of the authors' stories of early gay political efforts in the 1970's will impress anyone with a strong interest in the subject. They rightly credit the achievements of activists involved before Stonewall, like Franklin Kameny in Washington, who "almost single-handedly . . . formed and popularized the ideological foundations of the gay rights movement in the 1960's." They also bring to public attention the achievements of less heralded activists like Stephen Endean, who pioneered gay political efforts in Minnesota before moving to Washington as the director of the Gay Rights National Lobby. "Out for Good" also nicely captures the optimism that followed the enactment of gay rights ordinances in cities like Minneapolis in the mid-1970's, but it rightly notes that those victories may well have been won only because the movement's "natural opponents" had been "caught off guard" and were not yet organized. Just as with early abortion rights successes in 1970, surprising triumphs led to rapid mobilization of angry adversaries and quick reversals.

The archetypal defeat occurred in Miami in June 1977, after Anita Bryant led a nationally publicized crusade to overturn at the ballot box a nondiscrimination ordinance that the county commissioners had put in place. The vote, 69 percent to 31 percent, "seemed to be a repudiation of homosexuals by the American public," not just by 200,000 voters in Miami, Clendinen and Nagourney write. But out of that defeat, they argue, came significant progress, for "the results in Dade County that night roused many homosexuals . . . as nothing had before. It was a turning point for gay men and lesbians who years later would trace their own coming out or interest in gay politics to the Anita Bryant victory."

The Miami debacle was followed by similar annulments in St. Paul, Wichita, Kan., and Eugene, Ore., but in November 1978 California voters overwhelmingly defeated an initiative that would have forced homosexual teachers out of public schools, while a Seattle plebiscite preserved a gay rights ordinance. Clendinen and Nagourney track these events month by month and city by city while simultaneously providing a detailed account of the rise and fall of a host of gay rights organizations. Nonspecialists may on occasion find "Out for Good" excessively encyclopedic, but interesting people and compelling stories sometimes emerge. An excellent chapter recounts how the American Psychiatric Association finally removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, and a brief account of how a young gay man named Sean Strub obtained Tennessee Williams's signature for the first fund-raising letter sent out by the Human Rights Campaign Fund is an absorbing piece of writing.

Yet consistently "Out for Good" portrays gay activists as their own worst enemies, with political advancement repeatedly thwarted by unnecessarily ugly intramural politics. The authors forget that intense infighting has characterized virtually every struggle for civil or constitutional rights. They endorse the view that "most gay people actively dislike most of the people speaking publicly on their behalf," and repeatedly use an image they first invoke when Frank Kameny is explaining the downfall of Steve Endean: "After 20 years Kameny had come to expect this kind of battering at the hands of other homosexuals. It proved again the truth of what Donald Webster Cory of the Mattachine Society had told Dick Leitsch after Cory was voted out of the Mattachine Society in New York in the mid-1960's: 'They call me the father of "the homophile movement," and homosexuals always turn on their fathers.' " The assertion that animosity toward established groups and leaders has been "the recurring theme of the gay movement" seems both overstated and simplistic.

But the most disappointing and puzzling feature of "Out for Good" is its authors' decision to end their story in 1987. Only an eight-page epilogue focusing on the election of Bill Clinton to the White House addresses the past 12 years. Clendinen and Nagourney attribute their decision to the transformative devastation of the AIDS epidemic, which by the early 1990's had left the gay rights movement "in eclipse" and had made its previous battles seem "irrelevant." Only in one single sentence do they acknowledge that by the late 1990's, gay rights groups like the Human Rights Campaign Fund and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force were indeed functioning as important forces on the national political scene.

"Out for Good" ends on a sanguine note, arguing that "the AIDS epidemic had become a source of political energy in the way that Stonewall was in 1969, the way Anita Bryant was in 1977." Ironically, they say, AIDS accomplished a goal that activists had long sought, in that it "forced many gay men and lesbians to live their lives openly" and thereby brought about a greater "emergence of homosexuality" than might otherwise ever have occurred. One only wishes Clendinen and Nagourney had devoted the same reportorial thoroughness to this story that they so impressively apply to the events of years earlier. □

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