

Hail, Smiling Porn?

David Webb

The Honorary Director of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts tells how and why he founded the organisation.



A caravan parked in a courtyard of Blenheim Palace on a cold, wet November day in 1967 was the unlikely setting for the conception of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts (NCROPA). I was sharing that mobile dressing room with actors Leonard Rossiter and Bryan Pringle whilst on location there for a film called 'Diamonds for Breakfast'. They were pestering me to join them in playing cards, something I utterly detest. My nose was deep into *The Guardian* when I suddenly lighted on a report there of yet another complaint by a Mrs Mary Whitehouse about some innocuous television programme or other to which she and her hapless cronies from the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association had objected, something which I had noticed was occurring with increasing frequency and had found worrying.

This latest in a long list of arrogant and censorious complaints from the self-appointed guardian of the nation's morals set my blood coursing. Her pontifications could no longer be allowed to go unchecked. Before my captive audience of two rain-imprisoned fellow thespians, I therefore solemnly vowed to do something about that 'appalling phenomenon', as John Mortimer loves to describe her, and to set up an opposing organisation dedicated to the denunciation of censorship and to challenging and combatting the pernicious propaganda she and her associates were so irresponsibly disseminating. My oration received something less than an ovation, but there were cries of 'Bravo'. 'Good for you', said Leonard. 'You do just that and we'll support you', eager, however, to return to his poker game. I very much regret that it was nine long years later before my grand intentions of that grisly autumn day's filming were honoured and the NCROPA became a reality. True to his words also, however, Mr Rossiter became one of our first supporters and remained so until his recent sad and untimely death.

What finally triggered me into action was the absurd and costly prosecution of Heinrich Hannau in 1976 for publishing *Inside Linda Lovelace*, the autobiography of the celebrated American sex-film star of 'Deep Throat', in which Miss Lovelace played the somewhat fanciful role of a woman who discovers that her clitoris is freakishly situated in her throat. Incidentally, 'Deep Throat' has been showing in public cinemas in New York non-stop for the past fourteen years, although still prohibited to British eyes. By any standards, the book had little to commend it – but that was not the point. Here was yet another example of a tatty, second-rate publication, which would normally be left mostly unnoticed and untouched on the bookseller's shelf, being brought under the spotlight glare of the full might and majesty of the English legal system, which a jury found harmless and thus acquitted, and the legal hounding of which cost the British taxpayer hundreds of thousands of pounds in the process. The case fired an angry letter from me to the then London *Evening Standard*, which the editor published. The response both surprised and

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encouraged me and many of these respondents subsequently became the founding members of the NCROPA in April of that year.

The Right to Choose

One was used to hearing a great deal about the iniquities of censorship in general, of course, but no-one seemed prepared or, perhaps, honest enough, to face up to where exactly this censorship was most manifest, how it was being imposed and what specifically was required to get rid of it. The NCROPA needed to remedy that situation and did so quite simply by an unequivocal declaration of which laws it wanted to see repealed, which amended and where, and any new legislation it deemed necessary. In other words, NCROPA's overriding concern would be in the field of law reforms which would bring about a situation whereby an inalienable right of adults to choose for themselves what they see, read, and hear was a reality. The only circumstances in which the imposition of censorship could be justified, were those where there was incontrovertible proof that positive harm would result if it were not.

The most criticised and emotive area of censorship legislation was undoubtedly that applied to sexual material. The miserable and absurd concept that the depiction of sex and matters sexual is immoral was, and is, nowhere more endorsed and perpetuated than in the provisions of the Obscene Publications Acts. There are, of course, numerous other related Acts or parts of Acts which further restrict freedom of publication (23 at the last count, I think it was – not, of course, including Common Law offences), but it is these iniquitous, intolerable OP Acts which are at the heart of such repression and which imprison free expression and free creativity in the straitjacket of censorship.

There have been a few defections from our campaign but fortunately they are rare, and the vast majority of the letters and calls we receive are from grateful supporters and members of the public who are sick and tired of Mrs Whitehouse, of our nannyist society and of being denied the right to decide for themselves. They regard the NCROPA's commitment to adult freedom of choice, whilst retaining the absolute minimum measures to 'protect' children and those adults who do not wish to be forcibly affronted by material that *they* would deem offensive, as the only really sensible and realistic solution to the problem. That does not necessarily imply, of course, that we accept that children would be otherwise at risk and would therefore be in need of such 'protection'.

During the past ten years of the NCROPA's existence, however, it is a depressing thought that five major censorship statutes have been added to the veritable arsenal of repressive censorship legislative weapons already in the authorities' armoury. The U.K. is now virtually the last remaining country in the so-called 'free' Western World to retain draconian, out-moded censorship laws. Every year hundreds of thousands of harmless books, magazines, films and videos of delightful explicitness, which are legally available to consenting adults elsewhere, are here seized and destroyed by the police and ruthlessly suppressed by law. Those who are brave enough to risk falling foul of the law and who endeavour to produce and distribute such material, to fulfil the enormously popular and natural demand for it, are branded heinous criminals and have often been at the receiving end of savage prison sentences and swingeing fines. It has never been the business of the NCROPA to make any appraisals of these or any other publications. We make no attempt to draw arbitrary lines between what is and what is not acceptable, what is art and what is 'porn' – or what is neither. That is the pitfall of

all would-be censors who always wish to draw the line where *they* see it.

The Right to Dictate?

All the major, really credible investigations into explicit material of this kind have reached the same conclusion, which is that it is basically harmless, often helpful and, provided that children or actual physical harm are not involved, should be legally available to those who desire it. This was also the unanimous conclusion of the distinguished 1979 Home Office Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, the Williams Committee, to which the NCROPA gave both written and oral evidence. Yet the present and previous Governments have steadfastly refused to act on its recommendations, notwithstanding that they have both been formed by members of a political party which trumpets the claim that 'freedom of the individual' is the cornerstone of its whole philosophy.

Products like alcohol and tobacco – nowadays even glue – are all of proven harm if abused, often lethal. (On average one child dies in this country every six days as the result of sniffing glue.) Yet all these are legally available. Parliament, quite rightly, has deemed it sufficient protection simply to regulate their sale to children, but not to prohibit them for adults. No one has ever been killed by seeing a 'pornographic' book or film nor has it been proved that such an experience even harms. Why, then, is not the same yardstick applied to the publication of 'pornography' or, as I prefer to call it, sexually explicit material?

Neither the state, nor even Mary Whitehouse, has the right to dictate individual moral standards. The establishment's obsession, not with sex *per se*, but with its repression, is not only unjust and cruel; it is also intrinsically unhealthy and damaging. Surely all those other liberated Western World countries cannot be wrong?

There is, however, at last a glimmer of hope. On 25 April Winston Churchill's awful Bill to amend and extend the OP Acts failed to get its Third Reading in the House of Commons. The NCROPA campaigned with unprecedented vigour against this measure and our efforts paid off. It was our first Parliamentary win since our inauguration. Then, on 27 June, the Customs and Excise dropped their charges, under the 1876 Customs Consolidation Act (another statute on NCROPA's 'hit-list'), against the Gay's the Word bookshop in London. These may be small battles, but they are important victories from which we detect, amongst a growing number of our legislators, an awakening will to halt Mrs Whitehouse's march and begin an 'about turn' away from present authoritarianism and hypocrisy and towards tolerance and rationality.