

# Private Case – Public Scandal: The work of Peter Fryer in opening up the Private Case collection at the British Library

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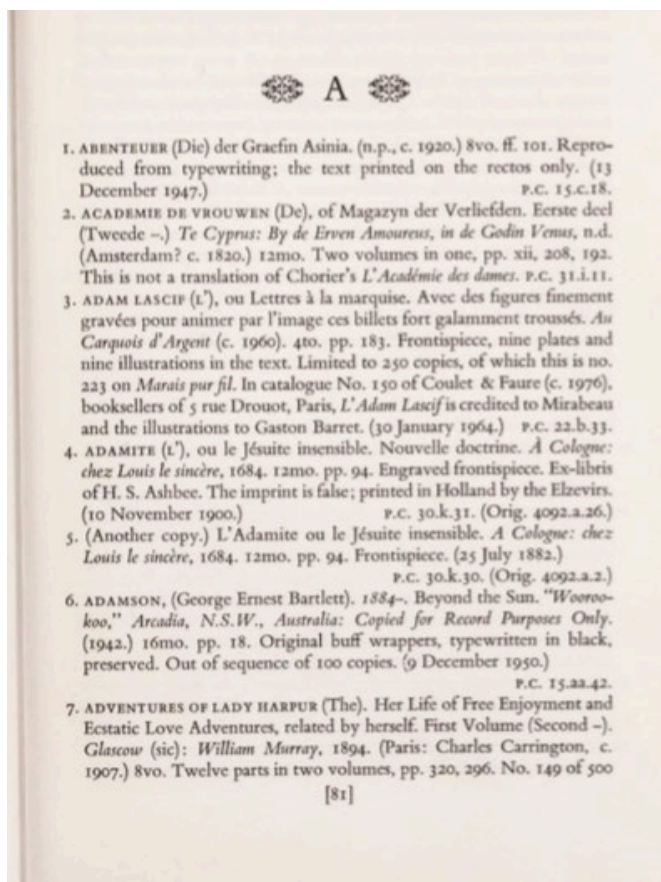


Figure 1 - A later bibliography of the collection: *The private case: an annotated bibliography of the Private Case erotica collection in the British (Museum) Library: compiled by Patrick J. Kearney; with an introduction by G. Legman*. Jay Landesman Limited, 1981. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*

The Private Case was not always accessible.

The banned erotica and other books in the Private Case were once hidden away in the British Museum, before becoming part of the British Library. It was only due to the persistent efforts of Marxist journalist and anti-censorship campaigner Peter Fryer that the museum eventually opened up the closed collection.

Fryer's inspiring saga against censorship is detailed in a short 160-page book published in London in 1966 by Secker & Warburg, *Private Case – Public Scandal*.<sup>1</sup> He reveals that even the existence of a list of the items included in the collection was initially withheld from museum patrons. Nor were books on the list viewable except, he discovered, to a select few, mainly those elites with approval from the Keeper of Printed Books.

The books in the Private Case had been withheld since 1856 from the public for a variety of reasons. Keepers of the collection were afraid the wrong eyes would see the prohibited books, but ironically it was this restriction from open access that resulted in the creation of a collection that is today largely well preserved.

In his 1966 text, Fryer asks, "The suppression of books, the maintenance of a secret catalogue, the censoring of subject indexes, the discouragement of serious inquirers, the hindering of free inquiry into sexual questions, the whole fog of furtiveness that envelops the subject of erotica at the BM [British Museum]: What have these anachronisms to do with honour, integrity, liberality?" (p.136).

Those were principles of service the museum was reiterating in 1932 when the Private Case was still closed to the public. Fryer adds, "No book is out of place in a national library. And a librarian's job is to bring readers and books together, not thrust barriers between them." (Ibid.)

<sup>1</sup> Peter Fryer, *Private Case: Public Scandal*. London: Decker & Warburg, 1966.

Eventually, the museum made the list public and it was added to the museum catalogue. It was not until the mid-1960s, however, that the books themselves were available to the general public to read in the museum reading room.

Thanks to Fryer we have a detailed if short “history” of how the collection became the Private Case, and descriptions of notable titles included. Chapter 8 of Fryer’s book, for example, focuses on “Homosexual and Sadomasochistic Literature.” Among the books featured is *L’Alcibiade Fanciullo a Scola* (Venice 1651), described by Fryer as “the first modern classic of homosexual love, a gem of erotic literature” (p.112). The museum actually has several editions of this, from 1862.<sup>2</sup> According to Fryer, “it is now known to be written by Antonio Rocco, a Venetian professor of philosophy”, despite what appears on the title page. “It is a graceful description of the beauty of boys and the pleasures they offer, and of a boy’s sexual education”, Fryer writes, non-judgmentally (ibid.). There is no English-language edition. With the digitisation of the Public Case, you can now read it for yourself in *Archives of Gender and Sexuality*.

Fryer also describes the first English-language “erotic work dealing mainly with homosexuality” (ibid.). *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain or The Recollections of Mary-Ann* (1881).<sup>3</sup> Fryer writes: “This is the life story of a male prostitute, who finds out by degrees that ‘it is not so agreeable to spend half-an-hour with a housemaid, when one has been caressed all night by a nobleman’” (p.113). The Private Case holds three editions, including a circa 1900 reprint.

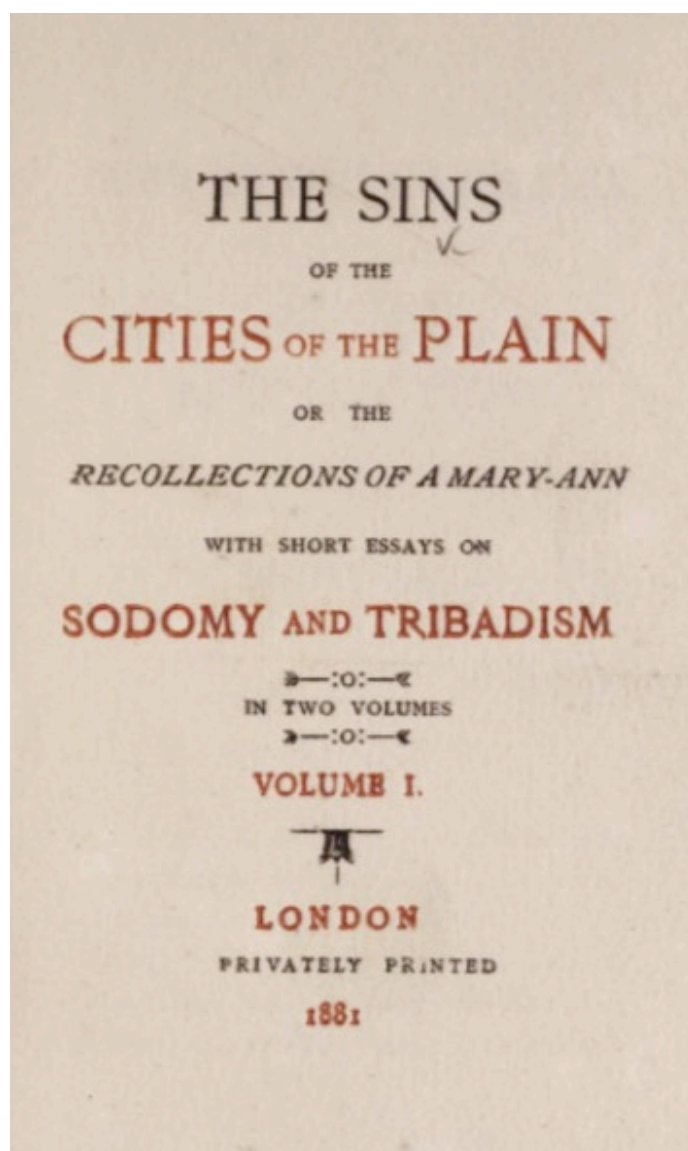


Figure 2 - *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, etc.* Erotica Biblion Society, [c. 1890]. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FTVNF291711932/AHSI?u=web-demo&sid=AHSI&xid=709f0410>

Modern readers of the Private Case can read the content today while freely analysing the power dynamics and class differences portrayed.

The British Library, which now holds the collection, has made fully accessible digital replicas of the Private Case in Gale’s *Archives of Sexuality and Gender: Sex and Sexuality, Sixteenth to Twentieth Century*.

**Daniel C. Tsang, *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* series Advisory Board member**

<sup>2</sup> Pallavicino, Ferrante, and Antonio Rocco. *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*. [Here wrongly ascribed to F. Pallavicino. By Antonio Rocco.]. N.p., 1862. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*

<sup>3</sup> *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, etc.* Erotica Biblion Society, [c.1890]. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*



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