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The lads come on and on Kevin Brazil



THE LOST AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SAMUEL STEWARD: RECOLLECTIONS OF AN EXTRAORDINARY 20TH-CENTURY GAY LIFE
edited by Jeremy Mulderig.
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BY THE TIME Samuel Steward began to write his autobiography in 1978, at the age of 69, he'd had sex more than four thousand times with more than eight hundred men. Each encounter was carefully recorded in his 'Stud File', an alphabetical card index which occasionally included physical mementos. There were records for Lord Alfred Douglas, Steward's lips landing 'where Oscar's had been'; for Thornton Wilder, who lasted 'ninety seconds and a dozen strokes'; and the 18-year-old companion of the ageing André Gide, offered up in a bedroom lit only by a 'frilly little pink tulip lamp'. The record for Rudolph Valentino included a swatch of his pubic hair. There were records for the entire basketball team at Steward's high school, some of the university students he'd taught, many of the sailors stationed at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in the 1940s and 1950s, and clients of the tattoo parlours he set up in the 1960s.

The Stud File was valuable evidence for Alfred Kinsey, for whom Steward performed a sadomasochistic encounter that was recorded on film. It also provided material for the pornographic stories Steward published under the pseudonym Phil Andros. He wrote more than twenty books in all, ranging from a social history of tattooing to murder mysteries featuring Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas as amateur detectives in Paris, but never got round to finishing his autobiography before his death in 1993. His manuscript was culled to produce a series of disjointed episodes published as *Chapters from an Autobiography* in 1981, and Jeremy Mulderig has now put Steward's unpublished manuscript together with the published episodes to produce *The Lost Autobiography*.

Steward was born in 1909 in Woodsfield, Ohio, a small town close to the foothills of the Appalachians. As a boy he witnessed the Ku Klux Klan kidnap in broad daylight the father of Woodsfield's only black family, a chiropractor; the man's wife and children disappeared the next day. Cross burnings and Klan conclaves were common. His mother died when he was six; his father was addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs, and left Steward and his sister, Virginia, to be raised by their grandmother and two maiden aunts, who ran a boarding house. The women were strict Methodists, devoted to Steward's education and intolerant of any discussion of sex. His tripartite sexual awakening was provided by sex education films shown in school; by Bill Shafer, a friend Steward memorialised by coining 'shafering' as a word for masturbation; and by a copy of Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* left behind in the boarding house by a travelling salesman. Ellis's

book reassured him that he was not alone in a world full of heterosexuals, and functioned as a rich 'manual of the erotic' throughout his teenage years.

Woodsfield provided plenty of opportunities. Direct propositions to members of the basketball and track teams, or to local toughs, were mostly successful, and the clock tower, graveyard and Methodist church provided convenient venues. (His forthrightness seems not to have caused him much trouble, except for the occasion when he was discovered by his father to have left a note inviting a boarding house guest to come and 'meat' him sometime.) When his aunts moved their business to Columbus, Ohio in 1927, so that Steward and his sister could attend Ohio State University, the city offered experiences he recorded in Housmanesque poetry: "'Tis only right you look to wed/Now you are grown and gone/And I may comfort me to think/The lads come on and on.' The sexual availability of ostensibly heterosexual young men was as remarkable as Steward's appetite – he doesn't record being attacked, or even that his targets recoiled from his advances. This he put down to Midwestern ignorance of homosexuality: 'The fundamentalist mind made two breathtaking leaps of illogic: people did not do such things, and therefore such things must be non-existent.' Only when 'the audience grew more sophisticated did our danger (the knowledge of our actual existence) and our long ordeal begin once more'. Steward visited Greenwich Village, the self-appointed centre of American gay life in the 1930s, but he felt little need to move there, the much mythologised rite recorded in most queer autobiographies then and now. Given Steward's three hundred sexual encounters in Ohio, one wonders whether these generations of rural gay émigrés were trying hard enough.

Columbus provided boys and bohemia, and Steward went on to study for a PhD at Ohio State in which he 'uncovered' the homosexuality of Cardinal Newman. He also met the poet Ben Musser, who got his own card in the Stud File and subsidised the publication of Steward's first collection of short stories, *Pan and the Firebird* (1930). After finishing his doctorate, he shuttled between teaching jobs in West Virginia, Washington State and Montana, at the same time assiduously cultivating his 'telequeen network' of mostly queer literary correspondents and holiday hosts: Stein and Toklas, Gide and Wilder, Carl van Vechten, Thomas Mann and Paul Cadmus. For Steward, a life in letters compensated (partly) for the one restrained by law and social convention. And by syphilis, picked up from a railway porter and necessitating a period of celibacy. The cure involved weekly injections of arsenic for months on end, as well as mercury rubbed into his armpits. Side effects included ulcers and purpura. Nothing dates his autobiography to 1978 more clearly than his breezy conclusion that while syphilis wasn't especially traumatising, 'a great deal more care might be taken nowadays in physical relationships if penicillin did not exist.' Aids soon emerged to make his autobiography a document of an irreversibly lost way of sexual life.

A trip to Europe in 1937 allowed Steward to meet many of his correspondents. After a flying visit to Housman's rooms in Cambridge ('to stand silently weeping, with chills along my spine'), his first stop was Lord Alfred Douglas's stuffy Regency flat in Brighton. Douglas's face had suffered 'the dreadful slackening of flesh that comes with age', but neither that, nor Douglas's strict and rabidly antisemitic Catholicism, could prevent gin and bitters doing its work on both parties; the most memorable thing about the sex was that all Douglas could offer was a 'shafering' since that was all he'd ever done to Wilde. From Brighton he went to Paris to meet Gide, who thoroughly disapproved of the dreadful Douglas but was more preoccupied with Europe's present, having recently returned from the Paris Exhibition, where the Soviet and Nazi pavilions had been provocatively placed opposite each other. Thomas Mann, whom Steward met in Zurich, offered something more memorable than sex: a confession, as he put his arm around Steward's shoulder, that 'it is through persons like you . . . that I hope to keep on living.' 'Of all the remembered gestures in my life,' Steward wrote, 'that one is perhaps the most treasured.'

By far the most significant friends Steward made through letter-writing were Stein and Toklas (a collection of their letters was published in 1977), who were living in Bilignin near Lyon. They seemed as taken with Steward as he was with them; Stein praised his first novel, *Angels on the Bough* (1936), and gave advice: 'You can't write and teach . . . You teach all day and then that word-finding part of your brain is worn out and you can't find any words to put down on paper because that part of your brain is empty. It would be better yes much better to be a butcher.' Steward, in turn, read and almost lost the manuscript of the second volume of *Everybody's Autobiography*. More successful was his gift of a food mixer, proving that nothing was beyond Stein's inimitable style: 'Oh so beautiful is the Mix Master, so beautiful and the literature [the directions for use] so beautiful and the shoe button potatoes that same day so beautiful and everything so beautiful.' Once Stein asked him: 'Do you think Alice and I are lesbians?' Steward was happy to declare himself what Stein called 'queer or gay or different or "of it" as the French say', but Stein never answered her own question. For Steward this was a sign of a generation gap: she, like Douglas, Gide and Mann, was 'really Victorian' and 'more than a little reserved' in terms of sexual identity as well as about sex itself.

Steward had arrived in Bilignin reeking of Pernod; after the shock of seeing Stein naked one night he calmed himself with the emergency cognac he always carried; he notes in passing that he was half-drunk when he climbed into bed with Wilder 'as I had to be in those days to have an encounter'. He was probably already an alcoholic when Prohibition ended in 1933: Ohio was well supplied with bathtub gin, as well as gelatin capsules to coat the throat and make it drinkable. His intake increased during his years as an instructor of English to West Virginia farmhands and Montana cowboys. Steward blamed his drinking on the loneliness of the precariously employed academic. He relied on daily injections of vitamin B12 to get by when he returned to Chicago in 1936 to teach at Loyola and then at DePaul University. Getting through a standard academic teaching day while drinking a quart of whisky, as well as shots en route to class, would be perversely admirable even if he hadn't also been mastering a range of classes that would make the specialists of today turn to drink: 25 new courses in two years on topics from Anglo-Saxon grammar to the modern novel, as well as courses in bibliography, linguistics and French. Yet the failure of Steward's academic career didn't result from his alcoholism, or the poor quality of his teaching. He lost one job, in Washington, because a character in his first novel was a prostitute; he left his job at Loyola out of frustration with the dean; he was fired at DePaul for having taken up tattooing as a hobby.

Steward's account of his alcoholism is honest and at the same time oddly evasive. He called his years as an academic in Chicago his 'vacant years'; he took to marking the calendar with crosses so he would know what day it was, and ended with an attempt at suicide. Drinking cost him many friends, but one who didn't desert him was Emmy Dax Curtis, a French teacher whom Steward met through a pick-up. Emmy fell in love with Steward, who 'in my peculiar way' fell in love with her too (precisely 211 times). He bought her a wedding ring and made her his common-law wife, broke her finger in an alcoholic rage and acted as her legal guardian and carer when a rare blood disease, polycythemia, confined her to a nursing home for the last ten years of her life. Steward concluded that 'I do not wish to recover in memory the frightfulness' of his drinking. And while he recalls the details of his recovery – he went to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and was sober from 1947 – he doesn't link his own alcoholism to his father's, or discuss the fact that for the first half of his life, the sexual conquests he was so thorough in documenting all took place when he was half-cut.

In 1949 Steward was introduced to Kinsey by one of his sexual partners in Chicago and became one of his most useful 'unofficial collaborators' (Kinsey was prohibited from employing homosexuals as his Institute of Sexual Research could only pay those of the 'majority sexual orientation'). Steward's sexual record-keeping, which for a time in the early 1950s extended to

photographing his encounters on the brand new Polaroid camera, fascinated Kinsey, who taught him never to use the word 'normal' in relation to sex, and prompted the end of his sexual relationship with Emmy by asking: 'Why don't you stop?' Kinsey also encouraged him to devote more time to tattooing and to investigating the sexual motivations of his clients. Steward noted '32 motivations for getting tattooed, of which 25 were sexual in whole or in part'. He recorded that of those returning for a second tattoo, the first was followed for 1724 men by getting laid, for 635 by fighting and for 879 by masturbating in front of a mirror.

Steward got his first tattoo when he was appearing as an extra in a Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo production of *The Nutcracker* because he thought it completed his gondolier costume. For him tattooing was bound up with role-playing, and provided him with a new identity as Phil Sparrow the Skid Row tattoo artist. And so he found a way out of the repression and hypocrisy of Eisenhower-era academia. The tattoo parlour also paid much better: by 1954 'my take from tattooing exactly equalled in one week what I made in one month of teaching!' Steward attributed his decision to leave academia to Poe's 'Imp of the Perverse', forever 'turning me against my regimented life and making me burn intensely with a new hatred for all authority'. He doesn't mention the second tattoo he acquired for himself: a series of inch marks running down his left arm, so that he 'always had to hand a convenient ruler to measure objects in which he was interested'. He learned to tattoo after going sober and turning forty, a milestone after which the 'male homosexual seems particularly vulnerable' to seeing 'his life disappearing behind and nothing but fog ahead'. Steward, however, realised tattooing was 'the most superb substitute for cruising that has been invented. If you become a tattoo artist, you will never have to go searching into the bars or baths again, for there you will find, as I did, that ... all the beauties will come looking for you.'

Steward was reborn twice: first as Phil Sparrow and then as Phil Andros. The steady stream of porn producers and managers that made up part of his clientele gave him access to another network of correspondents, this time the publishers of European gay magazines such as *Der Kreis*, published in Switzerland, and *eos* and *amigo* in Denmark. After publishing 'sociological' analyses of 'The Negro Homosexual in America', 'The Bull Market' (on hustlers) and 'Pussies in Boots' (on leather fetishists), Steward was encouraged to write pornographic stories and in 1962 to invent Andros – an intelligent, widely read hustler, who functioned both as character and pseudonym. Andros was depicted on the book covers by Tom of Finland, and his measurements are as oddly precise as those in his author's Stud File: 'I'm a little over six feet with a 50-inch chest and 16-inch biceps – and a good deal of hair on my body: a big triangular fan on my chest, narrowing down to a thin line as it passes through my navel, and spreading out again when it comes to my prick.' Steward's porn writing isn't particularly interesting or unexpected, although there must be few other gay porn heroes who move on to their next fuck by summoning the spirit of Milton's Lycidas – 'At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue,/Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new.'

Pornography had effectively been liberalised in the United States after *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* in 1966, but tattooing was increasingly restricted: a law enforcing a minimum age of 18 in Illinois destroyed much of Steward's business. And so he opened a tattoo parlour in Oakland, California. It was here, while living across the bay in Berkeley, that Steward became the Hells Angels' preferred tattoo artist. As they pass through the shop (and the autobiography), Steward's clients chart the evolution of America's subcultures: sailors in the 1940s, working-class gang members in the 1950s, hippies and Hells Angels in the 1960s. Under the needle, customers offered confessions, so that 'for a little while I became for them wife, mother, best boyfriend, best girlfriend, priest, confessor, counsellor and confidant.'

Only towards the end of his life did he submit his own sexuality to interrogation. This could be read as resistance to the belief, as common among sympathisers as among enemies, that same-sex desire must have a cause: sin, childhood trauma, genes. He grudgingly admits that his fondness for police officers was evidence 'of the deeply buried residue of guilt from my childhood that accounted for my psychic masochism'. But his autobiography is a testament to the pleasure he got from giving without the expectation of return. He confesses to never having been in love, and his sexual generosity seems somehow bound up with a failure of understanding. He didn't seem to want writing about himself to lead to self-knowledge and he didn't want it to recover lost time. That, he realised, was the true purpose of the Stud File. Full of cards and names and 'snippets of crinkly hair taken from my favourite persons', it provided the 'tangibles to which the imagination and memory could be tied, devices to stimulate nostalgia and the remembrance of things past'.
