

TRANS BRITAIN

OUR JOURNEY
FROM THE SHADOWS

'A vital record of how we got to where we are. Inspirational' **PARIS LEES**

EDITED BY **CHRISTINE BURNS**

Christine Burns MBE has campaigned for a quarter of a century for the civil rights of transgender people, and has been involved with the trans community for more than forty years. She has worked as an equalities consultant, helped to put together new employment legislation and the Gender Recognition Act, and wrote the first ever official guidance about trans people for the Department of Health. She lives in Manchester.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fishing for Birds

Pressing Matters

Making Equality Work (with Shahnaz Ali and Loren Grant)

TRANS BRITAIN

*Our Journey
from the Shadows*

Edited by Christine Burns MBE

Unbound

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To Mermaids

Mermaids is the only charity in Britain specifically focused on supporting whole families with a transgender child or parent. Established in 1995, the organisation has always been parent led, and does vital educational and support work.

This is a book largely about the lives of adult transgender people. But many (if not all) grown-up trans people have a story to tell about their youth – usually involving the fear of expressing who they were and the negative and irreversible bodily changes that they have had to deal with as a result of going through the wrong puberty.

Our hope is for a future where another generation doesn't face that need to hide and suffer in silence, with all the lost opportunity that involves.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world;
indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead, Anthropologist (1901–78)

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A photograph of three handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. The signatures are cursive and appear to be 'Dan', 'Justin', and 'John'.

Dan, Justin and John
Founders, Unbound

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i> by Professor Aaron Devor	xiii
<i>A Beginner's Glossary</i>	xix

Introduction by Christine Burns

The Visible Tipping Point	1
It Was a Long Night	8
The National Transgender Remembrance Memorial	20

PART ONE: Survival

Is There Anyone Else Like Me? – Christine Burns	23
1 The Doctor Won't See You Now – Adrienne Nash	39
2 1966 and All That: The History of Charing Cross Gender Identity Clinic – Dr Stuart Lorimer	51
3 The Formative Years – Carol Steele	68
4 Where Do the Mermaids Stand? – Margaret Griffiths	82
5 Sex, Gender and Rock 'n' Roll – Kate Hutchinson	92
6 A Vicar's Story – Rev. Christina Beardsley	102

PART TWO: Activism

A Question of Human Rights – Christine Burns	119
7 Taking to the Law – Mark Rees with the assistance of Katherine O'Donnell	135
8 The Parliamentarian – Dr Lynne Jones	161
9 The Press – Jane Fae	187
10 Film and Television – Annie Wallace	205

11	Section 28 and the Journey from the Gay Teachers' Group to LGBT History Month – Professor Emeritus Sue Sanders of the Harvey Milk Institute with the assistance of Jeanne Nadeau	217
12	A Scottish History of Trans Equality Activism – James Morton	231

PART THREE: Growth

	The Social Challenge – Christine Burns	249
13	The Trade Unions – Carola Towle	262
14	Gendered Intelligence – Dr Jay Stewart MBE	277
15	Non-Binary Identity – Meg-John Barker, Ben Vincent and Jos Twist	292
16	The Activist New Wave – Sarah Brown	304
17	Better Press and TV – Helen Belcher	317
18	Making History Today – Fox Fisher	329
19	A Very Modern Transition – Stephanie Hirst	342

	<i>Further Reading</i>	353
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	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	357
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	<i>Index</i>	359
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	<i>Supporters</i>	367
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Foreword

Dr Aaron Devor has been studying and teaching about transgender topics for more than thirty-five years and holds the world's only research chair in transgender studies. He was one of the authors of versions six and seven of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's (WPATH) *Standards of Care* and is overseeing the translation of version seven into world languages. He is a national award-winning teacher, an elected member of the elite International Academy of Sex Research, an elected Fellow of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and has delivered more than twenty keynote addresses to audiences around the world. He is also the author of numerous well-cited scholarly articles, and the widely acclaimed books *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (2016, 1997), Lambda Literary Awards finalist *The Transgender Archives: Foundations for the Future* (2014), and *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* (1989). Dr Devor, an out trans man, is the founder and academic director of the world's largest transgender archives, a former dean of graduate studies (2002–12) and a professor of sociology at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada.



Brian Sargent

As Christine Burns has so aptly pointed out in this book, with all the media attention these days, it would be easy to be fooled into thinking that trans and non-binary people just appeared on the scene in the past few years. After all, it is almost impossible to look at any kind of media today and not see stories about trans and non-binary lives. Increasingly, commentators are working hard to be fair and accurate – even as there is still a long way to go – and more and more of them are trans and non-binary people themselves. However, as Christine illustrates in her introduction, the reality is that people who we would today

think of as trans or gender non-binary have been around as long as we have been human (and probably even before that).

As the world's only holder of a chair in transgender studies, the founder and academic director of the world's largest transgender archives at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, and someone who has been around trans communities for more than thirty-five years, I know a very different reality. I know it from my own experiences as a gender nonconforming youth and adult, from countless hours spent with other trans people learning their stories from them, as a trans man, and from the history held in the extensive holdings of the Transgender Archives.

I'm old enough to remember when it was illegal to be LGBT, and queer was still a word that people spat at you because they either knew that you were gay, or they thought you were queer because of the way you spoke, dressed or acted. Back then, there were transvestites, drag queens (drag kings were unknown even to most gay people) and transsexuals – everything was very binary. As is so eloquently told by the narrators in part one, this was a time when everyone who was not straight (sexually or genderwise) lived in fear and, when they had the courage and the resources to seek out likeminded souls, gathered together in dark, hidden, out of the way places.

For trans and non-binary people of this era, locating others like themselves was fraught with possibilities for public disgrace and punishment. The overwhelming reality for trans and non-binary people, until the Internet changed it all, was profound isolation, secrecy, silence and shame. As you will read in the first-person accounts in this volume, pretty much every trans person over a certain age went through years, if not decades, of feeling that they were the only ones in the whole world who felt the way that they did; that they were unimaginable freaks for whom there were no respectable words or names. When they were unable, or unwilling, to hide their differences, the consequences

FOREWORD

were often dire: rejection by family and friends; loss of employment and housing; rejection by religious communities, social services and medical providers; incarceration in jails and mental hospitals; forced medication and electroshock; rapes; beatings; murder. There were no legal protections. There were no social support networks to speak of until the first pioneers started to band together into support groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Winning legal rights and social recognition required people to come together for more than individual support; they needed to build on the help they received from their peers, and the occasional cisgender (non-trans) allies, and create common cause for change. That activism, spearheaded by groups like Press for Change, took incredible courage, perseverance and just plain hard work in pre-Internet and pre-mobile phone days, when communications were much slower and more costly than they are today. At less than 1 per cent of the population, trans and non-binary people are few in number. This is compounded by the fact that many of us are unrecognisable as trans or non-binary unless we say something to identify ourselves as such. In the days before the Internet, this combined with immense social stigma, harsh laws, physical dangers and limited communications options meant that we had enormous obstacles to finding one another. Networking could only be done through face-to-face meetings, postal mail or telephone communications. However, travel was beyond many trans people's budgets, and telephone communications were much more cumbersome, less private and more expensive than today. Radio and television broadcasts, print newspapers and magazines, and film were the main forms of public media; printing your own materials was costly and required specialised equipment. The media was in the hands of a few powerful agencies. Trans and non-binary people's platforms for speaking for themselves were extremely limited.

Nonetheless, trans people did what needed to be done, as is so vividly recounted by the voices in part two, 'Activism'. Multiple organisations worked together to change laws and open up social possibilities that a generation before were almost unimaginable. Letters and broadsides were written and distributed. Meetings were held with key decision-makers. Much lobbying was done. Demonstrations were held. Songs were sung. Documentaries were made. People told their stories and became real in the eyes of the public. Small steps in the 1970s built into significant momentum in the 1980s and 1990s. Milestone advances were won with the passage of the Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations (1999) and the Gender Recognition Act (2004).

Laws, although essential, are not enough. Policies also need(ed) to be adjusted. Social attitudes and beliefs need(ed) to be brought into the twenty-first century. The Internet has been a great boon to the new generation who have taken up the cause as the pioneers are ageing and in need of successors. In the final section of *Trans Britain* we hear from some of the young people who came of age during a time when almost everything you needed to know about being trans or non-binary was a few clicks away, when anyone with access to the Internet could find others like them easily. Spared from extended periods of ignorance and isolation, they are ready and eager to do what it takes to claim lives of dignity for trans and non-binary people. As they do so, we will see the gender spectrum continue to diversify away from a forced binary into a more natural (statistically) 'normal' distribution (better known as a bell curve).

Trans Britain is, in many ways, a breathtaking story of courage and determination. It is told largely through the authentic voices of the people who were there, risking so very much, so that the rest of us could live safely and with some modicum of dignity and pride. It is a specific set of stories,

FOREWORD

told by a carefully selected group of people, representing a particular time and place. However, the arc of change described here is universal. Individuals finding and supporting each other, community building, activism for change, a new generation rising to new challenges: if you have ever worked to repair your world, you will see your own story here too. These are stories that need to be told, that need to be remembered. We need them to know who we are, where we came from. We need them to know where to go next. And we need them so that we can say *thank you* to the people who gave so much so that we can just be ourselves.

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