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Ticket

The fragility of progress

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In June 1990, Ronan McCrea was a giddy 13-year-old ballboy at a big tennis tournament in Trinity College featuring superstars of the circuit. A day he would always remember became one he would rather forget when the French player Henri Leconte started mimicking him on the court, exaggerating McCrea's limp-wristed swishiness to the delight of a large crowd. An Irish Times report said Leconte's imitation of "an effeminate ballboy" was part of the tournament's "good-humoured" display.

Can you imagine a tennis audience of today braying with laughter as a grown man made fun of the queerness of a child?

McCrea begins his book about the gay rights movement with this traumatic moment to show us how far we have come, "the almost miraculous nature of the transformation in the fortunes of gay people that we have witnessed". From decriminalisation to marriage equality and gender recognition, where LGBTQ+ lives are concerned, the Ireland of 35 years past isn't just a foreign country – sometimes it feels like a different planet.

As miraculous as this transformation is, McCrea says it's also a vulnerable one. His concern is that as the clock is turned back, and societies in the West revert to a conservative, even right-wing position, gay rights will come under fire. "The freedom that gay liberation has won for us will not be, and indeed, may never have been, sustainable."

These are concerns that many people have, but few will support McCrea's proposals for what to do about it.

In matters sexual and political, McCrea appeals for "a dose of modesty". The promiscuity of gay men, he says, scuppers any chance of acceptance by an increasingly conservative straight majority. So, he suggests that they should commit more to monogamous, culturally sanctioned ways of life. How you will feel about this suggestion might depend on what you think about Louise Perry, the reactionary feminist who has received outsize attention for saying that the sexual revolution was bad for women, and whom McCrea cites too often in this book.

Elsewhere he takes aim at the gay rights movement's "ever-lengthening list of letters and symbols", the target of fuddy-duddies everywhere. More damagingly, he also criticises the "hubristic" over-reach of the fight for equal rights which encompasses "newly embraced trans issues". Here, too, he calls for modesty. To retain gay wins it is prudent to let the trans movement fight for itself.

In the face of a resurgent right surely more solidarity is needed, not less. The prospects of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people have always been intertwined. Throughout history, homosexuals have been oppressed in large part because, by loving someone of the same sex, you're not doing gender properly. Homophobia is inextricable from transphobia. It's a pity that McCrea doesn't see this – even in his own history. After all, Leconte ridiculed him as much for his gender variance – his girlishness – as his presumed gayness.

Fear of what may come must not blind us to our interlinked fates. There has never been LGB without the T – never will be.

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