Q&A
With Angus McLaren,
author of
PLAYBOYS & MAYFAIR MEN

Question: Why did you decide to write this book?

Angus McLaren: By chance I stumbled across the trial of four upper-class young men for robbery with violence. The court case was inherently fascinating, but moreover cast a light on the key social questions of the 1930s. Such a study of upper-class men whose sense of entitlement led to robbery seemed especially timely, given the various mass movements such as Occupy which are attacking today’s gross disparities in wealth and income.

Q: What were some of the most surprising things you learned while writing/researching the book?

A: That flogging was employed in the UK until the 1940s.
That the meaning of the word “playboy” evolved over time.
That the term “life preserver” had several meanings.
That security was remarkably lax in the jewelry trade.
That in the interwar years many members of the social elite flew their own planes.
That the “gentleman thief” was such a popular fictional character.
That the censor would not allow British films that showed successful criminals.
That only in the 1930s did “men’s magazines” appear.

Q: What is new about your book/research that sets it apart from other books in the field?

A: This book presents a sensational trial that is to all intents and purposes forgotten and innovatively excavates this episode, tracing the life histories of the leading characters from public school to prison. The study demonstrates the ways in which a set of privileged men were able to exploit their class, gender, and educational advantages, and how the press and public commentators responded to
a brutal robbery committed by those whose pampered life left them with no serious reason to turn to crime.

But as fascinating as it is, the story of the “Mayfair Men” is then turned to the purposes of exploring key issues of interwar culture. A number of historians have recently produced “deep readings” of high-profile court cases to explore the social dynamics of twentieth-century Britain. Most works of this type have focused on women and femininity, and their protagonists are usually working or lower-middle class. This study is distinctive, however, in focusing on upper-class men and their style of “dissident masculinity.” It complements and extends the work of authors such as Martin Francis, Christine Grandy, Lucy Bland, Frank Mort, Judith Walkowitz, and Matt Houlbrook.

By focusing on the emergence of the notion of the playboy, the book finds a way of investigating elite cultures and lifestyles in new ways. In offering an important discussion of gender, class, crime and popular culture, the book not only unearths a scandalous crime, it also makes an important contribution to the historiography of twentieth-century Britain.

Q: Did you encounter any eye opening information while writing your book?

A: I was amazed to learn that in the 1930s diamonds worth a small fortune were commonly carried across London without any special security.

Q: Does your book uncover and/or debunk any longstanding myths?

A: The book debunks the myth that everyone in Britain in 1939, irrespective of class, bore enormous costs in combatting fascism, with even playboys redeeming themselves by personal sacrifice.

Q: What is the single most important fact revealed in your book and why is it significant?

A: In the 1930s the playboy’s entry onto the public stage was both a cause and an effect of the destabilization of conventional gender roles and the redrawing of the lines between the public and the private. Tabloid journalists played a central role in popularizing and exploiting the notion that a new type of unreliable young man on the make had arrived. For such writers who catered to the mass readership’s interest in toffs behaving badly, the playboys provided a limitless source of sensational stories. At the same time a surprising number of more serious social observers regarded the investigation of the lifestyle of such cynical and self-serving young men a compelling undertaking. They used the figure of the playboy as a cipher to channel wider discussions of generation, gender, class, crime, and politics.
Q: How do you envision the lasting impact of your book?

A: I would hope that the book is successful in winning a wide readership. If that occurred its lasting impact would be to alert young scholars and publishing houses that there was a demand for history books that married a bracing narrative with thoughtful analysis.

Q: What do you hope people will take away from reading your book?

A: I would hope that readers would see how the reporting of historical trial accounts can provide a point of entry into understanding a culture and a community.