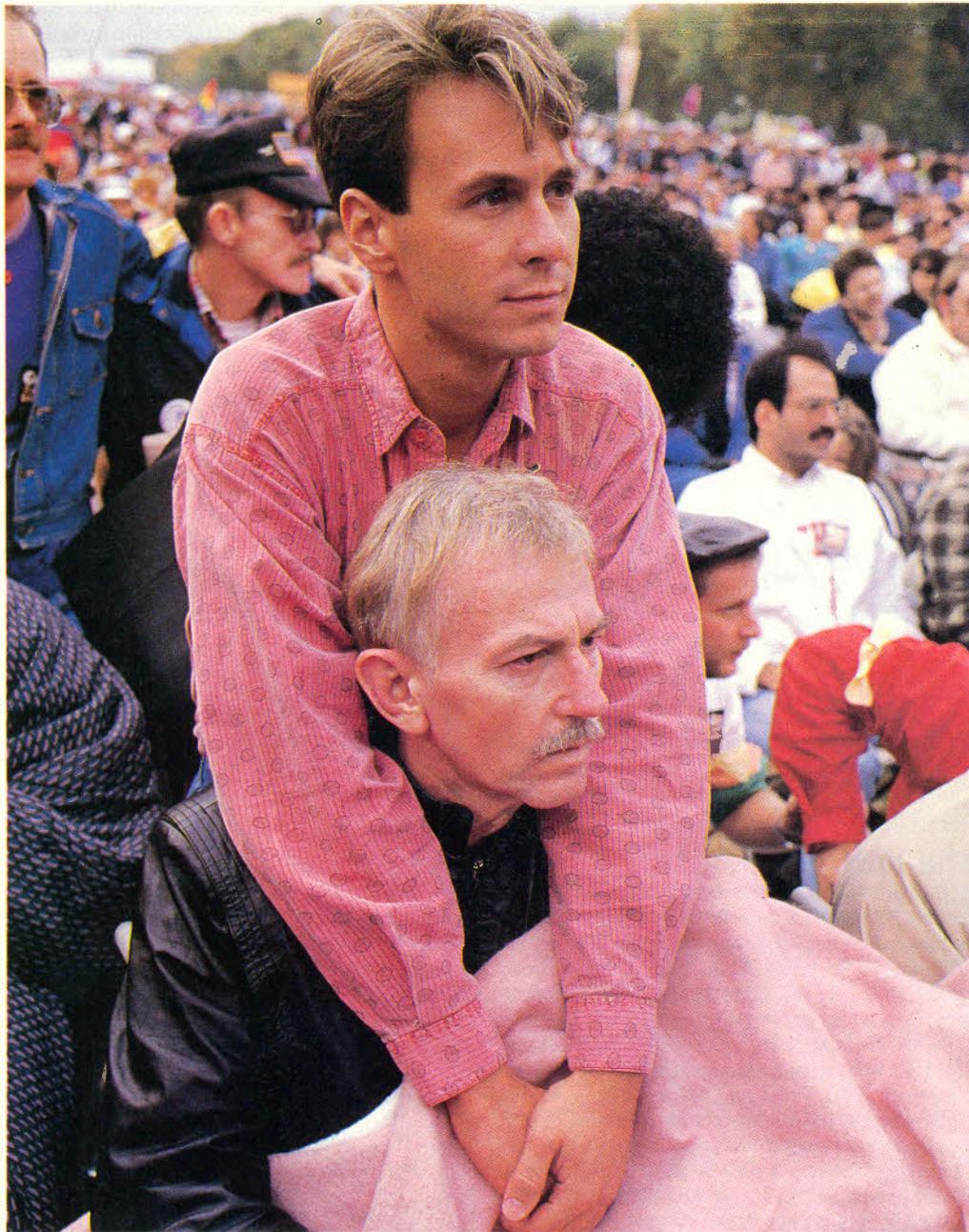


BOOKS



Marc Geller

An end to the silence

This week sees the British publication of the first magnum opus on the history of Aids. San Francisco reporter Randy Shilts has sold a quarter million books as well as film and TV rights to his 600-page epic. It has overtaken Spycatcher in US bestseller lists. DUNCAN CAMPBELL describes the manifest harm, as well as significant good, that the book will do to the effort of fighting Aids in Britain

THE POLITICS OF AIDS continues to have much to do with blame. Blame the sexual libido of gay victims, blame drugs users for their immorality, blame Africans for their malnutrition, ill health and sore-ridden bodies. It's these, as any tabloid reader will know, that are the real reasons for Aids — and so those who suffer and may be ill have only themselves to blame.

In *And the Band Played On* (Penguin, £15.95 & £8.95) Randy Shilts does a superb job of placing much of the blame where it should really lie. Finding what did cause Aids, the advice that can prevent its spread, the research that might cure it: all these things were not done, or only done late,

just because it was, at first, something that affected only other people — largely gay men. For years, silence prevailed in the US media and the US administration. When, after Rock Hudson's death, that silence ended, it was often replaced by stigmatisation.

Shilts chronicles some of the events in the years "before" Aids arrived in the collective western subconscious, conclusively to end some of the sexual joys and liberties of the '60s and '70s. The years "after", from 1983 on, are described as a diary of events in the lives of a cast of key characters, including Aids sufferers, the medical and research organisations and the gay communities of San Francisco and New York through which Aids began to ravage. The narrative perpetually contrasts the wilful inaction of the Reagan administration with the dawning realisation of medical researchers that tens or hundreds of thousands of men would die.

But Shilts also has his private agenda of blame for Aids, laid out in the book. Writing with the benefit of fully developed hindsight, his targets for ridicule include personal opponents of his in early 1980s debates over the closure of gay bath-houses in San Francisco. Debate raged for some years over whether or not the bath-houses, which were splendid palaces of 24-hours-a-day recreational sex, should be closed. On the one side stood civil libertarians, bath-house owners and gay activists; on the other were health officials, moralists and other gay activists — and Randy Shilts, the first full-time Aids reporter on a mainstream US newspaper, the San Francisco *Chronicle*, and himself a gay man.

Inevitably, in a history in which the narrator was also been a protagonist, Shilts' account seems partial and has attracted widespread criticism. In 1983, others have recounted, he was often jeered in the streets of San Francisco for the stances he took. These may have been right; but Shilts' current partisanship reflects at least a lack of grace, given that many of those who jeered may well now be dead or dying.

There is a lack of compassion, too, towards Aids sufferers, well displayed by Shilts' perspective on so-called "Aids-speak". This is the sort of terminology preferred by people with any disabilities (*not* "the disabled"), since the way language is used and the meaning it conveys is critical to wellbeing. Hence, it is proper to speak of *people* with Aids, not *Aids victims*. Shilts laughs at these distinctions and, in so doing, rebukes the almost unimaginable courage of some of the first people with Aids who were determined to go public with their disease.

The most serious criticism of Shilts' book concerns the credence he has lent to the alleged story of "Patient Zero". Promulgated as a result of Shilts' book, Patient Zero has now become a larger than life TV and media character, a metaphor for the archetypal promiscuous person whose endless sexual appetite supposedly started the Aids epidemic. Shilts doesn't quite say all of this — but he has said that Patient Zero, a French-Canadian called Gaetan Dugas, is "conceivably the man who brought the disease to the United

States" and then spread it around.

This aspect of his book has received more attention than any other. It was the only part to be serialised in one magazine and it was the title and focus of the first TV programme to be made based on the book. Shilts assured that media attention would be focused in this way, by naming Dugas, describing his life, even his alleged thoughts at length Gaetan Dugas is discovered in sexual encounter after sexual encounter every few pages through the first half of the book, in order to set up the theory that, wherever he went, Aids followed.

Shilts, in a postword, claims that his book contains "no fictionalisation" of the life of Dugas or others. But it is particularly hard to see how the author believes he is reporting fact when he tells us that, on Thursday 27 November 1980, Dugas had a particular thought: Gaetan died in 1984, never having met Shilts, and a Dugas diary is not among Shilts' many references.

The idea of Gaetan Dugas as Patient Zero is based on early studies of how Aids first spread, called the "Cluster Study". This week, I interviewed scientists including the researcher on whose original reports Shilts relies for the Patient Zero hypothesis. The scientist, Bill Darrow of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, specifically disavowed the validity of the assumptions used in his Cluster Study — assumptions which, in the book, Shilts uses to imply that Gaetan was almost single-handedly spreading the virus causing Aids.

The Cluster Study was not intended to define villains, but to show that a virus, rather than a poisoned product, was the likelier cause of Aids. Dugas appeared at the centre of the study because, according to researchers, he was co-operative, good at remembering and documenting his sexual relationships — and because he had Aids and, obviously, did infect some others.

Darrow's original report, repeatedly and prominently cited in the publicity for Shilts' book, found that 40 of the first 248 Aids patients in the USA had had sex with Dugas, or with someone who did. But Darrow himself now says that the study, although correct for its time, is now quite invalid. "We used an average of nine to 11 months for symptoms to appear after last sexual experience [with an infected person]," he said. But it is now known that the average period is more like eight years, and that major Aids symptoms usually take at least three to four years to appear.

Thus when Shilts, quoting Darrow's work, states that certain men had Aids illness nine or 13 months after sleeping with Dugas, the one thing that can be said with certainty is that they were *not* infected by Dugas. To continue to base the Patient Zero story on Darrow's 1982 research would be "misrepresenting science", Darrow said this week; adding:

Dugas probably wasn't the first person or the only person to carry the virus. I cannot give credence that he and he alone was responsible for taking Aids around America.

Both Dr Darrow and Dr Andrew Moss, a leading Aids epidemiologist at the University of California, San Francisco, pointed out that other Americans were infected with Aids before Dugas showed up. Dr Moss added, "To suggest that he is Patient Zero is nonsense. If you've got to choose

somebody, it wouldn't be him." Indeed, in the same month that *And the Band Played On* was published in the USA, a teenager who died in St Louis in 1969 was identified as America's possible first Aids case. The way Shilts had used the Dugas story was, said Moss, "a soap opera. It's a romantic construction that personifies the evil of the epidemic in an easy way."

Darrow also pleaded with Shilts not to quote Dugas' name in his book, fearing that the confidentiality of his Center would be distrusted and that the consequences for Dugas' friends and family, from depicting Gaetan as the evil Typhoid Mary of Aids, would be horrific. They were, and the family faced death threats.

In Britain, until this week, the Patient Zero story has been the only news from Shilts' book to reach newspapers and it has been used in a way which could destroy the rest of what Shilts is trying to say. When Princess Anne obliquely attacked Aids sufferers with asides about "self-inflicted injury" in opening the recent international Aids conference, and was criticised by charities and even the Health Education Authority, the *Daily Mail* shrilly trumpeted back to ask: "[Have they] not heard of the notorious French-Canadian airline steward . . . Patient Zero?" I asked Dr Darrow if he felt that Shilts had been reckless in his use of the reconstruction of Dugas' life — "You may have something there."

Overall, the book is written as though pre-packaged for a Dallasty film script, as the reader is forced endlessly to flit between moments of high

drama in divergent personal lives. With so much death, emotion and real trauma in both foreground and background, what happened next isn't really surprising. US network television is soon to start shooting a mini-series based on the book. Inevitably, one fears, the fictionalised life of Gaetan Dugas will find a prominent role in this series, which will be the first time US television viewers will have any glimpse of what living with Aids means.

The book is also partisan in that it is obviously the perspective of a gay man living in San Francisco. The problems of Aids and HIV infection for women, among drug users, poor blacks and elsewhere in the USA hardly get a look in. Worst of all, for no obvious reason, the main narrative stops dead in July 1985, with only a brief forward glimpse at the May 1987 Washington Aids conference.

And the Band Played On is nevertheless the first major means by which many in the "ordinary" world have been reached to hear of the hell that is Aids. Shilts too has shared in the awful and seemingly unending pain, having watched those he knew die. He is now watching three of his closest friends take their place in the inexorable progression of this terminal illness. His exposition of Reagan's lethal immobility does them sterling service; but his reckless promotion of the "Patient Zero" mythology has only helped make him wealthy, while prolonging the suffering and enhancing the prejudice and blame that has long fuelled the lethality of the Aids epidemic. □

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