

Sexuality: An Australian Historian's Perspective

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Suppression

IN 2004 A CONTROVERSY ERUPTED WHEN IT CAME TO LIGHT THAT THE AUSTRALIAN education minister, Brendan Nelson, had vetoed several projects recommended for funding by the Australian Research Council (ARC). The provocation for Nelson's action on behalf of the conservative government to which he belonged was an article published in a tabloid newspaper by right-wing columnist Andrew Bolt, criticising the ARC for supporting 'peek-in-your-pants researchers fixated on gender or race' (Bolt, 'Grants to Grumble').

Bolt's campaign against the ARC continued for several years, as did Nelson's vetting of research proposals. Among the columnist's targets were a project on 'the cultural history of the body in modern Japan', and another on 'attitudes towards sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman era' (Bolt, 'Paid to be Pointless'; Macintyre). The identity of the researchers and projects that Nelson had actually rejected remained a secret but university researchers, guided by Bolt's fixation with projects about sex, took for granted that these were prominent among those culled. One researcher later commented that applicants were omitting the words 'sexuality', 'class' and 'race' from proposals in an effort to avoid the minister's wrath (Alexander).

The episode raised many questions—including about academic freedom—but was of particular interest to researchers of sexuality. Why did such projects lend

themselves to ridicule? Why did Bolt find humanities research in this field so offensive? And why did researchers assume that it was projects about sex that were the most vulnerable to interference? Indeed, not long before this controversy broke, a group of academics at the University of New England in Armidale (where I then worked) who had formed a Sexualities Research Group were subjected to a hostile email campaign by academic and technical staff in the university's Science Faculty in response to publicity circulated for a one-day seminar on their subject. Some of those speaking at the seminar were members of the learned academies, several were already well published in the field, and all were carrying out serious research on what they believed to be a serious topic. But these incidents attest to the still not-quite-respectable status of the study of sexuality in universities, and particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Such a claim might at first blush appear a little odd. The history of sexuality is surely flourishing. It has its own specialist publication, the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*; courses in the field are taught in universities all over the world; vast numbers of scholarly articles, theses and books on the subject appear each year; and researchers do in fact compete successfully for grants to work in the field. In Australian history, especially among younger scholars, the history of sexuality is a vibrant field that is reshaping our understanding of many aspects of the past.

This article will, in the first instance, explore the development of the history of sexuality as a field of study in Australia. I suggest that the Freudian revolution registered with two key historians in mid twentieth-century Australia, Russel Ward and Manning Clark. The article then goes on to explore the constitution of 'sexuality' as an identifiable subject for study in the humanities and social sciences, and to discuss the particular significance of Foucault's approach to the history of sexuality in this context. Finally, I set out some case studies derived from my recent work, in order to demonstrate how the historical study of sexuality in Australia might enrich understandings of sexuality as an object of study.

A brief history

No one has yet traced the emergence of the history of sexuality as a field in Australia but it seems likely that a similar set of impulses has been at work here as in Britain, Europe and North America—if with some variations (Garton ch. 1). A local factor of some importance was the strength of social statistics and demography, as represented in the voluminous writings of the New South Wales (NSW) statistician Sir Timothy Coghlan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, much later, in the vast body of research emanating from the pioneering Demography Department at the Australian National University (ANU). These influences stimulated historical work on the Australian family

including studies of marriage, fertility and contraception (Caldwell and Ware; Ruzicka and Caldwell; Hicks; Quiggin).

Historians, of course, have been writing about sex for as long as they have been writing about Australia. But by the middle of the twentieth century, in the work of Russel Ward (born 1914) and Manning Clark (born 1915), a focus on the nature of sexual impulses was gradually moving to a more prominent place in the historiography, a development that reflected the influence of Freudian ideas on intellectuals of their generation. Ward, for instance, in his classic study *The Australian Legend* (1958), examined the cultural implications and sexual economy of a colonial frontier in which white men greatly outnumbered white women. This demography shaped cross-racial frontier interaction but it also had powerful effects on relations among settler men themselves. In particular, Ward began to explore the sexual dimensions of male mateship, suggesting that this venerable institution was a 'sublimated homosexual relationship' (Ward, *The Australian Legend* 99-100; Featherstone, 'Sex and the Australian Legend'). He had been involved in psychological testing while serving in the army during the Second World War and he knew his Freud and Jung, his wide reading in the psychoanalytic tradition being clear enough from a perusal of the bibliography of his 1949 masters thesis on modernist poetry (Ward, 'The Genesis'). Ward, the aggressively heterosexual champion of the noble bushman, in this manner became the unlikely pioneer of two modern strands of historical writing that have become integral to the historiography of sexuality in Australia: race relations and homosexuality.

Indeed, both of these male historians—Clark and Ward—well understood the demands of the sexual self. Clark's biographers have represented the historian as a sexually passionate man in private life (B. Matthews; McKenna). Moreover, the mode of his psychological portraiture in the six-volume *A History of Australia*, with its debt to the nineteenth-century European novel (especially his hero, Dostoyevsky) as well as to D.H. Lawrence, provides a way into thinking about sexual drives. Certainly, in his telling, some of his characters were moved by lust, or in the case of his memorable account of the inland explorer Robert O'Hara Burke, by an intense romantic love (Clark, *A History of Australia* 149).

Clark and Ward both lived in Canberra in the 1950s, the former as professor of history at Canberra University College, the latter as a mature-age doctoral candidate at the ANU. Clark's diaries from this period contains several reflections on Ward's marriage—and adulteries—but in view of the revelations concerning Clark's own troubled marriage in the recent biographies, they seem likely to be as much about their author as about their ostensible subject. The solipsism of much of Clark's writing is plain enough. Ward, at an academic party in Canberra,

was flirting w[ith] three women, when his wife joined the group. He frowned—put on the poison peep look—snapped at her. She moved away.

You see—a man w[ith] Ward's aims—bed w[ith] one of the women—must hate his wife because she stands between him & his desires. So she becomes loathsome to him.

'Ward', wrote Clark a few months later, 'is one of the "new men"—the Protestants, with a watery religion, unlimited ambition, memories of childhood, utopian hopes—belief in happiness, and then the hell of the life he lives now—afraid of his political past—tortured by sex—wanting love and comfort—the quest for the lost lolly pop' (Clark, Diary 4 July and 9 November 1955).

As a distinct field of enquiry, the history of sexuality really belongs to the more recent past. The rise of social history in the 1970s—a 'history of below' concerned with the everyday lives and struggles of the common people—was formative, with historians of madness and crime being among the antipodean pioneers of studies of sexuality (Bongiorno, "Real Solemn History" and its Discontents'). Another new area of study—intertwined with the social history movement—was women's history. In seeking the historical roots of women's oppression, feminist historians turned to sex for part of the answer. Some studies dwelt on women's experience of marriage and the family (Summers; Dixon; J.J. Matthews; Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath and Quartly). Others turned their attention to the history of crime, or of prostitution, drawing on the sources and methods of labour, social and economic history as well as feminist theory (Daniels; Allen).

Gay and lesbian history also developed as distinct areas of study, gathering momentum in the 1980s and 1990s. Here was another instance of local factors providing a particular stimulus, since Australia's historical reputation for homophobia here combined with a burgeoning interest in the homoerotic dimension of male mateship and the rise of Sydney as a major global centre for gay culture (Wotherspoon, *Being Different*; Wotherspoon, *City of the Plain*). Gay and lesbian histories were eventually joined, and sometimes challenged, by queer theory. Often under the aegis of postmodern and poststructuralist theory, historians influenced by queer studies explored a range of marginalised and 'fluid' sexualities—bisexual, transvestite, transsexual, transgender. In explicitly and self-consciously breaking with modernist movements such as socialism, feminism and gay liberation, queer might even have been crucial in the crystallisation of the distinct identity of 'historian of sexuality'—something discernible in Australia by the late-twentieth century, just in time for Bolt to include 'a heavily-studded Queer Studies lecturer' in his academic rogues' gallery (Bolt, 'Grants to Grumble'). By then, however, the development of sexual history as an internationally recognised and respected field provided historians of

Australian sexuality with a sense of scholarly identity and global community that made local attacks of this kind less effective than they might otherwise have been.

What is sexuality?

Yet this still begs the question of what we are actually talking about when we refer to 'sex' or to 'sexuality'. Jeffrey Weeks has commented that the history of sexuality is 'a history without a proper subject'—by which he appears to mean that its subject matter is elusive, and the product of time, place and culture (21). A recent commentator has described the field as 'at once all encompassing and fragmented' (Harris 1086). Raymond Williams in *Keywords* suggests that 'the sense of sex as a physical relationship or action' was not common before the nineteenth century. Up to then, sex was used mainly to denote the divisions between men and women; each sex was simply a 'section' of humanity. Words such as 'sex', 'sexual' and 'sexuality' in their modern senses might have entered everyday English from biological and medical literature, and perhaps from pornography seeking to pass itself off as such (283-86). The abstract term 'sexuality' was undoubtedly popularised by the rise of sexology towards the end of that century.

Freud's innovation in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in loosening the ties between gender identity and sexual activity or orientation was critical in marking out 'sexuality' as that 'great surface network' comprising 'the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges [and] the strengthening of controls and resistances' to which Michel Foucault would later refer (Foucault 105-6). Freud nonetheless applied a double standard in his treatment of men and women, which meant that the connection between gender and sex was retained. Since the passage to (hetero)sexual maturity in the normal woman meant the transfer of susceptibility to erotic stimulation from the clitoris to the vagina, puberty implied a more radical transformation for her than for a sexually normal male adolescent. She was forced to put aside her 'childish masculinity', with its focus on stimulation of the clitoris, and in combination 'with the wave of repression at puberty', the changes involved in becoming a woman made her prone to neurosis and hysteria. There were also, said Freud, related differences in male and female perversion. 'In men the most complete mental masculinity can be combined with inversion', he remarked, but in women 'character inversion'—the appearance of the 'mental qualities, instincts and character traits ... marking the opposite sex'—occurred with 'regularity'.

Nonetheless, Freud influentially insisted that we needed to *loosen* 'the bond that exists in our thoughts between instinct and object. It seems probable that the

sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object's attractions'. This original instinct was for Freud bisexual and without shedding this original bisexuality entirely, a normal human being would become heterosexual in the course of proceeding to sexual maturity (Freud, *On Sexuality* 143-44, 53, 60). Homosexuality became a case of arrested sexual development, an increasingly influential idea among the few doctors in Australia who were engaged with these ideas in the early decades of the twentieth century (Bongiorno, *Sex Lives* 210). As Steven Angelides puts it, the approach assumed that 'the more highly evolved the species, the more the individual is divested of a bisexual heritage' (Angelides 41, 43; Storr 13).

Such assumptions ran up against an older idea, found in the writings of sexologists such as Henry Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, that homosexuals (or Urnings, as Carpenter called them) were individuals of unusual refinement and culture and therefore, by implication, more highly evolved than others less favoured by nature. Robert Vivian Storer, a Sydney doctor, in his remarkable tome *A Survey of Sexual Life in Adolescence and Marriage* (1932), drew on both of the ideas in a somewhat contradictory manner. In the first instance, he referred to the classical tradition in arguing that unlike modern Christian society, the Greeks had recognised the normality of 'a definite homosexual trend' among pubescent boys, which received 'its best outlet in the friendship of a man wiser and older'. Repression in adolescents of what was a perfectly normal impulse was likely to lead to adult effeminacy and homosexuality (15, 33, xiii-xiv, 20, 48). What Storer understood as adolescent 'bisexuality', however, persisted into adulthood, especially among the well-educated. It was manifested, he said, in a 'desire for the companionship of adolescents', although not necessarily for sexual purposes, and was commonly found in scoutmasters and teachers—and, he might have added, in some doctors, for Storer would find himself repeatedly in trouble with the law in this regard in the years ahead (Storer 95-96, 76-77; *Smith's Weekly* 21 November 1936, 1; 5 December 1936, 2; 6 March 1937, 3; 2 July 1938, 1, 9-11; 9 July 1938, 1; *Truth* (Melbourne) 18 June 1938, 16; 25 June 1938, 3; 2 July 1938, 20; 9 July 1938, 9; 16 September 1939, 14; 23 September 1939, 16; 7 October 1939, 17; 21 October 1939, 20; 18 November 1939, 13, 19; 9 December 1939, 14; 4 July 1942, 18). Storer took it for granted that few adults—and he seems to have been primarily concerned with men rather than women—were capable of divesting themselves entirely of their adolescent bisexuality. And while recognising that it would be difficult to persuade 'many that homosexuality is an endowment rather than a vice', he echoed Carpenter and Ellis in presenting the 'homosexually inclined' as 'persons of taste, refinement, and sensibility' (96, 187, 122, 187-88, 190).

Freud insisted on the variety of ways in which a person might be an 'invert', including in the variety of their sexual practice. It has sometimes been suggested

that, under Freud's influence, medical opinion in this period was moving away from the idea of the male homosexual as an 'invert'—a 'feminine' man—and embracing the notion that homosexuality was rather a treatable illness (although Freud did not himself see homosexuality as an illness). Homosexual men *might* be 'effeminate', and lesbian women 'mannish', but these were no longer regarded as necessary connections (Chauncey). What Ellis understood as a 'congenital invert' was being recast as 'a treatable homosexual' (Waters 170).

It has been the role of historians to challenge the rather linear conceptions of sexual change that such interpretations imply. Garton has described '[t]he shift to sexual modernity' as 'protracted and contested', and he has plausibly suggested that its 'frameworks' might have been 'shaped as much by local circumstances as by the ideas of sexologists and sex reformers' (191-92). Historians, rather like Freud himself, have insisted on *variety*. For instance, the most detailed and accomplished research we have of the history of lesbian desire in Australia, Ruth Ford's body of work on the subject, emphasises the resilience of a variety of ways of understanding, practising and representing sexual desire between women, notwithstanding the emergence of modern western legal and medical discourses of homosexuality. Old rituals and practices such as romantic coupling and the act of 'passing' as male continued into the twentieth century; neither sexology nor psychoanalysis swept all before it. The scandal sheets of the press, such as the *Truth* chain in Australia, while sometimes engaging with the new 'scientific' formulations of inversion and perversion, also promoted attitudes to sexual orientation that were indebted to older, demotic understandings. Women themselves, moreover, did not necessarily draw on the scientific language of sexology in seeking to express the nature of their desire for other women. They found the language of romance more attractive and suited to their needs than the vocabulary of sexual science (Martin; Newman).

Freud himself was confronted with ways of understanding sexual practice among colleagues in the medical profession that posed a potential challenge to his approach to sexuality in *Three Essays*. He noticed the experiments being carried out in Vienna by Eugen Steinach, 'a physiologist, hormone researcher and biology professor' (Wyndham 87). The Harley Street Australian expatriate sexologist, Norman Haire, published a book in 1924, *Rejuvenation*, in which he boosted Steinach's work on the transplantation of sex glands, recognising much potential in this procedure as a cure for homosexuality. Whereas in the normal human embryo there was a gradual differentiation in the development of either testicles or ovaries, in some cases this differentiation was incomplete. As a consequence, 'the individual's sexual characters may also be mixed, so that he is sexually intermediate, either physically or psychically or both. This is thought to be the underlying reason for hermaphroditism and homosexuality'. Steinach—and Haire—therefore advocated the transplantation of new testicles into homosexual

men. The logic was impeccable. Since those who were castrated early suffered from 'defective desire and potency', weakness of intellect, and a 'lack of courage, concentration, and staying power', it followed that 'if by some means a testicle could be grafted or injected into the body', or digested in sufficient quantities, the opposite would occur (Haire 6, 24, 28-29). 'It would be unjustifiable to assert that these interesting experiments put the theory of inversion on a new basis', Freud wrote in 1920, 'and it would be hasty to expect them to offer a universal means of "curing" homosexuality. ... [I]t seems to me probable that further research of a similar kind will produce a direct confirmation of [the] presumption of bisexuality'. Freud emphasised that such experiments suggested it was not 'that part of the sex-glands which gives rise to the specific sex-cells' which acted as determinants, but rather their interstitial tissue, or the 'puberty gland'. 'It is quite possible', he reassured his readers (and perhaps himself) in 1920, 'that this puberty-gland has normally a hermaphrodite disposition'. In this way, Freud sought to retain the essentials of his developmental understanding of sexuality (Freud, *On Sexuality* 58-59, 136 [Additions 1920]).

Foucault

Most Australian historians working on the history of sexuality have been influenced by Michel Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality*. There, in the first volume, Foucault characteristically treated Freud not as the great liberator of humanity from 'an outmoded prudishness' but as 'worthy of the greatest spiritual fathers and directors of the classical period' in having given 'a new impetus to the secular injunction to study sex and transform it into discourse'. Freud did not effect a 'sudden reversal' of sexual reticence; rather, the 'good genius of Freud' placed sex 'at one of the critical points marked out for it since the eighteenth century by the strategies of knowledge and power' (158-59). Freud was part of a continuum that Foucault believed needed to be understood if one were to appreciate the manner of sexuality's invention over the last couple of centuries. He was not a rebel against Victorian mores.

Foucault, above all, understood sexuality as 'a historical construct', challenging the stereotype that western societies had progressed from nineteenth-century repression to the relative freedom of the twentieth. Far from producing silence, the Victorian era was dominated by an injunction to 'talk about sex' (105, 22) an impulse that some have gone so far as to call 'the invention of sexuality' (Weeks ch. 2). Foucault and his followers have tended to distinguish 'sex' as a biological or anatomical category referring to bodily organs and acts—something which has clearly existed across millennia—with 'sexuality', a field of pleasure, desire and knowledge emerging in the last couple of centuries (Davidson). Where particular desires were once understood simply as sinful or permissible, in the nineteenth century they were intertwined with individual selfhood—at 'the core

of one's being' (Garton 14)—as well as becoming key markers of the quality of a population and its political arrangements.

It would be difficult to produce a worthwhile book about sexuality while ignoring the Foucauldian model (or models) even if, as in Hera Cook's 2004 study of England's 'Long Sexual Revolution', the argument seeks to overturn Foucault's major claims concerning modern sexual history. My own *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (2012) was written for a commercial publisher and therefore aspires to some kind of general audience. Theoretical references and digressions were already scanty in the manuscript I submitted late in 2011. By the time the book had been edited for publication, they were even less in evidence. In a generous review, Dennis Altman pointed out, reasonably enough, that '[t]his may be the only major book about sexuality in the last thirty years that does not feel it necessary to discuss Foucault' (68). Yet in researching the book, and then attempting to write a convincing account of what had happened across more than two centuries of Australian history, I became aware that Foucault—or at least the way Foucault had been 'read' by many subsequent historians—had continued to shape the research agenda for the history of sexuality in ways that might need rethinking. For instance, there has been the tendency of many sexual histories to concern themselves more with what was *said* about sex than with what people *did* (McLaren 6). These studies were rather like proverbial Australian blokes in a bar, for whom the distinction between talking and doing can be a slippery one. The result was that many such histories seemed disembodied, disconnected from lived experience that social historians have made their subject matter, and which cultural historians, in the wake of the linguistic turn, were increasingly inclined to treat with suspicion. Yet social history—and, more particularly, a historical practice powerfully influenced by demography—has struck back. In the case of recent British historiography, several of the most important contributions have returned the history of sexuality to its modern roots in social history. Innovative use of oral history has been a feature of some of this work (See works by Fisher and Szreter).

Historians following Foucault have also perhaps said more about non-mainstream sexualities than sheer numbers might warrant (Harris 1087-91). Indeed, for historians, there is always a danger of exaggerating the prevalence or representativeness of an attitude or practice, since it is easiest to hear the voices of those who shout loudest, whether in commendation or condemnation. Historians of sexuality need to remind themselves often that values are also expressed through silence, diffidence and inertia. Australian historians of birth control, for instance, have not always adequately recognised that at the same time as noisy pronatalists condemned contraception and abortion as a threat to morality and national survival, the actual regimes of policing operated in rather contradictory ways. This apparent dissonance between language and practice

might have been partly a case of police turning a blind eye to abortion in exchange for bribes, and partly a realisation that the availability of birth control buttressed male sexual prerogatives. Yet there is also substantial evidence of customary acceptance of birth control, especially through the 'pre-industrial' methods of periodic abstinence, withdrawal, condoms and abortion. In the circumstances, middle-class and official 'noise' might well have been the symptom of political impotence rather than influence (Allen; Bongiorno, *Sex Lives* ch. 3).

Moreover, behaviour that is 'abnormal' or illegal is far more likely to register with state, church and media than sexual practices with high levels of social approval. Demographic data and oral testimony have been used by some historians in overcoming this difficulty, while court documents, medical records and the results of official enquiries can be 'read' in ways that open up worlds beyond their most immediate referents. Yet our glimpses are often clearest in those moments when the common modes of behaviour have, for some peculiar reason, been exposed to public view by the operation of the law or the media. The recent work on Britain's Profumo Affair, for instance, has revealed that in addition to its connections to national politics and the cold war, the scandal needs to be read in light of wider social anxieties in postwar Britain, and especially postwar London, about sex, morality, crime, race and gender. This work often reads somewhat like sexual archaeology, with historians metaphorically excavating the various 'sites' (Notting Hill, Soho, Whitehall and Westminster) needed to interpret the scandalous behaviour exposed to public view during 1963 (Mort ch. 7; Davenport-Hines).

In this way and others, the history of sexuality has gained considerable acceptance in the wider discipline for what it reveals about how societies function in their political, cultural and economic aspects. Sexuality might be a source of pleasure, of ribaldry or of scandal and shame. But it is also fundamental to how we are ruled, how we organise our material and spiritual life, and how we conduct our everyday relations with one another. Nonetheless, we have probably asked sex to carry too heavy a burden in the modern west; we are all something more than our sexual selves. But especially for those who have been marginalised and oppressed because their desire fails to run along a course approved by law or convention, sexuality can seem overwhelming in its claims to personal or group identity.

Antipodean sex

In an era when it seems reasonable to speak of a transnational turn in historical writing, it might be wrong-headed even to contemplate a history of sexuality, such as my own recent effort, that pays much attention to national boundaries. A

recent (2009) forum in the *American Historical Review* on transnational sexualities registered the manner in which the internationalisation of historical practice is challenging a history of sexuality concerned with the nation-state, rather as it is confronting the assumptions and methods of other sub-fields in the profession. I am sympathetic to this kind of critique of nationally-based studies; yet I would also reply that the detailed exploration of a nation's history can uncover stories, experiences and patterns that are often rendered invisible in the broader brush-strokes inevitable in transnationalism. Moreover, while the transnational turn has most commonly been understood as a means of exploring shared histories between places separated by oceans, or at least long distances, in Australia of the nineteenth century the various colonies had each acquired many of the characteristics of 'nations', albeit within a larger entity, the British Empire (Atkinson, '2005 Eldershaw Memorial Lecture' 197). These settler boundaries and territories sought to supersede the sovereignties, borderlands and boundaries that remain meaningful to many Aboriginal people (but obscure to the newcomers) even today. A properly transnational history—of sexuality, as of many other subjects—would need to take account of this diversity, of what I like to call the transnational history on our doorstep. Indeed, variations of experience are also local and regional, occurring *within* the colonies/states, as well as between them. The argument can be extended to the diverse sexual cultures found among the peoples that have come to make Australia their home, especially in the twentieth century. Demographers noticed as early as the 1970s that there were significant differences between the contraceptive practices of various ethnic groups, while historians of abortion have noted that migrant women often relied on networks based in their own ethnic communities (Caldwell and Ware; Baird 49, 63, 76).

Delimiting a study according to a category such as 'Australia' allows us to consider both the manner in which local happenings were shaped by wider international forces, and how—in some cases—Antipodean developments influenced the wider global picture. The former seems obvious. British influences, for instance, have been as apparent in the overwhelming influence on Australian sexual regulation of the English common law, as in the social purity campaigns of the 1880s, the writings of Marie Stopes in the 1920s, and the movement for reform of the laws relating to abortion and homosexuality in the 1960s and 1970s. When there was a revolutionary overseas development such as the publication in 1948 of the Kinsey Report (*Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*), the local response might initially have been muted. But the eventual consequences for a nation whose borders have been open to western intellectual innovation in general, and especially during the twentieth century to American influences, cannot have been other than profound (Wotherspoon, 'City of the Plain' 101-2; Kirby).

There are also some well known examples of studies of sexuality from the Antipodes influencing scholarship from abroad, such as Freud's indebtedness to Australian anthropological work by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen on the Arunta people in his accounts of incest and virginity taboos (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*). And it is surely one of the more peculiar features of the history of sexology in the English-speaking world that two of its most significant figures had such strong connections with Australia. Henry Havelock Ellis spent four years of his youth in Australia working as a bush schoolmaster, a period which by his own account he regarded as critical in his social and intellectual development. And Norman Haire came to occupy a towering status in sexual science while an expatriate doctor in London between the wars, including as a founder of the World League for Sexual Reform. Australia would go on to produce internationally influential sex scholars and activists in the 1970s and beyond, authors such as Germaine Greer, Dennis Altman and Lynne Segal, while the feminist philosopher of *The Sexual Contract* (1988), Carole Pateman, spent most of the first twenty years of a distinguished academic career at the University of Sydney. More recently, the New Zealand-born, Australian-based Annamarie Jagose has emerged as an influential international figure in queer studies.

A national history focused on the period since the late-eighteenth century might also be a useful way of exploring influential claims advanced in the international literature for the relationship of sexuality to modernity. For instance, if both the Foucauldian approach and basic chronology are correct, the history of European Australia ought to be a useful means of exploring the 'invention' of western sexuality. Australia was first settled as a penal colony in 1788, at a time when some long-standing ideas about sex, gender and the body were being radically transformed (Hitchcock). As such, it would be tempting (although not completely accurate) to suggest that Australian sex was born 'modern'. Certainly, by the late eighteenth century, scientific opinion was coming to accept a view of men's and women's bodies and minds as fundamentally different from each other in a way that had not been true before. Medical opinion increasingly rejected the ancient idea that men and women had the same genitals, only that the greater heat of the male body caused men's to protrude. Women's possession of ovaries now came to define their sex, where once these had been treated as the female equivalent of the testes (Laqueur). As divisions between the bodies, minds and souls of the sexes became more sharply defined in western thought, so too did the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour (Hitchcock ch. 3; Jennings 19). Varieties of sexual behaviour that did not conform to these basic norms—masturbation, sex between men, sex between women, sex between humans and animals, even female aggression towards men—were not only sinful and unnatural, but a frontal challenge to the gender order. At the same time, as Faramerz Dabhoiwala has recently shown, by 1750 in Britain 'most

forms of consensual sex outside marriage had drifted beyond the reach of the law', a transformation accompanied by—indeed, profoundly influenced by—a major renegotiation of the relationship between the 'private' and the 'public'. The result was a socially complex, but nonetheless real, expansion of sexual freedom (77).

The development of this basic sexual economy was well advanced by the time the First Fleet sailed into Sydney Cove. And, if we examine the very early colonial period—the half-century or so before Victoria came to the throne—there are few indications that the erotic behaviour of either free or unfree settlers was understood as a strong indication of the character of individual or society. The early colonial state did not set the control of the 'sexual' impulse apart from other appetites that were seen as liable to a sinful excess and social disorder (Marsden; Phillips). In any case, the authorities were in practice able to exercise only a limited influence on the sexual conduct of either convicts or free settlers in the early years (Atkinson, 'The Moral Basis of Marriage' 104-15). But from the late 1810s and early 1820s, there was a move towards a stricter regulation of the erotic life, one which fell both on prisoners and officials. Indeed, where pressure could be practically applied, Indigenous people were also expected to subject themselves to the disciplines of respectable family life at the same time as they became subjects of the British state (L. Ford).

Aboriginal sexual practices were an object of fascination, and often of disgust, among the literate men who produced journals documenting the early history of the colony (McGrath; Clendinnen; Konishi). It was only later, however, from the 1820s, that the reform of Aboriginal sexuality—its transformation from 'savagery' into 'civilisation'—came to be seen as a prerequisite for a proper Aboriginal subjecthood. James Gunther of the Wellington Valley mission complained of 'the dominion of the old men, with their absurd laws', among which he adjudged 'polygamy ... the root of so much evil'. He organised the marriages of women 'to what we considered Suitable partners, that is to say some of the young men, more advanced in civilization' but local Aboriginal elders considered these 'illegal' and 'even threatened the parties in question with death' (735-36).

Indigenous resistance was not the missionaries' only difficulty. The traditional practice of older men taking several—usually younger—brides while less mature men went without, had led to transgressions such as adultery and elopement in classical Aboriginal society. But the sexual competition now offered by white men may well have rendered this situation even more difficult by reducing the supply of marriageable women. In 1839 the missionary Lancelot Threlkeld warned that if Aboriginal men from Manilla River in north-western New South Wales came into his mission at Lake Macquarie accompanied by their wives, 'civil

protection must be afforded by Government at this place, or, the women will be forcibly taken away by the tribes belonging to these parts, they being deficient of the Female Sex' (Gunson 159). Missionaries and officials also recognised that their civilising and Christianising project was being hindered by some white male colonists' *savage* behaviour towards Aboriginal people. By the 1830s well-informed settlers were convinced that many 'outrages' carried out on both sides had their origins in the convicts' 'continually having connection with the black women' (Parry 66). In 1840 a Wesleyan missionary at Geelong in the Port Phillip District (later Victoria) complained 'of the depraved conduct of the hut-keepers and shepherds, who for their own base purposes induce the natives, particularly the females, to leave the Mission Station to the great interruption and injury of our work' (Hurst 149). Yet there were also suggestions that Aboriginal women might help to solve the ratio problem of the limited opportunities for marriage among working-class white men, a scheme of sexual engineering that some officials would reprise a century later with their proposals for the biological absorption of Aboriginality through controlled mating between working-class men and mixed-race Indigenous women. Governor Bourke in the 1830s was said to have 'had a favourite theory' that the blacks might 'be amalgamated' with the lower-class whites through inter-marriage, thereby raising the former in the scale of civilisation (Langhorne, 'Statement of Mr George Langhorne' 187; Langhorne, Letter to C.J. La Trobe 507-8). Here, the proximity of the working-class white and the Aborigine on the ladder of civilisation was seen as an opportunity for population-building rather than a threat to frontier peace.

Convict sexuality became subject to closer surveillance from the 1820s, a shift that was part of a larger trend towards more systematic punishment. Yet in weaving the regulation of the erotic life so tightly into the fabric of penal society, the architects of this new order also provided some of the conditions for transportation's demise. One impulse that contributed to this demise was a 'revolution' in government and information. It involved the sensational exposure of 'social evil' to parliamentary and public view, often as a prelude to legislative reform. Sexual immorality was among the matters exposed through new techniques developed by the British state for gathering and presenting information (MacDonagh, 'The Nineteenth-century Revolution in Government' 58; MacDonagh, *Early Victorian Government* 4-6; Innes). The vast intelligence assembled about the penal system made its way across an empire increasingly understood not as a collection of diverse and disparate colonies, but as an integrated unit run according to a uniform moral and administrative code by an elite with a shared sense of moral propriety (Laidlaw ch. 7). Meanwhile, the more intense moral purpose that evangelicals and humanitarians brought to the business of governing in the 1830s meant that when scandal was in fact uncovered, the impulse to devise a 'respectable' remedy was stronger than before (McKenzie). By the 1830s the sexual behaviour of convicts—especially

men—had come to be seen by British elites as indicative of colonial society's character. Such ideas extended in the 1840s to colonial opponents of transportation, many of them recent emigrants from Britain. In recent years, historians have laid increasing emphasis on the folk devil of the convict sodomite, a stereotype seen to have been especially effective not only in helping to end convict transportation but also in lowering a veil of shame over the so-called 'convict stain' for generations (Gilchrist 54-65, 229-30; Smith).

I have dwelt on the early colonial period because it seems to me to underline both the centrality of sex to any understanding of the dynamics of a society, and the ways in which sexual modernity emerged from a self-conscious process of official regulation and 'making peoples'—to borrow the title of a book by New Zealand historian James Belich. Later in the century, sex was understood as an adjunct to race-building, and sexual activity that was not put to work for the race or nation—especially non-reproductive forms of sex—aroused considerable official concern. Hence, fears about declining birth rates were not only focused on women's supposed selfishness, but on their shamelessness in apparently having sex for pleasure or companionship rather than for motherhood. Yet the demographic data on declining birth rates, as well as the rich historiography of Australian contraception, abortion and infanticide, underline that noisy pronatalist discourse did not translate readily into effective official measures to suppress birth control. It is worth recalling that Ansell, now a leading global manufacturer of condoms, began in an inner-Melbourne terrace house before the First World War (Johnston with Wippell).

When birth-controllers—many of them eugenicists—challenged orthodox pronatalist ideas in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, they largely did so within a racialist and reproductive discourse that accepted the making of a high-quality population as the fundamental purpose of sex, while now being more explicit about other benefits, such as the strengthening of marriages through mutual orgasms and efficient, scientific birth control. But when sexual revolution happened in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, one of its most salient expressions in public discourse was a growing recognition of sex for pleasure, and the rapid and drastic loosening of the rhetorical bonds with older ideas about race-building. This was clearly an Australian version of a broader western transnational theme, but Foucauldian understandings of the history of sexuality are too sceptical of just how liberating—for public discussion and perhaps also for sexual practice—this discursive transformation could be in a society where the insecurities and vulnerabilities of a small white population had figured so largely in its sexual history. If the 'revolution' in birth control inaugurated by the pill and legal abortion subjected women to the disciplines of the clinic, it also provided the opportunity for an unprecedented sexual and social freedom.

It is true that even in an environment that became less repressive for so many people, hierarchies of sexual value were modified rather than abolished. The sexual desire of a male homosexual in a stable relationship—especially if he also happens to be well-educated and affluent—has clearly continued to enjoy a greater legitimacy than that of the gay man who seeks a sexual encounter in a public toilet or a sauna. Married couples and even the monogamous unmarried retain a higher status than gay and lesbian couples, but the qualified legitimacy now enjoyed by the latter has in no way raised the status of other marginalised sexualities and identities: bar dykes, ‘promiscuous’ gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals and transvestites (Rubin 11-12). As I showed in *Sex Lives of Australians*, the sexual transformations of the era since 1960 have also been significantly conditioned by class, race, ethnicity, age and religion. Nonetheless, a more open treatment of sex helped place sexuality at the very core of identity and provided many Australians with a new sense of freedom, pleasure and belonging.

Room for dreamers?

In undertaking the media publicity for my book, I was often asked by journalists what was distinctive about sex in Australia. It’s not an easy question to answer. One (negative) response is that Australia was influenced by similar mores to other societies shaped by Judeo-Christian understandings of the body and pleasure (Hawkes, *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality* 9-15; Hawkes, *Sex and Pleasure in Western Culture* ch. 2). Of course, settler Australia was distinctive, or at least unusual, in some obvious ways. It was founded as a penal colony and its white population was, for much of the nineteenth century, marked by a massive imbalance of the sexes, with many more men than women. Yet in this latter respect, it was hardly unique, for other Anglo colonial societies experienced similar demographic circumstances, and with many similar consequences for the patterns of male social behaviour and bonding (Belich, *Replenishing the Earth* 323, 548-49).

Some journalists have provided their own responses to the question of Australian distinctiveness by focusing on William Chidley, a colourful figure well known to many scholars of Australian history but perhaps less so in broader historical consciousness. I would strongly suspect he does not feature in the teaching of Australian history in schools although the passages discussing him in my book have apparently prompted the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s social history unit to make a documentary about him. Chidley is one of those figures vulnerable to serial ‘discovery’. In the 1970s, there was a stage-play, *No Room for Dreamers*, as well as the publication of his *Confessions* and a good deal of scholarly research (Chidley; Hutchinson).

So who was William Chidley? If you had wandered along a major street in Sydney in the years just before the Great War—let's say 1912—you might well have encountered a strange sight—a bearded and earnest-looking man, dressed in a simple tunic and sandals in an obvious attempt to emulate the ancient Greeks. He was probably carrying a bundle of pamphlets, each bearing the title *The Answer*, which he would offer to passers-by for a small fee.

The message these brochures contained was simple. Modern civilisation had led to the degeneration of humanity. Accordingly, Chidley advocated nudity and a diet of fruit and nuts. But it was his attitude to sex that was most controversial. In particular, the modern manner of coition was unnatural, destroying body and mind. The problem was the forcible penetration of the vagina with an erect penis. This practice was wrecking the physical and mental health of humanity. Sex should occur only in the Spring, when the vagina would act as a vacuum, drawing a flaccid penis inside. Chidley's simple suggestion superseded any notion of man as the active partner and woman as passive in sexual intercourse, and so implied a radical critique of the prevailing sexual and social order.

Chidley, who died in 1916, was subjected to prosecution and persecution by the state, and would spend much of final phase of his life either in gaol or a mental asylum. On the way, however, he had acquired some illustrious, if occasionally bemused, correspondents, such as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis. Within Australia, there was a popular movement to defend Chidley, an effort in which feminists, socialists and liberal and radical intellectuals were prominent (Finnane; Bongiorno, *Sex Lives* 60-61, 149-51).

Chidley's appeal to modern journalists is easy enough to understand: it is the 'shock of the old', perhaps accompanied by surprise that the reputed greyness of Australian history had produced such a man. The persecution of Chidley also confounds many stereotypes about Australia, including the idea that it is notably tolerant of dissenters and ratbags. Just as sex seems to have played some recent role—in the conservative mind at least—in setting the limits of academic freedom, so it has also in the past defined the boundaries of toleration and freedom of speech.

But Chidley's career is a reminder that the history of sexuality in Australia is a part of global history. He was an energetic autodidact who read widely in an international literature he believed relevant to his concerns about sex and the future of humanity, and his ideas belong to a tradition of radical sexual utopianism that is transnational rather than specifically Australian. Like many such utopians elsewhere, Chidley stressed sexual equality between men and women, and women's capacity for initiative and desire. And he was not writing for an audience of 'experts', even if he desperately sought—and, when he

achieved it, flaunted—their approval. Instead, he placed his ideas before the common people. Above all, Chidley placed sex at the centre of life. In this regard, he was hardly swimming against the tide of his time. His academic qualifications and achievements might be meagre by comparison, but he was a contemporary of Freud, as well as of Ellis, Carpenter, Bernard Shaw, Olive Schreiner, Emma Goldman and many other intellectuals grappling with ‘the sex problem’. One of Chidley’s defenders, Bernard O’Dowd, the Melbourne public servant and poet, was no less inclined than Chidley to see sexual desire as overwhelmingly the most potent force in history. He wrote to his mistress:

Isn’t sexual desire an exigent companion for lovers who are also more than lovers? It wouldn’t let us rest (or me anyway) or talk quietly or anything until its demands were acceded to, & when they couldn’t be quite, it did its best to keep everything else from having a chance. It is indeed a most singular power, so seemingly gigantic in its feverishness in comparison with the immediate results (though of course proportionate enough if possible results are considered). To consider it one really feels in the presence of a mysterious power, hardly of earth at all. We call it an instinct, but all other instincts are gradually learnt, painfully & consciously learnt, & then incorporated in the body. But this one is not as they, it seems pre-human, nay pre-vital & more than anything else in the world makes one realise Schopenhauer’s notion of a Will that is not Idea & that is not necessarily associated with even a Body, a bodiless, idealess Will to Live (O’Dowd).

For Chidley, too, sex was powerful in this kind of way. Yet it was also the principal source of individual misery and social degeneration as well as the way to human happiness. It was in the status Chidley gave to sexual joy as the key to the gates of heaven on earth that his main significance lies. In this respect, Chidley and *The Answer* might still speak to our own times. Modern western societies have arguably also elevated sexuality to a kind of religious status. But they have not done so in ways that would have satisfied Chidley’s quest for a divine union between lovers founded on spiritual harmony, human gentleness and perfect equality. Chidley’s significance may lie less in the answer that he believed he’d discovered, than in questions about sex and intimacy, freedom and pleasure, that he raised—and with which we are still grappling a century later.

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