

## **Editorial Introduction: Writing New Zealand's Sexual Histories**



IN 2012 BARRY REAY TOOK NEW ZEALAND scholars to task for their lack of interest in sex, boldly proclaiming that there is ‘almost no national sexual historiography’.<sup>1</sup> Reay’s comment inspired us to reflect on what historians have already written about sexuality in New Zealand, and what we might write. We invited a group of scholars to participate in a workshop on ‘New Zealand’s Sexual Histories’ at the University of Otago, and a selection of the papers from that workshop features in this special issue. This is the first time a dedicated volume on sexuality has appeared in the *New Zealand Journal of History*. Its publication marks the thirtieth anniversary of an important turning point in the history of sexuality in New Zealand, the Homosexual Law Reform Act 1986, and gives us a reason to reflect on the local historiography, highlight some key trends in the field and suggest potential areas for future research.<sup>2</sup>

We can measure some of the key transitions and developments in the history of sexuality through the pages of the *New Zealand Journal of History*, now in its forty-ninth year. In fact, sexuality has been a feature of New Zealand historical scholarship from the founding of the journal in 1967. The very first issue featured an article by P.S. O’Connor describing Ettie Rout’s efforts to manage the spread of sexual disease amongst New Zealand troops stationed overseas during World War I.<sup>3</sup> Many years later, in a 1993 special issue on women’s history to mark the centenary of women’s suffrage, the first article to include the word ‘sexuality’ in its title appeared.<sup>4</sup> A number of the journal’s articles in the intervening years touched on sexuality, including Judith Binney’s 1975 study of William Yate and Barbara Brookes’s 1981 article ‘Housewives’ Depression’, the first significant study of abortion in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> In 1989, Charlotte Macdonald’s survey of research on gender and crime examined prostitution and the sexual double standard.<sup>6</sup> Over the past 25 years articles have appeared on brothels, same-sex desire, cultures of sex and romance in the interwar decades, interracial sexual violence, abortion, the contraceptive pill, the regulation of sexuality on the home front during World War I, and purity crusades.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past 40 years New Zealand scholars have published widely on sexuality in other journals too, including Andrée Levesque, whose pioneering exploration of European women’s sexuality in colonial New

Zealand appeared in 1981, and a multitude of authors in the *Women's Studies Journal*, which began in 1984 and has published historically inflected articles on sexuality ever since.<sup>8</sup> Three books of collected essays – Phillida Bunkle and Beryl Hughes's *Women in New Zealand Society*, and *Women in History* and *Women in History 2*, both co-edited by Barbara Brookes, Charlotte Macdonald and Margaret Tennant – provided a forum for debate on sexuality within the context of gender more generally. So too did the later volumes *The Gendered Kiwi*, *Fragments* and *Sexualities Down Under*.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1980s Stevan Eldred-Grigg's monograph *Pleasures of the Flesh* brought the history of sexuality to a mainstream audience.<sup>10</sup>

Both in New Zealand and internationally, one of the central features of the scholarship on sexuality is the field's 'ability to cast its net widely'.<sup>11</sup> Sexual citizenship, fertility and contraception, eugenics, sexual crime, sex education and advice literature, abortion, infanticide, single motherhood, juvenile delinquency, sexual violence and prostitution are just some of the topics that have been canvassed by historians and scholars from other disciplines. The essays in this volume share the characteristic breadth and variety that define the field. Our contributors cover childbirth, colonial moralities, friendship, homoeroticism, sex education, marital infertility, and anti-masturbation campaigns. The essays cover a wide time frame, from the 1840s to the 1970s: two essays examine sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century, two explore the mid-twentieth century and a further two span both. Some authors adopt a case study approach, while others deploy a long time frame to chart the evolution of sexual attitudes and sexual knowledge.

If the passage of time shapes sexual identities and practice, space and scale have also deeply structured erotic and intimate life. While these have traditionally been the domain of geographers, historians have increasingly turned their attention to the ways cities, rural locales, ships and buildings – and a host of other places – have shaped the sexual expressions that took place there.<sup>12</sup> To borrow Neil Brenner's definition, 'scale' refers to the 'nested territorial units stretching from the global, the supranational, and the national downwards to the regional, the metropolitan, the urban, the local, and the body'.<sup>13</sup> In sexual terms, scale stretches from the laws that have governed sexual activity – the criminalizing of sexual assault or sex between men, for instance – to the spaces in which sexual intimacies are exchanged. Sexuality is both big and small, broad and fine-grained, and New Zealanders' experiences have spanned a range of scales. Lindsay Watson's article shows how parents in homes kept an eye on their sons' sexuality, for instance, ever vigilant for signs of masturbation. In contrast, Chris Brickell's exploration of same-sex adolescent intimacy suggests the countryside allowed intimate bonds to form

between boys, while girls' schools accommodated intense 'pashes' and pupils' adorations for teachers. Alison Clarke considers childbirth on nineteenth-century immigrant ships, paying close attention to the nexus between bodies, space and intimacy on board the immigrant ship. She demonstrates the analytical possibilities of space for the study of sexuality, treating the ship as a particular space where modes of intimacy are altered or intensified and moralities are placed under greater scrutiny.

In recent times historians have debated whether New Zealand's events and ideas have been shaped in peculiarly local ways or whether these were primarily a by-product of international flows and networks. Giselle Byrnes, for instance, urges us to shrug off the straitjacket of national history and adopt a more transnational approach.<sup>14</sup> Miles Fairburn suggests New Zealanders were exceptional in the extent to which they borrowed unusually heavily from the United States, Britain and Australia: a small society could only produce a portion of the cultural materials it needed, and so drew from elsewhere for its magazines, films and books. Far from culturally isolated, Fairburn suggests, we were internationally engaged bricoleurs par excellence.<sup>15</sup> As the authors in this special issue show, sexuality has been central to the flow of international ideas. In the case of masturbation anxiety, as Lindsay Watson demonstrates, New Zealand doctors were trained overseas and tracked the international debates very closely. Ordinary men and women absorbed overseas professionals' opinions from the local newspapers; some attended public talks by travelling lecturers on the perils of self-abuse; and others read the pamphlets imported from Australia and elsewhere. Claire Gooder documents the series of sex-education pamphlets produced by our Department of Health during the middle of the twentieth century. Local and international knowledge intersected as these underwent constant modification over three decades and reflected social changes both here and abroad. As useful as it is to think transnationally, it would be a mistake to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Sarah Carr's article on colonial Otago shows that migration fed into a specific local ecology: previous waves of migrants, religious influences, geography and class distinctions combined to make for a diverse (and sometimes pragmatic) sexual morality. Sexuality in New Zealand has been shaped by local as well as global forces.

Several essays start to address the shortcomings of the existing literature. Heterosexuality has rarely been analyzed in New Zealand's history, either as a category or set of practices in which power shapes individual experience. Barbara Brookes's work offers the most notable exception to this lacuna, offering a careful consideration of women's sexual citizenship and questions of equality in a changing society.<sup>16</sup> A number of pieces in this special issue

explore aspects of heterosexual practice. In her discussion of childbirth on the high seas, Alison Clarke shows how gender structured connections between men and women at sea. Jane Adams traces medical and legal discourses about infertility to examine the norms and expectations of sex, and sexual rights, within marriage during the 1950s and 1960s. Claire Gooder shows us that sex education has long been a site where shifting social expectations about heterosexual practice are played out. The production of (hetero)sexual knowledge sometimes had a lasting impact. One adult recalled the sex pamphlets of her 1960s youth, possibly those that feature in Gooder's piece: 'We were given these books with a perplexed teenager on the front and lots of biological drawings of ovaries and things. At the end she's smiling happily because she knows things.'<sup>17</sup>

Source materials pose particular challenges for historians of sexuality. Bronwyn Dalley suggests we sometimes have to 'creep in sideways', especially when we search for information on the most inaccessible aspects of sexuality.<sup>18</sup> The authors in this special issue explore a wide range of sources. Some types are reasonably widely used, including court records, 'prescriptive literature', medical texts and government reports. For historians of sexuality, legal records are particularly alluring because they 'seem to describe behaviour not easily uncovered in other sources'.<sup>19</sup> For instance, in her work on the history of divorce in New Zealand, Hayley Brown has argued that the divorce file is 'a rich source for exploring sexual norms and expectations of marriage'.<sup>20</sup> Brown notes its potential for investigating the history of adultery, the increasing importance attached to sexual pleasure within marriage and, more broadly, the role of competing sexual expectations in marital breakdown. In her contribution to this volume, Jane Adams builds upon Brown's work, using nullity cases to explore the relationship between levels of sexual knowledge, including sexual ignorance, and marital infertility.

The New Zealand scholarship on sexuality has a temporal focus on the late nineteenth century and beyond, and this reflects the relative strength of twentieth-century sources. Court records, so important to the study of sexuality, are of limited value for New Zealand scholars interested in the colonial period, for the holdings are patchy and incomplete, although the Lost Cases Database is filling in the gaps, as is the ongoing digitization of nineteenth-century newspapers.<sup>21</sup> With *Papers Past*, keyword searches of digitized newspapers have radically transformed our access, making the search for sexuality-related coverage much easier and faster than it has been until now. Sarah Carr's article makes use of legal records and a digitized corpus of nineteenth-century Otago newspapers, but she also brings attention to an underutilized source for the study of sexuality in New Zealand: the kirk records of the Presbyterian Church,

which Scottish historians regularly consult when they chart the relationships between sexuality and social control.<sup>22</sup>

Visual sources offer clues of their own. Brickell's discovery of Robert Gant's photographs, for instance, has enabled him to more fully explore sexuality and desire in the late nineteenth century. He has argued that 'in the absence of a rich language of naming, visual material provides us with some valuable clues to erotic self-understanding during this period'.<sup>23</sup> Claire Gooder also makes a case for the importance of the visual in her contribution to this volume, arguing that scholarly interpretations of sex-education literature tend to overlook or ignore the pictures associated with the text, and that imagery provides valuable insights into sexual knowledge in historical contexts.

In their essays, Clarke and Brickell draw on diaries, an oddly overlooked source in histories of New Zealanders' intimate lives.<sup>24</sup> These both tell us something about events in particular times and places and indicate what people thought about their relationships. Women on the immigrant ships write about other passengers giving birth, for instance (Clarke), while the early diaries of novelist and playwright James Courage ponder what it meant to be sexually 'inverted' (Brickell). Diaries reveal their writers' innermost thoughts and lay bare societal expectations and sexual subjectivities, but finding relevant examples can be tricky. As Dalley suggests, archives' catalogues rarely, if ever, list such terms as 'sexuality', 'fertility' or 'intimacy' in the record for each diary, and the reader must sift through many diaries and swathes of text to find the nuggets. When it comes to unearthing sexuality-relevant material in either published or unpublished sources, there is no substitute for serendipity. Sometimes we find relevant material in the old-fashioned way, hidden away on a shelf or in the pages of a notebook where an online keyword search could never find it.<sup>25</sup>

For all New Zealand historians' efforts to date, notable gaps continue to pepper our historiography, and it is worth charting these in some detail. Sexual pleasure remains underexplored in a nation where narratives of sexual repression retain their currency.<sup>26</sup> Much more remains to be done on sexual practices during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially between women and men. Although histories of contraception tell us something of the constraints imposed on sexual activity and of a growing sense of reproductive freedom from the 1960s on, we know reasonably little about what people actually did together, what they thought about it, and the language they used to describe it. Frank Bongiorno notes a similar trend in Australian historiography, where there 'has been the tendency of many sexual histories to concern themselves more with what was *said* about sex than with what people *did*'.<sup>27</sup>

Some substantial areas of historical inquiry still have scope for more work. There is still a relatively small literature on lesbian history in New Zealand, though the work of Ngahua Te Awekotuku, Alison Laurie and Julie Glamuzina provides notable exceptions.<sup>28</sup> This partly reflects a paucity of sources. Sex between women was never illegal so there are no court cases to use as evidence, and government officials seem to have been more interested in male homosexuality.<sup>29</sup> Female masturbation remains to be examined, but once again a dearth of sources makes this a difficult history to write. The 'secret sin', as it was called, was especially secret when it came to girls and women.

Perhaps most strikingly, New Zealand historians of sexuality have yet to deeply engage with questions of race and ethnicity. The voices and experiences of Māori are a striking absence from the scholarship, while sexuality rarely appears in treatments of the Māori historical experience. Understandably, Māori historians are focused on unpacking colonialism's impact upon social, economic and cultural patterns. Histories of dispossession, resistance and resilience shape *Huia Histories of Māori* and *Tangata Whenua*, two important publications in which Māori perspectives are central to analysis; but they have little to say about sexuality. This perpetuates a silencing of takatāpui voices and experiences.<sup>30</sup> Sexuality does feature in studies of the early contact era, but this work has emphasized European representations of Māori sexuality and morality.<sup>31</sup> Daley suggests New Zealand's historiography predominantly focuses on the regulation of sexuality rather than its pleasures, and this is reflected in work on missionaries in particular: they are often shown as regulators, controllers and re-makers of Māori bodies.<sup>32</sup> Such an analysis gives us some insight into non-Māori perspectives, but reveals little about indigenous knowledge or experience.

Jessica Hutchings and Clive Aspin attribute these gaps to a lack of reliable historical sources on Māori sexuality, claiming the 'prevailing Victorian morality the colonisers brought with them meant that a narrow view of sexual relationships was imposed on indigenous societies, a process that was facilitated by the dominant influence of Christian missionaries'.<sup>33</sup> Understanding Māori experience through a repression narrative is limiting, for it underplays the potential for Māori resistance, or for comprehending the extent to which aspects of Christian models of sexuality and morality were folded into Māori life.<sup>34</sup> Ngahua Te Awekotuku, however, has identified carved representations of both heterosexuality and homosexuality that challenge narrow conceptions of Māori sexuality in the colonial era.<sup>35</sup>

Sexual practices and cultures of migrant communities, including the Scottish, Irish and English, have not yet been extensively examined, while

scholarship on the country's oldest ethnic migrant groups, especially the Chinese and Indian communities, has so far focused on recovering their histories to help complicate anachronistic bicultural narratives around race relations.<sup>36</sup> Although 'marriage, sex and morality were always a part of the Antipodean imperial project', scholars of migrant communities have considered the relationships between marriage, kinship and social cohesion without exploring how these shaped sexual and conjugal cultures in the colony.<sup>37</sup>

Not all contributions to sexual histories are made in writing. In recent years there have been calls for histories of sexuality that draw upon approaches utilized in the history of emotion and studies of material culture so as to redirect attention to 'the historical actors operating at the centre of sexual encounters and relationships'.<sup>38</sup> New Zealand's museum sector is taking the lead here. In 2015 Te Papa Tongarewa hosted an exhibition on contraception that drew from the collection of doctor Dame Margaret Sparrow.<sup>39</sup> The Charlotte Museum Trust, meanwhile, actively collects artefacts and items relating to New Zealand lesbian culture.<sup>40</sup> Through their collecting practices, libraries, archives and museums are laying the foundation for new areas of historical inquiry in the future.

Still, there is scope for more. We lack New Zealand histories of celibacy, multiple-partner sex, sadomasochism and fetishism, and we await work that examines the link between sexuality and disability and broadens the study of sexuality to include those in later life. As Charlotte Greenhalgh notes, historical treatments of 'love and marriage' and sexuality 'have been left to the young'.<sup>41</sup> Without a doubt, though, our authors are contributing to the gap-filling both here and elsewhere. Carr recently wrote the first piece on bestiality in New Zealand, while Watson has added substantially to the meagre literature on sexual purity campaigns.<sup>42</sup> Rather than a case of 'almost no national sexual historiography', New Zealand has a thriving scholarship to which historians have made vital and important contributions, covering an impressive array of topics, not all of which have been canvassed here. In a few more years, with a little more historical investigation, we may be able to bring together a national narrative survey of sexual history, much like John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman's *Intimate Matters* or Bongiorno's *The Sex Lives of Australians*, synthesizing local work and painting the big picture.<sup>43</sup> The contributions to this special issue bring us closer to that possibility.

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## NOTES

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2 The workshop was made possible by funding from the University of Otago's Centre for Research on Colonial Culture. Funding from Angela Wanhalla's Royal Society of New Zealand Rutherford Discovery Fellowship made Professor Matt Cook's (University of London) participation at the workshop possible.

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4 Barbara Brookes, 'A Weakness for Strong Subjects: The Women's Movement and Sexuality', *NZJH*, 27, 2 (1993), pp.140–56.

5 Judith Binney, 'Whatever Happened to Poor Mr Yate? An Exercise in Voyeurism', *NZJH*, 9, 2 (1975), pp.111–25; Barbara Brookes, 'Housewives' Depression: The Debate Over Abortion and Birth Control in the 1930s', *NZJH*, 15, 2 (1981), pp.115–34.

6 Charlotte Macdonald, 'Crime and Punishment in New Zealand, 1840–1913: A Gendered History', *NZJH*, 23, 1 (1989), pp.5–21.

7 Bronwyn Dalley, 'Lolly Shops "of the red-light kind" and "soldiers of the King": Suppressing One-Woman Brothels in New Zealand, 1908–1916', *NZJH*, 30, 1 (1996), pp.3–23; Chris Brickell, 'Same-Sex Desire and the Asylum: A Colonial Experience', *NZJH*, 39, 2 (2005), pp.158–78; Charlotte Greenhalgh, 'Bush Cinderellas: Young New Zealanders and Romance at the Movies, 1919–1939', *NZJH*, 44, 1 (2010), pp.1–21; Angela Wanhalla, 'Interracial Sexual Violence in 1860s New Zealand', *NZJH*, 45, 1 (2011), pp.71–84; Joanna Richdale, "'I don't care what it is going to cost, I am prepared to pay": Men's Voices and Abortion in New Zealand, 1919–1937', *NZJH*, 46, 1 (2012), pp.21–33; Barbara Brookes, Claire Gooder and Nancy De Castro, "'Feminine as her Handbag, Modern as her Hairstyle": The Uptake of the Contraceptive Pill in New Zealand', *NZJH*, 47, 2 (2013), pp.208–31; Katherine Sanders, "'The Sensational Scandal which has Worried Wellington": The Kelburn Raid, Sex, and the Law in First World War New Zealand', *NZJH*, 48, 2 (2014), pp.91–118; Lindsay R. Watson, 'The Perils of Impurity: The New Zealand Purity Crusades of Henry Bligh, 1902–1930', *NZJH*, 49, 2 (2015), pp.110–35.

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