



## HOMOEROTIC SUBJECTIVITIES AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

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### Abstract

*The subjectivities of homoerotically-inclined men sometimes seem elusive, especially in an historical context. This article explores a range of life documents — court files, diaries, photographs and letters — and looks at the characteristics of each. Such sources have their own particular contributions to make to a history of homoerotic subjectivity. Their narratives also reveal something of the interactions between the social and the personal, and the article uses several men's lives to explore these connections. When we closely analyse life documents, we see that while understandings of past subjectivities are indeed complex, they are by no means beyond reach.*

**Keywords:** Homosexuality; masculinity; history; identity; archives

### Introduction: Imaginations

Eleven years ago I left a sociology department with a new PhD. I began a postdoctoral fellowship in a history department and, wide-eyed, tried to carve out a space in a somewhat different discipline. "How", I asked a new colleague, "do you find your way into the consciousness of people in the past? I mean, most of them are dead, and you can hardly go and ask them what they think". His response was this: "Well, obviously, you need to develop a historical imagination". So ended one of the first conversations in my new academic home.

I felt chastened by my colleague's tone. I had been "found out" for my lack of training in dealing with the lives of people past, even though I knew a fair amount about (post) modern society. But I was intrigued too. Only much later would I discover R. W. Colling-

wood's "historical imagination" from 1935: an incitement to construct a consistent, evidence-based picture of past events and conceptions (Collingwood, 1959<sup>1</sup>). In my existential moment 11 years ago, one question seemed especially salient: How does a researcher gain access to the ways people in history understood, and responded to, the world around them, and how they negotiated subjectivities within that world?

I soon became interested in the history of male homosexuality in New Zealand. Given my new location in a history department — and a gender studies programme soon after — it seemed a logical extension of my PhD research on the relationships between heterosexism and liberalism during the late twentieth century. I began to ask questions about the lives of same-sex attracted men in the past. Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was much to consider. How did New Zealand men understand and classify their desires, I wondered, and how did they communicate them to others? In which ways did they work with or against the ideas and expectations of their social worlds? How did they engage with the cultural resources at their disposal (such as images, music, literature and newspapers)? In short — and as queer theorist Alexander Lambevski (2009) put it more recently — how did they "fashion" themselves?

These were big questions and, in the end, the answers filled a book (Brickell, 2008a). In this

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<sup>1</sup> Collingwood's essay appeared in print in 1946, but, on its first page, he notes the date of writing as 1935. See the discussion in Curthoys and Docker (2005, pp. 103-106).

article, however, I want to step back and consider the kinds of source materials that reveal something of homoerotic subjectivities in history. Sociologist Ken Plummer refers to these materials — diaries, personal correspondence, autobiographies, memoirs and photographs — as “documents of life” (Plummer, 2001). Therein people record their lives for their own reflection and, sometimes, for the eyes of others. Of course, they would not have expected the attention of subsequent researchers, but we can learn a lot from the images, postcards, journals, letters and scrappy notes that somebody thought to save from the dustbin or the backyard incinerator. Documents created in official settings offer more clues. Court records are the archives of the state, created when citizens are tried for criminal activity: until 1986, New Zealand men could be imprisoned for having sex with boys or other men.<sup>2</sup> The resulting paper files, with their statements from prisoners and witnesses, reveal a myriad of details about the lives of those involved (Brickell, 2008b).

In the following sections of this article, I explore a range of life documents and look at the characteristics of each, and the contributions they make to a history of homoerotic subjectivity. In the process I consider how these documents reveal something of the wider social and historical forces at work (cf. Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 45).

When researchers focus on the lives of homosexually-inclined men we engage in a multidisciplinary exercise (Clarke & Peel, 2007, p. 12; Riggs & Walker, 2004, p. 8). While I check in with gay and lesbian psychology as I explore the “psychic processes” (Sandfort, 2000, p. 15) involved in the construction of subjectivity, other disciplines are useful too. My attempt to “recapture the way history felt” for these men, and to explore their “emotional investments” in wider cultural representations, draws from the increasingly influential history

of emotions (Stearns & Lewis, 1998, p. 1; Roper, 2005, p. 59). Historians of sexuality sensitise us to the effects of time and place on communities and identities (Chauncey, 1995; Houlbrook, 2005; Katz, 2001). A sociological perspective highlights the ways social processes and scripts shape individual lives (Brickell, 2006; Plummer, 1995), while cultural geography draws our attention to the ways identities are enacted and realised in spatial contexts (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Hopkins & Noble, 2009).

In the following sections I explore these multiple foci by working my way through several types of sources: court records; personal diaries; photographs; and letters. Each of these sources affords us particular insights into the subjectivities of men in history, and suggests the confluence of the social and the individual. Along the way, we glimpse the lives of several New Zealanders: the occupants of a late-nineteenth century hotel room; an aesthete author abroad in the 1920s; a labourer, a sailor and two mid-twentieth century military men; and a beach-loving physical culturist and his pen friends.

### **Court Documents**

Some male New Zealanders made it into the public record in sad, fleeting circumstances: they were arrested for consensual sex with another man. In the archives, their court files sit alongside the recorded misdemeanours of swindlers, murderers and other law-breakers. The earliest New Zealand court records date from the 1860s, and typically include police and witness statements, judges’ notes, the reports of physicians and probation officers and, sometimes, confessions from those arrested (Brickell, 2008b).

The case of Beverly Pearson and Walter Lydiard is one of many. One summer’s evening in 1895, the two men checked into the Falls Hotel in the small village of Henderson (later absorbed into greater Auckland). This was the men’s sixth visit, and the hotel owner became suspicious. He settled police into the

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<sup>2</sup> From this date, an age of consent of 16 applied.

room adjacent to Pearson and Lydiard's, and at five o'clock the next morning, when their bed could be heard shaking, the officers entered the room and drew back the bedclothes. Having discovered the couple "lying on their left side and facing the wall, Pearson's face to Lydiard's back, Pearson's two arms clasped round Lydiard's body", and the "persons" (penises) of both men erect, the officers charged the pair with an attempt to commit sodomy. Pearson retorted: "Do you for a moment believe I would commit such an abominable offence? I will prove there is no foundation to this charge". In his own defence, he continued, "I am fond of nice boys. We were only kissing each other after waking up. It was not such a serious thing against nature at all". Pearson turned to Lydiard and added: "I understand it all Walter, I am accused of using you as a woman" (Pearson & Lydiard, 1895). If Lydiard responded, his words went unrecorded.

This fragment of a situation tells us a little about the social and personal organisation of sexuality. In Pearson's explanation, a kiss meant one thing and an "unnatural" connection another. As he told it, his kiss signified an attachment to a "nice boy", but not a sexual interest — and certainly not a delineable sexual subjectivity. As Leonore Tiefer points out, the kiss is a highly context-dependent, meaning-laden act, always embedded in broader cultural practices (Tiefer, 1995, ch. 7). But what sort of act was it here, in this Henderson hotel room in 1895? Pearson's kiss affirmed a connection to Lydiard, another man, but Pearson disavowed any "serious thing against nature". He desexualised the kiss, separating it from the detective's accusation of sodomy. Ultimately, we cannot know whether or not Pearson's proclamation reflected (or contradicted) any closely-held understanding of same-sex intimacy, but these court documents hint at the kinds of rhetorical manoeuvres men might make in a given situation. Material circumstances, self-understanding and forced explanations all jostled for attention in this single moment.

During the early twentieth century, homoeroticism was increasingly named and medicalised. Some physicians embraced theories of nerve weakness as an explanation for "sexual perversion" or "homosexuality", and their theories filtered down to lay people through newspaper reports (Coleborne, 2010, p. 69). From there, men wove elements of professional discourse into their own self-understandings (Brickell, 2008a, ch. 2). Once again, court records afford us valuable insights into working class lives. Middle- and upper-class men were very rarely sent to court, so these sources tell us little about their experiences. A Dunedin labourer, arrested for having sex with a man down by the wharves in 1934, told police: "I cannot give any explanation for committing these acts other than that my nerves are bad. I do not abuse myself, nor am I in the habit of having intercourse with women. I now realize the seriousness of committing acts of this nature" (Polson, 1934). A retired public works foreman, meanwhile, attributed his transgression to his neuritis that flared up during the First World War (Smale, 1933).

Other working men stepped outside of the medical moment. They complained of a lack of willpower, and alluded to uncontrollable desires. In 1946, on a ship travelling from Peru to the New Zealand port of Lyttelton, a sailor was caught having sex with another seaman. "For some years past I have found that I had a very strong sexual nature", he claimed in a statement to the Christchurch court. "When I saw the Junior Ordinary Seaman, J\_\_\_\_ M\_\_\_\_, sleeping in the bunk next to me with only a towel around him my nature overcame me and I bent over and took his penis in my mouth" (Brown, 1946). Of a 20-year-old soldier accused in 1942 of a sexual act with a barracks mate, a probation officer wrote: "To all who know him so well this lapse is entirely inexplicable and it would appear to me that he has been caught in a weak moment" (Kettle, 1942). A year later, when another soldier was apprehended for his sexual activities with a man he met in a Christchurch restaurant, his probation officer concluded: "On the accused's own admission to me he feels that this habit

has got such a hold on him that he cannot fight against the temptation, and would welcome surgical treatment" (Alcoff, 1943).

In this last example, the language of temptation intersects with medical discourse. Lay and professional voices were just as tightly entangled. Men's accounts of their sexuality were sometimes recorded in their own words ("I had a very strong sexual nature"), although the spaces of their fashioning — police stations and courtrooms — interpellated those same men as criminals. In other moments, after a process of selection, refraction and rewording, probation officers relayed the information men provided to them ("this habit has got such a hold on him"; "he cannot fight against the temptation"). Either way, court documents provide some idea of the ways working class men engaged with wider, socially available discourses of homoeroticism, and how they stitched these discourses into their own accounts of self.

### Personal Diaries

If court records consist of subjective accounts created and compiled for one particular reason — the establishment of guilt or innocence — personal diaries serve other purposes. If the court record is primarily a working-class one, most diaries are the creations of middle-class men. While courtroom testimony is a defensive move, diaries are commemorative and sometimes confessional. These are typically intended as private records, often prefaced like those of the novelist James Courage: "Diary: For MYSELF and no other". Courage was born into a well-to-do Canterbury sheep farming family in 1902. His literary interests coalesced early, and he began his private journal at the age of eighteen. The young man wrote the following year that "I must have originality, I must have individuality", and he set off for London (Courage, 1920). Over the years that followed, James Courage committed the details of his new life to a series of small bound volumes. Erotic encounters, enjoyed or imagined, coloured the pages:

Directly I saw him approaching up the road something inside me 'switched on'. I tried not to look at him; surveyed the magnolias in the garden. Then, just as he passed, I looked into his face and met a confident (yes!) smile. My heart quivered like a hot light, and the blood rushed into my face. I felt lusty but intensely embarrassed. I don't even know his name (Courage, 1927a).

Parted with C. today and felt sad and a bit hopeless over nothing at all. If I had not slept with him the parting wouldn't have given me a single pang. How damnably sex colours everything! (Courage, 1928a).

James Courage's emotional life leaps off the page. There are visceral reactions ("something switched on", "my heart quivered" and "felt a bit sad and hopeless"), raw and intense and conveyed onto paper. Then, a sentence or two later, Courage reviewed his feelings with sadness and embarrassment, showing us — an audience never intended — how his sexuality was simultaneously a source of pleasure and discomfort. Here is another example:

[M]y sexual nature is compounded almost equally of sensuality and of acute fastidiousness. In consequence when I'm in a healthy state I am constantly seeking a sexual satisfaction from an ideal — an impossible state of affairs, productive of a terrible nervous asceticism (Courage, 1928b).

Elsewhere, James Courage's disquiet mingles with other tropes. To read his diaries is to see how cultural resources intersected with transgressive desires in a world that alternated between hostility to same-sex eroticism and incomprehension of its very possibility. While some New Zealand men drew upon the medical discourses of homosexuality, for Courage the exhibits inside the British Museum were significant:

[I] purposefully avoided going into the room containing the Greek statues of young men. Perfection like that humiliates me, and the physical side of it wakes up a state of sensual libido that tortures me (Courage, 1927c).

On the one hand, the rooms full of antiquities legitimated Courage's desires — and those of countless other homoerotically-inclined men (Cook, 2003, pp. 125-126). At the same time, the exhibits stirred up troublesome feelings that could find little satisfaction in the context. On another occasion, in the same museum, Courage was aroused as he watched a young man in an adjacent room — "Fair hair, round head, brown eyes. Wanted to lie with him at once" — but again nothing came of it (Courage, 1928d). Sappho's poetry also sparked a response:

At tea with H. L. I picked a book, containing fragments of Sappho, from the bookcase. Afterwards brought it home with me. Read some of it at once and was so profoundly stirred that I spent two hours writing an excessively erotic poem addressed to an unknown youth. I hadn't written a poem for six months, and had almost forgotten the intense intellectual excitement of it (Courage, 1927b).

Courage's diaries oscillate between upset and elation, disappointment and pleasure, convention and resistance. In a new set of social spaces, far from rural Canterbury, Courage described himself as an "invert":

To society at large the individual invert is anathema — an unthinkable anomaly. To himself he is often a collection of half-understood but painful perceptions. More frequently he is aware of his state, and it is then that he understands his loneliness, his seemingly purposeless segregation in Nature (Courage, 1928c).

Courage's ambivalence surfaced again. While "unthinkable" and anomalous, the invert — a figure popularised by psychologist Havelock Ellis at the turn of the century — was worthy of a defence against his detractors: "Sexual intercourse between males — *where both are inverts* — has every scrap of right to be considered as normal as that between men and women" (Courage, 1929). It is worth considering whether Courage had read Ellis (1918), or the pamphlet *The Invert and His Social Adjustment* written by an author with the pseu-

donym "Anomaly" (1927). In the case of the latter, Courage's pairing of the words "invert" and "anomaly" provide the only hint.

This was a self-referential telling, for James Courage was his own/only audience, and his diaries remained embargoed by their donor — Courage's sister — until 2005. Nevertheless, as documents of Courage's life, these journals reveal both contemporary social processes and self-expression. The weight of public opinion is palpable, while the spaces and interactions of the city, and the recollections of antiquity, informed his construction of identity. Courage's diaries begin to show us — to borrow from Stearns and Lewis (1998, p. 2) — how "men and women give shape to their own lives, sometimes attempting to conform to the prevailing standards, sometimes internalizing them, sometimes resisting, but always negotiating between experience and precept, in the process giving history its distinctive, human contours".

## Photographs

The diary does not always exist in isolation. Sometimes it speaks to a photographic record that accompanies it. Photographs, in turn, further reveal the embodied and spatialised elements of identity: they tell of their makers and their audiences, and reveal a range of themes and symbols with wider social application (Brickell, 2010). They are "culturally conditioned visual communication systems" that draw upon the structured "symbolic codes" circulating in their own time and place (Ruby, 2006, p. 67). "Private" photographs are "public" objects, for the worlds of meaning on which they draw are deeply social as well as profoundly personal (Holland, 1991, p. 3). In New Zealand, as elsewhere, the rapid diffusion of the autographic Kodak camera after the First World War led to a boom in informal, private photography (Callister, 2008, ch. 1).

Here, in Figure 1, are Courage and his sometime lover Frank Fleet. The writing on the back of this photograph, and others in the same series, tells us this picture was taken in



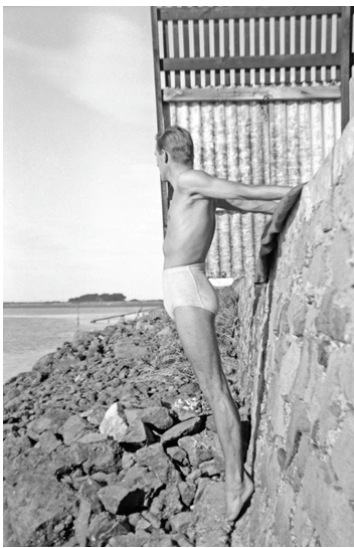
February 1931, when Courage and Fleet spent time together in the Argentinean city of Buenos Aires. This holiday snapshot evokes snatches of diary narrative. Courage's ballet shoes speak to the entry, from 12 March 1921, "I am effeminate, yes, it hurts me to write it but I am, for I love clothes and pretty things, and have great opinions on art" (Courage, 1921). In this image, Courage-the-aesthete presents himself as the man he says he is. Fleet, introduced in Courage's diary, takes shape too: "Frank; colour, dark; age, 25; father Argentine, mother Cornish. An athlete, and handsome; one of the sweetest creatures I've ever known, with something so touchingly lonely and child-like in him that it makes tears of gentleness start to the eyes" (Courage, 1930). Fleet is confident before the camera, facing it head on. Courage, meanwhile, turns slightly from the photographer and towards Fleet, his oblique bodily pose reinforcing a shy, somewhat ambivalent facial expression which echoes the ambivalences in his diaries.

Courage and Fleet are not openly intimate in this image, though they appear quietly comfortable in each other's company. Each man's clothing mirrors that of the other; the identical hats and similar singlets and baggy shorts hint at their affective connection. Keen to remem-



*Figure 1 (above): James Courage (left) and Frank Fleet, near Buenos Aires, February 1931. S10-580a, Hocken Collections, Dunedin, New Zealand.*

*Figure 2 (below): David Wildey, Redcliffs and Waimairi Beach, Christchurch, 1950s. Author's collection.*



ber this moment, to hold on to who he and Frank were that day, James slid this photograph into his collection of papers and kept it for posterity.

As the image of James Courage and Frank Fleet demonstrates, we make — and (re) present — ourselves in time and place. Figure 2 shows David Wildey, photographed in about 1950. Wildey is a gay man now in his late 80s, born and raised in middle-class Christchurch. His extensive personal records reveal his past work as a teacher, Second World War medic, and artist's model. He arranges himself on a rock wall near his beach house in Redcliffs, and poses lithely on Waimairi Beach. Like Fleet, Wildey announces his physical presence before the camera. While seated, he accessorises with a packet of cigarettes and three imported magazines: *Music and Musicians*, *Courier*, and a barely-discernable dance title. Wildey performs an identity for himself and any friends who might be watching. He is handsome, fit, urbane, stylish, self-composed and cultured. Wildey taps into and rearticulates a range of tropes and influences: the physique movement and the artistic world, both with their cover of respectability and their coded homoerotic meanings and significances. He brings together the local and the global by shaping and revealing his body in ways particular to his time. As we look at his photographs, we can see the connections between everyday life and the wider society in which it takes place.

Photographs, like diary entries and court statements, reveal a little of the processes by which "cultural representations become part of subjective identity" (Roper, 2005, p. 57). David Wildey's photographs are expressions of his self and his embodied culture; his muscles and magazines tell us something of his identity in the early post-war years. They also speak of cultural capital: a knowledge of, and facility with, culturally-credentialised markers of taste and status (Skeggs, 2004). When Wildey sent copies to his pen friends, in the same envelopes as his letters — an interchange I will soon discuss in further detail —

he supplemented his textualised identity claims with visual "evidence". In David Wildey's archive, like James Courage's, the visual and the textual, the self and the other, constantly intersect.

### Letters, Exchanges

Even though historians and literary scholars regard letters as an important source, they have been little used in the social sciences (Stanley, 2004). This is rather surprising, as correspondence is highly evocative of people, feelings and places. Matt Houlbrook's history of "queer London", for instance, begins with one man's — 22-year old Cyril's — 1934 letter to Billy, a would-be lover, and from there Houlbrook maps Cyril's encounter with the city and its queer life: the Caravan Club, mentioned in Cyril's correspondence, and the pavements and theatres of the West End. This letter, therefore, provides a launching point for Houlbrook's rich exploration of everyday gay life in that metropolis in the first half of the twentieth century (Houlbrook, 2005, pp. 1 -3).

Letters are designed for exchange; they actively create and remake relationships through social interaction (Stanley, 2004, p. 212). In this dialogical process, letter writers put their selves in order and then perform those selves to their interlocutors. Houlbrook's Cyril had this to say in 1934: "I have only been queer since I came to London about two years ago, before then I knew nothing about it [...] sometimes I wish I was still normal as queer people are very temperamental and dissatisfied [...] I honestly hoped to have an affair with you Billy" (Houlbrook, 2005, p. 2). Cyril's letter is simultaneously a confession, an expression and a rehearsal of queer identity; it is a performance for the benefit of the man who seems reluctant to love him back.

James Courage published a number of novels, some set in Britain and others in New Zealand, and his *A Way of Love*, with its openly homoerotic attachments, generated a swag of fan mail. Men told Courage of their own desires,

and their attempts to make sense of them. One letter began with an evocative vegetable metaphor, and went on to describe thwarted longings:

The feeling that you were holding up a mirror to a part of myself that I had never cared to analyse too closely was immensely strong — I felt like an onion from which successive layers were being relentlessly stripped — an almost indecent exposure. So real was the impact of the book (perhaps heightened by the fact that I began it while waiting for the start of a Bach concert in the Festival Hall, and spent most of the concert staring at a curly-haired violinist at the first desk) [...] Now what can I do about myself? I'm old enough to know that I find nothing erotic in women (I *have* tried): I have tried to immerse myself in my work — but that solved nothing. I know no-one whose inclinations (perhaps proclivities is the more honest word) are the same as mine, and I cannot bring myself to confess them to my friends — although one in whom I confided recently in a moment of despair (such moments are becoming all too frequent now) took it with a, to me, [sic] alarming equanimity, and said that he had known for a long time (how?). Nor am I going to stand on street corners and flutter my eyelids (although last week I walked from Covent Garden to Kensington after the ballet with God knows what nameless longings). [...] I am sorry to have burdened you with this outpouring, and you will have every right to ignore it, but if you could tell me what I want to know it would be an act of charity for which I will always be grateful. Yours sincerely, Bruce Smith<sup>3</sup>.

[PS] I have re-read this letter — it isn't at all what I wanted to say, but then my letters never are (only when I write about pictures can I really express myself), and it's even more brackety and incoherent than usual. I have given you my address, and you will gather from the letter-head where I work (I mess about with pictures and drawings): and since I seem to have put myself in the confessional you'd better know that I'm twenty-six (Smith, 1959).

Confessional indeed. Courage was only the second person Bruce Smith had told about his "inclinations", but *A Way of Love* prompted that retelling. Confronted by the book's mirror, Smith's innermost sexual self was exposed, much like the inner layers of an onion, and demanded acknowledgement. The letter tells a story of recognition, classification and a search for answers, and suggests that literature could be a powerful prompt in the construction and negotiation of homoerotic selfhood. As Richard Hornsey explains, "the modern homosexual has been [...] inextricable from experiences of reading and their attendant moments of personal enlightenment" (Hornsey, 2010, p. 166).

David Wildey was an avid letter writer too, and a Dunedin archive holds an extensive collection of his correspondence over several decades. Through the contacts pages in physique magazines — and, later, the gay media — Wildey forged connections with others like him. He and his new comrades discussed shared interests: music, physique culture and photography, and sometimes the correspondence led to meetings in person. "Guilio", an Italian man based in Britain, answered Wildey's advertisement in physique magazine *Man's World* in 1956, and the pair struck up a friendship:

I am sending off to you by surface mail the latest issues of *Adonis* and *Body Beautiful*. Do let me know what you think of them. I find them very attractive and I think the photos are even better than in *Man's World*. These two magazines are frankly not 'muscle culture' ones — but merely — or again frankly — paeans of praise for the physique as a thing of beauty and elegance — not as a piece of beef-cake [...] When I visit New Zealand you'll have to take me out somewhere where we can indulge our love of naturism and whilst lolling or lazing in the sun — gabble away about opera and sandwiched in between all that — [I will] shoot at you with my camera! Is that okay by you? ("Guilio", 1956a).

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym.



This letter is full of reference points. *Man's World*, *Adonis* and *Body Beautiful* were visual translations of male same-sex desire, Guilio's dismissal of "beefcake" notwithstanding. Opera, naturism and body photography were "mainstream" preoccupations, and yet all had their queer meanings too (Borehan, 2007; Koestenbaum, 2001). These tropes repeated themselves over and over again in David Wildey's correspondence. When Wildey included photographs of himself with his letters, the visual and the textual intersected. Guilio again:

Your wonderfully long and thoroughly delightful and extremely welcome letter arrived this morning [...] I'm quite crazy about all [the photos you sent]. You have just the clean and Grecian lines which I admire so much more than those revoltingly over-developed American muscle-men! ("Guilio", 1956b).

An American pen-friend conveyed his approval too:

The beach shots [you sent me] revealed a rugged looking guy, certainly a pleasant chap, 'sexy looking' indeed. Is one of the swimsuits gold? The pose you assumed in it was most inviting — sort of a 'come hither pose' ("Blackie", 1961).

The body and its pleasures were central to these men's identities. The ancient world retained its appeal ("clean and Grecian lines"), and international magazines — *Man's World* and the others — were valuable conduits through which an embodied homoerotic subjectivity could circulate on a global scale. By the 1980s and '90s, a more public gay culture provided a new language, and enabled new descriptions of sexuality and selfhood. Here is a young man writing to David Wildey in 1994:

Hi, I'm a straight-acting bi guy. I'm 28 years old. I'm always interested in seeing an older guy as I have no interest in guys my own age sexually or otherwise. I've 'tried' all age groups but I just prefer the conversation, company etc of older men. Even physically I find older guys a big turn on. I'm 5'7", slim

muscular build, I've got some tattoos. I've dark brown hair, eyes. I'm averagely hung, I'm circumcised. I like sports, music etc ("David", 1994).

This letter adopts the language of the gay personals advertisement (Malcolm, 2004). Its self-presentation combines both physical descriptors ("5'7", slim muscular build [...] dark brown hair, eyes") and a statement of social and sexual preference ("I find older guys a big turn on"). When juxtaposed with the 1950s letters from Wildey's archive, this one reflects a profound change over four decades. Most noticeably, its language is less discreet and more explicit than the earlier examples: "I'm averagely hung, I'm circumcised". The linguistic specificity of the classification "straight-acting bi guy" contrasts with the more oblique descriptors of the 1940s and '50s: "he's so" or "he's that way" (Brickell, 2008a; Porter & Weeks, 1991). "Straight-acting bi guy" is a world away from Beverly Pearson and Walter Lydiard's fond kisses and nineteenth century language of "unnatural" sex.

David Wildey kept carbon copies of some of his own letters during the 1980s and '90s, and his two-way exchanges underscore the dialogical aspects of letter writing. One set of examples, between David and "Bill", began formally and with a degree of detachment. "Thank you for your pleasant friendly letter, and my apologies for the delay in replying", reads David's first letter (Wildey, 1981). As the correspondence continued, it became a vehicle of fantasy and desire. "I know that one day it will come true and that we will share some loving and tender experiences together", Bill wrote to David at the end of 1981, only to add: "I am having difficulty just at this moment with a bulge in the front of my shorts which, if there was anyone else around, would prove somewhat embarrassing" ("Bill", 1981). David could not resist, and replied: "two nights ago [...] admittedly a very hot night [...] I couldn't sleep for thinking about you [...] rather thrilled at your expression of reciprocal willingness" (Wildey, 1982).

To "Skip" — who asked for a passive lover — David Wildey wrote, "I'm all for genuinely warm and loving relationships. As for 'kissing and cuddles' I swoon! Sorry I'm not at all 'feminine acting when making love'. Like you, Skip, I'm reasonably masculine" (Wildey, 1994). This was as much a claim to a particular — masculine — gay identity as an expression of sexual interest. Not always, though, was Wildey so uncompromising. On another occasion, in a letter to "Grant", he suggested a degree of flexibility: "I don't usually turn on to hairy guys, but there's always a first time" (Wildey, 1993). David Wildey's sexual desires, like those of his fellow New Zealanders, were not wholly consistent: sometimes they were fixed, other times fluid.

The letters in the Courage and Wildey archives are thematically complex and multilayered. As researchers pore over these men's letters and photographs, we see how homoerotically-inclined New Zealanders located themselves in time and space, how their sexual desires and experiences reflected and inflected their subjectivity, and how the personal and the social informed one another.

### Conclusion

I need not have worried too much, 11 years ago, about the "problem" of exploring identities historically. The more I learnt about source materials — the more I unearthed and pored over countless interesting examples — the more I realised what is possible. In court records, letters, diaries and photographs, men leave traces of their subjectivities.

Analysing these traces is hardly a smooth and uncomplicated matter, though, for these materials reveal constant tensions and contradictions. James Courage was both enthralled and disappointed by his desires for other men, while the sexual satisfactions of many of his countrymen ran up against discourses of weakness and moral failure. Enjoyable erotic adventures led to prison for some. Clearly, pleasure and suffering were not mutually exclusive. Guilio, David Wildey's pen friend, drew

a fine line between his aesthetic enjoyment of male bodies and (for him) the crass eroticism of "beefcake". Others treated correspondence as a confessional, projecting their embrace of, and reservations about, male same-sex desire.

Always social constraints and possibilities shaped individual lives. Some institutions — notably the police and court systems — forced some men to account for their actions and themselves. Others drew upon a range of resources: novels, Greek imagery, and physical culture. Men picked up, sorted through, and interpreted these cultural materials, and wove them into patterns partly — although not wholly — their own. Reflexivity is everywhere in these accounts. Men were one another's interlocutors, co-constructing identities as they wrote to one another and met in person.

Ideas and materiality, M. E. Bailey reminds us, always "intertwine in a spiral of mutually informed contingency" (Bailey, 1993, p. 104). Archival sources show us that men took their ideas about intimacy and eroticism into a range of spaces (the beachfront, the courtroom, the museum, the ship's cabin, the bedroom), and gave them form through their actions. These spaces, in turn, structured interactions and modes of self-understanding. David Wildey's seaside photographs, like the snapshot of James Courage and Frank Fleet in Argentina, anchored identity in time and place.

Different sources, then, show us different things about queer psychologies, identities and existences. Court files resonate with the control of the state, even as they reveal the languages and practices of identity. In diaries, men tell of their experiences, and those of others, in their own voice, while letters — episodes in a dialogical exchange — pull social interaction sharply into focus. Sometimes an archive includes photographs alongside letters and diaries, and these elucidate the themes present in the written sources. A photograph's setting, poses, and expressions all provide hints about erotic and intimate subjectivities.

Just as these sources suggest realms of individual experience, they also alert us to the social forces from which these experiences emerge. The epistolary form, to give one example, "frequently acts as a barometer of social changes" (Stanley, 2004, p. 223). This measure becomes clear when we trace a life over time as a thread that loops together periods in a history of sexuality. David Wildey's life, for instance, traverses wartime, the post-war queer cultures, and the politically ambivalent '60s. Later, in the '80s and '90s, Wildey involved himself with a more formally organised gay community. By looking at his life in letters, we learn something of the shifting social pattern in which he took his place.

I have examined several kinds of life documents here, but there are others too. Autobiographies, unpublished memoirs and stories, recorded interviews and other types of case records all offer useful insights. So too will emails and other digital forms of communication, if they can be saved for posterity (Rosenzweig, 2003; Sentilles, 2005). These kinds of sources provide opportunities for fine-grained analysis, and allow researchers to see how historically-situated subjects have worked with and against wider social themes in their own search for pleasure, meaning and identity. This is a rich research field, full of opportunities to further develop the "historical imagination" that so piqued my curiosity a decade ago.

### Author Note

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