

Mates and Lovers – A History of Gay New Zealand (2008: Godwit)
**Transcript of “Author Meets Critics” Session – SAANZ Conference,
University of Otago, 2008**

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Dr. Chris Brickell is a senior lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Otago. He is a prolific scholar and author and his latest achievement is *Mates and Lovers – A History of Gay New Zealand*, published earlier this year under Random House’s Godwit imprint.

We have here Dr. Sandy Callister who by day is Managing Director of the Wellington research agency Colmar Brunton but also by day she is a Research Associate at the Stout Research Centre at Victoria University of Wellington. Sandy specialises in historical research based on photography and she’s the author most recently of *The Face of War: New Zealand’s Great War Photography* which came out from Auckland University Press also this year. She is currently researching a book for Random House on the family albums created by ordinary New Zealanders at the end of the 19th Century. I would also like to record a note of thanks to the University of Otago’s Film, Media and Literature Network for funding Sandy’s visit today.

Dr. Andrew Gorman-Murray is a Research Fellow in Human Geography at the University of Wollongong. The main focus of his work is geographies of sexuality and gender, particularly in relation to domestic, suburban and rural spaces. Among his many publications this year he co-edited a special issue of *Australian Geographer* titled ‘Geographies of Sexuality and Gender Down Under’. He has just been awarded a three year Australian Research Council Discovery Grant for 2009-2011 to investigate changing relationships between masculinity and domesticity in Sydney.

Robert Aldrich is Professor of European History at the University of Sydney. First and foremost a historian of France and French Imperialism, he is also a leader in the field of gay history and earliest on in that field he pioneered with *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (1993). With Garry Wotherspoon he edited a two volume *Who’s Who in Gay and Lesbian History* published in 2001 that contains almost a thousand entries on figures of importance in the history

of homosexuality in the western world since antiquity. In 2003 he published *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, and most recently he came out with *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (2006), a very lavish book from Thames and Hudson.

Sandy Callister

As a visual historian my departure point is the world of appearances, so it was with a great deal of pleasure and attentiveness that I have looked at and lingered over Chris' book. Reproductions of images mentioned are included below.

Chris has understood photographs to be a form of evidence, constructed, contingent and open to interpretation, not just as illustrations. Chris has had to be something of a detective, tracing the elusive shards of an evolving gay identity in New Zealand history. In those early instances he has cleverly made use of court testimony and what text and commentary exists, but it is the photos that carry the gravitas for me.

For me it is not simply about what the photographs show or suggest. I would take it one step further and argue that in a very real sense the medium of photography itself has allowed men to actively construct, narrate and shape a cultural history of gay identity in New Zealand. Today I want to briefly talk to four images, three from the Robert Gant albums of the 1880 to 1911 period, and then I want to end with one from Frank Sargeson's estate, an image which is really a sobering gravestone to the seemingly idyllic era which Gant recorded.

I find Gant's albums fascinating, not the least that I am a descendent of a Wairarapa farming family and had never thought the Wairarapa a hotbed of anything. Gant's albums were created at a pivotal time in New Zealand's photographic history. From 1882 through to 1904, advances in camera technology enabled less expensive hand held cameras to replace the complicated tripod and cape cameras. This development, along with an increasing prosperity and more leisure time, led to an upsurge of interest in photography. Alongside the studio photographs catering for the domestic and overseas tourists markets there were, then, a number of talented amateurs who provided the impetus of the early camera clubs, the first one being founded in Wellington in 1882. Gant rightly belongs in that group of people taking up amateur photography. The thing that is

worth noting about them though is that the first wave of amateur photographers who had it in their means to make these more intimate and private visual archives of New Zealand lives have really rather been overlooked by our scholarly attention.

This first image (p.49) is so affectionate– I love the phrase Chris uses in the book to describe it ‘adhesive portraiture’. Looking at both the Gant albums and a range of family albums from this period I have become increasingly aware of the complexity of Victorian sexuality and its polymorphous nature. I think most of our perceptions of this period are sometimes from those stern photographs that you see, especially of the early settlers, very forbidding people. But when you look at the Gant album, and albums like it, these albums speak to a playfulness and an exuberance which the fluidness of settler cultures allowed space and time for, as well as more accurately capturing the fluidness and mobility of settlers, and in this case men as they moved around the imperial world.

Fluid is such a good descriptor. Perhaps that is what drew Gant to New Zealand in the first place. We are permitted to glimpse a more intimate, delightful world in this respect. I think Chris’ photos from this period act as route markers to a number of histories still waiting to be written. Robert Gant worked as a pharmacist. I take it that he may have developed his own photos and compiled the albums. As Chris points out we cannot assume that all the young men in these photos shared his homoerotic interests, but I do think the albums would make a wonderful subject for a very close reading simply because Gant was vitally interested in creating, producing, shaping and interpreting his sense of identity and subjectivity through this visual medium.

What is interesting about albums is they are about visual storytelling in their chronological flow, the organisation and the sequencing and captioning. We often look at albums with others. We tell stories that confirm who we are. So their creation raises a new set of questions for me. For whose pleasure did Gant create these albums? Did he censor any of the photos? Who saw them at the time? To whom did they communicate? How come they survived? What of his work hasn’t survived? And why have photos of intimacy and the domestic world not been valued or considered critically?

Take this album page (p. 55) and Gant's apparent foot fetish. The visual theorist Kristin Metz argues that familiar photographs are fetish like. Here we have a really double whammy effect. Gant has cut out three sets of feet with shoes intentionally intensifying the fetishistic effect. Gant's subject submits to the executioner but who does he look at, and with what emotions does he look with his hands tied behind his back?

I think it is very, very interesting, and then this one (pp. 83-84). I call it the languid maiden. Being practical, I do not think the ground looks that comfortable, but the raised leg and that shoe again, it invites. Or is it about submission? And then, again he is lying right next to the fence. Are we meant to understand that he is hidden and we are privileged viewers? There are quite a few mysteries about this photo; there is a thread of voyeurism running through a great many of the Gant photos.

Robert Gant ends just prior to the Great War when my scholarly interest in men picks up. I just want to end with Chris writing about Frank Sargeson in his book. This photograph (Shrine to World War One soldiers. Frank Sargeson Collection, PA9-005, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.) could be in his book. It belongs to the Sargeson Estate and it is memorialising soldiers killed in World War I and the sheer number of photographs and in the lovingly created tableau of mourning we are brought face to face with the sweep of death that cut down friends and fellow soldiers, but given Sargeson's sexuality it is also testimony to the tragedy of lovers and lust shattered.

So to conclude, if we give centrality of place to the photographic representations, examining them as cultural text in their own right, the imaginative history of gay New Zealanders is revealed to be fragmentary and partial, partial but also testimony to the efforts and creativity of human beings who sought to construct, shape and affirm their sexuality and affection for other men.

Later question: I would like Chris to expand a little bit more on Robert Gant's albums and their history to this point because I do not think they all had survived had they?

Andrew Gorman-Murray:

I think *Mates and Lovers* is a glorious book. It is beautifully wrought and it is really informative and as Sandy pointed out it's a visual masterpiece

as well. It is a pleasure for reading. For me as a geographer who ranges across disciplines – or what I sometimes call an interdisciplinary tart – two aspects particularly stand out: its interdisciplinarity and also its spatial sensitivity. In Chris' academic world the disciplines of sociology, history, geography and gender studies provide the points of reference. Chris' scholarship speaks to and ranges across this range of disciplines and *Mates and Lovers* is a showcase of interdisciplinary writing. I do mean interdisciplinary, not multidisciplinary, because Chris weaves together the historical, geographical and sociological perspectives to provide the first history of love and sex between men in New Zealand in the period between the early years of British colonisation and the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. So from my perspective as a geographer who works across historical, gender, media and cultural studies what I find really important and impressive about Chris' interdisciplinary work is his attention to the nuances of geography in shaping lives, identities and communities.

This is not entirely common in much non-geographical or interdisciplinary work which often invokes place or geography as a container for activity rather than the actor itself. For instance certain histories of places, a gay history of London, New York, Brazil, whatever, often takes that known place as a known geographical reference, a framework for action, without teasing out spatial configurations, differences in connections within that place. Not that that's a criticism of the work of historians or sociologists, because that's often not what they're looking for, and geographers need something to do as well, so that's our job! So what I mean is that Chris' spatial imaginary could have stopped at the borders of New Zealand easily and quite understandably, but his interdisciplinarity led to a careful exploration of an array of geographical differences within New Zealand and connections both within and beyond New Zealand.

Chris takes up and applies some of the key precepts of the discipline of geography issued over recent years, particularly the mutuality between place and identity where identities or subjectivities are spatially constituted, and the geographical imperative of knowledge production where discourses and identities are produced and operate in particular localised geographies or are locally modified from more distant imports.

Thus, as Chris argues in Chapter 1, ‘social expectations and prevailing ideas shaped settler society, but so too did men’s experiences of space and their interactions with others’ (p. 80).

Mates and Lovers is organised to explore how men’s same-sex desires and individual and shared identities changed over time, from colonial beginnings to the post gay-lib era. As this discussion unfurls, Chris shows how shifting identities were also embedded in changing spatial relationships, each affecting the other. Chapter 1 focuses on sex and romance, desire, emotion and mateship between men in the colonial period in the 19th century. Early in this period, and for much of the century, cities were small, urbanisation yet to take hold, and men and women occupied separate, segregated worlds in many respects. Until the later decades of the century working class men’s lives were underpinned by itinerant labouring, boarding houses and non-urban work such as mining. In these segregated public and private spaces opportunities and camouflage for intimacy were presented. Rurality and itinerancy, labour and mobility, rather than settlement, urbanity and domesticity, provided spaces which configured and enabled same-sex friendships and desires. Even in settlements in incipient cities, social circles were segregated for both men of lesser and greater means. In this man’s world, same-sex intimacy was enabled through relationships and pursuits in public spaces.

Chris also shows how international connections were important in shaping men’s relationships through colonial laws, news from overseas, travel overseas and travellers coming to New Zealand. What this suggests is that global connections have been always important in sculpting men’s worlds, desires and opportunities in New Zealand before the era of so-called globalisation.

The shifting roles of these various spaces, the public and private, the urban and rural, leisure and work, global and local are then traced through the remaining chapters on the 20th century. International influences remain important, but shaped to local context. Men’s lives in New Zealand were informed by legal and medical discourses, magazines and literature, gay rights and queer politics, movies and travel, liaisons and relationships. As the 20th century progressed, urbanisation gathered pace and cities grew, and more sizeable and entrenched homoerotic worlds emerged in New Zealand cities. Much akin to Gayle Rubin’s arguments

about urbanisation in the US, urbanisation in New Zealand facilitated more spatially settled friendship networks and communities. Urban space became more important in framing notions of homosexual identities and communities. As spatial relations shifted to the settled urban from itinerancy, the private sphere also appeared to become more important with house parties and domestic networks supporting communities of practice alongside bars, beaches and beats. And now, as Chris points out, the virtual space of the internet interweaves with physical spaces, creating new linkages and access routes.

As well as being attentive to the shifting geography of sexuality, Chris also demonstrates that multiple and overlaying homoerotic geographies existed simultaneously, as the meshing of virtual and physical worlds suggests. In Chapter 3 he speaks of parallel homoerotic and square worlds, but it is also true that parallel *homoerotic* worlds existed in cities and regions. These imbrications respond to different configurations of homoerotic desire manifested in different spatial forms: gay, queer, takatāpui. And while urban spaces have increased in importance, it seems that rural and regional spaces remain significant sites of exploration and community, perhaps more so than in Australia in some ways, or at least from my point of view. I wonder if spatial imperatives actually underpin this, the different national scales, different urban systems and city sizes and different meanings and forms of urbanity and rurality. So that's a question.

One final aspect of Chris's interdisciplinarity and spatial sensitivity that I must also mention is the role attributed to emotions, to love, intimacy and desire, in shaping homoerotic mobilities and spaces. This concern with the imperative of emotions is a rapidly growing concern across sociology, geography and history, and so again Chris' scholarship shows its interdisciplinary purchase. While the link is not explicitly made, I think *Mates and Lovers* also contributes to burgeoning work on emotional geographies, and shows how longstanding the role of emotions has been in shaping mobilities and spatialities.

Apart from the questions that I have already raised, there are other questions and comments that I wish to finish with. At a couple of points Chris mentions mixed gender communities and I wondered through your intrepid research if you also began to see correlations and divergences –

for want of a more historically sensitive term – between gay and lesbian geographies in New Zealand. Did coalition politics and issues like that emerge in the 1970s as it did in Australia? And speaking of Australia, *Mates and Lovers* provides a wonderful catalyst for exploring cross-Tasman linkages and differences. I see a huge scope for comparative work on rurality, urbanity and Indigeneity. I think also in light of yesterday's panel on the future of gender and sexuality studies, cross-Tasman work is vital. For too long both of our countries have perhaps looked to the wider Anglo-American world without showing enough scholarly interest in each other's worlds, and this too would also build interdisciplinary expertise, knowledge and links.

Finally, while recognising *Mates and Lovers* pretty much stops at the 1970s, I also wondered about the impact of HIV/AIDS on homoerotic, gay and queer geographies. Work from the US and from Australia suggests that there have been impacts on sexual geographies from HIV, so I wondered about how these spaces might have changed in New Zealand as well.

Robert Aldrich

Historians always have the final word! Like the others I have a great admiration for Chris' marvellous book which presents a panorama of lives, of diverse lives, lives of people who to New Zealanders are well known like the Reverend [William] Yate and Samuel Butler and Frank Sargeson and James Courage, but also those whose private lives were not well known: Alexander Turnbull and his cashmere socks and silk underpants. But for many of us, and I agree with what's been said before, some of the most interesting characters in the book are the ones who are not well known such as Robert Gant, that pharmacist thespian photographer and his wonderful albums which illustrate everything as we've seen from men canoodling and lads frolicking naked at the seashore to exotic men on boats on the way back 'home' to England, a visual archive that Chris has so well used, not just as a complement to his text but as a part of his investigation, as a part of his documentation of this history of gay New Zealand.

I think Chris' book shows us that history itself, and the book is one of a very few volumes consecrated to the gay male history of a particular

country that tries to encompass such a diversity of themes and a breadth of period. But even for those outside the field of gender studies and studies in sexuality I think Chris' book is really very interesting and important for what it says about sexuality, about masculinity, about codes of conduct, about the relations between public lives and private lives, about the relations between the state and the individual. He has revealed many insights into these areas through his commentaries, through his insights and through the wonderful humour that colours the pages. I am sure most of you have read the book but I cannot resist a quotation of one obituary of Gant's friend Harry Mowat. 'Mr Mowat did not marry. He was always of a jovial disposition.'

I could talk for much longer than I have time to do so about this book but three points I would like to underline, three points that I took away from the book. First of all the variety of gay lives, homosexual lives, and the worth as a historical strategy of looking at those lives. There was a rather old fashioned type of gay history that tried to prove that Michelangelo or Shakespeare was gay; the attempt to identify gay and lesbian figures, to find the stains on the sheets, and in some ways to locate ancestors. There was then a rather more sophisticated sort of history, much influenced by post colonial studies, post modern studies, queer studies, that tried to theorise what sexuality and gender meant in society; in some ways trying to find the descendants of those ancestors, with a great deal of theorising. Some in my own view was extremely fruitful, and other theorising from a historian's perspective was quite sterile. But what Chris has done here I think is to move us forward in a historiographical sense to examine the lived experiences, the individual lives, the way that particular people worked their way publicly and privately through that maze of relationships and contacts, of desires that we all face, straight or gay, and by placing the focus on the progression of those lives, the experiences in a very real setting, I think Chris introduces us to a new sort of historical methodology.

The second point that I take away from the book is the particularity of New Zealand. We've just heard about the importance of cross-cultural and comparative studies and it is very interesting to look at the case of New Zealand which is not well known in gay studies world wide which is often focused, erroneously, on a North American example or less often on

the Western European example. Here we see similarities and differences: we see similarities in what Chris nicely calls 'erotic cityscapes' for example. We see similarities in the geographies of homosexual contact, but we also see some differences that are rather interesting in an international context. A different chronology: the late arrival in New Zealand of Freudian ideas, the persistence of ideas of sexual inversion, the time in which organisations such as the Dorian Society were established in 1962. And perhaps most importantly, I think, the relatively great degree of tolerance here for sexual dissidents than in Australia.

Chris, in talking about the interwar years of the 20th century, says there was very little, if anything, in the way of systematic police surveillance in this period. He points out that while these early years of the 20th century were hardly years of unfettered freedom, nor were they a time of complete repression and indifference to men's suffering. Later on he points to the relative absence of McCarthyism in New Zealand. Well, I think this particular New Zealand example is actually very suggestive for enquiries about other countries, why New Zealand had a somewhat different itinerary, and how we can compare the trajectories of sexuality and responses to sexual dissidence in various countries.

The third point that I would like to mention briefly is the title and what it implies: *Mates and Lovers*. In recent years historians and other commentators of sexuality have moved perhaps a bit away from trying to find evidence of sexual commerce, as it were, and they've moved increasingly into a study of the realm of the emotions. Some of you may know books by George Hegarty, by Martha Vicinis, by Jonathan Ned Katz on comradeship and friendship, on intimacy. In some ways what Chris does, and it is an important contribution, is displace the centre of gravity from the nether regions of the anatomy to the head and the heart, to look at intimacies, at companionship. In particular examples I think of Samuel Butler and [Charles] Pauli, his companion, or a very lovely example in the book: Robert Rowan, a New Zealand soldier who in the midst of wartime found his South African mate and lover, ultimately left his wife and children and settled with him seemingly with a happy ending to the story. Dare we say that part of what Chris is talking about in this book is love which is a word that sometimes doesn't appear very much in studies of sexuality and gender.

I did wonder in Chris' remarkably coherent and persuasive presentation about questions of ethnicity. I would have liked Chris to say a little bit more about the Maori aspects of New Zealand life and also the experiences of some of the migrants to New Zealand who've not come from the Anglo-Celtic world. I would like to know a little bit more about regional variations in New Zealand. Chris very cogently weaves together examples taken from throughout New Zealand but I wonder if there are differences between Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, between city and countryside, between different age groups, religious groups. Finally I would like to know a little bit more about why New Zealand's story, at least in a certain number of crucial points such as the question of tolerance, does seem to be somewhat different from the narrative of other countries.

So I'll close with those points, and as a kind of ending to that just give you one more quotation from one of the characters in his book. Percy Ottywell, talking about his own sodomy: 'It was not natural to me it was induced by what I read'. Well I hope everyone reads this book!

Chris Brickell

In response to Sandy's question about the survival of Robert Gant's albums I know three albums that have survived. Those two albums that Sandy has shown the photographs from were passed down through the family of one of the men who appears in them, seemingly reasonably judiciously, to people who, it was understood, wouldn't destroy them. They actually turned up with the grandchildren of that man, and in order to get their images reproduced I encouraged their transfer to the Alexander Turnbull Library. Photographs from a third album are held by the Wairarapa Archive in Masterton. I presume there must have been other Gant albums, too, held by other people. The photographic and visual research was a very substantial part of the time that I spent on the book; probably about a third of the total research time.

In terms of some of the other questions, I am really glad that Robert mentions the ethnicity question. I have always seen that as a limitation of the book, but oddly it's something that no-one else has picked up on. It became really clear to me when I was doing the research that particularly for the pre-urbanisation period, prior to the end of World War II, it was

very, very difficult to get hold of material. In terms of the regulation of male homosexuality, there was virtually no policing of Maori in that period at all. I found a couple of case files involving Maori, but intriguingly they dealt with bestiality, not with sex between men.

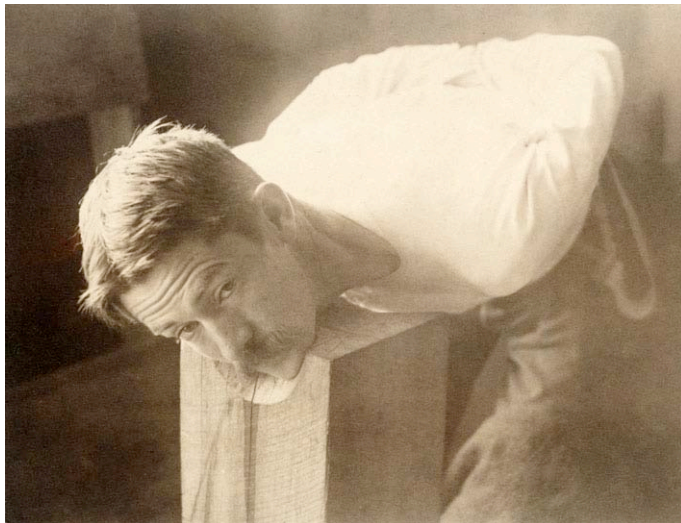
I should explain very briefly why it is that that came to my attention. The crime of buggery actually covered sex between men as well as sex between men and animals, so when I was opening up these folders I had no idea what I'd find in there. James Smith, convicted for buggery, might be involved with John Brown or with a goat or a dog or a donkey. It is interesting that the rural policing for Maori men was of bestiality, not of sex with other men, and figuring out why that might be is quite intriguing. But certainly court records focus very, very much on European men. To tap into one of Andrew's points, they also focus on urban men rather than rural men. That intensified my sense of excitement when I actually did find historical records that dealt with rural men. Interestingly, too, in terms of the international literature there's very, very little that deals with rural men in terms of the history of homosexuality. Jens Rydstrom, at Lund University, has explored questions of rural male sexuality in the Scandinavian context. However, in terms of the British, US and Australian literature there is relatively little on this. It's also intriguing to contemplate the degree of difference there may have been between rural and urban men, rural and urban mores around sex between men. I don't know too much about that, partly because the amount of material I could find was relatively limited. To go back to another of Sandy's points, I'm also very proud to say that the Brickell family lived for several generations in the Wairarapa, and some probably went to Gant for their medicine!

I think I should perhaps also mention the relationship between the gay material in the book and the almost entirely absent lesbian material. This has been a concern of some people. However, the reason for this is partly because I've seen the book as coming very much out of a study of masculinity; that is what it is primarily. Also, a lesbian history is currently being worked on by Alison Laurie at VUW, and I don't want to steal her thunder too much! When I was talking to men about the post war years, I got a sense of the very separate gay male and lesbian cultures in New Zealand, certainly before the coming together of gay and lesbian

movement politics during the 1970s. Even the early law reform movement of the 1960s was fairly sex-segregated. Women weren't allowed entry into those early gay clubs, and there was a sense that that separation of worlds between men and women actually continued right through into a fairly recent point in time.

A transcript of continuing audience discussion is on the *New Zealand Sociology* website.

Images from the Robert Gant albums, c.1888-1891, as referred to by Sandy Callister, reproduced with permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library: PA1-q-963-03, PA1-q-963-04. The 'languid maiden', in Callister's words, from c.1910, is reproduced with permission of the Wairarapa Archive: 90-017/680.





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