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Sexual Pleasures and Dangers: A History of Sexual Cultures in Wellington, 1900–1920

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Abstract

This thesis examines sexual cultures between 1900 and 1920. It is based on court records of trials for 'sex crime' in the Wellington Supreme Court district, which covered the lower north island. Although sex crimes were an extreme manifestation of sexual practice, and court records represent only partial and constructed accounts of it, the sources can provide insight into attitudes toward sexuality in the past. In this thesis, a crime is posited as an 'extraordinary moment', capable of illuminating a variety of cultural beliefs about sexuality. Victims, their families, the accused men, criminal justice authorities and many others expressed views about codes of sexual behaviour in response to sex crimes. Combined, they form a multi-layered and, at times, contested grid of understandings about sexual mores. This thesis is focused on the reconstruction of these codes of sexual behaviour. To do this, a case study method has been employed which traces the construction of sexuality by individuals and within the courts.

The possibilities of sexual pleasure and sexual danger – autonomy and victimisation – framed the meaning attached to sexual encounters by the parties involved, and by others. Such understandings were predominantly shaped by the variables of age and gender. Very young children lacked sufficient sexual knowledge to identify a sexual encounter as either sexually pleasurable or dangerous; they labelled it a physical attack. By adolescence, girls and boys were increasingly sexually aware. For them, and for adults, sexual experiences were characterised by the possibility for sexual pleasure or danger, or a mix of the two. This potential for sexuality to be experienced as pleasure shaped observers' understandings of codes of sexual behaviour. Observers often conflated sexual maturity with consent: childhood was predominantly constructed as a time of sexual innocence and adulthood as times of sexual activity and agency. But codes of sexual behaviour were also mediated by gender. Gendered constructions of character shaped self-representations and observers' understandings of sexual mores. While the double standard of sexual morality set the backdrop for the understanding of sexual mores in the wider Wellington area during the early twentieth century, there were considerable variations in levels of acceptance of it. This thesis examines constructions of sexuality in relation to children, adolescents, and adults of both sexes.

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