

Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880

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This is a relatively short book by Britain's leading historian of sexuality, but it has a big agenda. Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, Lesley Hall discusses the shifts, the continuities and the changes in sexual custom and practice that prevailed between 1880 and the present day. All the key elements are here: marriage and divorce; the increasing separation of sex from reproduction; same-sex relationships; the growth of sexual knowledge; prostitution and its attendant activities; sexually transmitted diseases; legislation and censorship. We are given a deft and scholarly overview of sex, gender and social change during the period by a pioneering writer in this area of research.

The book is engagingly written - it is refreshing to read such a polished text at a time when History often seems besieged by unreadable texts and dense, specialist language. Hall's elegant, witty prose is a delight. It is old-fashioned history writing of the best kind, a narrative account rather than a theoretical treatise and is much the better for it. There are some wonderful vignettes of real people caught up in the vicissitudes of sexual politics in late nineteenth century and twentieth century Britain. Indeed, this is emphatically a book about the ordinary lives of individuals who breathed, lived and experienced the period as much as grand historical themes.

The book is organised chronologically so readers can see events within the social and cultural context of the day. Hereby, Hall has been able to chart the symbiotic, and often dialectic, relationship between sexual progress and other forms of social reform, placing sexuality within a wider context of change: in education, in employment, in politics, in medicine and in the law. Sexual beliefs, Hall argues, were neither monolithic nor consistent: at one and the same time women were believed to be natural homemakers and home-breakers. Thus at the time when motherhood was thought to be a naturally biological state for women, it was commonly believed that once women were educated not only the family but indeed the human race itself would be at risk: educated women would not want to be mothers. As one might expect, the strength in organising the book in this way, decade by decade, is also its weakness. Not only is there a tendency for some stories to remain incomplete (for example the continuities within abortion reform are not altogether

developed) but the political context sometimes appears rather sketchy.

Of course there is much here that will be familiar to the expert reader: the Married Women's Property Acts, the Divorce Acts, the Contagious Diseases Acts, the Oscar Wilde trials and so on. But other less well known pieces of legislation (e.g. the Indecent Advertisement Acts) are also examined and individual cases are used to illustrate current opinion and practice - like Edith Lanchester who in 1895 was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum by her parents when she announced that she wanted to live in a free union with a socialist railway clerk. Only after the intervention of several high profile socialists, including John Burns, was she released to continue her attachment to her lover.

Scandals too are well covered and Hall does not shrink from dealing with West End establishments which offered erotic massages to their customers. The massage parlours which flourished at the end of the nineteenth century may well have been a response to the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. This denied prostitutes the opportunity to work on the streets, and they had little option but to set up trade in alternative locations.

By the twentieth century ideas about eugenics had come to inform the sexuality debate. Lesley Hall shows that both the left and the right wing were sympathetic to eugenic beliefs. Almost 50% of the Eugenic Education Society were women, of whom many were single working in professional occupations. Indeed a number of key suffragists such as Mrs Frances Swiney joined the Eugenic Education Society and eugenic ideas may have been even more widespread among leading suffragists than Hall suggests - for instance it is known that Emmeline Pankhurst was sympathetic to the cause of eugenics and that she campaigned with Mary Dendy to set up institutions for those children deemed to be 'feeble-minded'. Of course, as Hall points out, much of the concern was heightened by the panic surrounding the spread - or the perceived spread - of syphilis, with its legacy of 'miscarriages, stillbirths, deaths in early infancy and the birth of wizened puny babies' (p69).

Lesley Hall has fun challenging some of the long-cherished stereotypes of men and women from the late Victorian period. 'Under the crinoline' she writes, 'the Victorian female was a hot little number' (p16). Not all men were 'pestiferous roués, harassing brutes or chivalrous defenders of womanhood' (p53), for many were as much victims as women. The tragic case of John Hindson who was sentenced to death for helping to procure an abortion for his girlfriend resonates poignantly across the centuries. Reform of this kind, as with so much sexual reform, was a long time in coming. For while in 1936 the much-needed Abortion Law Reform Association was founded, it was not until 1967 that an Abortion Act (which essentially gave statutory force to the Bourne case of thirty years before) allowed a woman some rights over the unborn child in her body. But a great many sexual stereotypes remain. Hall shows how even in the third millennium women can still be categorised by their sexual conduct; how single mothers can still be stigmatised for giving birth to babies without the right sort of ring on their left hand; and how homosexuals can still be regarded as second class sexual citizens, denied equal sexual status with heterosexuals.

What is novel about this book is that all discussions about sexual attitudes and behaviour are conducted within a coherent framework of transgressive sexuality. Indeed, Lesley Hall underlines the point that transgressive sexuality and what was considered 'normal' existed side by side in Victorian London, and that such cohabitation exposes the myth of the Victorian era as primarily characterised by prudery and sexual restraint.

Among the benefits of such a wide-ranging book is the clear identification of what issues needs further elaboration and indeed further research. As Lesley Hall affirms, the book focuses on London, and certainly, there is a dearth of knowledge about sexuality in the provinces - the experiences in the capital might well be interestingly different from those in Birmingham, Newcastle or even Torquay. Religious influences on sexual conduct, such as the influence of Ellice Hopkins, might add an interesting dimension to our understanding of sexuality in this period. Other researchers might investigate how exactly did the

established, and indeed non-established churches, respond to the changes in sexual mores which constitute the focus of this brilliant little book. Others yet could examine the effect that race had on sexual politics and vice versa - one remembers that the 20th century immigration laws were bound up with issues of alleged sexual immorality. Clearly, Lesley Hall can only touch on individual sexual reformers, some of whom, like Stella Browne, deserve a book of their own. Indeed the book's cover, which shows two women in a public house, one a barmaid dressed in the conventional garments of the trade, the other a customer wearing a pinstriped suit, suggests another research avenue to be explored - the history of cross-dressing.

This is one of a few rare books which can be enjoyed by the general reader, used as an undergraduate text, offer fresh insights to social historians and indicate further lines of enquiry for future researchers. It is an entertaining, judicious and insightful discourse by a well-established author who has, over the years, influenced a generation of students and academics. As always, her scholarship is unquestionably good and her skill in sharing her vast knowledge of her subject with so much enthusiasm and style is exceptional. This is history written with transparent warmth and humanity - it will undoubtedly give pleasure to all who are fortunate enough to read it.

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