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THE SEX LIVES OF AUSTRALIANS

FOREWORD

26 MARCH 2012

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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THE HON. MICHAEL KIRBY AC CMG^{*}

This remarkable and highly readable book offers a cornucopia of sexual tales from history. It holds up a mirror to Australian society and describes the sexual lives of its people from the first penal settlement in 1788 to the present times.

The book starts with tales of the sex-deprived convicts, mostly men, arriving in the antipodean world. The advent of the first boatloads of disempowered women is recounted, as is the very vulnerable condition of the indigenous people and the so-called “half casts” that sprang from sexual unions with them. It proceeds through the early colonial age of repression, of harsh laws, of capital crimes and the cult of mateship. Captain Moonlight, the bushranger, strides boldly across the stage with his male lover. He and the Kelly Gang contributed to a panic over sodomites: the moral enemies of Australian society. The opening of the Victorian age sees reflections in the Australian colonies of many of the controversies that beset England and America at the same time: scandals in high places; hypocrisy in public and private conduct; patriarchal attitudes to “ladies”; harsh sexual censorship; backyard abortions; the early controversial ventures into birth control; the plight of “fallen women”; and the ever present quest for social, racial and religious “purity”.

Even masturbation deeply disturbed many of the leaders of Victorian society. Spilling of the seed was regarded as a serious sin and it was a topic for endless debate and solemn instruction, mostly addressed to the young.

By the end of the 19th Century, sado-machoism had put in an appearance, including in the gifted composer, Percy Grainger. So had cases of cross-dressing. Venereal disease was literally on many people’s lips. And with the advent of the First World War, a large cohort of young Australian men ventured overseas to discover, for the first time, the brothels of Cairo and Paris, before they were marched off to Gallipoli and the Somme, to die in the Empire’s Battles. Our soldiers and their cousins from New Zealand proved shockingly sexual for the stern British commanders. Merrily they sang the song “How’re they going to keep him down on the farm, after he’s seen Patee?” Sexual internationalism had well and truly arrived.

The post war era and the Great Depression brought the return of countless controversies in Australia over nudity, erotica, supposed clitoral nymphomania and that old recurring anxiety over masturbation.

But soon, the very existence of the nation was in danger. The Second World War brought the advent of the “factory girls” and many young men freed from the suburbs and farms, facing the possibility of death and determined to savour the joys of life,

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whilst they had it. The clientele for sex in Australia included some of the Yankee soldiers, a number of them black: exposing Australian women to the unaccustomed attractions of racial variation: not often seen in the era of White Australia.

When the Yanks went home, wartime austerity gave way to cautious national prosperity in the 50's and 60's. "Heavy petting", "car sex", boddies and widgies, rock 'n roll and other dastardly threats made their appearance. Lady Chatterley and Billy Graham take their bows in this Act of the drama, although not necessarily together.

And, as if this were not enough, the era of permissiveness gave way to a sexual revolution. The contraceptive pill saw women liberated from pregnancy. Naturally, religious leaders denounced the consequences, declaring them to be an end to civilisation. Their worst fears seemed to be realised, not only by the promiscuity of healthy young heterosexual Australians shamelessly "living in sin". But also by an increasing cohort of gay advocates, after Dennis Altman, who outrageously refused to be ashamed of their "perversion". Increasingly, this "queer" minority even began demanding equal legal rights – including (horrors) the right to marriage equality and civil recognition and acceptance of their intimate long-term relationships.

Although, by the current age, the denunciation of masturbation appears, at last, to have disappeared from the litany of Australia's national anxieties, new sources of stigma and discrimination appeared in the past 20 years, to agitate the national psyche.

Just when sexual freedom was tasted for the first time, including among the previously demonised sexual minorities, a strange new retrovirus appeared, apparently out of Africa, to sweep the world. Cunningly it chose as its major portal of entry, penetrative sexual intercourse. Whereas in Africa and Asia, the major impact of this virus was on heterosexuals, in Australia, as in other Western societies, the newly liberated communities of gay men felt the heaviest burden. With the virus came a groundswell of fresh fear and loathing.

Just to prove that attitudes to sexual activity are cyclical, and partly political, some Australian politicians, taking their lead from America, saw votes to be had in whipping up new hostility. A huge media-driven campaign of fear was raised against paedophiles, often causing confusion in the public perception of homosexuals. Continuous campaigns were waged to tap religion-fuelled fears of relationship recognition for sexual minorities. The success of such campaigns can be measured by their impact in recent elections in Australia, as in the United States of America. Fear, whether on the ground of gender, race or sexuality, is always a potent weapon for demagogues.

The social value of this book is that it helps us to understand the debates and controversies that arise for contemporary Australians by recognising their links to the same forces that had to be faced and overcome in earlier times. By knowing more about our past, in this regard, Australians may become wiser and more accepting of sexual differences at present and in the future. And less willing to jump on the bandwagons so regularly rolled out by politicians and the media when the electoral cycle makes its recurrent appearances. As well, this book reveals a large unwritten story of the burden that repressive laws and attitudes have placed on millions of

human beings. They have been cast into a well of loneliness by an enforced unwanted celibacy, often advocated by religious leaders. Yet now we have reached a time where the joy and fulfilment of a happy sexual life is often possible. And increasing millions will demand it, for it is central to a happy life, good health and personal fulfilment.

In this sense, this book is a story of a journey of one country, through repression and violence to truth and greater freedom. The journey to larger acceptance and peace is by no means over. But as the author shows, it has well and truly begun.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Craig' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Sydney
27 March 2012
