

## LAW &amp; CULTURE

**HOMOPHOBIA: AN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

Shirleene Robinson (ed);  
Federation Press, 2008; 262 pp;  
\$39.95 (paperback)

Despite the fact that gender and sexuality studies have increased in legitimacy since the 1970s in Australia, there is still a paucity of quality lesbian and gay scholarship. This is particularly so when it comes to lesbian and gay history. Thus, this new collection of essays on the history of homophobia is especially welcome.

Edited by Shirleene Robinson (lecturer in Australian history at Bond University), the collection includes 11 essays addressing various periods in Australia's history and various sexuality issues purportedly linked by the concept of homophobia. In her introduction, the editor defines homophobia very broadly. Whilst noting its origins as a psychological concept describing a certain type of fear, Robinson states:

Over the past 30 years ... the word 'homophobia' has been used universally ... to describe prejudices that impact upon individuals as a result of their attraction to members of the same sex ... this text uses the term ... to describe anti-homosexual prejudices. (p 3)

I have some reservations about the concept of homophobia being defined in this way because it fails to take into account its usefulness as a descriptor of bigotry based in fear that goes beyond 'run of the mill' prejudice. Defining homophobia as 'anti-homosexual prejudice' detracts from this useful meaning. The use of a broad definition also means that the essays that follow have little in common and do not really build upon, nor explore, similar themes (except at the most general level). Having said this, however, I also found that taken alone, each of the essays is a fascinating analysis within its own terms, adding to our knowledge of the various discourses that shape prejudice.

With the exception of Alan Berman (law lecturer at the University of Newcastle), each of the contributors is an historian or cultural theorist, most with connections to Queensland academic institutions. The collection begins with an essay co-

authored by Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton ('Mapping Homophobia in Australia'). Largely descriptive, this essay sets the 'modern' scene with respect to homophobia in Australia by recounting the results of an attitudinal survey of 25 000 Australians conducted in 2003–04. Most of the results of this survey were unsurprising — perhaps with the exception that Catholics are the least homophobic of those Australians with a religious affiliation! Flood and Hamilton analyse the results in conventional ways, breaking them down geographically, by gender and by age.

After this contemporary snapshot, the remaining essays in the book look back in time and are presented chronologically, according to the periods of history they examine. Lucy Chesser ('What they were doing with their clothes off I don't know') examines attitudes to lesbianism from the 1860s to the 1890s, carefully analysing the role that misogyny and sexism played in forming these attitudes. In the next chapter, Yorick Smaal and Clive Moore ('Homophobia in fin de siècle colonial Queensland') analyse attitudes toward male homosexuality in Queensland from the 1860s to the early 20th century, noting the role that British imperialism played in the demonisation of non-heterosexual desire. In Chapter 4 ('Filthy, obscene and mad'), Ruth Ford examines lesbianism from the 1940s to the 1960s and, like Chesser, notes the fact that patriarchy and sexism remained the major discourses policing female sexuality. In Chapter 5 ('From "vice" to "homosexuality"'), Graham Willett recounts the increasingly homophobic 1950s when non-mainstream sexualities were linked to communism and subjected to greater societal surveillance. The 1960s and 70s are examined in chapters 6 and 7, with Julie Ustinoff first considering popular media of the 60s ('Hit Him With Your Handbag!'), followed by Emily Wilson's recounting of medical and psychological discourse from 1960 to 1980, pathologising homosexuality ('Someone who is sick and in need of help'). This chapter focuses on male homosexuality, which was the focus of the medical profession, and recounts the discourses of disease and disorder which led to the use of aversion therapy and psychosurgery on gay men.

In Chapter 8 ('The continuing homosexual offensive'), Steven Angelides examines

sex education of children in the 1970s and 80s against the background of the gay liberation movement. He recounts how 'sex education' became a site for profound contestation of radical and conservative discourses surrounding sexuality. This is followed by Shirleene Robinson ('On the frontline'), who looks at the queer press from the 1970s to 2000 and the role it played in fighting homophobia. The final two chapters depart from the rest of the book in that they do not examine attitudes to homosexuality in a particular historical period. In Chapter 10 ('Older gay men's recollections of anti-homosexual prejudice in Australia'), recounts the stories of coming out and prejudice experienced by 22 Australian gay men aged between 60 and 79. Their stories were collected by the chapter's author, Peter Robinson, as part of his doctoral research and span the decades of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. The collection concludes with Alan Berman's re-examination of the Tasmanian decriminalisation of sodomy in the 1990s and its effect on attitudes towards homosexuality in Australia.

The index is comprehensive and useful. An added bonus to the collection is the wealth and diversity of materials referenced by the authors in their various essays. Covering both primary and secondary sources, the notes to each essay provide fruitful resources for further research and analysis.

As with any collection, the quality of scholarship and analysis varies. Particular highlights for me were Chesser's nuanced approach to lesbianism in the 19th century and Angelides, insightful analysis of sex education in the period of 1970s lesbian and gay radicalism. The editor in her introduction makes clear that the book was not intended as a theoretical exploration of the construction of homophobia. Rather, it was intended as an 'accessible collection exploring the circumstances through which homophobia has evolved and has been articulated and contested in an Australian context' (p 5). It is indeed a very useful contribution to this project.

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