

The Perils of Impurity

THE NEW ZEALAND PURITY CRUSADES OF HENRY BLIGH,
1902–1930¹



AMONG THE CYCLES of sexual expression and repression identified by historians such as Lawrence Stone, Jeffrey Weeks and Richard Davenport-Hines, the three decades prior to the First World War stand out as a time of particular anxiety over sexual expression in young males.² One manifestation of this concern was the proliferation of purity movements in Britain and the Empire. While the British movements have received considerable scholarly attention, there has been comparatively little study of the purity movement in New Zealand, and as yet no comprehensive account.³

An important influence on the New Zealand purity and hygiene movements was the Australian White Cross League (AWCL), for which extant documentation is quite rare. Although AWCL lecturer Henry Bligh is not a figure known to history, there has been some acknowledgement of his New Zealand crusades, his milieu and the social and ideological conditions that made them possible. Educational historian Colin McGeorge refers to the AWCL in his insightful discussion of ‘Sex Education in 1912’, concluding that it was impossible to ‘determine the extent’ of the League’s lecturer’s New Zealand operations.⁴ Stevan Eldred-Grigg mentions the AWCL as one of a number of short-lived New Zealand purity organizations.⁵ Chris Brickell focuses on the inconsequential role played by the AWCL in the 1924 Inquiry into Mental Defectives and Sexual Offenders and briefly on Bligh’s visits to New Zealand schools.⁶

In this article I discuss the rise of two sex education factions: social purity and social hygiene. Against this background I examine the activities of the AWCL, an organization that was able to sustain a New Zealand social purity campaign for two decades, unlike the ephemeral indigenous purity groups that lacked resources, clear objectives or drive. I maintain that the AWCL’s success was due to Henry Bligh’s determination, which gained him access not only to open public lectures and church groups, but to captive male audiences in primary and secondary schools, prisons and industrial schools – then an innovative strategy for sex educators. While Bligh taught the progressive concept that males should have a higher regard for women, I highlight the particular male sexual pseudopathologies perpetuated by Bligh

and the AWCL. I also argue that, although a product of the religious social purity movement, Bligh's lecturing style demonstrated characteristics of the developing and scientifically based sexual hygiene movement, and as such was adopted as a model by progressive educators in their unsuccessful attempts to promote sex education in New Zealand schools. While it appears that the failure of the AWCL to persist in the rapidly changing social conditions of the early twentieth century was due to the turmoil resulting from the First World War, I indicate that at least some of the causative factors arose in the nineteenth century.

In describing the early years of the twentieth century, James Belich speaks of 'intense social obsessions with sexual impropriety, prostitution, masturbation, venereal disease and uncontrolled motherhood and childhood'. There were '“moral panics” about low birth rates and racial deterioration'. Inside the nation, it was thought, 'immorality and social welfare encouraged the unfit to procreate, while selfishness and contraception discouraged the fit'.⁷ By 1901, the sex ratio in New Zealand had almost normalized, but the many men who did not marry until they were in their late twenties offset this balance.⁸ The informed middle class supposed that this period between puberty and marriage presented serious 'problems of temptation' for males.⁹ As Bronwyn Dalley explains, women were regarded as 'invariably chaste, innocent, passive, perhaps naïve and easily led astray. They fell victim to designing men at the drop of a hat, sometimes quite literally.'¹⁰ Sexual liaisons outside marriage helped spread the devastating venereal diseases that could potentially infect innocent wives and children.¹¹

The clergy, doctors and women's organizations believed that if men could be induced to show restraint, male sexual aggression could be reduced and therefore venereal infections and pregnancies outside marriage would decline.¹² Medical and religious authorities combined to imagine male genitals as a source of disease and moral decay. Some Victorian physicians declared more than a certain number of involuntary seminal emissions per week harmful, and termed the condition 'spermatorrhoea', a medical construction now seen as *pathologizing* normal male sexual physiology.¹³ Masturbation was thought to cause such sexual disorders, culminating in the 'uncontrollable desires of the rapist'.¹⁴ Although the logic was not made clear, sexual excess also initiated a slippery slope that terminated in criminality; this correlation may have arisen from the observation that most prison inmates were inveterate masturbators.¹⁵ Sexual disorder could become social disorder.¹⁶

Physicians in the early twentieth century continued to promote Victorian attitudes about masturbation's perceived ill effects: the loss of semen (the

retention of which was supposed to maintain masculine characteristics) and the degeneration of the nervous system due to orgasmic shocks, ultimately resulting in insanity and possible death. To discourage boys from falling into the habit, clerics focused on the sin of onanism. The Rev. W. Edward Lush of Auckland instructed parents to warn their son 'that his concealed members are never to be played with, and that the touch of anyone else is to be avoided with horror ... more boys have failed in their school examinations from want of living energy brought down from this vice than can be reckoned. As to religion and spiritual life it is so deadly a sin that it breaks fellowship with God at once.'¹⁷ Joseph Firth, headmaster of Wellington College until 1920, promoted athletic activities to distract boys from sex.¹⁸ Following the advice of English doctors such as Jonathan Hutchinson, Dr Arthur of the AWCL recommended circumcision as the final resort to treat masturbation.¹⁹ Prevention of masturbation and treatment of 'congenital phimosis' (non-retractable foreskin in newborns) were the main reasons circumcision of boys became fashionable in England and other Anglophone countries from the late nineteenth century until the 1920s.²⁰

The superintendents of New Zealand's Industrial Schools fought a continuous battle against masturbation. Thomas Archey, manager of Burnham Industrial School, held 'sex parades' at which he warned: 'The spinal column will dry up. The teeth and hair will fall out. The boy will die.'²¹ Archey's approach was typical of those using fear of physical and mental deterioration in an attempt to suppress masturbation – an approach also used by Dr Arthur of the AWCL.²² Lush warned that '[f]ar more of the lunatics in our asylums went there from giving way to this habit than has ever been openly published'.²³ Superintendents of New Zealand's mental hospitals recorded masturbation as a cause of male insanity from 1878 to 1920, with a peak incidence of 12% in 1900.²⁴ Such an understanding of male sexuality was commonplace in the first three decades of the twentieth century and expressed by influential citizens such as Lieutenant-Colonel Guy Powles and Brigadier Bray (of the Salvation Army).²⁵ Behind their statements lies the perception that working-class males were dissolute and that seminal loss resulted in eventual degeneracy and criminality.²⁶

New Zealand's universal primary schooling in the nineteenth century did not include sex education as part of the curriculum.²⁷ The clergy criticized parents for not instructing their offspring in sexual knowledge, but religious teaching for centuries had imbued believers with feelings of guilt and shame about their own sexuality, making it difficult for parents to appear confident before their own offspring.²⁸ This conspiracy of silence prompted Frank Milner, rector of Waitaki Boys' High School, to observe in 1912 in

referring to the young: 'A doctrine of pusillanimous reticence about their vital physiological processes defeats its own end.'²⁹

During the early stages in the odyssey towards the development of formal sex education, the crusade for 'moral harmony' in New Zealand was, as Belich has noted, 'a knot of many strands. The strands' thickness varied and the knot was constantly rewoven – an historian's nightmare.'³⁰ McGeorge recognized the attitudinal split between the conservative and liberal elements in the sex education debate: 'On the one view knowledge is power and brings foresight and control. On the other view information arouses curiosity and emotions which cannot be comprehended or controlled by young people.'³¹ These debates in New Zealand reflected the struggles that were also occurring in Britain, Western Europe, North America and Australia. The two opposing – yet sometimes intermingling – forces, or broad strands, might be called the moralists/purists and the hygienists. Each camp consisted of a varying band of adherents, identifiable from the 1880s onwards in New Zealand. Although the moralist faction hoped to avoid the corruption of 'primal innocence', both sides shared the goal of 'damage limitation'.³² Both perspectives arose from the educated elite's desire to eliminate (through their contrasting methods) prostitution, extramarital sex, venereal disease and extramarital births.

The earlier strand to enter the public arena, of which the White Cross League (WCL) was the pre-eminent organization, was *social purity*, led by the moralists or social purists. In the late nineteenth century Protestant Christians openly aimed to bring about social change through abstinence outside marriage. The human will was invoked in an effort to raise awareness from the physical to the intellectual, and ultimately to the 'spiritual' level; fear of disease and social or spiritual damnation were used as the stick. Any sexual knowledge imparted to the young was imprecise and minimal, but always within a religious context. The focus was on male sexuality, since it was believed to be the major driving force behind social impurity. Sex education within the social purity milieu occurred in both private and public settings.

The private Victorian sex education session for a boy was taken by an authoritative adult, father, clergyman, physician or principal, who kept the emotional tone low while instructing a youth to avoid masturbation and intercourse. To aid such instruction, a variety of books were available, including Edward Lush's *A Waybook for Youth: A Book for Fathers to Give to Their Sons* (1900) and his *The Parental Duty of Preserving Innocence by Purified Knowledge* (1905). There were also AWCL pamphlets by Dr Arthur, including *Purity and Impurity* (for teenage boys of 15 years), *The Choice*

Between Purity and Impurity (for men), and *The Training of Children in Purity* (for parents).³³

As to the public setting, lectures on sexual knowledge were reported in New Zealand newspapers from the 1880s. A cleric or physician would give an open lecture on sexual continence to a group of males, usually over the age of 16. Such lectures were advertised and well attended, and as relatively exceptional events, the excitement level was high.³⁴ While men-only lectures were common, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) also hosted visiting female lecturers for women-only audiences.³⁵

As authority in sexual matters shifted from religion to medicine, the second strand of sex education, *social hygiene*, emerged early in the twentieth century, led by the growing medical profession in response to the prevalence of venereal disease. Instruction was based on the premise that if young people – and men in particular – were given the facts about venereal disease, they would modify their behaviour and avoid infection. Physicians or nurses provided instruction to single-sex young adult groups. Instruction was more explicit than that provided by the social purity lecturers and could include anatomical diagrams and medical nomenclature. The military were forced to develop this approach as the war progressed. The admonition to remain abstinent failed and was quietly replaced with 'blue light' kits and post-coital hygiene instruction.³⁶ Eugenicists, some of whom were physicians, allied themselves with the social hygienists, because their desire to control human sexuality was driven by the belief that venereal disease led to diseased or weak offspring, resulting in 'racial suicide'. Sex was not just for pleasure but also for the preservation of the race.³⁷ The social hygiene movement does not appear to have been as highly organized in New Zealand as it was among the larger population centres in the United States, where in 1905 surgeon and social hygiene crusader Dr Prince A. Morrow formed the Society for Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis.³⁸ Morrow's *A Plea for Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis* was reprinted as a pamphlet and distributed by the AWCL, which demonstrates that the boundary separating the purists and hygienists could be indistinct.³⁹

The term *sex hygiene* was used in the first half of the twentieth century for sex instruction aimed primarily at avoiding disease. However, in the literature of the period the term is not always clearly distinguishable from *sex education*, a term used throughout the twentieth century as a more generic term for instruction in human sexual reproduction. Gooder has noted the 'dearth of national histories of sex education' worldwide, and unsurprisingly the earliest information is patchy.⁴⁰ In Scotland nurses and medical officers gave 'ad hoc' talks, primarily for girls.⁴¹ In Europe isolated instances of

school sex hygiene classes occurred before the turn of the century, promoted by a few progressive individuals and exclusive of any direction from the education establishment. In Sweden, for example, girls were targeted for sex education in the hope they would be protected from pregnancy and infection. In Poland Iza Moszczenska advocated sex education from an early age and pamphlets for boys emphasized 'moral and ethical issues', respect for females, abstinence, marriage fidelity and the effects of venereal diseases.⁴² By the end of the second decade of the new century, German sex education books, written for children by socialist doctors such as Max Hodann, took a more scientific approach by using precise biological terminology.⁴³ While the progressives made some advances, the conservative reaction was ever present. In Europe this role was filled by the Catholic Church. In the USA, the 'Chicago Experiment' of 1913–1914, in which visiting physicians gave lectures to segregated classes in 21 Chicago high schools, was terminated in response to community hostility.⁴⁴

Gooder has also pointed out the lack of any substantial work on the history of New Zealand sex education.⁴⁵ Although Louisa Allen and McGeorge have investigated sex education in the first decades of the twentieth century, others have focused on the post-World War Two phase.⁴⁶ Historians and sociologists have also concentrated on female sexuality (Brickell being a notable exception) or focused on the controversies over delivery or content.⁴⁷ Beyond the period of this discussion, sex education was appropriated by the educationalists and became integrated into the classroom.

The public face of the social purity strand of sex education first emerged in England, where Ellice Hopkins, aided by the Bishop of Durham, established the White Cross Army in 1883.⁴⁸ She had been active from the mid-1870s, publishing numerous didactic tracts that have been described as 'melodramatic, misinformed and plagued by class limitations'.⁴⁹ In 1891 the Church of England Purity Society amalgamated with the White Cross Army to become the Church of England Purity Society of the White Cross League.⁵⁰ Supported by groups such as the WCTU and the Young Men's (and Women's) Christian Associations (YMCA, YWCA), the White Cross movement spread into Africa, Australasia, India, China, Japan, Jamaica, Trinidad, Canada and the United States.⁵¹ By 1890 the Rev. B.F. Da Costa had introduced the WCL to the USA, where the Anglican and Episcopalian Churches adopted it and the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement promoted the White Cross Pledge.⁵² In Australia, the AWCL operated from Sydney, with Dr Richard Arthur as president.⁵³ He practised medicine in Sydney and became New South Wales Minister of Health in 1927.⁵⁴ The WCTU worked with the AWCL and distributed its material.⁵⁵ Greg Logan and Jim Jose have discussed the

attempts of the AWCL to contribute to the development of sex education in Queensland and South Australia respectively.⁵⁶

The White Cross League's objectives were to promote purity among men and boys, a chivalrous respect for womanhood, the preservation of the young from contamination, and a higher tone of public opinion.⁵⁷ The League defined purity as 'rightfulness in thought, in word, and in deed with regard to the relations between the sexes'; 'rightfulness' referred to exclusively *non-sexual* thoughts, words and deeds.⁵⁸ Purity encompassed both *personal purity*, meaning the prevention of masturbation in young males, and *social purity*, meaning abstention from extramarital intercourse. Since the refined section of the middle class accepted the idea that men were the sexual aggressors and women the passive recipients, those in the AWCL targeted boys and (to a lesser degree) men. New Zealand's WCTU, with its 'optimistic view of masculinity', believed 'that a different form of civilization, one where men were chaste, could emerge' – a view that closely paralleled WCL objectives.⁵⁹

During the 1880s, reports of the White Cross Army in England and similar societies in Montreal, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane stimulated Anglicans and Wesleyans to form comparable organizations in New Zealand.⁶⁰ In 1885 a Social Purity Society was formed in Auckland to advocate amendments to laws relating to illegitimate children and prostitutes, and Marshall Booth and Mrs Stewart (representing the Women's Mission) spoke at the inaugural meeting of a short-lived White Cross Society in Dunedin.⁶¹ The Anglican Church formed a Social Purity Society in Christchurch in 1889 to promote purity objectives congruent with those of the AWCL.⁶² In 1890, when the president Canon Stanford left, the Society was reconstituted as the St Saviour's Guild in order to carry out preventative and rescue work.⁶³ Opposition to the establishment of purity groups came from the *Tablet*, which complained that 'Society has lost its regard for the old restraining influences of Christianity, which kept men and women innocent', and Professor Brown, who advised teachers that 'if you honour the ideal humanity in every man and woman then there will be little need of social purity societies'.⁶⁴ The non-viability of these early purity organizations was probably due to the small middle-class urban population base and ineffective leadership.

Twenty years after the first local attempts to organize purity societies, AWCL purity lecturer Richard Henry Wren Bligh arrived in New Zealand. Bligh was born in 1871 in Bega, New South Wales.⁶⁵ In 1895, when he was 14, his parents divorced, and he eventually moved to Sydney.⁶⁶ While there he had 'often been stuck up by night nymphs' and at the age of 25 he learned of the dangers of impurity from an unnamed 'pure missionary who revealed the magnificence of sex to him'.⁶⁷ This encounter set Bligh firmly on his career

path and he subsequently became the AWCL's lecturer.⁶⁸ Working from his Sydney base, Bligh lectured on purity throughout Australasia.⁶⁹ Bligh visited New Zealand in 1902, 1906, 1907–1908, 1911–1912, 1914–1915, 1917–1918, 1920, 1923–1924, 1926 and 1930.⁷⁰ Driven by the AWCL purity objectives and influenced by the medical authority of Dr Arthur, Bligh's self-declared vocation was to educate boys about the sexual dangers of adolescence, namely masturbation and premarital intercourse.⁷¹ Like Dr Arthur and other eugenicists, Bligh supposed that the future of the race depended 'on the purity of the lives of both men and women'.⁷² Bligh hoped that his revelations of the horrific effects of both individual and social impurity would stir citizens into action and form strong branches of the AWCL in New Zealand.⁷³

In 1902, as Secretary of the AWCL, Bligh made his first New Zealand tour, accompanying the eminent Irish 'evangelist and medico' the Rev. Dr H. Grattan Guinness.⁷⁴ In Auckland Bligh spoke at a meeting for the purpose of establishing a branch of the AWCL.⁷⁵ Following Dr Guinness's recommendation, a meeting was held to form a Christchurch White Cross League. Even though a council was elected, the League foundered.⁷⁶ Bligh returned to Australia, but arrived back in Dunedin in January 1906 to undertake his most successful purity crusade in terms of number of lectures, media reportage and support from public figures.⁷⁷ Bligh appears to have inundated the countryside with his purity message, as newspapers record him visiting Dunedin, Woodside, Oamaru, Timaru, Tekapo, Ashburton, Burnham, Rangiora, Greymouth, Hokitika, Nelson, Wellington, Whanganui, Hawera, New Plymouth, Carterton, Feilding, Masterton, Eketahuna, Gisborne and Auckland before returning to Sydney early in 1907. He gave public sex education lectures to separate male (over 14 years) and female (over 15 years) audiences, as well as to boys (and sometimes girls) in primary and secondary schools, boys in industrial schools and men in prisons and military camps. On the afternoon of 1 July 1906, before 3000 men and boys in the Wellington Town Hall, Lord Plunket reinforced Bligh's message by speaking of the purity of the British people.⁷⁸ Lady Plunket presided over the complementary lecture Bligh later gave to 3500 women.⁷⁹ The fact that about 10% of Wellington's population attended Bligh's lectures was due not solely to the prurient curiosity of the 'bad boys and baldheads', as the *New Zealand Truth* called them, but also to effective advance advertising and endorsements by politicians, educationists and the clergy, not forgetting the influence of patrons Lord and Lady Plunket.⁸⁰ The high turnout of women reflected both their rising political status and their expected role as guardians of sexual purity.⁸¹

Bligh's support came from the medical, educational and progressive religious elements of the middle class, who believed that the increasingly

discontented and organized working class were behind society's moral failings. As in Australia, Bligh found a ready ally in Protestant organizations, such as the WCTU, the YMCA and the Council of Evangelical Churches of Wellington.⁸² In Christchurch support came from both Bishops Julius and Grimes.⁸³ Many state primary schools were equally welcoming.⁸⁴ Frederick Gibbs (headmaster of Nelson Boys' School), the headmaster of Richmond School and Oscar Flamank (successively headmaster of various Dunedin schools) all openly supported Bligh.⁸⁵ Strong support from the secondary sector came from Thomas Pearce (rector of Southland Boys' High School), Frank Milner, Joseph Firth, Thomas Cresswell (principal of Wellington College from 1924) and Martyn Renner (boarding-master at Wellington College).⁸⁶ Firth wrote to the *Evening Post*: 'Those who have doubts about the wisdom of speaking directly to the young upon this subject, will, after hearing Mr Bligh, be convinced that, nothing but good – and great good, too – can result from his manner of dealing with it.'⁸⁷ To further endorse Bligh's lectures, Firth appeared on the Wellington Town Hall stage alongside the Governor General and later donated five guineas to Bligh.⁸⁸ In December 1908 a deputation met with the Minister for Public Health and Education, George Fowlds, to suggest that Bligh be appointed to the Education Department to lecture in the schools of the Dominion. Tactfully, the minister made a non-committal reply.⁸⁹ Emphasizing the belief that sexual impurity arose from within the working class, the WCTU commented positively on the Wellington and Canterbury branches of the British Medical Association's endorsement of Bligh: 'It will never do for the morals of the indecent part of the community to swamp those of the better class.'⁹⁰

Bligh lectured to single-sex groups, usually boys or young men, not always to acclaim. John A. Lee, in recalling his time at Burnham Industrial School during 1906, described Bligh as 'repellent and sly'.⁹¹ Bligh used material from Sperry's *Confidential Talks to Young Men* and, utilizing an accepted Victorian approach, began his talks using a 'simple botanical lecturette' to explain how flowers reproduced.⁹² To avoid the mammal-human connection, Bligh next explained how bird mating demonstrated 'the "chivalry" which the male bird showed to the female bird'.⁹³ In applying this metaphor to humans, he advised that men and boys should treat women as though they were sisters and protect what he called the 'weaker sex', and thus become less likely to indulge in sexual activities.⁹⁴ He explained the bodily changes as a boy grew into manhood and instructed his listeners how to act when they had reached puberty, illustrating his talk with 'physiological diagrams'.⁹⁵ While Bligh rarely seems to have resorted to religious admonitions, he did warn his listeners that the genitals were 'sacred and not to be tampered with'.⁹⁶

Upon reaching puberty, Bligh said, ‘the door was also opened for self-abuse, a practice all too common among colonial boys and youth’.⁹⁷ He considered that masturbation was the result of lack of knowledge and it was ‘monstrous’ that boys should be left in a condition of ignorance as only good could come from a ‘clear understanding of the organs of the human machine, and the use and abuse of those organs’.⁹⁸ McGeorge describes Bligh as ‘scaring the living daylights out of the pubescent boys of Australia and New Zealand with lectures on the perils of self-abuse and the need for purity of mind’.⁹⁹ This would not necessarily have been news to all boys, since the ideology of masturbation-induced illness was established in New Zealand well before Bligh arrived.¹⁰⁰ Whereas Dr Arthur warned of the physical and mental harm of self-abuse, Bligh refuted the idea of horrifying boys with ‘warnings of lunacy, imbecility, etc.’.¹⁰¹ If a boy had erred, it was better to be sympathetic and guide him into better habits: he should be instructed to ‘take cold baths, read pure literature, and pray [to] God for assistance to do right’.¹⁰² This reflects accepted AWCL advice that ‘there is no greater aid to chastity than plenty of cold water, if possible, take a cold bath every morning; failing this, sponge locally, or better still – all over with cold water, and dry yourself energetically with a rough towel, rubbing the limbs towards the extremities. Keep all parts of the body perfectly clean, and to prevent irritation, remove all accumulation under the foreskin.’¹⁰³

At the end of his lectures, Bligh recommended AWCL pamphlets and *The Task of Social Hygiene* (1912) by Henry Havelock Ellis.¹⁰⁴ Bligh also distributed Knight’s Vow cards that displayed on one side the words ‘New Zealand White Cross Knighthood’ with a shield above the words ‘My strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure’.¹⁰⁵ On the reverse was printed ‘The Knight’s Vow’, which was to be signed and dated, and ‘God Knights His Servants “Neath His banner manfully Firm at thy post remain”’.¹⁰⁶ No New Zealand cards have surfaced, but a Western Australian card shows the Member’s Pledge, in which the member agrees ‘to treat all girls and women with respect, and to endeavour to protect them from wrong, to endeavour to put down all indecent language and jests, to maintain the law of purity as equally binding upon men and women, to endeavour to spread these principles among my companions and to try and help my younger brothers, and to use every possible means to fulfil the commandment “Keep thyself pure”’.¹⁰⁷ To emphasize the pledge, Bligh told the story of a young man who went to the doctor for a sexual problem: ‘After an examination, the doctor remarked “You had better go and sin with some woman.” To this the religious youth replied, “Yes, doctor, have you got a sister available[?]”’.¹⁰⁸

The press reported the contents of Bligh's lectures to women, but not his lectures to girls. In both cases he based his text on Ellice Hopkins' religiously inspired *The Power of Womanhood or Mothers and Sons*, a book banned from some libraries for discussing infantile masturbation.¹⁰⁹ In his talk to women, entitled 'The Power of Womanhood', Bligh instructed mothers to teach boys to protect girls, 'help boys to control passion' rather than encourage it and to 'rouse the chivalry in boys'. Mothers were to teach their daughters to 'treat boys as though they were certain of their manliness' so that the male 'protective instinct would become a reality'.¹¹⁰ Put simply, the divine role of girls was to draw out the natural protective instincts of males and avoid awakening sexual desire. This approach parallels German sex education literature of the early twentieth century, where the mother was idealized as 'heroic' and 'divine'.¹¹¹ Truby King's assertion that '[t]he destiny of the race [is] in the hands of its mothers' complements this view.¹¹²

In 1906 Bligh visited both Weraroa and Burnham Industrial Schools and established firm relationships with managers Burlinson and Archey.¹¹³ Bligh's direction to the lads in these institutions was to retract their foreskins regularly and clean out the 'irritating matter' that led to fiddling.¹¹⁴ Both Dr Arthur and Bligh appear to have erroneously assumed that all boys would be able to do this, but both the assumption and advice were problematic.¹¹⁵ In the case of some boys forcible retraction may have caused the foreskin to become trapped behind the glans (paraphimosis). Later that year it was reported that a Burnham boy had in fact been circumcised to treat paraphimosis after he had followed Bligh's hygiene regime.¹¹⁶ To protect his reputation Bligh wrote to the Commissioner heading the Burnham Inquiry 'I wish to say that the only advice I gave the boys there, I give at every secondary school addressed by me in Australasia.'¹¹⁷ He also wrote to Burlinson: 'It has gone out to the people through the press that on account of the example of Mr Bligh, Lecturer White Cross League [a boy] suffered from great pain ... My work is too precious to leave unguarded from misunderstanding.'¹¹⁸

Bligh also advised boys that if a boy's foreskin could not be retracted, making hygiene impossible or if cleaning failed to prevent masturbation, then circumcision was a possible remedy.¹¹⁹ This is consistent with Dr Arthur's warning: 'Should a young child display any tendency to objectionable habits the wisest plan is to consult a doctor, as this vice in the young is sometimes brought about by the existence of local irritation. In some cases in boys the operation of circumcision is needed to set matters right.'¹²⁰ Bligh even went so far as to write to the Secretary of Education, Edward Gibbes, urging that medical officers be given carte blanche to circumcise boys under State control: 'Many lads fall into the habit of self abuse, mainly through the fact

that in their case it is impossible to remove the foreskin so irritation is caused through lack of cleansing, and young lives are spoilt.¹²¹ Gibbes replied that ‘whenever a Medical Officer of an Industrial School recommends the operation ... permission is always granted by this department’.¹²²

By the second decade of the twentieth century, social hygienists in Anglophone countries were attempting to persuade educational authorities to introduce formal sex education into schools. In Australia in 1916 a delegation from the Society for the Promotion of Social Hygiene asked the Victorian Minister for Education to make sex education part of the curriculum. This was rebuffed.¹²³ In the United States, Max J. Exner, Maurice A. Bigelow and Thomas W. Galloway led the move towards a science-based approach (rather than a moralistic one) for adolescent sex instruction, hoping that a dry approach would be less suggestive.¹²⁴ Those promoting the introduction of sex education into New Zealand schools appropriated Bligh’s model. After Bligh’s 1907–1908 tour, the Wanganui School Committee recommended that the Minister of Education appoint Bligh to give sex education lectures in schools throughout the Dominion.¹²⁵ Oscar Flamank, president of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), successfully promoted Bligh’s method of sex education for primary schools at the 1912 Annual Meeting.¹²⁶ However, when the NZEI proposal was discussed at the 1912 Conference of the New Zealand Church of England Men’s Society (NZCEMS), the Rev. Lush warned: ‘It was of no use to teach morality on any but a religious basis. If it had not been for religion I would have gone to the devil long ago.’ Auckland’s Bishop Crossley agreed.¹²⁷

The topic of sex education arose during the hearing of the 1912 Commission on Education, chaired by journalist and social reformer Mark Cohen. Thomas Pearce said ‘Mr Blyth [sic], who has visited us from time to time, treated the subject in the most tactful manner indeed’.¹²⁸ Frederick Gibbs suggested: ‘Lectures on sexual physiology, such as those given by Mr Bligh, should be given by men and women specially trained for the purpose, who should visit each school once in two or three years ... I say that after having heard Mr Bligh lecture in my school on three occasions. In fact, I think it is more desirable that it should be dealt with in large classes.’¹²⁹ The Stratford Branch of the WCTU recommended the appointment of Bligh as teacher of sexual physiology in the schools.¹³⁰ The Cohen Commission concluded: ‘The general opinion appears to be that something of the kind should be undertaken, but there is much diversity of view as to when and by whom, this instruction should be given.’¹³¹

Even though Bligh was well received by some women’s groups, many educators, medical authorities, Protestant clerics and some politicians, he

also had his critics and detractors. Bligh was refused permission to address the boys of Winton School in Southland, two schools in Dunedin and one in Christchurch.¹³² The High Schools' Board and the Presbyterian Theological Hall in Dunedin, and the Holy Cross Seminary in Mosgiel, refused Bligh access.¹³³ After Bligh's 1906 Wellington visit, Alfred Gourley was arrested and pleaded guilty to charges of indecently assaulting three boys. Part of Gourley's ploy was to pass himself off as Bligh's assistant.¹³⁴ The *New Zealand Truth* exploited the incident to highlight the negative influence of Bligh's lectures.¹³⁵ The *Truth*, being highly critical of wowsers, launched a series of personal attacks on 'Pure-boy Bligh', calling him 'a purity quack', 'a Methody and unmusical', 'an unpleasant personality' and 'lamentably ignorant', with a voice 'as charming as the metallic rasp of a crosscut saw on an unsuspecting nail': 'His nasty nostrum is as bad as the disease, inasmuch as the youth and the aged, the pure and the impure, the healthy and the sick, are dosed the same "Sins of Impurity" physic.'¹³⁶ Bligh was condemned for making an income from an unwholesome subject and because sex education was a subject better left to parents or ignored. *Truth* continued, suggesting that boys appreciated the time away from lessons rather than the lecture itself, they knew intuitively that masturbation was wrong and Bligh's approach was too immodest and sensationalist – 'putrid piffle and suggestive smut'.¹³⁷

At the 1911 NZCEMS Conference some had suggested that Bligh was putting ideas into boys' heads prematurely and that this was more harmful than 'all the evil literature in circulation'.¹³⁸ One speaker revealed that in a Christchurch school 'there had been a marked increase in lewdness amongst scholars, after the visit of the lecturer, and as a result some of the older lads had requested that the headmaster prevent him from revisiting'.¹³⁹ The visit to a North Island secondary school 'had done more harm than good, although the master seemed ignorant of the dreadful state of affairs and spoke approvingly of the lecturer's addresses'.¹⁴⁰ Responding to such public criticisms, Bligh wrote: 'I am afraid the critical spirit here in evidence judges without hearing; but, if the criticism is that of honorable men, filled with a desire to promote all that is pure, the evidence they have collected, I will receive with sadness.' *Truth* commented: 'Ow 'umble'.¹⁴¹ At the 1912 NZCEMS Conference, Bishop Crossley spoke against the appointment of a lecturer in sex education for state schools: 'I am afraid that lecturers (as I have come across them) would foster unhealthy curiosity, rather than allay it.'¹⁴²

During Bligh's fourth New Zealand tour in 1912, in a widely reported incident at Wellington College, six boys fainted during a lecture 'illustrated with physiological diagrams'.¹⁴³ The cause of the fainting was probably high temperatures rather than shocking diagrams, but the damage was done.¹⁴⁴

After the lecture, in an action typical of adolescent male disdain, many boys politely tore up their 'Knight's Vow' cards.¹⁴⁵ The following month, in Petone, Bligh 'was subjected to a good deal of interruption, some horse-play being also in evidence ... The meeting eventually closed in some disorder.'¹⁴⁶ A week later Bligh endured the ridicule of Masterton youths, which resulted in two letters to the editor, one pointing out that Bligh was 'entitled to at least British fair play and common courtesy'.¹⁴⁷

At the Cohen Commission three secondary principals had spoken against the Bligh sex education model. William Morrell, rector of Otago Boys' High School, was 'strongly opposed to ... sexual physiology in the curriculum of the schools ... I am confirmed in my attitude by the independent judgement of other experienced headmasters, including one who had had such a lecture in his school. He said he would never have such a lecture again.'¹⁴⁸ The devout Charles Bevan-Brown, headmaster of Christchurch Boys' High School, thought 'it would be dangerous to appoint itinerant lecturers to lecture on sexual physiology in schools. Talks on such subjects should be in a religious atmosphere.'¹⁴⁹ James Tibbs, headmaster of Auckland Grammar School, reiterated this sentiment: 'There is a grave danger of arousing prurient curiosity and unhealthy discussion among boys ...'.¹⁵⁰ In 1915, after 'a long and at times heated discussion', the Auckland City Schools Committee refused permission to Bligh to address schools under its jurisdiction.¹⁵¹

In Australia Bligh had often met with Education Department snubs. In 1913 the South Australian Education Department refused him access to schools and in the early 1920s 'became lukewarm about his visits'.¹⁵² Both Bligh and Dr Arthur visited Brisbane during the years 1917–1920, but were refused permission to enter schools.¹⁵³ Bligh was also banned from state schools in Victoria after parents complained, and the Australian Catholic Federation opposed Bligh's visits to South Australia.¹⁵⁴ In the United States and Europe the Catholic Church consistently opposed sex education, seeing in it 'the danger of equating the human with the animal world', while ignoring the 'spiritual' component.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps because of the smaller Catholic population and his targeting of Protestant and state schools, major Catholic opposition to Bligh in New Zealand did not eventuate.¹⁵⁶

It is tempting to admire Bligh's single-mindedness and determination in the face of personal attacks and rebuffs. The organization of his purity campaigns alone is impressive: he employed assistants to go ahead to each town and wait on ministers, who did all that lay 'in their power to make the meetings a success'.¹⁵⁷ How Bligh funded his travels is unclear; he may have received a retainer from the AWCL. It appears that sympathetic Anglicans hosted him during his New Zealand tours.¹⁵⁸ The free government railway

pass certainly helped his 1906 tour.¹⁵⁹ Bligh would have been pleased that by 1924 a New Zealand White Cross League had been established, consisting of 14 districts and 25 branches, with a national council in Wellington.¹⁶⁰ However, the only evidence so far discovered where the League apparently operated autonomously in Bligh's absence is the representations to politicians in 1924 and 1926.¹⁶¹

After the First World War, the fear that returning infected soldiers would spread venereal disease provided a new impetus for the introduction of sex education. In February 1919 the Acting Prime Minister, Sir James Allen, outlined a scheme for the future training of Senior Cadets in good citizenship.¹⁶² At the Secondary Schools Assistants' 1921 Conference Martyn Renner advocated the adoption of sex hygiene as a secondary and technical school subject.¹⁶³ Thomas Cresswell suggested to the Venereal Diseases Committee of the Board of Health of 1922 'that sex hygiene be made a compulsory subject in all training-colleges, the instructors being specially qualified doctors' and that 'teachers be advised to take every opportunity during lessons in hygiene, physiology, botany, &c., to give children a sane and normal outlook on sex matters'.¹⁶⁴ The Minister of Education, Christopher Parr, sympathized with AWCL objectives and even organized Truby King and Dr Ada Patterson (Schools' Medical Inspection Branch) to speak to pupils in high schools on 'the subject from a biological and medical point of view'.¹⁶⁵

From May to November 1924 the Committee of Inquiry into Mental Defectives and Sexual Offenders met to consider the problem of the 'feeble-minded' outbreeding the 'more intellectual classes'.¹⁶⁶ This inquiry probably added momentum to the sex education debate, because the AWCL held a special conference on 17 May in Wellington with the president, Dr James Elliott, in the chair. Delegates were present from throughout the Dominion and visitors included Sir John Luke (ex-mayor of Wellington), Peter Fraser (MP for Wellington Central) and Brigadier Bray.¹⁶⁷ After commending the work of Bligh, the conference resolved to request that the Minister of Education establish the teaching of sex education to both primary and secondary pupils, using instructors approved by the AWCL.¹⁶⁸ On 29 May Dr Elliott, Thomas Cresswell and Martyn Renner, representing the AWCL, met with Christopher Parr, Maui Pomare (Minister of Health) and Dr Ada Paterson.¹⁶⁹ The meeting proposed that the two Ministers present should confer with the Minister of Defence to secure the interest and co-operation of the Defence Department in giving instruction to Senior Cadets.¹⁷⁰ The outcome of the meeting was a string of proposals (including the placement of Edith Howe's book *The Cradle Ship* in all school libraries), four of which were identical to those that

Bligh later submitted to the Royal Commission on Mental Defectives and Sexual Offenders.¹⁷¹

Apart from Dr Wilkins' articles in the early 1920s, no further mention was made of sex education in the *Education Gazette* until 1945, when teachers were told: 'It is the privilege and responsibility of the parents to give children an introduction to sex education ... There is no place in the primary school for group or class instruction on sex education.'¹⁷² No doubt Bligh would have been disappointed at such a lack of commitment on the part of educational leaders and politicians.

An assessment of his activities in terms of the purity and hygienist sex education strands reveals that Bligh exhibits characteristics of both. Emerging from the Anglican mainstream, Bligh was certainly active in promoting sexual repression. To help stop medical quacks selling 'cures' for male sexual problems, Bligh was part of the movement (led by Chief New Zealand Health Officer and anti-quackery campaigner Dr James Malcolm Mason) that encouraged the government to prevent quacks using the mail system to ply their wares. In response, the government passed the Post Office Amendment Act 1906, prohibiting 'the registering, forwarding or delivering of postal correspondence for treatments for sexual ailments'.¹⁷³ Bligh also sided with those urging the Minister for Justice to prevent the publication of advertisements by quacks professing to cure sexual disorders. This resulted in the Quackery Prevention Act 1908 and prompted Bligh to claim that sexual quacks 'had been abolished'.¹⁷⁴

Bligh promoted change in that he provided the impetus to advance sex education from individual instruction within a religious context to a more secular approach, moving beyond simply teaching abstinence. Unlike other purity lecturers or evangelists he emphasized personal purity without depending entirely on the use of fear and tried to impart an understanding of human sexual physiology that, albeit flawed, was clearly in advance of the majority of his social purity contemporaries. For the progressive educationalists, Bligh's lectures provided a possible model for future sex education in schools, although such a practice was not to fully eventuate for another 40 years. His lectures to groups of older primary schoolboys set a precedent not adopted until late in the twentieth century.¹⁷⁵

Bligh's public lectures were open to all of appropriate age, but his practice of speaking to captive audiences in schools, industrial schools, prisons (New Plymouth Gaol, 1906) and military camps (Balmoral Camp, 1906; Tahuna Park Military Camp, 1914; Trentham Camp, 1915) contrasts with the open lectures of the evangelicals and appears to be exceptional at the time, especially as he was medically untrained.¹⁷⁶ The teaching of captive audiences exemplifies

Foucault's model of control by the powerful: the targeted males were expected to internalize Bligh's 'sexual science' and adjust their behaviour to conform to his imposed sexual constructions.¹⁷⁷ Bligh aligned himself with the scientific approach in his use of 'physiological diagrams', possibly due to Dr Arthur's influence. While the army hygienists did little better, Bligh was disappointed that his pre-war purity lectures had failed to reduce venereal infection rates and he acknowledged that the War had 'completely upset his calculations as to the visible fruits of a period of sex education'.¹⁷⁸

After having his access to schools blocked by the South Australian Education Department late in 1929, Bligh returned to New Zealand and in August 1930 married 22-year-old Leila Pemberton of Orari.¹⁷⁹ He died less than three months later in Christchurch Hospital on 11 November 1930, aged 58.¹⁸⁰ Mrs Bligh later joined the Cooneyite sect and died on 21 May 2013 in Israel.¹⁸¹ Announcing Bligh's death, Hobart's *Mercury* newspaper declared: 'There is hardly a school in the southern lands which he had not visited in his work on behalf of purity and high moral standards.'¹⁸²

From 1906 until 1920 the number of newspapers reporting AWCL activities had steadily declined, indicating a loss of public interest in social purity.¹⁸³ The purity movement had been a reaction to an undercurrent that had its origins decades earlier. Contraceptives, produced by the rubber and chemical industries, became more readily available from the 1880s onwards. These, along with gonorrhoea and abortion, had the potential to further reduce birth rates. On top of this, in the nineteenth century, post-Enlightenment liberal Christianity and scientific naturalism had challenged the authority of the church. Darwinian evolution and psychology indicated humans were animals rather than spiritual beings.¹⁸⁴ The germ theory of disease had shown that microbes rather than divine retribution caused venereal diseases.¹⁸⁵ As the working class, which mainly consisted of labouring families who had escaped the class system in Britain, became more urbanized and developed into a political movement, any upper-class attempt to restrain sexuality may have been perceived as unpalatable.¹⁸⁶

What is clear is that any attempt by New Zealand's 'upright and upright' minority to impose their pre-war morality on the working class majority could not survive the 'carnage and outrages' of the First World War.¹⁸⁷ Jeffrey Moran labels the accelerated post-war moral decline in the USA the 'revolt of youth'. Women were no longer seen as sexually pure and could no longer be used as the standard by which to judge male behaviour.¹⁸⁸ Even in more restrained New Zealand, popular innovations such as jazz, the cinema, up-beat dance and the gramophone were seen as sexually liberating and both Protestant and Catholic churches lost members.¹⁸⁹

The inability of the purity movement to maintain public interest also reflects social hygiene's move to manage diseases more scientifically. By 1928, in New Zealand psychiatry, masturbation was 'no longer identified as causal of mental illness'.¹⁹⁰ In the United States sex educators abandoned social purity as ineffective and army doctors' lectures focused on venereal disease and prostitutes, using 'blunt instruments', such as photographs showing 'the most grotesque consequences of syphilis and gonorrhoea', rather than the 'gentle prodding' of the purity lecturers.¹⁹¹ After the war, it was estimated that there had been 'approximately 4000 cases of syphilis and 12,000 cases of gonorrhoea' among New Zealand troops.¹⁹² Fearful of an epidemic of venereal disease on the soldiers' return, the government established clinics in the four main cities, resulting in the treatment of 381 cases of syphilis and 428 of gonorrhoea in 1920.¹⁹³ This, and the development of the use of Salvarsan to treat syphilis, inevitably led the medical profession to regard the social purity approach of the AWCL as unscientific and outdated.

Although the AWCL failed to establish a permanent social purity organization in New Zealand, it did provide a nucleus for some to initiate what was to be a protracted journey towards the establishment of sex education in New Zealand schools. At the time of Bligh's death in 1930, politicians and educators could not agree on the necessity of such courses, let alone who would teach sex education and to which age group. Nothing had changed since the 1912 Cohen Report. For the time being, as happened in Queensland and South Australia, it was convenient for educational authorities to ignore sex education and perpetuate the 'conspiracy of silence'.¹⁹⁴

While the New Zealand purity movement still awaits a major scholarly analysis, investigating Henry Bligh's purity crusades reveals much about New Zealand's attitudes towards sexuality prior to the First World War. In the two decades before Bligh's arrival, small Protestant groups had attempted unsuccessfully to initiate a local movement to address concerns over illegitimacy, prostitution, venereal disease and racial deterioration. It took Australian Henry Bligh's energy to raise public awareness of the issues through his lecture tours. Unlike local efforts, his lectures contained very specific guidelines for behaviour modification, and were widely reported by local newspapers. The warm reception Bligh received from Protestant clergy, educators, physicians and some politicians indicates he was meeting a need. However, the early attempts by physicians and educators to establish formal sex education based on the Bligh model failed due to lack of political support. While the First World War provides a convenient explanation for the demise of social purity, New Zealand interest was already declining before the outbreak of war. After the war the sexual purity movement faded as the

medical profession took over the management of sexually transmitted diseases and the young perceived religious approaches to controlling sexuality as old-fashioned. Belich provided an image of the crusade for moral harmony as a 'knot of many strands'; an analysis of Henry Bligh's activities does not unravel the knot, but helps us identify one significant thread in this complex story.¹⁹⁵

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NOTES

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125 WC, 10 March 1909.

126 Report of the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the New Zealand Educational Institute, Wellington, 1912, pp.11–16.

127 PBH, 12 April 1912.

128 AJHR, 1912, E-12, p.320.

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132 AG, 21 April 1908.

133 OW, 19 February 1908; *Star*, 26 February 1902; NZT, 2 May 1908.

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135 NZT, 6 October 1906.

136 NZT, 29 April, 1911; NZT, 2 May 1908; NZT, 29 April 1911.

137 NZT, 4 July 1908; NZT, 2 January 1909; NZT, 29 February 1908; NZT, 20 April 1907; NZT, 2 May 1908; *New Zealand Free Lance*, 9 January 1909; *Observer*, 3 November 1906.

138 NZT, 29 April 1911.

139 Probably Christchurch Boys' High School. See AJHR, 1912, E-12, pp.240–1.

140 NZT, 29 April 1911. Probably Wellington College.

141 AS, 9 May 1911; NZT, 13 May 1911.

142 NZT, 20 April 1912.

143 AG, 30 March 1912.

144 NZT, 6 April 1912.

145 NZT, 6 April 1912.

146 NA, 17 April 1912.

147 WDT, 23 April 1912; WDT, 24 April 1912.

148 AJHR, 1912, E-12, pp.240–1.

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- 153 Logan, p.21.
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