

Reviews (Books)

Mates & Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand. By Chris Brickell. Random House, Auckland, 2008. 431pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN 978-1-86962-134-6.

RARE INDEED ARE PUBLISHED STUDIES that offer histories of New Zealand's 'erotic and affectionate past'. Even rarer are works asserting that homoeroticism can lie 'at the heart of masculinity itself'. In *Mates & Lovers* Chris Brickell boldly goes where few historians of New Zealand masculinity have gone before. He takes to the streets, the parks, the boarding houses and hotels, the beaches, theatres, ferries (and ferry buildings) of New Zealand's past to document the long history of gay New Zealand.

The use of the word 'gay' in Brickell's title need not raise concerns about an anachronistic use of language. As he explains in the Introduction, 'the modern gay man was made not born' and this book 'traces the means of his making'. The tracing begins, predictably enough, with poor Mr Yate. Samuel Butler also makes an early appearance. But to Brickell's credit he uses the well-known stories of these two men to explore the twin themes of the book, the erotic and the affectionate. He also resists applying labels to Yate, Butler and the other men who appear in his pages. Throughout *Mates & Lovers* Brickell is sensitive to the language of the era.

When the language changes, thanks to the ideas of sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and the arrival of words like 'homo-sexual', Brickell's focus on the idea of modern gay men being made not born comes to the fore. Brickell is very well read in the international historiography of (homo)sexuality. He knows that the standard story tells us that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sexual preferences were 'medicalized', police surveillance of 'deviants' increased, and a culture of repression gripped society until the halcyon days of the 1970s and the emergence of gay liberation. But his book does not conform to that story. Extensive archival research leads him to write a study more in tune with George Chauncey's *Gay New York* (1995). Doctors like Truby King emerge as benign figures, intent on helping troubled young men. The lack of police surveillance of homosexual activity is noted, and Michael King's misrepresentation of the Norris Davey/Frank Sargeson arrest is cleared up. Rather than repression, Brickell traces the continuities in erotic cityscapes — the long use of theatres, parks, hotels, wharves and streets — and the changes in homosexual cultures. By the 1920s the romantic friendship model was increasingly problematic, but the growth of urban areas allowed for a 'queer world' to emerge, based on networks of friends. In the 1950s and 1960s these networks became more public, thanks to the popularity of drag clubs and the founding of Wellington's Dorian Society. Public celebration and calls for liberation dominated the 1970s, which some older men, who had enjoyed the discretion of earlier times, lamented. This is not a simple, simplistic, linear story. There were bath houses long before the 1870s, let alone the 1970s. Christchurch had a male bordello in the 1860s. Rather, it is a story that allows Brickell to achieve his aim, and show the reader how the modern gay man in New Zealand was made.

Brickell's archival research was not limited to textual sources. *Mates & Lovers* is notable for the number of illustrations (almost all photographic) gracing its pages. Many are afforded full-page and even double-page spreads, and the publishers have not shied away from the cost of colour. They have even included pictures in the notes, select bibliography and photo credits. And herein lies a problem. What is a photograph doing in the photo credits? It is not illuminating or extending the argument of the book, and nor are many of the images found throughout the main text. In contrast to the text, the captions for the illustrations are often trite. A double-page spread of John Grimek

— Mr America 1940 and 1941, Mr Universe 1948, Mr USA 1949 — is referred to as ‘[t]he man’ toning his leg muscles. It is a fair assumption that ‘the man’ who created the scrapbook with Grimek’s news clippings saw him as more than just a man in trunks. When the images work, as Robert Gant’s superb photographs in the first two chapters do, they enrich Brickell’s arguments. But when they are just more pictures of pretty young boys — the book is notable for the lack of images of older men — the impact wanes and opportunities are lost.

There is another lost opportunity at the heart of *Mates & Lovers*. Perhaps because this is the first book-length study of the subject, Brickell concentrates on laying out the narrative detail and richness of gay New Zealand. There is an argument about making the modern gay man, and attention to continuities and changes in homosexual cultures, but there is little engagement with wider understandings of New Zealand’s past. Brickell is to be congratulated on uncovering so much about urban life, and making city streets a central site in the story. But this does not lead him to comment on the rural focus of so much New Zealand history. Similarly his stories about sex and romance elicit few remarks about the absence of considerations of affection in local historical works. Readers with a wide knowledge of the history and historiography of New Zealand can easily slot Brickell’s book into the framework, and understand the richness and contribution of this important book, but it seems a pity that readers have to work at identifying the wider significance of the study. *Mates & Lovers* is more than ‘identity history’, but I fear non-sympathetic readers will only view it as such.

Mates & Lovers deserves its place on our bookshelves. Expertly researched, well written, full of marvellous stories, and with more than enough illustrations, this is a book of which its author should be proud. And if more New Zealand historians recognize that homoeroticism can lie ‘at the heart of masculinity itself’ then his job will be done.

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Diggers Hatters & Whores: The Story of the New Zealand Gold Rushes. By Stevan Eldred-Grigg. Random House, Auckland, 2008. 543pp. NZ price: \$55.00. ISBN 978-1-869419-25-7.

IT IS 122 YEARS SINCE VINCENT PYKE’S ACCOUNT of the Otago gold rushes appeared, 47 years since Philip May’s of the West Coast rushes, and 46 since John Salmon’s history of gold mining in New Zealand, the last standing as the only comprehensive account. A great deal of research has taken place since Salmon’s work appeared and so for several reasons the time was ripe, especially with the sesquicentennial of Gabriel Read’s Tuapeka discovery approaching, for a fresh history of the events of the 1860s. The publication of *Diggers Hatters & Whores* thus promised to fill something of a void in the historical literature.

Stevan Eldred-Grigg’s book has two parts: Part 1 offers a chronological account of the main discoveries, while Part 2 explores in more systematic fashion a number of themes. A final chapter deals briefly with a range of issues including ‘winnings’ and ‘losses’. The book concludes with the rather startling claim that ‘The gold rushes were the single biggest event in the history of colonial New Zealand.’ It is well written (the odd crudity aside), conveys a good sense of the excitement which the discoveries of gold generated, is beautifully illustrated and altogether attractively presented.

Somewhat in common, though, with much of the writing about nineteenth-century New World gold rushes the emphasis is on the onward rush of discoveries and diggers. Much less successfully does the author deal with the weary retreat which often followed.