

Queensland's emerging homosexual subculture and public space, 1890–1914

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ABSTRACT

The use of public space has been acknowledged as important part of sexuality studies since Laud Humphries's classic 1970 study of beats in America. Increasingly, research by Australian historians of homosexuality has recognised the function that space has played, and continues to play, in the formation of sexual identities. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only the rich could afford their own privacy. For most young men, access to private space was a luxury. Single men lived either with their family or in cheap, shared accommodation.

Drawing on evidence from the Queensland criminal justice system, this paper examines the behavioural codes used by men to attract like-minded others in areas of public space, arguing that the beginnings of an embryonic homosexual subculture began to form in Brisbane by the early 1900s. Focussing on places of employment, hotels, boarding houses and beats, the paper also argues that rural spaces—traditionally considered peripheral—informed the development of urban sexual subcultures. More specifically, the argument suggests that there was a dynamic relationship between rural, regional and urban sexualities in *fin de siècle* Queensland given the demographics of the colony/state and the mobility of the male population.

INTRODUCTION

Major studies of homosexuality in Australia have tended to focus on urban homosexual identities after World War I, or the Gay Liberation Movement in its various forms from the late 1960s until the 1980s.¹ Men in rural and regional areas are rarely considered in these analyses of urban subcultures. This paper calls for a revision of these historical assumptions and omissions regarding Australian male sexual identity. Turn-of-the-century Queensland—largely a man's world; characterized by hard physical work, a strong drinking culture and limited access to women—is a good case study. It allows historians to access intersections between the dominant urban subculture and parallel rural and regional developments. This paper offers a corrective to an often neglected period in Australia's history of homosexual identity construction. The argument demonstrates that the germination of Queensland's homosexual subculture began in the late nineteenth century, assisted in part, by the fluidity between urban and rural spheres.

The work presented here draws on a total of 116 definitive charges² of homosexuality between 1890 and 1914, and examines the depositions that remain for those charges. It also uses corresponding newspaper reports, prison admission books

and Judges' notebooks. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that while depositional evidence may provide invaluable data on homosexuality, the nature of the research process also poses various methodological and theoretical concerns. It is difficult to interpret and extrapolate evidence from archival sources: when people are speaking in court they are likely to fabricate information and to overstate or to underplay their roles.³ It is important, therefore, to highlight the speculative nature of the argument presented here. While all histories are provisional to some degree, some—such as homosexual histories which work from limited sources—are more speculative than others. Just as the actors in this paper must decode perceived signs that each offers the other in the pursuit of sex, so must the historian speculate on the meanings of these signs and the associated practices. There is a self-reflexive twist underpinning this paper as we consider, conceptually and methodologically, the different layers of speculation in the research. Concerning the terminology used in this paper, I have chosen to use terms such as 'like-minded others' and 'homosexually inclined men' rather than the term 'gay'. Not only are these phrases more appropriate historically, but they more accurately reflect the fluidity of sexual desire, and perhaps



identity, of those who engaged in male-to-male sex within public spaces.

It is crucial when trying to map the emergence of a homosexual subculture in Queensland, to place homosexual codes within the broader context of the production of urban space. The dominant use of public space in Queensland at the turn of the century was both male and heterosexual. It was based on the gendered spatial division of labour, and stratified according to class and ethnicity. Physical, emotional and material exchanges within the spaces of homes and workplaces, as well as in public areas set aside for urban infrastructure and leisure, presumed, privileged and reproduced a heteronormative and patriarchal order.⁴ For most young men access to private space was a luxury and single men lived either with their family or in cheap, shared accommodation. Living conditions gave little privacy for sexually active men and privacy was especially luxurious for homosexually inclined men. Single, wage-earning, working-class men pursued their relaxation in public places such as pubs, boarding houses and within city streets, rather than in the private sphere of the home.⁵ The court records used for this study include disproportionately large numbers of men with limited education and lower social status; indicating that the subculture was anchored in the lower classes and that the upper classes possessed sufficient private space to indulge away from the public eye.

While public space is closely associated with the production and consumption of commodities and with white heterosexually identified men, it is always subject to both dominant and subversive uses. Reading space correctly depends on the lens being used to view the terrain.⁶ Public spaces are socially constructed, contested and contingent—they illuminate a variety of social forces seeking to define and regulate the production of meaning.⁷ According to William Leap, these contingent and contested meanings emerge

when forms of human activity impose meanings on a given location, and transform neutral terrain into landscape, that is, 'a particular way of seeing' relevant to that particular locale.⁸

Men disposed to male-to-male sexual contact reapply meaning to spaces which have more dominant and traditional meaning. This reapplication of meaning occurs when men who engage in certain 'rules of play' subliminally code their behaviour, posture and dress in order to display their desire and make homosexual contact.⁹ This public display of behaviour enacted in public areas such as parks, toilets and beaches, is neither masculine nor feminine but markedly and specifically homosexual.¹⁰

AN URBAN HOMOSEXUAL SUBCULTURE

Garry Wotherspoon has speculated that an amorphous homosexual subculture may have emerged in Sydney from about the 1830s, and other scholars such as Clive Moore and Bruce Baskerville have suggested that small, fragmented homosexual subcultures were also emerging in Australia's other

major cities during the nineteenth century.¹¹ From the last decade of the nineteenth century, clear patterns of sexual activity based on the subversive use of public space were evident to the astute observer in Brisbane.¹² Beats—a uniquely Australian phrase designating any place where men might meet to arrange sexual activity—were centred on public transport systems, parks, streets, public toilets and baths. Within these spaces sex and social contact between like-minded men was readily available to those attuned to 'particular ways of seeing'. Brisbane's Botanical Gardens, along with the centrally located Wickham and Albert Parks, were favoured meeting places for those 'in the know'. Charges levelled against an eighteen-year-old man living on Brisbane's north side suggest that toilets at Nudgee and Eagle Junction railway stations were being used for sexual practices in 1911.¹³ Another case from Brisbane in 1892, suggests that men were using a public toilet behind a hardware store in Queen Street as a Beat—linking commercial space, semi-public space, company employees and customers.¹⁴ Others still began to rely upon the visibility of difference to meet other homosexual men, marking out their sexual difference through a codification of dress, posture or deportment in public places.

Boarding houses and private hotels were another place that men might have met for social and sexual contact. Let us take an incident from 1907, when forty-two-year-old James Marshall Stuart, described by the *Truth* as a piano-playing, "western man of the coffee room class", made unreciprocated sexual advances towards twenty-six-year-old itinerant worker Joseph Cavanagh in a Brisbane boarding house.¹⁵ This case allows us to clearly read the signs and symbols used by homosexual men to attract like-minded others. Arriving at the inner city Woodlands boarding house on a Saturday morning in March, Stuart repeatedly struck up conversations with young Cavanagh during the day. That same night at about eight thirty pm, Cavanagh went to Stuart's room after being told something by his mate also staying at the boarding house. The two entered into a conversation and Stuart asked to be woken the next morning at seven am. Then Stuart confessed to Cavanagh that:

[t]here is a dreadful rumour going about me and the Mrs of the house told me I would have to leave through it...there were two men at Newstead boarding house and I was keeping them there and they said I was using them. It is all lies the only thing I ever done when I was out west, there was no women, I got a boy to rub me off.¹⁶

Stuart admitted that regardless of the rumours, "I always have a boy undress me".¹⁷

During their discussion, Stuart asked Cavanagh to undo his collar stud, which the younger man obligingly did before he returned to his room to sleep. Soon after he

awoke to find someone [James Stuart] had hold of me by the penis...he was moving up and down...He had an erection at the time.¹⁸

Upon being woken, Cavanagh exclaimed, "what the hell are you doing...you call yourself a man", Stuart replying "What's up! What's up!".¹⁹ Cavanagh proceeded to beat Stuart until the proprietor of the house, Edna Boyce, came to the door and said "[t]hat will do I have sent for the police".²⁰ The choreographed



nature of the case's verbal cues suggests that Stuart had given Cavanagh a very clear indication of his intention. Stuart established a timeframe by announcing that he would have to leave tomorrow as the result of a 'dreadful rumour', hinting at both his sexual orientation and the time constraint of any potential interlude. He then announced to a virtual stranger that he was an accused homosexual with a penchant for younger men, before finally admitting that he is always undressed by young boys. It is at this point that Stuart asked Cavanagh to remove his collar stud. While the intentions of younger man are harder to deduce, Cavanagh's violent reaction suggests that Stuart mistook Cavanagh's availability (although without exact details it is impossible to know). In the early 1900s, some coffee houses in Brisbane had risqué reputations and were meeting places for homosexual trysts.²¹ By reading the codes in this case, we can be quite certain that James Stuart was a 'coffee house queen', soliciting young men in Brisbane's boarding houses and part of a small, but discernable gay subculture in Brisbane. The jury in Stuart's Supreme Court trial did not find the evidence to convict on this occasion, but perhaps his rather unpleasant beating by Cavanagh ensured that he refined his 'way of seeing' in order to secure more fulfilling future interludes.

RURAL AND REGIONAL SPACES

In 1901, twenty-one per cent of Queensland's adult males lived in Brisbane. Forty-three per cent were domiciled in other smaller urban areas strung along the coast, and thirty-five per cent lived in rural areas.²² In the same period, Queensland's economy centred around primary industries such as agriculture, pastoralism and mining, which required migratory male itinerant workers on a perennial circuit. Regional towns outside Brisbane were economically integral to Queensland's development and facilitated different social and spatial changes. Rockhampton was the second major seaport in the 1890s. Townsville was the principal financial city in the northern district of the colony/state, and the gold-mining city of Charters Towers was for many years, Queensland's second biggest urban centre. Men significantly outnumbered women at this time: 132.2 to 100 in 1890 and 125.3 to 100 in 1900.²³ The imbalance decreased in the twentieth century, but remained quite marked during the early decades. Unlike other colonies, such as Victoria, which was urbanising and industrialising behind a protective tariff, Queensland's focus on rural industries prioritized the male sphere.²⁴ A significant number of men involved in criminal cases, many in their sexual prime without access to women, engaged in situational casual male sex. The depositions are littered with examples of itinerant workers engaging in homosexual activity. George Isap for example, a thirty-four year old South Sea Islander sodomised another Islander station-hand at a North Queensland Station in early January 1900, while Robert Marshall, a thirty-two year old farm labourer seduced the son of his employer, on a Monday in April 1907.²⁵

While historians have readily acknowledged the place of situational homosexuality in harsh climatic conditions of the Australian bush, little emphasis has been given to relationships that might have formed beyond these casual and sexually expedient encounters. Some rural men, like their urban counterparts, chose to spend their sexual and social company

exclusively with other men, reading the signs of availability of like-minded others in public spaces. As Bruce Baskerville has argued, frontier environments despite all their dissimilarities with urban subcultures are also "constructed around a central idea of men having sexual and emotional relationships with other men in a colonial society officially hostile to such relationships".²⁶ An excellent example occurred at Talgai West Station in 1910 where Joseph Talty, a seventeen year old horse boy and Edward Jordan, the station's cook were involved in an ongoing sexual relationship. According to witnesses

They slept in the same room and partially naked in the same bed. They were generally together and mostly in Jordan's room when they were not working—when they were in the room the door was generally bolted.²⁷

These two men clearly chose to share each other's social and sexual company over several months going as far as to exchange gifts.²⁸

Hotels in small towns, much like their urban counterparts, also played a smaller but integral part in fostering homosexual identity in Queensland. The example of Patrick Keating is a case in point. Keating, a forty-seven year old schoolmaster at Mount Dornville Provisional School, had been staying at the Dornville Hotel in Millmerran near Pittsworth for ten months when on a Sunday night in July, he was seen acting suspiciously in the hallway of the hotel.²⁹ Another occupant, Frank Roberts, along with William Connolly the Licensee of the hotel, were standing in the yard at the rear of the building when they saw the defendant walk along the verandah from the direction of his bedroom towards a room occupied by a heavy set shearer named John Conway. Conway who was about thirty-five or forty years of age stayed at the hotel on occasion when he was away from his mother's farm.³⁰ It is interesting to note that his mother's property was only about six and a half kilometres from the hotel—a relatively short distance in the early twentieth century—perhaps suggesting ulterior motives for staying. In their testimony, Roberts and Connolly, the men standing in the rear yard, told the court how Keating briefly entered Conways's room before leaving to return to his own lodgings. A few minutes later, he reappeared and returned to Conway's room. After hearing Conway calling out "are you there"?, apparently to no one in particular, Roberts and Connolly went up to the room to discover Keating sneaking away from Conway's bed.

Upon being caught, Connolly exclaimed,

he was trying to ride me[,] look at his penis
he greased it. And look at my backside he
greased that.³¹

Why had Conway decided to stay the night when he only lived a few kilometres away, especially considering he was sober and there were rumours going around amongst the men staying at the hotel that "the accused [Keating] would ride [them] if he got the chance"? What would offset the cost of staying at the Hotel when Conway could easily have returned to his mother's farm for free lodging? Was he too tired to return home, or does the evidence suggest that Conway was using the hotel for sex? When questioned by the other men staying at the hotel, Conway admitted it was he who had asked Keating to return to his room for a tube of lanoline, with the apparent excuse: "I wanted to see



how far you would go”.³² Despite Conway’s description of Keating as “the most degraded creature I ever met”, it appears that he was probably a consenting party, who had read the signs that sexual activity was available, and quickly changed his story upon being caught. This case is not an isolated occurrence, and when taken in conjunction with evidence of Beat sex at Townsville’s Strand and the Bundaberg’s Botanic Gardens, a clear parallel between urban and regional spaces emerges.

CONCLUSION

Given that travel was a necessity for many workers at the turn of the century, homosexual activity in rural contexts and urban public spaces was inextricably connected. The features of larger population areas, obvious in Brisbane and larger regional areas, were also visible in smaller urban settlements. John Lee has argued that the great depression of the 1930s affected the ability of young gay men to socialise in South Australia, stymieing existing social interaction and curtailing the development of homosexual meeting places.³³ However, I would argue that similar circumstances in the 1890s might be read differently; that the itinerant nature of male working life, might just as easily encouraged interaction between different networks of men, subsequently transmitting different experiences and ideas. In this context, men and youths in rural environments contributed to the development of gay subculture in Queensland, although, admittedly, it was only the capital that had the spatial and social complexity to support a substantial subculture. This said, geographic, economic and employment patterns impacted upon the movements of men throughout the colony/state, altering the development of any centralised subculture. Some men who visited Brisbane must have taken their ‘big city experiences’ with them back to the bush and others, their homosexual experiences in the bush to the city. James Stuart the Brisbane ‘coffee house queen’, mentioned earlier was actually a wool wholesaler who hailed from the western Queensland districts. The depositions reveal a consistency in place and time where particular men adopted particular ways of seeing in order to locate other homosexually-inclined men for sexual release and social stimulation.

¹ See for example, Garry Wotherspoon, *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Subculture*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1994; Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000; Dino Hodge, *Did you meet any Malagas: A Homosexual History of Australia’s Tropical Capital*, Night Cliff, NT: Little Gem Publications, 1993; Robert Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer: Remaking the Australian Homosexual*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002.

² For the purpose of this paper, a definitive charge is one that has been positively ascertained as relating to male-to-male sexual behaviour (as opposed to charges of bestiality). The author acknowledges that the taxonomy of criminal charges clouds the exact figure. The total number of offences is most likely higher than can be ascertained here. It must also be acknowledged at this point, that for every sexual story told within the criminal justice system, many remain untold. The vast majority of homosexual incidences never recorded. The

information that remains is more accurately a reflection of the policing of particular offences rather than actual incidence.

³ Paula J. Byrne, *Criminal Law and Colonial Subject: New South Wales, 1810-1810*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p. 9.

⁴ Lawrence Knopp, ‘Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis’, in David Bell and Gill Valentine, (eds), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 154.

⁵ David Bell, ‘Perverse Dynamics, Sexual Citizenship and the Transformation of Intimacy’, in *Mapping Desire*, p. 306; Steven Maynard, ‘Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subcultures, Police Surveillance, and the dialectics of Discovery, Toronto, 1890-1930’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, 2 (1994): 216-217; George Chauncey, ‘Privacy could only be had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets’, in Joel Saunders (ed.), *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, New York: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 225.

⁶ Knopp, ‘Sexuality and Urban Space’, pp. 154, 155.

⁷ Knopp, ‘Sexuality and Urban Space’, pp. 154, 155.

⁸ William Leap, ‘Introduction’, in William Leap, (ed.), *Public Sex/Gay Space*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 7.

⁹ Graham Carbery, ‘Some Melbourne Beats: A Map of a Subculture from the 1930s to the 1950s’, in Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, (eds), *Gay Perspectives: Essays in Australian Gay Culture*, Sydney: Department of Economic History, University of Sydney, 1992, pp. 132, 142-143; Clive Moore, ‘From Beats to Cyber Sex: Australian Gay Male appropriation of Public Space’, in Lynette Russell, (ed.), *Boundary Writing: An Exploration of Race, Culture, and Gender Binaries in Contemporary Australia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006, p. 27; Ira Tattelman, ‘Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse: Communicating in Sexually Charged Spaces’, in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, pp. 71, 82-83; Richard Tewksbury, ‘Cruising for Sex in Public Places: The Structure and Language of Men’s Hidden, Erotic Worlds’, *Deviant Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 17 (1995): 4-9.

¹⁰ Chauncey, ‘Privacy could only be had in Public’, p. 238.

¹¹ Clive Moore, ‘The Frontier Makes Strange Bedfellows: Masculinity, Mateship and Homosexuality in Colonial Queensland’, in Garry Wotherspoon, (ed.), *Gay and Lesbian Perspectives III: Essays in Australian Culture*, Sydney: Department of Economic History with The Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, 1996, pp. 17-44; Garry Wotherspoon, ‘A Sodom in the South Pacific: Male Homosexuality in Sydney 1788-1809’, in Graeme Aplin, (ed.), *A Difficult Infant: Sydney Before Macquarie*, Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1988, pp. 95, 97; Robert French, *Camping by a Billabong: Gay and Lesbian Stories from Australian History*, Sydney: Blackwattle Press, 1993, p. 9; Clive Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows: The Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press in association with the API Network, 2001, p. 31.

¹² Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows*, p. 70.

¹³ R. v Ernest Fontain, Briefs, Depositions and Associated Papers in Criminal Cases Heard, 1 August 1911 to 31 August 1911, QSA, SCT/CC224; R. v Herbert Edward Garnham, Briefs, Depositions and Associated Papers in Criminal Cases Heard, 1 March 1910 to 31 March 1910, QSA, CCT/N59.



¹⁴ R. v James Anderson and Job Allen, Briefs, Depositions and Associated Papers in Criminal Cases Heard, 1 April 1892 to 30 April 1892, QSA, SCT/CC99.

¹⁵ R. v James Marshall Stuart, Briefs, Depositions and Associated Papers in Criminal Cases Heard, 1 May 1907 to 30 May 1907, QSA, Brisbane, SCT/CC184; *Truth* (Brisbane), 31 March 1907; *Brisbane Courier*, 29 March 1907.

¹⁶ R. v Stuart, QSA, SCT/CC184.

¹⁷ R. v Stuart, QSA, SCT/CC184.

¹⁸ R. v Stuart, QSA, SCT/CC184.

¹⁹ R. v Stuart, QSA, SCT/CC184.

²⁰ R. v Stuart, QSA, SCT/CC184.

²¹ Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows*, p. 88.

²² Katie Spearritt, *The Poverty of Protection: Women and Marriage in Colonial Queensland, 1870-1900*, BA Honours Thesis, University of Queensland, 1988, p. 31.

²³ Table 6: 'Sex Ratio, States and Territories, 31 December 1796 Onwards', *Australian Historical Population Statistics*, <www.abs.gov.au>.

²⁴ Adam Carr, 'Policing the "Abominable Crime"', in David L. Phillips and Graham Willett, (eds), *Australia's Homosexual Histories: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives 5*, Sydney, Melbourne: The Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research and the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 2000, p. 36.

²⁵ R. v George Isap, Criminal Files, 1 January 1900 to 31 December 1900, QSA, A/18329; R. v Robert Marshall, Depositions, 1 January 1907 to 31 December 1907, QSA, A/4972; Her Majesty's Gaol, Entry No. 15/2302, Register of Male Prisoners Admitted: Admission Book, August 1901 to May 1903, QSA, PRI 1/14A.

²⁶ Bruce Baskerville, "'Agreed to Without Debate": Silencing Sodomy in Colonial Western Australia, 1870-1905', in Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, (eds), *Gay and Lesbian Perspective IV: Studies in Australian Culture*, Sydney: Department of Economic History with The Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research, University of Sydney, 1998, p. 104.

²⁷ Baskerville, "'Agreed to Without Debate'", p. 104.

²⁸ Baskerville, "'Agreed to Without Debate'", p. 104.

²⁹ R. v Patrick Keating, Briefs, Depositions and Associated Papers in Criminal Cases Heard, 1 April 1907 to 30 September 1907, QSA, CCT4/N54.

³⁰ R. v Patrick Keating, QSA, CCT4/N54.

³¹ R. v Patrick Keating, QSA, CCT4/N54.

³² R. v Patrick Keating, QSA, CCT4/N54.

³³ John Lee, 'Male Homosexual Identity and Subculture in Adelaide before World War II' in *Gay Perspectives*, pp. 104-105.

