



Review of Chris Brickell, *Mates and Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand* (Auckland: Godwit for Random House New Zealand, 2008), 431 pp.

Philip Culbertson

How does the erotic past relate to the ways we understand and experience our lives today? This is an eternal question within research and writing on the history of sexuality... (p. 373)

Though this pressing question is asked quite late in *Mates and Lovers*, it seems to me that the most interesting vantage point from which Chris Brickell's book can be read is from position of "nuanced historical construction"—that how we understand masculinity today is necessarily a product of the way it was both understood and practiced in the past. Of course, Brickell's book can be read from other points of view as well: as straight historiography, as a collective memoir of men in New Zealand who have had sex with other men, as a pictorial essay because of the nearly-300 photos in the book, as a "memory-tweaker" for gay men in New Zealand who are old enough to have been "out" since the 1960s, or as a history lesson for younger gay men who have never thought about why they have the opportunities and protections that they do. For all these reasons the book is worth savoring, but as an academic, I found Brickell's constructionist approach (p. 382) to be particularly fascinating and extremely informative.

Questions are asked at the beginning of the book as well, which also set the tone for Brickell's subsequent explorations:

When in our history has mateship become erotic; what have been the complex relationships between eros and affection; when has sexual desire suggested a particular identity; and when has it not? When, where and how have these distinctions been understood, underlined or undermined? (p. 8)

All of these questions, argues Brickell, reveal the "ambiguity" of New Zealand masculinity. That topic was addressed thirty years ago by prominent New Zealand historian Jock Phillips, in an article in *The Listener*, but it has taken this encyclopedic work of Brickell's to plumb those depths further. Careful and intensive investigation doesn't always, of course, lead to clear answers, and part of the fun of this book is the author's creativity in "exploring the spaces in between what is known and what is not" (p. 8). Brickell's book is as much about what isn't said as what is, and about how what is seen is interpreted.

The book is ordered more-or-less chronologically, spanning the decades from the arrival in Aotearoa of Anglican missionary William Yate in 1828, to Auckland's 2001 Hero Parade and Maori Television's successful show *Takataapui*. Brickell admits that his "available documentary sources overrepresent Pakeha lives, but

other experiences are reported too, most notably those of Maori” (p. 16); in passing, he also references same-sex activity in the Chinese and Samoan communities. Over this nearly-175 year historical span, the author examines literature, an astonishing collection of photographs, court records, diaries, and newspaper archives, and supplements these with the recorded interviews with senior members of the contemporary gay community.

The “usual suspects” are here: Samuel Butler, Norman Gibson (so touchingly eulogized by his daughter Miriam Saphira in her book *A Man’s Man*), Frank Sargeson, Chris Carter, Witi Ihimaera, Ngahua Te Awakotuku, Noel Virtue, Carmen, Fran Wilde, and Peter Wells. But moreso, this book is about the many men whose names are not so well-known (except on occasion from court records), who acted out their same-sex attraction, whether furtively or flagrantly. New Zealand’s lesbian life gets very little mention, and a companion volume one day would be most welcomed.

From the wopwops of the Wairarapa to the shearing-sheds of Southland to the bogs of Blockhouse Bay, few locations are outside Brickell’s curious gaze. Of necessity, the primary focus of the book is on New Zealand’s cities, particularly Auckland and Wellington. In this manner, the author addresses not only the physical geography of the country, but also the social geography of masculinity. “Antipodean men found sex and sociability in many places, and urban and rural areas provided different sorts of cultural and sexual opportunities for their inhabitants” (p. 14). Men met, and continue to meet, in pubs, movie theatres, public parks, outside the Auckland Ferry Building, and in the street, in order to play out this history of male-male love and sex in New Zealand.

I particularly appreciated Brickell’s exploration of words and terms, learning that “drag” and “camp” entered the Kiwi vocabulary when police arrested two Londoners, Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park, in 1870, and whose relationship was skillfully fictionalized in Peter Well’s novel *Iridescence* (2003). The term queen—derived from the Middle English “quean”, or a disreputable woman—was already in use in the 1930s (pp. 83–84); “cocksucker” was already in use in 1890 (p. 119); by the 1930s men who had sex with men were known as “queers”; that in New Zealand patois of the first half of the twentieth century, “going gay” referred to married males who committed heterosexual adultery (p. 278), and that political advocacy to “come out” began in New Zealand in the very early 1970s.

In his brief discussion of the overlap between gender and sexuality in the Pasifika community, Brickell displays his informed accuracy that the Samoan fa’afafine “is predominantly a gender identity rather than a mode of sexuality, but New Zealand has attended to provide little room for third-gender categories, and until recently most Pakeha assumed fa’afafine to be gay” (p. 368). Rarely do non-Samoan writers capture this significant distinction, though of course, the traditional definition of fa’afafine is increasingly deconstructed today by gay Samoans who perform in drag in Auckland clubs. This may seem a small point within such a vast history, but it illustrates the care with which Brickell conducted his research.

At the end of the book, Brickell answers his own question with which I began this review. He writes:

In many ways, the history of sexuality is like a long, idiosyncratic rope, a hank of twisting strands that pick up and drop off, split and recombine along the way. We modern New Zealanders grasp those homoerotic threads that stretch back in time, just as we spin and grab hold of our own. (p. 384)

This is a masterful work, in so many ways. It includes 1101 endnotes, plus extensive photo credits and an index. In that sense, it holds its own as a major scholarly contribution to the study of sex and gender in Aotearoa New Zealand. But no reader should be cowed by this academic apparatus, for the book is an enjoyable and brilliant read.

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