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Abstract	<p>This chapter examines the development of queer youth cultures in New Zealand in the decades before 1950. It explores broad social patterns, international and local influences, and the intricacies of young people's own experiences. By examining life stories and important societal changes, the chapter asks how meaning was negotiated at the level of the individual. The intimate opportunities available in the early years of colonisation grew alongside the processes of urbanisation, and although modern gay and lesbian identities solidified after the Second World War, their prehistory is full of ambiguous relationships and intimate possibilities. Young people's stories reveal that the intimate present is built to a considerable degree upon the past.</p>	



## CHAPTER 4

# Same-Sex Desire and Young New Zealanders Before 1950

*Chris Brickell*

Situated in the South Pacific on the edge of the world, New Zealand seems far away from the centres of imperial power. Its history, though, is not as remote from that of America and Europe, and the global shifts around the meanings of sexuality, as one might suppose. New Zealand's young people experienced same-sex friendship and desire in ways similar to those elsewhere: between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, they were influenced by wider patterns of rural and urban life, literary cultures, the growing importance of secondary schooling, the prognostications of doctors, and the repressive power of the state. Adolescents and young adults who navigated the complexities of queer desire—defined here as feelings of same-sex attraction and eroticism—negotiated the restrictions and possibilities afforded by their everyday worlds as they grappled with the highs and lows of adolescent emotion. These dynamics were both global and local.

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people's own experiences. I sketch important societal changes and ask how meaning was negotiated at the individual level. A range of sources—letters, diaries, official records and scrapbooks—grant us some insight into the emotional lives of young, homoerotically inclined New Zealanders over many decades. There are fewer sources for girls and women than boys and men. This is mostly because only the latter were subject to overt modes of policing, and these legal processes generated a disproportionate number of available archives. In light of these differences, the chapter provides as much balance as possible.

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY BEGINNINGS

How did New Zealand's past shape queer desires among young people? Archives from the earliest years of Pākehā (European) settlement offer up a few clues. Christian missionaries arrived during the 1830s, and some of their encounters with indigenous Māori were erotically charged. William Yate, for instance, set foot in the Bay of Islands in 1828 and befriended several young Māori. The Church Mission Society investigated these encounters, and it emerged that Yate and the boys masturbated one another. One lad testified: 'He said to me "Unbutton your trousers". I said to him "For what purpose should I unbutton them?" He said to me "kia titotoi taua"'. A purse-lipped transcriber explained this phrase: 'the meaning of this expression is an act of most gross obscenity committed upon one another, each holding the penis of the other in his hand'.<sup>1</sup> Another scandalised churchman claimed that more than fifty youths were involved with the missionary. Still, this was not the only meeting of religion and homosexuality. The Christian churches established schools to train their future leaders and, much like English public schools, these had their fair share of homoerotic dalliances. In 1852, a scandal rocked one such college in Auckland. A senior staff member declared that 'evil practices' had gone on 'almost from the commencement of the college' in 1843. Such activities began among the Pākehā lads who were said to have 'corrupted' the Māori pupils.<sup>2</sup> College staff stepped up their surveillance and began checking the bedrooms every night, but it all proved too much. The school went into abeyance in 1853.

New Zealand's countryside provided opportunities for sex between males during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Many fifteen-, sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds laboured alongside adult men in the sparsely settled rural areas: gumfields, goldfields and rough logging

59 camps. Tents, huts and remote spots provided ideal locations for sexual  
60 contact. Only a few participants came to the attention of the authori-  
61 ties, most of them adult men who had (or attempted to have) sex with  
62 boys or reluctant older partners. Even then, only sodomy was illegal;  
63 William Yate, and others who stuck to mutual masturbation, were never  
64 charged with any crime. Although a few adult men ended up in court,  
65 sex between boys went mostly below the radar during the nineteenth  
66 century.<sup>3</sup>

67 There is very little historical evidence of sex between young women at  
68 this time. A great many girls in their teens worked as domestic servants,  
69 and some larger households probably brought together girls with shared  
70 sexual interests. There were not a great many houses like this, though;  
71 most households only employed a single servant who spent her days and  
72 nights under the thumb of her master or mistress. Still, the changing  
73 world of female work gave rise to new social opportunities. Later in the  
74 century, the factory sector grew rapidly, and this gave girls the chance to  
75 meet one another. Factory workers had their evenings and weekends free  
76 to socialise together, unlike the servants, and increasing amounts of spare  
77 time meant friendships were less constrained by institutional pressures.<sup>4</sup>

78 Some girls developed intense emotional friendships. Resa Gibbs was  
79 the daughter of a reasonably well-off family that lived in the small city  
80 of Nelson. In 1883, she developed an attachment to a Miss Furlong  
81 who visited the family for a time. As Resa's ardour began to cool, Miss  
82 Furlong declared: 'Oh Resa I used to love you more than any one in  
83 the world & to think you near perfection as possible, & I used to sleep  
84 with your likeness under my pillow, kiss it last thing at night & show  
85 it to my friends saying "there's the girl", etc.!' <sup>5</sup> Such florid expressions  
86 of devotion, recorded in the diary of Resa's brother Fred, mirrored the  
87 pattern of romantic friendship prevailing in Western Europe and North  
88 America.<sup>6</sup> Young, middle-class women developed 'smashes' and 'crushes'  
89 on one another. University women courted one another, swapped pas-  
90 sionate letters, and composed intense poetry to their beloveds.<sup>7</sup> Like the  
91 overseas versions, some New Zealanders' romantic friendships doubtless  
92 incorporated erotic elements, but it is not easy to draw clear demarca-  
93 tions. On the one hand, we know Resa and Miss Furlong sometimes  
94 slept in the same bed, however bed-sharing was common in large families  
95 at the time, and although the practice was mostly non-sexual, the possi-  
96 bilities cannot be denied. Resa's brother Fred worried that Miss Furlong

had strung Resa along, and he asked his diary: ‘does she laugh at Resa & think what a fool she is making of her?’<sup>8</sup>

Boys and young men also forged intense tactile friendships, and a surprising number posed for the camera as photography became popular. In Fig. 4.1, for instance, a photograph taken by local pharmacist Robert Gant in the small town of Masterton in 1889, two adolescents—sixteen-year-old Harry Perry and nineteen-year-old Charlie Blackburn, both clerks—touch heads and look at one another intently. This image is dramatic in more ways than one: their costumes are explained by the roles the pair played in a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan’s musical *Pirates of Penzance*. This photograph is a stagey snapshot in time. Many other pictures of Harry, Charlie and their friends show sideways glances, heads and knees that touch, and varying degrees of intimate proximity.<sup>9</sup> These visual codes bear a close resemblance to images of North American boys and men at the time.<sup>10</sup> Romantic feelings, whether enacted in a photo shoot or in real life, did not always preclude an interest in girls or women—but sometimes they did suggest a sexual attraction to men. Robert Gant, for instance, took male lovers. Fred Gibbs may have worried about his sister Resa, but he had no problems with Miss Furlong’s sentiment itself. Fred, whose own intimate interests lay with men alone, never married. As a youth, he was deeply ambivalent about young women and went out of his way to avoid them. ‘Only danced with a girl’, he wrote one evening in 1884, ‘and didn’t like it much’.<sup>11</sup> No girl could compete with Fred Kelly, the son of a foundry-man who became Fred’s ‘greatest friend’. ‘Without realising it I was far more confidential with him than with anyone else’, Fred told his diary. ‘We could always enter into and sympathise with one another’s moods, which I now perceive to be the greatest proof of true friendship’.<sup>12</sup> He was heartbroken when another pupil accidentally shot Kelly dead during school rifle practice.<sup>13</sup> As a sixteen-year-old, Fred admired only men: one public figure was ‘a fine looking fellow’, he wrote in his diary, and another ‘gave me tremendous impulse’.<sup>14</sup> Did his feelings have an erotic component? We cannot tell from his journals, but four years later, then a twenty-year-old school teacher, Fred described an evening with a male colleague: ‘H. & self necessarily interfere with one another, while the most unfortunate result is that I get nervous & unnatural’.<sup>15</sup> Fred did not say what he meant by ‘interference’ and ‘unnaturalness’, but his description is highly suggestive: during the late nineteenth century, the euphemism ‘unnatural’ often implied a sexual connection between men.

B & W IN PRINT



**Fig. 4.1** Harry Perry (left) and Charlie Blackburn on the set of *Pirates of Penzance*, taken by Robert Gant (1889) (© The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington—PA1-q-962-12-3)



The character and meanings of love and friendship came under greater scrutiny by the end of the nineteenth century, in heterosocial contexts as well as homosocial ones. For instance, young people discussed the concept of platonic love amongst themselves. In 1900, one young woman talked things over with the members of her discussion group in the small town of Gore. They wondered whether there was a point to platonic attachments if ‘true love’, which eventually led to marriage and children, was ‘better’.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, in an era when New Zealanders debated women’s suffrage—a right granted in 1893—girls in Gore wondered whether greater equality might be around the corner: freed from the constraints of gendered romance, would platonic love help to ‘make men our equals’?<sup>17</sup> These concerns spoke to a changing gender order, a slow convergence of male and female leisure cultures, and the increasingly public lives of women. This spurred a number of questions: What did relationships mean at a time of social change? What would heterosocial intimacy look like in a feminist future? Could boys and girls, men and women, just be friends?

Male friendships also demanded attention. American historian Michael Nardi points out that the ‘concept of friendship between men once included a range of erotic, platonic and sexual possibilities’, but this broad understanding narrowed during the late nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Much the same was true of New Zealand, and new professional discourses played an important role. In the case of same-sex friendship, doctors like Truby King, the superintendent at Seacliff Lunatic Asylum, mobilised new knowledge about health and disease. King and his contemporaries reinforced a widening distinction between ‘pure’ (that is, platonic) forms of love and ‘perversion’. In 1891, King admitted to Seacliff a twenty-one-year-old named Percy Ottywell whose attachment to a fifteen-year-old boy had come to the attention of the authorities. A local doctor, one of two required to testify in the process of committing a patient to Seacliff, described Percy’s feelings this way: ‘He says that he is greatly attracted to a boy named Douglas and cannot live without him, that his affection for this boy has become an all absorbing idea, and that his greatest happiness is to see him and be with him constantly’.<sup>19</sup> Under questioning at the asylum, King’s new patient said: ‘It is a true and genuine affection, in fact I have a passionate regard for the boy, in a perfectly pure way you understand. There is nothing that I would not do for him, I would lay down my life for him’.<sup>20</sup> Percy went on:

175 You can't understand a pure and ardent love for a boy such as I have, and  
 176 I feel that what I am telling you will simply confirm you in the idea that  
 177 I am mad. Yet you will admit that a man may love a woman – then why  
 178 not one of the other sex? The Bible says 'love one another' does it not?<sup>21</sup>

179 King, though, remained unconvinced. The superintendent felt sure that  
 180 the young man 'seems subconscious of the fact that such ideas as the  
 181 above are not normal', and he managed to extract further information  
 182 from his young patient:

183 Questioned further as to this affection for [Douglas], patient volunteered  
 184 that his love for him was now entirely a pure affection but that it has not  
 185 been so all along. Impure ideas with regard to [Douglas] would come  
 186 into his head in spite of himself but he never said or did anything rude to  
 187 him.<sup>22</sup>

188 Truby King was unwilling to accept Percy Ottwell's claim that his own  
 189 feelings fell entirely into the 'pure' type of love. Percy was left to find a  
 190 way to bridge the gap between spiritual forms of homosocial love and  
 191 his own carnal desires.<sup>23</sup> For example, his reference to the Bible was an  
 192 assertion of the acceptability of love between men, even if he was ulti-  
 193 mately forced to confess the 'impurity' of his sexual interests.

194 The rise of the middle classes, in New Zealand and internationally,  
 195 gave way to a new moralism.<sup>24</sup> Doctors like King played an important  
 196 role, seizing any opportunity to speak out against the perils of the age:  
 197 obscene drawings and books that incited adolescents to become sex-  
 198 ually active, and the pleasures to be found in the gardens, streets and  
 199 theatres of the cities.<sup>25</sup> According to King and his contemporaries, a  
 200 carefully choreographed sexual order was the appropriate remedy for  
 201 perceived social ills.<sup>26</sup> Girls should be chaperoned and boys watched for  
 202 signs of uncontrolled lusts. In 1893, in the middle of all this moralising,  
 203 New Zealand's sexual offences laws were extended in their scope. No  
 204 longer was only anal sex ('sodomy') between males illegal, but oral sex  
 205 and mutual masturbation joined the schedule of forbidden acts. A new  
 206 term, 'indecent assault', described these additional activities.<sup>27</sup> Consent  
 207 was no defence; homoerotic contact was defined as a violation of both  
 208 the partner's body and the social order. In contrast, sexual relations  
 209 between girls and women were still legal: nobody paid much attention  
 210 to them.<sup>28</sup>



In spite of the tightening legal situation for male same-sex contact, convictions were relatively rare. When a case involved an older man and a boy, the man was usually the only one sentenced. Younger partners were usually acquitted; those in authority assumed them to have been led astray or strong-armed by the older partner. Some encounters were indeed coercive: rural men forced boys into sex in the tents and huts of the sheep stations, and men in the cities assaulted unwilling youths on waste ground and in the alleys. Other times, though, lads were fully complicit in the liaison, and prosecutions of their adult partners took place only if parents found out. Some boys met men in city streets and agreed to swap sex for drinks or entry to the music halls; a few retired to local hotels for a night.<sup>29</sup> Others—especially telegraph boys—sought cash from men for services rendered. Sex between boys remained outside of the concern of New Zealand’s parliamentarians and middle-class moralists, going unnoticed and unpunished until the following century. Still, some lads took an interest in the way the justice system dealt with adult offenders. Judges complained that youths flocked into the courts’ public galleries whenever a prisoner came up on a sexual charge, and young people eagerly read about such cases in the newspapers. When a tramp propositioned a group of boys in Dunedin in October 1895, they turned on him and shouted ‘Mockford! Mockford!’, labelling him with the name of a local man convicted of sexually assaulting a boy two years earlier. William Mockford’s name became a taunt, picked up from the courtroom or the newspaper and levelled against a man who showed an interest in boys.<sup>30</sup>

What about other labels for those interested in same-sex eroticism? The figure of the ‘sod’, a contraction of ‘sodomite’, circulated in New Zealand during the 1890s. ‘You are a sod, you dog!’, a father yelled at the Dunedin tramp.<sup>31</sup> The label ‘sod’ was further popularised during the prosecution of Oscar Wilde in London in 1895. New Zealanders read about the Wilde case in the (imported) British papers as well as the local media. ‘Oscar’ was a term bandied about by the enforcers of morality. During the early twentieth century, the proprietors of picture theatres kept an eye out for ‘Oscars’, men who made a bee-line for the lads in the back rows and fumbled with them under strategically placed coats.<sup>32</sup> The term ‘queen’ also appeared during the early twentieth century. A tabloid newspaper told its readers about adolescent boys in the cramped gaols who adopted names like ‘Queenie’, ‘Ruby’ and ‘Violet’ and swapped sexual favours for tobacco. The paper railed against one such miscreant



who ‘has been known to behave blastiferously in the bath-house with five persons in an afternoon’.<sup>33</sup> The figure of the ‘queen’ also turned up during the First World War. Having absconded from their military camp, two young brothers spent the night in a hotel under the watchful eye of the nineteen-year-old military policeman who had apprehended them. According to court records, all three played billiards before sharing a large double bed. In the morning, the policeman caught hold of one man’s penis ‘and asked me to stick it into him’. His unwilling prospect said ‘What the hell game are you up to?’, the young officer cheekily taunted ‘Won’t it rise this morning?’, and the aggrieved party told his brother ‘I think he is a queen’.<sup>34</sup> The policeman was himself arrested, ending up on the wrong side of the law.

## LABELS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Not everyone identified with terms like ‘queen’. Some early-twentieth-century boys and men used no specific terminology; others referred simply to ‘those sorts of jokers who fool round with men’ or men ‘of my own nature’.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes, women drew upon male precedents. Born in Wellington in 1888, author Katherine Beauchamp enjoyed romantic friendships and sexual relationships with other girls during her adolescence. Katherine described herself in Wildean terms, including in this entry in her journal. Of her lover Edith Bendall, Katherine wrote in 1907:

Never was the feeling of possession so strong, I thought. Here there can be but one person with her. Here by a thousand delicate suggestions I can absorb her – for the time ... O Oscar! am I peculiarly susceptible to sexual impulse? I must be, I suppose – but I rejoice. Now, each time I see her to put her arms round me and hold me against her. I think she wanted to, too; but she is afraid and custom hedges her in, I feel.<sup>36</sup>

Oscar Wilde was important in Katherine’s young life, as literary scholar Sydney Janet Kaplan explains: ‘Obviously, Wilde did not *influence* her desires, but his ideas allowed her a space in which such desires might be recognized and named’.<sup>37</sup> Katherine also referred to the work of Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter, albeit in literary rather than sexual terms, and she articulated her feelings in her early prose. A 1906 story about two girls named Hinemoa and Marina bursts with homoerotic



feeling: ‘Hinemoa bent over her with a curious feeling of pleasure, intermingled with a sensation which she did not analyse’.<sup>38</sup> The following year, Katherine wrote of Edith Bendall:

I cannot lie in my bed and not feel the magic of her body: which means that sex seems as nothing to me. I feel more powerfully all those so-termed sexual impulses with her than I have with any man. She enthral, enslaves me – and her personal self – her body absolute – is my worship.<sup>39</sup>

Katherine Beauchamp—who as a young woman adopted the pen name Katherine Mansfield, relocated to England, and became an internationally known fiction writer—went on to live a more-or-less bisexual life. She occasionally expressed reservations about her same-sex attractions; in 1907, she wondered: ‘Do other people of my age feel as I do I wonder so powerful licentious so almost physically ill –’.<sup>40</sup> When she pursued relationships with men, she sometimes pondered the ‘Oscar-like thread’ to her sexual nature.<sup>41</sup> Katherine married a man but had a lifelong intimate friendship with Ida Constance Baker whom, in later years, she referred to as her ‘wife’.<sup>42</sup>

Like Katherine Beauchamp/Mansfield, Eric McCormick went on to become a prominent author. He was sixteen in 1923 when he confessed to his diary about his desires for other young men. ‘I prayed one night with passionate intensity that this feeling might be pure’, he wrote with some trepidation. ‘It is one of the most powerful forces in my nature, and I pray devoutly that it may not merely be a perversion of the sexual instinct’.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes the term ‘perversion’ gave way to another label: ‘invert’. James Courage, another would-be author who left New Zealand to follow in Mansfield’s footsteps, referred to himself as an invert during the late 1920s when he was in his late teens. This term had been popularised by the British doctor Havelock Ellis, but it remains unclear how widespread it was in New Zealand.<sup>44</sup> Eric McCormick’s adoption of the idea of sex instincts, also developed by Ellis, hints that some New Zealanders were familiar with the new language. Meanwhile, one queer ancestor—to use an admittedly anachronistic phrase—begot another. Katherine Mansfield saw herself like Oscar Wilde; James Courage imagined himself as Mansfield. Her ‘early struggles at self-expression in New Zealand are so exactly like mine’, James told his journal, ‘it’s positively uncanny’.<sup>45</sup>

Other young people left no trace of any written vocabulary that articulated their sexuality. Ernie Webber grew up in Dunedin during the



1920s, and as an adolescent, he led an active outdoors life. As an adult, he was arrested and jailed when a jealous business acquaintance told police about Webber's relationship with another man. Although the textual records of Ernie's early life say little about his self-understanding, his adolescent scrapbooks offer a sense of the connections between style, desire and the body. Several images from one scrapbook capture moods: they show an urbanely dressed Ernie with his dog; a photo of Ernie dressed in drag—complete with garters and a parasol—for Otago University's yearly capping revue; and a nearly naked young man—not Ernie—pasted onto another page.<sup>46</sup> In this last image the toned arms, muscled thighs and an open stance represent the erotic appeal of a physically active life. The 1920s saw the emergence of the scrapbook as a cultural form, especially among adolescents, and Ernie's journal gestures towards the role of photography: cut-and-pasted images sometimes played a significant role in the creation of a queer subjectivity.<sup>47</sup> As Ernie grew older, he became more interested in the literature on homosexuality, and he collected books on sex and relationships. These included a copy of the proceedings of the First International Congress for Sexual Equality held in Holland in 1951.<sup>48</sup> Over time, the visual symbolism of Ernie Webber's youth gave way to a more socially active engagement in the organised homosexual movement (Figs. 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4).

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If diaries and scrapbooks hint at modes of self-understanding, court records tell of sexual encounters in New Zealand's rural and urban areas. These documents are records of state repression but they provide clues about homoeroticism in its wider context.<sup>49</sup> As we read these records, we notice that the story of state regulation intersects with the comings and goings of adolescents' intimate lives. We learn, for instance, that boys and young men in country districts mucked about together in secluded spots. This is an excerpt from one file: 'When we got to Corfields gate I stopped and Thomas stopped also. I asked Thomas if I could see his cock. He said "Right ho"'. These two lads wandered off the road and, as one later told police after they found themselves in trouble: 'I worked myself off into him and we then returned to the road'.<sup>50</sup> There are other, similar examples. In 1945, two young electricians—one nineteen, the other twenty-four—looked after the signalling system for a railway line in a sparsely populated part of the country. One afternoon, they sneaked into a lineside hut:

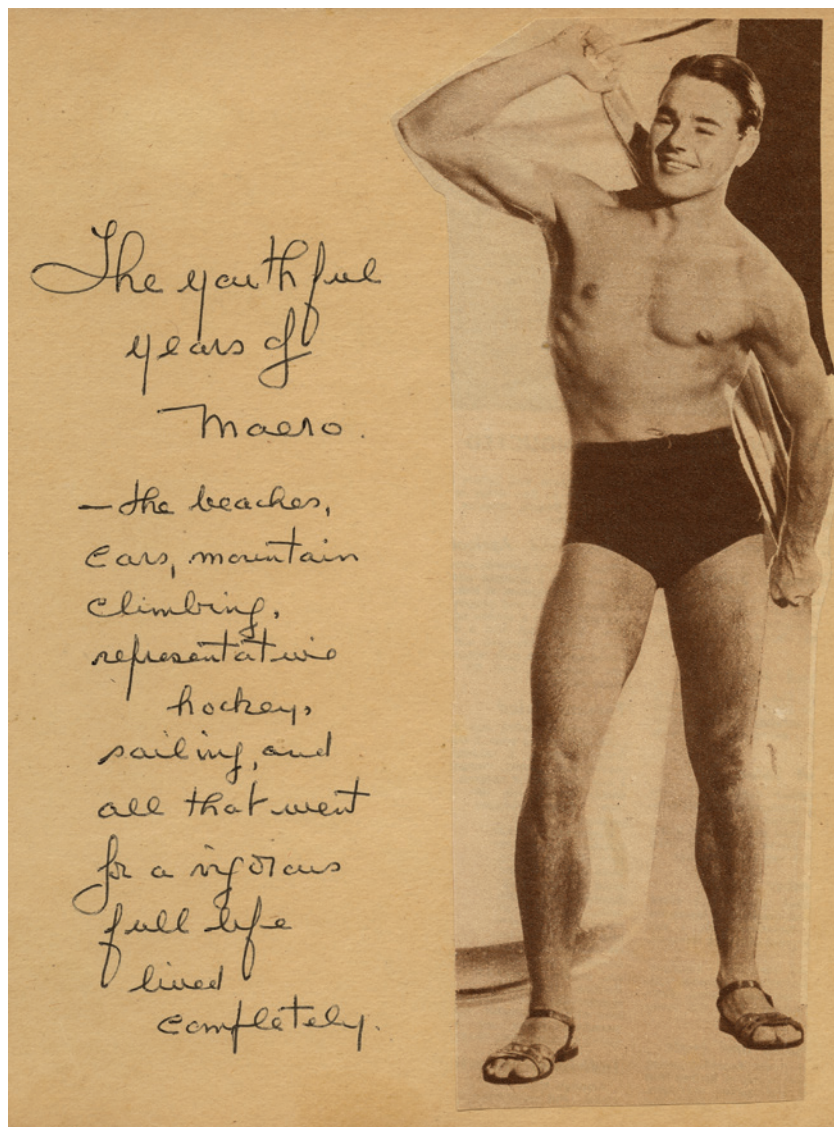


Fig. 4.2 Ernie Webber scrapbook cutting. 'Maero' was Ernie's own nickname, although its origins are unclear (Courtesy of Hocken Collections, Dunedin—MS-3333/019)





**Fig. 4.3** Photograph of Ernie Webber with his dog (Courtesy of Hocken Collections, Dunedin—MS-3333/020)





**Fig. 4.4** Ernie Webber during Capping Week (Courtesy of Hocken Collections, Dunedin—MS-3333/019)

360 Hunter and I told several smutty yarns and the conversation then turned  
 361 to sex and private parts. After a while I got an erection. I do not know  
 362 whether Hunter was affected in the same way. After about five or ten min-  
 363 utes ... Hunter suggested that we take our trousers off. I asked Hunter if  
 364 he thought it would be safe enough and he said that he thought it would.  
 365 I then unbuttoned the front of my trousers and let my trousers about half  
 366 way down my thighs. Hunter did the same thing. We then both got onto  
 367 [the] bunk. After we got on the bunk Hunter said that I could have first  
 368 turn if I liked.<sup>51</sup>

369 These lads did not get much further before they were interrupted by a  
 370 man who burst in and then reported their activities to police.

371 Social, economic and technological shifts shaped erotic experience.  
 372 Bicycles enabled youths to travel long distances independently, often  
 373 from one side of a town or city to the other, and their riders searched  
 374 for sex and companionship. The motor car, which became increasingly  
 375 common during the 1930s and 1940s, was both a mode of transport



and a private space. Men ‘parked up’—to use an American term—in semi-secluded spots, and mucked about in the back seat. Road trips also provided erotic possibilities: those lucky enough to have access to a car could travel far away from home, out of the city and into the sparsely settled countryside. Back at home, the sharing of bedrooms between siblings became rarer as New Zealanders became more affluent and house sizes increased. A room of one’s own was a space to entertain friends as long as a certain discretion was observed.

The critical mass provided by increasing populations generated new erotic opportunities. Urban growth gave rise to bigger shops, including the department stores where many younger and older queer men spent their days. Their drapery counters and window dressing sections were the workplaces of an increasing number of homoerotically inclined adolescents. One man later told of his first encounter with gay people: it took place during his first week in his department store job. ‘I thought they were delightful, they were different, not your usual type of male, rather fairyish. It was said that they were camp, that they like each other. And I thought “that’s what I must be”’.<sup>52</sup>

Girls met new friends in sports teams, nurses’ hostels and the ranks of the women’s auxiliary services during the war. Religious organisations had their uses. Some met lovers at church and at Bible Class camps over summer. One woman told an interviewer about her teenage experiences:

In a dormitory with 200 people when you’re seducing somebody you don’t know whether she’s going to yell “Don’t do this dreadful thing to me” or whether they’re going to make too much noise... it’s really quite a tricky thing. It’s the ultimate in dangerous living when you’re 13 or 14 because you know you might get caught out.<sup>53</sup>

During her adolescent years, this woman met a primary school teacher at a Bible Class camp, and she became something of a mentor. Since the older woman didn’t think that lesbianism was ‘a terrible thing’ she helped her young friend come to terms with her desires.<sup>54</sup> Oral history testimony also reveals that girls who lived in New Zealand’s geothermal areas made friends in the mineral pools. ‘The romantic spot we had was the hot pools... ride and swim all day and off to the hot pools at night. Then in the hot pools, well! That’s where friendships were either cemented or broken’.<sup>55</sup>



Court files tell us that youths found one another while sitting on the steps outside Auckland's Ferry Building and the Domain, a large park in the middle of the city. Lads hung around the shops and loitered near wharves and war memorials.<sup>56</sup> In 1932, an eighteen-year-old labourer met a slightly older agricultural salesman near Warner's Hotel in central Christchurch and then the pair adjourned to a shed behind a row of shops. A policeman discovered them while doing his rounds:

On making an examination I found [the labourer] lying on his back and accused lying on top of him. I could see these two but they could not see me. I listened to their conversation for a few minutes and I heard [the labourer] say to accused "You are no bloody good, you can't get a bloody horn". This was repeated several times and I heard accused say "keep quiet". I then heard the words "I ought to give you a gamerouche" [i.e. oral sex]. I could not say definitely which of these two said these words.<sup>57</sup>

Another court case, this one from 1941, provides rich detail about young queer men's lives in Auckland—by then New Zealand's largest city. Having received a complaint of indecent behaviour among a group of youths, police set out to investigate. The transcript of the crown prosecutor's questions reveals specific details of the group's language and social interactions. Grocer's assistant Victor Andrews, twenty-one, told of his involvement with a number of other boys and young men, including sixteen-year-old shop assistant Bruce Millar and various members of the military forces.<sup>58</sup> Victor and Bruce had never been sexual partners but they became friends and discussed their conquests. 'He didn't like civilians', Victor told the prosecutor when asked about Bruce; 'he likes the navy. There are others round town doing the air force. I am telling the truth. Millar and I had nothing to do with the army'. Victor told the prosecutor more about his sexual partners: 'I have been with a doctor. There is another chap who is now away in prison. There is a chap working at the post office. There were various sailors. There were lots of chaps who I don't know where they are'. He even admitted to boasting among his friends: 'I may be a tempter. I do not regard myself as a menace to the community ... Amongst my own friends I was proud'.<sup>59</sup>

The conversation between Victor Andrews and the crown prosecutor contains some interesting language. The prosecutor asked whether Victor and Bruce were 'brother practitioners', and Victor remained silent. When asked whether the boys 'were two queens', the lad snapped:

‘That will do. I was known as a bitch. I am not’. Victor disavowed the passivity suggested by the terms ‘queen’ and ‘bitch’ before going on to say: ‘I haven’t been out with anybody since I have been in court. I am fighting against [it] and I hope to win’.<sup>60</sup> Victor and the crown prosecutor both drew upon a range of ideas about homosexuality. The term ‘brother practitioner’ hinted at a sexual interest shared by particular kinds of youths and men, while Victor’s comment about fighting and winning implied a psychological state that might be transcended given sufficient effort. The idea that homoerotic desire sometimes implied passivity lies at the basis of the mutually understood distinction between ‘bitch’ and its unstated counterpart: ‘butch’. The term ‘pick up’ also had an agreed upon meaning: ‘You used to go round looking for men and picking them up?’ the prosecutor asked Victor. Of another young witness, the court official asked ‘Have you a beat?’ and he obtained the answer: ‘The men usually picked me up round the ferry buildings’.<sup>61</sup> This court case paints a picture of sexual modernity: the networks of homoerotically inclined youths that expanded in New Zealand’s cities had their own locales, rituals and frames of reference, and these were known about by police.

During the 1940s, an increasing number of prosecutions told of a new police focus on erotic encounters between adolescent boys, as the cases from the isolated railway, inner city Christchurch and wartime Auckland reveal. Middle-class ideals of morality were never far from the surface, and a further example tells of the intersections of youth, sex and socio-economic status.<sup>62</sup> Four Christchurch lads, aged sixteen, seventeen and twenty-one, met at St Paul’s Church in 1944. They paired off in private houses, took photos of one another, went to the pictures and kissed each other goodbye as they headed home on the trams.<sup>63</sup> Somehow a local detective became aware of the boys’ fun and had them arrested, but their probation officer recommended leniency. The parents of each lad were ‘respected residents’ of the local community, the officer said, and the boys had ‘previously borne an excellent reputation’. The probation officer wanted to give them the opportunity to re-establish themselves ‘in the eyes of the community’.<sup>64</sup> Not only were boys from ‘respectable’ middle-class backgrounds treated more leniently than working-class males, but new developments in psychology played an important role. Doctors had begun to write about transient life stages, suggesting that all young people move through an inevitable ‘homosexual phase’ on

their journey to adulthood.<sup>65</sup> If not carefully guided, though, they could become trapped in the phase and never make the transition to heterosexuality.<sup>66</sup> The ideological benefits of this idea were two-fold. First, it exempted teenagers from the pathologised category of homosexuality, a category that gained an increasing amount of publicity. Second, it deepened the division between adolescent and adult sexuality at a time when social norms drew distinctions between these groups more forcefully. The new category of ‘the teenager’ appeared in newspapers and magazines, and it signalled a sharper psychological boundary between adolescence and adulthood.<sup>67</sup> While some adults were thought to be irredeemably homosexual, it was assumed that wayward teenagers could be placed back on the path to righteousness. This idea went hand in glove with the increased policing of young people’s sexuality: there remained a risk the homosexual period might become permanent if precocious youngsters were not carefully monitored.

The idea of the homosexual period applied to girls as well as boys. Some doctors derided lesbianism as a matter of ‘unnatural mutual gratification of perverted sexual abnormality’, but the law did not allow police to charge girls for having sex together.<sup>68</sup> Some girls did end up in borstals for other reasons, though, and many of them developed intense, sometimes sexual relationships with the other inmates. They gave one another names like ‘Sailor Boy’, ‘Lovey’, and ‘Sloppy Chops’ and spoke of ‘darls’ (short for ‘darlings’). A girl’s ‘special darl’ shared hugs, kisses and sexual intimacies. A borstal psychologist talked to some of these girls and collected their correspondence. ‘Sweetheart and I are just mutual friends. You are jealous because I was with her most of the other day. I accept the fact that she thinks a lot more of you than she probably ever will of me’, one inmate wrote to her darl semi-reassuringly.<sup>69</sup> Some of these inmates reverted to heterosexual relationships once leaving the borstals, but not all of them.

Schools also gave rise to intense relationships between girls during the mid-twentieth century, even if many of these were not overtly erotic. As we have already seen, smashes and pashes were adoring attachments between female adolescents, and these retained their popularity in New Zealand’s schools into the 1930s.<sup>70</sup> Shirley Albiston was a pupil at Wellington East Girls’ College, and her diary records the significance of girls’ intimate friendships there. Shirley’s friend Nancy ‘was very thrilled’ when she realised that Olga, an exchange student from Russia, ‘had such a “pash” on her’. Opposites attract, Shirley wrote in 1938,

with ‘Olga so passionate and Nancy so reticent’.<sup>71</sup> Girls also harboured pashes for school staff. Shirley loved and worshipped a thirty-something teacher with a ‘sweet’ demeanour, ‘eyes such a lovely blue’, and ‘cheeks so pink’.<sup>72</sup> Only belatedly—nearly a year later—did Shirley realise her teacher was ‘an ordinary human being instead of a species of deity’.<sup>73</sup> Still, Shirley betrayed not the slightest trace of jealousy when Nancy and a girl named Paula also fell under the teacher’s spell. Nor did the pash imply an exclusivity of gender. Some girls at Shirley’s school, including Nancy who expressed an interest in a tall, handsome fellow named Ted, pashed on teachers while also desiring boys.

Shirley did not follow the same pattern as Nancy. She professed no interest in boys, and had nothing good to say about those she met along the way: she thought a friend’s beau ‘uncouth’ and declared another looked ‘like a cabbage’.<sup>74</sup> In later adolescence, Shirley airily reported: ‘I have so much to occupy my time, there is no room to think about boys’.<sup>75</sup> Did she ponder the significance of same-sex attachments? Perhaps. The climate of opinion provided some worrisome ideas about female relationships; this was a departure from the mood of the late nineteenth century when Nelson resident Resa Gibbs became attached to Miss Furlong. While doctors talked about the homosexual phase, even a YWCA guidebook told camp leaders to make sure their adolescent charges ‘become heterosexual’—although they did not say how.<sup>76</sup> Shirley Albiston’s diary echoes some of these notions. Shirley was sure her ‘childish adoration’ for Miss Gardiner would die away as she got older, and she assumed that she would soon become aware of ‘the opposite sex’.<sup>77</sup> Havelock Ellis suggested ‘female inverts’, as he called lesbian women, possessed male souls, Shirley hinted at such an idea. ‘Valerie says that [a teacher] is neither feminine nor masculine’, she wrote warily, ‘which is rather horrid because it might insinuate anything’.<sup>78</sup> We cannot know whether she recognised herself in this description. Her diaries come to an end in her young adulthood, with no sign of any interest in boys.

## 558 CONCLUSION

559 Modern gay and lesbian identities solidified after the Second World War,  
560 but their prehistory is full of the kinds of ambiguities found in Shirley  
561 Albiston’s diaries and the court files that reveal the language and move-  
562 ments of boys and men arrested for sexual offences. Literary allusions,



ideas lifted from sexological treatises, and the occasional newspaper report all gave voice to the perils and pleasures of homoeroticism in a society that mostly ignored same-sex intimacy between girls and women, but gradually intensified the regulation of sex between boys. New Zealand’s erotic landscapes were spaces of danger, stigma and satisfaction—and sometimes all three simultaneously.

Young people explored their own desires in a wider context: during the late-nineteenth century, the growth of the middle class gave rise to a new regulation of sexuality and a group of medical professionals who gave their view on ‘proper’ sexuality. The growing cities offered new social opportunities. Young New Zealanders made friends and had sex as the commentators railed against immorality; the trial of Oscar Wilde cemented new discourses of degeneracy and provided those like Katherine Beauchamp with a reference point for their own feelings. By the 1940s, military personnel in Auckland enticed boys and young men into sexual embraces while adults disseminated new theories of ‘the homosexual phase’ and tried to divide adult sexuality from that of the emergent ‘teenager’. Social changes interwove, interlocked, and sometimes cut across one another. These contradictions gave rise to modern sexual identities, publicly articulated to greater and lesser degrees, in the decades before gay liberation. Boys and men of the 1920s referred to others ‘of my own nature’; by the 1940s, some used the term ‘so’: ‘is he so?’, one might ask a friend of a new acquaintance. After the war, a boy or man might be referred to among friends as ‘queer’; his heterosexually inclined counterpart was ‘square’. These identities consolidated during the 1950s when increasing numbers of young people filled the streets, the newspapers began to tell of intersecting queer and youth cultures in the cafés, and a fast-growing critical mass of homoerotically inclined men and women set the scene for the homophile organisations of the 1960s.<sup>79</sup>

All the while, young people built lives for themselves out of the opportunities, ideas and symbols available in their time. Unbeknown to them, these young New Zealanders provided valuable clues for future historians of sexuality. The intensity of their story is familiar to modern readers, even if their terminology—and the risks attached to their sexual practices—are less recognisable. As we tease out the details of their stories, we see that the intimate present is built to a considerable degree upon the past.

# NOTES

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