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Boys and Homosex: Danger and Possibility in Queensland, 1890–1914

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On a Sunday evening in mid-1897, Wade and Walt were caught committing sodomy in a room at Cloughly's Hotel, situated somewhere in the western reaches of Queensland.¹ This discovery was nothing exceptional. In a frontier world disproportionately populated by young men in their sexual prime, 'unnatural' crime appeared regularly enough before the colonial courts in urban and regional areas. At first glance, this case appears similar to other matters involving men and boys heard before judges and juries. Walt, age unknown, but certainly an adult, had been working at the hotel for about six months when the offence took place; Wade was a boy of 11 who was visiting his aunt, the proprietor of the premises. One evening, the two residents ended up in a room together, partly undressed and in a compromising position.

Sometime after supper, Walt apparently beckoned Wade into his quarters asking the young visitor to bolt the door behind him. What happened next comes from a police tracker who watched events unfold in the lamp-lit room through a three-inch hole in the door, evidence corroborated by a domestic servant who later arrived at the scene and also witnessed the act. Wade and Walt were sitting on the bed, both with their trousers unbuttoned. When the boy became aroused, Walt lay down on his stomach and pulled his shirt over his head and his trousers below his knees. Wade got on top of the defendant and began to work his body up and down. The tracker testified that the boy was in a state of physical arousal. '[H]is "dicky" was out of his trousers and was stiff', he later told the court.² This, it would transpire, was a crucial observation.

When Walt appeared before the courts on a charge of sodomy a few months later, the colony's Chief Justice, Sir Samuel Walter Griffith, was unsure on the basis of the facts presented if an offence had occurred. He referred the matter to the Court of Appeal for consideration. The problem for Griffith was Wade's age and the sexual position he had occupied during the

alleged act. The boy supposedly penetrated Walt, not the other way around. Despite an eyewitness account of Wade's arousal, common law generally presumed that boys under the age of discretion (at that time 14) were physically incapable of such acts. This idea had considerable legacy in English law. The renowned jurist, Sir Matthew Hale, had argued in the late eighteenth century that 'An infant under the age of fourteen years is presumed by law unable to commit a rape, and therefore it seems cannot be guilty of it... it seems as to this fact the law presumes him impotent, as well as wanting discretion'.³ This legal fiction applied even in the light of other corroborative evidence, including medical advice that boys had attained a state of puberty.

The Queensland Court of Appeal in a split decision determined that the same principle of 'immature age' applied to its jurisdiction.⁴ It followed that sexually receptive adult males could not be charged in such matters because the law established that young boys could not physically commit penetration on either males or females. In the eyes of the law, Walt could not be found guilty of sodomy, or its attempt, in Cloughley's Hotel on that fateful Sunday night in 1897. The Crown discontinued the case and Walt was discharged.

The case of Wade and Walt brings to the forefront of historical research a number of critical assumptions about boys and sexuality in turn-of-the-century Queensland and the wider British world. Here we have a boy of 11 – by the available accounts a willing and physically able participant in an act of sodomy – classified by the state as having neither the physical capacity nor the intellectual discretion to adopt the active role in intercourse. Implicit in this reasoning is the notion of consent – that by inference, boys under the age of discretion were also unable to initiate or permit sexual activity with others of the same sex no matter which position they adopted.

What should we make of men like Walt, and boys like Wade? How might we understand their behaviour? The historical scholarship on sex involving young people generally adopts one of two frameworks privileging either danger or possibility.⁵ Much of the feminist literature since the 'rediscovery' of child sexual abuse in the 1970s has considered contact with minors within discourses of maltreatment.⁶ Historians working from criminal charges of rape, carnal knowledge and indecent assault rightly consider their evidence within narratives of gendered exploitation and abuse. Boys, however, are rarely considered in these accounts, notwithstanding a few exceptional examples.⁷ Queer scholarship has been cautious of the state's proscription and regulation of sexual behaviour, and has more readily privileged the construction of innocence that developed alongside the emergence of 'childhood' from the eighteenth century onwards. Historians of 'homosex' have been more likely to recognize potentially non-harmful relationships between adults and youths within narratives of identity and subculture.⁸ Indeed, age-structured relationships have formed discrete aspects of queer identities at particular moments and places in the past.⁹

Drawing on 116 charges of male-only sex to come before the Queensland courts between 1890 and 1914, this chapter examines the nuanced complexities between danger and possibility associated with age-structured relationships.¹⁰ It suggests a number of ways we might think about boys, agency and abuse in the historical setting. Part of the problem is the illegality of homosex regardless of age. Even if boys like Wade were over 14 they could not consent to same-sex acts. Thus, the threat of criminal prosecution accompanied expressions of desire or identity as well as crimes of violence. This ambiguity covers much of the legal evidence with lawyers, as Stephen Maynard observes, playing a significant role in the creation of these narratives.¹¹ Prosecutors and defence barristers respectively positioned young males as vulnerable or collusive depending on their aim and strategy. In an 1899 matter in the river city of Maryborough about 250 kilometres north of Brisbane, for instance, Mr McGrath acting for the accused went as far as to ask the magistrate to explain to a boy of nine that he would not be required to answer any questions in which he might incriminate himself while a police prosecutor outlined to the court the boy's vulnerability and assault.¹² Court-room narratives then, reveal an equivocal mix of coercion and participation as a number of scholars examining the complexities of sex with male youths in the British world point out.¹³ Their analysis traces the complex power relationships evident in criminal justice records and the possibility of – and slippage between – peril and pleasure contingent on a range of contextual factors like age, relationship, setting and class.

Two Acts of Parliament regulated homosex in Queensland in the period under review. The 1865 Offences against the Person Act in force until the end of the nineteenth century outlawed sodomy, attempted sodomy and indecent assault. It provided no special statutory protection for boys. The introduction of the Criminal Code Act in 1901 refined existing colonial legislation. It added crimes of gross indecency between males (following the Labouchère Amendment in Britain in 1885¹⁴) and also created a separate offence under section 210 of the indecent treatment of boys under 14, which included touching, mutual masturbation, oral and intercrural sex.¹⁵ The new Code also incorporated in the statutes a provision on capacity brought about by the 1897 Court of Appeal case of Wade and Walt.¹⁶ This particular feature remained part of the criminal law until the end of the twentieth century.

The protection of boys from homosex has formed a significant concern of the courts in Australian jurisdictions since settlement.¹⁷ More than 30 per cent of same-sex matters in Queensland the 1890s involved men and boys (although the age of the complainant is not always clear), even before the introduction of the new law in 1901. But the creation of section 210 provided new arsenal for police and prosecutors. Penetration did not have to be proved and the legislation was well used. It accounts for 40 per cent of the charges to appear in the twentieth century to 1914, not including more

serious crimes of penetration as well as matters involving youths between 14 and 17 years of age.¹⁸

The increase in prosecutions was in part a corollary of policing practices and the concern for the protection of children that emerged in the late nineteenth century, evident in increases to the age of consent and other legislative refinements. The inequalities of power in age-structured relationships as well as the spectre of 'unnatural' vice were also causes for concern in male-only offences. Spatial and employment patterns stretching across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also go some way to explaining the proportion of boys in the records. Male access to public places brought men and boys into contact with one another in city streets and urban workplaces. Boys in the Australian bush often laboured alongside adult men and shared living quarters with them.

Homosex came to official attention through various means. Some boys reported their own maltreatment or that of their friends to older siblings and parents. In early January 1912, for instance, schoolboys seven-year-old Francis and ten-year-old John each reported the activities of 67-year-old Thomas who had separately taken them behind the bushes on the side of a Brisbane road to do 'something rude' on the promise of loose change.¹⁹ Third parties also notified the authorities of their suspicions or observations when offenders were caught in the act. When a local baker discovered an elderly man interfering with an eight-year-old boy under his Dunwich home on Stradbroke Island in 1913 for instance, he promptly intervened before telling the boy's father what had taken place.²⁰ The potential dangers of effeminacy and the possibility of 'contamination' were other concerns, but less so in the antipodes where flamboyant subcultures readily found in the metropole were slower to develop.

Of course, like all crimes and especially sexual ones, a large but unquantifiable number of cases never came to public notice at all. Boys were often too frightened or intimidated to report their maltreatment while some youths did not want to report incidents they had enjoyed. Others deliberately kept their age-structured arrangements discreet, exchanging sex for consumer pleasure, money and other resources. Some witnesses also discouraged male youths from going to the authorities given the stigma attached to 'unnatural' behaviour. One scrub-cutter, for instance, advised an older male youth in 1899 not to report an assault. 'I think the best thing you can do is to squash the matter', he said. '[I]t will give both of you a lot of trouble as you have no witnesses.'²¹

Age-structured relationships often involved ambiguity where poverty, vulnerability, and physical stature mediated relationship between men and working-class youths.²² Let us take the example of unemployed Albert, simply described in the records as a youth but probably in his late teens. He was approached by a 50-year-old German labourer, Fred, in the streets of Warwick, a town west of Brisbane, in late April 1912. After striking up a conversation, the two labourers spent the afternoon together, strolled

through the town's streets, and stopped at a few hotels for drinks. Early that evening, Fred sought lodging for two at the Warwick Club Hotel. After knocking back a few beers, the man and youth stripped off their clothes and retired to their respective beds. Soon after, Fred made his way over to his roommate's cot, pulled back the bedclothes and rolled young Albert on to his stomach. They had only been intimate for about a minute when the proprietor's son (who had been alerted by his mother who occupied the adjacent room) burst in, catching them in the act. He gave them five minutes to collect their belongings and threw them out into the street. The young labourer and his older companion headed off together to find alternative lodgings. Fred told his young acquaintance 'not to worry': he had £36 and would find them somewhere else to sleep.²³ It is unclear how the police became involved.

Other boys also appeared amenable to intimate male company. 14-year-old Wilfred, an apprentice blacksmith, told a constable upon arrest in 1912 that he was a consenting party to gross indecency with Douglas, a 'rough-looking, strongly built' man of unknown age.²⁴ Wilfred had asked Douglas for 1/- for admission to the Melba Moving Picture Theatre in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley. We do not know whether they struck an agreement at the time money changed hands or during the movie, but young Wilfred made a number of suggestions on where they might spend some time together after the show. The judge hearing the matter acknowledged the 'possibility he [the accused] was to a large extent led into it by the boy'.²⁵

Also consider the case of three Ipswich boys aged between 13 and 16 who spent regular evenings with Edgar, a former teacher and father. The boys would stop by for a bite to eat and something to drink before Edgar would take them to his room one by one where he would perform oral and anal sex. The boys were each given half a crown for their time, and they returned on numerous occasions. They were well aware of what Edgar wanted; indeed, it appears that one lad had become acquainted with the situation after another had told him of the tutor's financial generosity.²⁶

None of the boys in these three examples levelled complaints of abuse. Albert was caught with Fred by a suspicious hotel proprietor; young moviegoer Wilfred was reported to police by other boys who suspected Douglas' intentions. The Ipswich tutor Edgar only came unstuck after an incriminating letter was found by one of the boys' mothers. We should be careful, however, not to read the absence of complaint as the presence of unproblematic consent. Security, money or consumer pleasure all play a role in these cases and many like them. Unemployed Albert may have found security in Fred's financial status and the potential for employment his older companion offered. Wilfred used sex for payment, exchanging his desirability for entry to the local pictures. The young boys who joined Edgar in his room received regular payment and at least one of them was receiving weekly tuition. And as Matt Houlbrook points out, excitement and adventure could quickly develop into something more sinister.²⁷ In the months after he was

convicted of sexual assault, Edgar appeared before the courts charged with the murder of another boy in the district, although that case failed for want of sufficient evidence.²⁸

The boys who frequented Edgar's house probably found safety in numbers. Boys often looked out for each other in public and there are numerous instances where they reported the abuse of friends or intervened in potentially dangerous situations. These friendships between individuals of similar age and physical stature had their own potential for pleasure and discovery. School-boy experimentation could be remembered fondly. In his autobiographical *Confessions*, the renowned Australian sex reformer, William Chidley, described his childhood sexual experiences with his close friend Walter:

I do not remember when it commenced, as I do not remember when we did *not* – when the moods came and we were alone – play with each other's penis and lying down, suck each other's penis. The satisfaction this gave us I remember Walter calling comforting.²⁹

Accounts like this add further evidence to boys' capacity for pleasure so denied by the law's concern about their vulnerability on the one hand, and their potential to commit offences on the other hand.

Interest and desire was not confined to activities between boys of a similar age. Some youths appear to have enjoyed longer-term relationships with men and older contemporaries. One 17-year-old horse boy, Jacob, maintained a four-month relationship with Eli, a cook of unknown age, on an outback station in the mid-1900s.³⁰ According to a number of labourers stationed on the property:

Accused and [Eli] slept in the same room and in the same bed. They only wore shirts in bed. Accused had a bed for himself if he had wanted it. They were generally together and mostly in [Eli's] room when they were not working – when they were in the room the door was generally bolted.³¹

Their relationship was clearly sexual. One labourer recalled a conversation he overheard outside their room. 'Aren't you finished yet...', Jacob allegedly asked Eli, before remarking, 'Don't squeeze my balls so hard'.³² Eli also presented his young lover with a gift of some clothing. While Eli skipped town before the matter got to court, Jacob received a suspended sentence on conviction for his role in the affair.

Jacob's court appearance indicates that the authorities considered boys and youths as parties to offending in certain circumstances. The very prosecution of a boy between 14 and 17 for homosex is a telling indication that the Crown thought it had a reasonable prospect of conviction. But most boys and youths involved in homosex offences were not indicted, even if young males who assaulted children appeared occasionally before

the bench. The Crown faced a number of difficulties in this regard, not least that lawyers and boys themselves were persuasive in arguing that they had been the recipients of coercion or abuse, even if that was not always the case. Like their older counterparts, they were unlikely to admit to behaviour that cast them as an outlaw or immoral. But part of the reluctance to prosecute boys may be explained by judicial attitudes: in effect the courts carved out a place for youthful indiscretion, and judges were anxious that adolescent offences should not ruin future prospects. Certainly, the decision on physical incapacity in the case of Wade and Walt protected young boys up to a certain age from charges of rape and sodomy. Another possibility is that the primary interest of the state was to convict adults who transgressed sexual and social norms. In these cases, the cooperation and testimony of younger counterparts was a crucial part of the corroborative case.

If boys walked the tricky line dividing vulnerability from possibility, then men's behaviour was mediated by desire, situational circumstance and design. The rural frontier is one context that features strongly in the evidence. Late nineteenth-century Queensland was largely a masculine preserve predicated on mining, agriculture and pastoral pursuits. Men still significantly outnumbered women in the 1890s. The imbalance between the sexes persisted into the early decades of the twentieth century, and was magnified outside the larger metropolitan centres of Brisbane and Toowoomba in the state's south-east.³³ It was here, beyond the confines of urban life, that mateship emerged as the dominant narrative of masculinity. By definition, these men had little social infrastructure, limited or no family networks, and a dearth of female companionship. At a time when few working-class boys finished school, it was not uncommon for younger boys and adolescents to travel in company with men in search of work or live rough in a male-only world.³⁴

Some young men with no other sexual outlet found intimate companionship and sexual release with their mates in the rural context, especially under the influence of liquor. Alcohol was a prominent feature of male frontier life in colonies like Queensland and New Zealand. Here, boys may have been especially attractive for lonely men. They were more physically compliant and emotionally controllable than adult contemporaries: a safer bet in a world where rough justice could be served without hesitation when sexual availability was misread.³⁵

Older European attitudes to the accessibility of young male bodies may have also persisted in the frontier worlds of Australia, New Zealand and America, tempering dominant attitudes to sex with young people. As Randolph Trumbach explains, it was acceptable up until the eighteenth century for boys to pass through a period of sexual passivity as the objects of adult male desire.³⁶ While this pattern began to fracture in urban environments like London after 1700, where social and industrial transformation was rapid, there is some evidence to suggest this trend persisted in rural pockets of settler societies well into the nineteenth century.³⁷

The young male body, then, was not only manipulable but may have offered some kind of institutionalized and erotic allure in a male-only world. For some men, the soft, denuded and lithe adolescent body possibly evoked feminine characteristics in an environment where memory was often the only reminder of the female form. 'Of indeterminate character', Martha Vicinus explains, boys were 'handsome liminal creature[s] [who] could absorb and reflect a variety of sexual desires and emotional needs. The boy personified a fleeting moment of liberty and of dangerously attractive innocence.'³⁸

Ethnicity also figured in men's conceptions of youths and sexuality. Like those possibly drawn to the gendered liminality of young bodies, men from non-Western cultures brought with them to new worlds very different conceptions about sex and gender at a time when Queensland was the most racially heterogeneous of all the Australasian colonies. Alongside white and Indigenous populations, Chinese and Japanese immigrants and Pacific Islander indentured labourers made up three distinct minority population segments.³⁹ Some Melanesians, for example, came from societies where homosexual initiations were fundamental to becoming a man, or where homosexual acts were tolerated in male society.⁴⁰ There are a number of Queensland examples where experienced Pacific labourers were discovered in compromising positions with new young recruits.⁴¹

Chinese notions of sex too were very different to the British sex and gender order that emerged in the eighteenth century. Traditional concepts of sex in China were power-based and geared towards social roles, much like patterns in ancient Greece and Rome.⁴² It is difficult to assess whether these ideas were transposed to colonial settings with working-class immigration. What was a Chinese gardener thinking when he decided to seduce a 14-year-old plumber's apprentice at Killarney on the Southern Downs in 1912? And what should we make of another Chinese male who reported the incident to police?⁴³

Along with desire for the young male body and cultural baggage imported from Asia and the Pacific, violence was an ever-present possibility of frontier life. Power, as Chris Brickell reminds us, was both a constitutive and motivating force in age-structured relationships.⁴⁴ The case of 21-year-old Daniel and youth Jerome is a case in point. It highlights the deployment of violence against young males and calls into question the utility of age when it comes to identifying abuse and capacity. On New Year's Eve in 1898, Daniel and Jerome had returned to their tent after cutting wood at Brenda Station in far west southern Queensland. Arriving back at the camp, Daniel ordered his younger workmate to strip naked for a beating. Terrified, the youth complied and lay over the bunk where he was struck twice with a cane. Jerome explained what happened next to the court:

He said ['N]ow do you know what I am going to do[?]'

I said 'Yes', thinking he was going to give me a hiding.

He said, 'No I am going to give you something that will teach you to do as I tell you.'

He said, 'I am going to get into you.'

He dropped his pants and caught me around the waist and arms and held me there with both his arms... I could feel him trying to get into me... and after a while he succeeded in penetrating into me a good way. I tried to get away again but he would not leave [sic] me.⁴⁵

If the absence of women in rural Queensland encouraged homosociality and situational sex, the brutality of the frontier equally bred countervailing traditions of violence. Male aggression was directed not only against women and children but against male adolescents as well. As Libby Connors reminds us, sexual violence could be used to reassert the social order, to inflict humiliation and subordination, and to exercise control within the remote colonial world.⁴⁶

Control and power were especially pervasive in institutional settings, even if such matters were less likely to come to official notice because of this very dynamic. Four teachers in this sample were accused of sexual assaults on boys, including 30-year-old Eric, who was convicted of sexually interfering with three male students at a state school near Rockhampton in 1911.⁴⁷ Five years earlier, in Brisbane, the 29-year-old Superintendent of the Boys' Home at inner-suburban Woolloowin was charged with three offences against wards in his care.

Narratives of effeminacy often absent in other age-structured affairs appear more prominently in the institutional context. William Chidley, who earlier described his schoolboy interludes without remorse, wrote of his shame when he was later masturbated by a young teacher whom he described as a man with an effeminate face and hands.⁴⁸ The Brisbane newspaper *Truth*, meanwhile, in its coverage of the Woolloowin Boys' Home scandal, drew attention to the Superintendent's high cheek bones and affected demeanour.⁴⁹ Such descriptions perhaps acted to cast offenders as weak, dangerous and atypical of men in positions of trust.

The family also contained hidden dangers, even if intrafamilial abuse between members of the same sex is almost entirely absent from the historical record. This is an area requiring urgent scholarly attention. We do know that boys in state care were often sent out to work with families, often as part of their sentence in reformatories.⁵⁰ Here, under the remit of protection and correction, boys tenured to the colonial family could be subject to abuse by social relatives – perhaps a father or brother figure with whom they were residing. The 1896 case of Wilbert is one of the rare examples to come to light.

In that year, 13-year-old Wilbert found himself in trouble with the law. Convicted of breaking and entering, he was shipped from Bundaberg (north of Brisbane) to the Reformatory for Boys in the colonial capital, some 350

kilometres away. After a number of months in detention, Wilbert was placed in service with the Nicholls family, compromising Mr and Mrs Nicholls and their two children, including their eldest son, 16-year-old Milton. A few months after the boy's arrival, Milton approached Wilbert down by the local jetty asking whether reformatory boys engaged in sexual practices.⁵¹ Wilbert denied knowledge of any such thing, even if the visiting Justices' registers indicate that some of his contemporaries were punished for forceful or arranged encounters.⁵² That night after the lights went out, Milton snuck into Wilbert's room and accosted the boy for sex. Wilbert attempted to resist the advances, but the physically stronger 16-year-old was persistent and controlling. Young Wilbert finally relented and so began a three-year pattern of abuse with shades of physical violence.

In 1899, Wilbert, now 16 years old, ran away from service with the Nicholls family and found refuge at a station north of Brisbane. The investigation into his absconding is what brought this case to police attention. But unlike some of the other boys in this chapter, Wilbert had attempted to bring his experience to notice. He had made numerous complaints to an older acquaintance with no success. Apparently his confidant did not take further action because 'he didn't think he [Wilbert] had told me the truth'.⁵³ Wilbert had been too frightened to notify the police on his own initiative and hoped that his older friend might take action on his behalf. Wilbert's actions were a counterpoint to those boys who were unable or unwilling to speak out. Despite the police investigation turning up other credible evidence about Milton's coercive behaviour with other boys, the police and the prosecution refused to proceed on the matter given Wilbert's doubtful character.⁵⁴ The potential stain of 'unnaturalness' on the young perpetrator Milton also figured in the authorities' decision to discontinue the case.

Out of the towns and cities boys and adolescents came into contact with adult men and other youths on the streets and in workplaces. If these environments could be a dangerous place for the young, they offered others an entrée into the nascent queer worlds emerging in the capital Brisbane. As Melissa Bellanta points out, young Australian larrikins and queer men would have intersected on street corners, parks, vacant lots and abandoned buildings where those interested in same-sex pursuits also loitered.⁵⁵ Like patterns elsewhere, Brisbane's queer subculture was structured around particular public places – certain men began to knit connective threads across city streets, parks and public toilets. With limited access to private space, wage-earning men sought out privacy and leisure outside the confines of the traditional home.⁵⁶ Some queer men began marking out their difference by dress, demeanour and affectation, and by the late nineteenth century, the flamboyant and passive male was slowly beginning to emerge as a distinct archetype. In Sydney, for instance, scandalous broadsheet *The Scorpion* ran a sensational story on the 'Oscar Wilde's [sic] of Sydney'.⁵⁷ The report referenced London's high-profile 1899 Cleveland Street scandal and the

working-class messenger boys involved in the affair. *The Scorpion* suggested that similar patterns were occurring locally.

Newsboys in particular developed an unsupervised culture occupying the same kinds of places where certain men cruised for sex.⁵⁸ Let us consider Brisbane's 'naughty newsboys' as the press called them: 17-year-old Allan, 19-year-old Wilbur and 16-year-old Robert.⁵⁹ On a Sunday afternoon in mid-October 1905, they had all been roughing about with a group of boys in the rooms of an abandoned oyster saloon in Brisbane's Queen Street when, Robert later alleged, their horseplay got out of hand. By intention or design, the three boys got separated from the rest of the group and found themselves in one of the many rooms upstairs. According to Robert, the two other boys grabbed him by the arms and knocked him to the ground. As Wilbur pinned the boy's shoulders to the dusty floor, Allan undid Robert's belt and pulled down his pants. Allan then placed himself between the boy's legs where he 'bumped away' for some ten minutes. Not satisfied with aiding and abetting, Wilbur then demanded some attention of his own. 'If you don't give me one I will shove it in your mouth', he declared.⁶⁰ Hearing footsteps in the hallway outside, Robert seized the moment of distraction and managed to wriggle free. Outside in the hall, he saw two other boys, buttoning up his pants as he passed by. He immediately notified the police of what had occurred and his assailants were apprehended soon after.

Like many of the cases here, it is difficult to unpick with any certainty the dynamics of that day's events. Robert's version of events – that he was outnumbered and overpowered by his older companions – was corroborated by Dr Alexander Marks, who testified at trial that Robert had sustained physical injuries from the assault. The jury found the evidence compelling and Allan and Wilbur were both convicted of sodomy.⁶¹ But what did the defendants make of their own behaviour and what about the other boys who were playing alongside them that afternoon? In his own defence, Allan told the arresting officer, Police Constable William Lipp, that Robert was a 'puff'. '[I]t is not the first time he has done it', Allan declared. 'I can bring a witness who will swear that he got ten bob from a black fellow that stuffed him. I knew what he wanted when he walked up the stairs so I followed him ... There are plenty of others in Brisbane who do it besides us mob, so I am not the first.'⁶² The term 'puff', forerunner to the word 'poof', was a nineteenth-century reference to effeminate homosexual males, and used in London from about the 1830s onwards.⁶³

Allan remarks indicate that some working-class youths were familiar with queer identities and subculture, using this knowledge to explain and justify their own behaviour. One telling indicator is Robert's alleged status as effeminate homosexual. Presumptions about his identity downplayed the violence of the defendants' actions. Indeed, the revelation that he had 'done it before', apparently meant that he would do it again (presumably with any male who wanted it), and that by walking up the stairs, he had indicated his

sexual availability to the other boys. Despite his own actions that afternoon, Allan did not identify as queer. He maintained his own masculine gender status by adopting the active role in intercourse. As George Chauncey explains of early twentieth-century New York, some youth gangs regarded effeminate homosexuals as fair game. 'Sexually using a fairy', Chauncey argues, was not only 'legitimized as a "normal" act but could actually provide some of the same enhancement that mastering a woman did'.⁶⁴ The fact that Allan referred to 'us mob', and that the footsteps heard by Robert that afternoon belonged to two other newsboys who watched the act from the hallway outside, suggests that some Brisbane boys were engaging in sex with males alongside a complex queer underworld. Added to the 'naughty newsboys' who had sex with 'puffs' but otherwise considered themselves normal, other youths appear to be enmeshed in urbanized queer life. One young employee who worked at a Brisbane hardware store in the early 1890s, for instance, picked up customers in the toilets there, and other youths at the store teased each other about sexual positions, joking about 'which end' they adopted in intercourse.⁶⁵

The historical evidence around boys and homosex is difficult to unpick. Frightened, intimidated or concerned about their job security, boys who were abused did not always complain about their maltreatment, or were encouraged by others to let the matter rest. When they did bring matters to notice, their character – their criminal history, reputation or the language they used in court – meant that their allegations might be ignored or disbelieved. On the other side of the coin, those boys who confessed to abuse or maltreatment when confronted by their parents or the authorities were not always as non-compliant as the depositions might suggest. At a time when homosex remained illegal, male youths, like the men caught alongside them, were likely to downplay their agency in same-sex encounters. Boys' sexual engagement with men was mediated by money, consumer pleasure, power and coercion as well as curiosity and sexual pleasure.

The case of Wade and Walt indicates that age was central to contemporary knowledge about boys and capacity – at least as far as the state was concerned. But it is unlikely that this translated to a frontier world at a time when few boys finished school and many performed physical labour alongside adolescents and men. Here, older institutionalized ideas of young male passivity, the lithe and ambiguous adolescent male body, and the cultural baggage of men of other ethnic extraction tempered nineteenth-century British sex and gender norms. Gender too could mediate knowledge of male-only sex. If effeminate behaviour indicated sexual availability for urban youths including the 'naughty newsboys', it also marked out potential dangers that certain men posed to boys. The Superintendent of the Woolloowin Boys' Home and Chidley's teacher were both men of effeminate character. As the twentieth century progressed, this would become

an increasing marker of danger, as homosexual identity, perversion and molestation became increasingly conflated.

If historians of homosex have been prepared to explore the sexual potential between men and boys, they have been less likely to consider the possibility of abuse in their analyses. In some ways, this stems from the scope of their inquiries, which tend to focus on the formation of subcultures and expressions of identity. The criminal justice evidence is quite clear, however, that danger accompanied possibility in equal measure, the balance weighed by age, physicality, power and vulnerability. Age-structured relationships within institutional settings, for instance, are one context that often indicates the presence of abuse: even in the early twentieth century, the assault of boys by those in positions of authority could generate particular concern when it came to notice.⁶⁶ The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century world is long removed from our own. But at a time when sexuality, abuse, capacity and childhood remain at the forefront of the public imagination, attitudes and approaches to sex in the past can elucidate our modern knowledge formation and how we might best respond to problems of agency and abuse.

Notes

This research was funded by a Griffith University Postdoctoral and Research Fellowship. I would like to thank the editors, Chris Brickell and Mark Finnane for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

1. All names have been changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of defendants, complainants and witnesses as part of the conditions of use governing these records. The first initial of each Christian name is correct although the name itself has been changed. The names of officers of the court and witnesses for the state are correct.
2. Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA), CCT7/N65, Briefs, Depositions, and Associated Papers in Criminal Cases [in Rockhampton] (14 September 1897), Deposition no. 3.
3. Sir Matthew Hale, *Historia Placitorum Cronae: The History of the Pleas of the Crown: Published from the Original Manuscripts by Sollom Emlyn; with Additional Notes and References to Modern Cases Concerning the Pleas of the Crown* by George Wilson (London: T. Payne, 1800), 629.
4. I have discussed the legal aspects of this case in Yorick Smaal 'An Imbecility of Body as well as Mind': Common Law and the Sexual Incapacity of Boys', *Criminal Law Journal*, vol. 36 (2012), 249–51.
5. Yorick Smaal, 'Historical Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse', part 1, *History Compass*, vol. 11, no. 9 (2013), 702–714.
6. See Stephen Angelides, 'Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse and the Erasure of Childhood Sexuality', *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2004), 141–77.
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 13. See Maynard, "'Horrible Temptations'", 191–235; Chris Brickell, "'Waiting for Uncle Ben": Age-structured Homosexuality in New Zealand, 1920–50', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 3. (2012), 467–95; Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–57* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 110–11, 124–25, and especially 182–86.
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 26. QSA, CCT2/87, Briefs, Depositions and Associated papers filed in Criminal Cases Heard in the Circuit Court, Ipswich (18 April 1899), Depositions nos. 1–4.
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 28. *Western Star and Roma Advertiser*, 18 February 1899, 2; *Western Star and Roma Advertiser*, 8 April 1899, 2; *Warwick Argus*, 20 May 1899, 7.
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13

Leery Sue Goes to the Show: Popular Performance, Sexuality and the Disorderly Girl

Melissa Bellanta

On a Saturday night in 1887, 13-year-old Mary Ann M., a resident of the inner-industrial Sydney district of Waterloo, paid a visit to Paddy's Market. After winding past the sideshows and colourful stalls, the sound of bands and the calls of vendors, she ended up talking with a group of 'larrikin' youths in the streets outside. 'Larrikin' was a colloquialism used throughout colonial Australasia in this period, most often in Sydney and Melbourne. It described participants in an urban youth subculture based around loose-knit street gangs known as 'larrikin pushes' or 'mobs'. Composed of young people of both sexes aged between their early teens and early 20s, the larrikin subculture was characterized by a hectic enjoyment of popular entertainments, street-smart dress, burlesque humour, a love of pugilism and clashes with police. It was also characterized by sexual activity, including group acts of male sexual violence towards women.¹

One of the 'larrikins' whom Mary Ann M. met outside Paddy's had recently been charged over the gang rape of a 16-year-old girl. The charges brought against Michael Mangan over the so-called 'Mount Rennie Outrage' had eventually been dropped, but other members of the 'Waterloo push' to which he belonged had been convicted and hanged.² Patrick Flynn, also present outside the market, would be charged with a sexual offence that night. He took Mary Ann M. to Redfern fire station, where he worked as a watchman, and had sex with her along with two of his friends. Discovering them in bed a few hours later, police charged Flynn and his friends with carnal knowledge of a minor. When interviewed, M. claimed the sex had been consensual, and that she had also had sex with two other men a few months earlier while staying with a girlfriend, Nell D.³

Contemporary observers of girls mixing in larrikin circles in late nineteenth-century Australia were by turns outraged and concerned by their sexual precocity. They referred to them using sexualized terms such as 'prostitute', 'brazen-faced hussy', 'brazen-faced larrikiness', 'girl brothel-keeper'

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Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World

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palgrave
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Selection, introduction and editorial matter © Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight 2016
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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–1–137–48940–1

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Children, childhood and youth in the British world / [edited by]
Shirleene Robinson, Simon Sleight.

pages cm. — (Palgrave studies in the history of childhood)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978–1–137–48940–1 (hardback)

1. Children—Great Britain—Colonies—History. 2. Youth—Great Britain—Colonies—History. 3. British—Colonization—History.

4. Nationalism—Great Britain—Colonies—History. 5. Great Britain—Colonies—Social life and customs. I. Robinson, Shirleene, 1977–
editor. II. Sleight, Simon, editor.

HQ792.G7C48 2015

305.230941—dc23

2015025766

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