

Mapping Out the Venereal Wilderness: Public Health and STD in New Zealand 1920–1980. By Antje Kampf. Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2007. 272pp. European price: €29.90. ISBN 978-3-8258-9765-9.

WHEN I WAS A POSTGRADUATE AT MASSEY UNIVERSITY one of my fellow students, Philip Fleming, was completing his PhD on the response to venereal disease in the first half of the twentieth century. I remember him scandalizing the more strait-laced types by saying he was studying ‘the clap’ when asked about his research. The reaction has long bemused me; venereal disease was hardly the most risqué topic, and besides, this was the late 1980s and were we not meant to be all grown up about sexual matters by then? Antje Kampf’s study of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) in the twentieth century puts this reaction in context. In the 1980s New Zealand was only just emerging from a set of public health responses to venereal disease that had been around for decades: venereology was a shunned medical discipline, and although overt moralizing about ‘at risk’ groups had abated somewhat, prejudices about VD patients continued and old stereotypes died hard. Abstinence was still being touted as the best way to stay pox-free in the not-so-swinging 1970s. No wonder VD research, even of a historical nature, caused embarrassed titters a decade later.

Kampf’s book adds substantially to the local literature on VD — strangely thin given the wealth of source material and the growing attention internationally (and here) to sexual matters. Public health is her main focus; how the Department of Health organized itself to respond to VD, and how regulations regarding VD came into being. She covers the different treatment regimes such as clinics set up in the wake of World War I, and the VD ‘answerphone’ (‘Dial-a-VD’) established in 1976. Prevention and education were key parts of public health treatment, so sex education, or rather lack of it, forms a strong theme. Not being controversial seems to have been the guiding motto of the Department of Health and the medical profession, as state agencies and other groups all appeared to have been expecting each other, or preferably parents, to impart the necessary instruction. Information about VD could be hard to find, with posters advising about clinics put in places so discreet they were barely noticed.

Much of the literature about VD focuses on issues of morality, particularly concerning female behaviour and sexuality. Those with VD have often been presented as faceless ‘sufferers’, and VD itself as a negative experience. Kampf aims to take things beyond the passive, stigmatized female archetype having a poor time of it at the hands of an uncaring medical profession; ‘what happened to the male patient?’ she asks.

I am not sure a case is ever made for VD being anything other than negative. Just because contracting it was a mark of bravado among some sailors does not necessarily mean it was a positive experience. Patients may not have considered themselves ‘suffering’ or as victims, but the treatment at early clinics (such as lack of privacy) clearly prompted many with VD to seek treatment elsewhere.

One of the strengths of this work is turning the focus onto men, in their roles as ‘victims’ and spreaders of disease. Here, the sections on seaman and the Navy are particularly interesting. Comments from sailors about their behaviour in ports and from ‘ship girls’ are nicely juxtaposed. The chapter on wartime paints a stark picture of the New Zealand soldier away from home, and the discussion of the World War II experience covers much new ground; the long trek up Italy after 1943 takes on a whole new meaning when the VD rate there — 115.8 per 1000 men — is set against 47 per 1000 for the war as a whole (and 60 per 1000 for World War I). The Navy had the worst reputation but also a more realistic attitude towards prophylactics. The daily condom allowance (given to ratings from 1933) was increased in wartime.

Looking at male and, from the later 1940s especially, Maori patients certainly disrupts some of the traditional ways of viewing VD treatment and policy. But in the end, as

Kampf notes, the female patient came in for the most scrutiny through the period under discussion. And because of the social construction of female sexual behaviour (and indeed all sexual behaviour), it is hard to keep ‘morality’ out of it. More discussion of how notions of morality and expected female sexual behaviour changed over the century would have helped here.

The work shows the advantages of taking a long view of a topic, placing New Zealand into an international context (we were no better or worse than other Westernized countries) as well as delving into a range of literature. Too often studies of public health simply look at policy; the effects of that, its use or disuse by patients, is ignored. Policy and practice are brought together well, and here the research conducted at medical schools (including localized studies or interviews with patients) comes into play. The post-World War II chapters in particular are strong, especially in their discussions of ‘promiscuity’ and youth behaviour.

This book is converted from a PhD, and some of the clunkiness of thesis construction remains. More care and better editing would have smoothed the text, picked up some of the minor errors (the date of New Zealand’s contagious diseases legislation, for example) and ensured that the book’s title (and chapter titles) reflected the content. This is a study essentially of the twentieth century up to 1980, and the First World War story plays a key role.

There is a lot of food for thought in this work, and I found myself jotting down many topics crying out for fuller treatment in other studies — sex education, sexuality and the armed forces, the port. Raising questions and pointing to further studies is a mark of a good piece of history. I only hope the German publication does not make this book inaccessible to New Zealand audiences.

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Looking Flash: Clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand. Edited by Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow and Stephanie Gibson. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2007. 279pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN 978-1-86940-397-3.

LOOKING FLASH COMPRISES a significant and diverse collection of essays reflecting recent and ongoing research by academics and museum curators on aspects of New Zealand dress history. The essays highlight a number of approaches to the study of dress in New Zealand, from analysis of individual items to social and cultural histories. The variety of approaches and range of subject matter reflect the ad hoc nature of current research into dress in New Zealand.

All three editors have at some time worked as curators in New Zealand museums; one — my colleague Stephanie Gibson, a History curator at Te Papa — continues to work in the field.

Authors of essays with museum connections have, not surprisingly, chosen to write on topics relating to or inspired by objects in their respective collections. Their essays deal with or relate to items as diverse as the extraordinary journey of a significant cloak ‘from a weaver’s expert hands, to a museum collection, to the collector’s market and back to a museum again’; the unpicking of a long-held mystery surrounding deconstructed eighteenth-century silk gowns in Te Papa’s collection; and clothing fashioned by and also made for survivors of ships wrecked off the lower South Island coast. Jennifer Quérée’s essay on the clothing of the *Dundonald* and other survivors of shipwrecks off the New Zealand coast makes for fascinating reading. Like most of the essays in *Looking Flash*, it is a well-researched and well-written account. A brief analysis of the significance of