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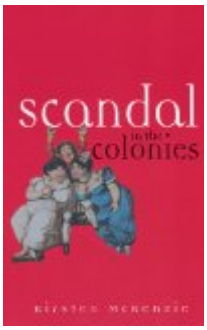
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kirsten McKenzie. *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town 1820-1850.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004. xiii + 210 pp. $27.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-522-85075-8.



Reviewed by Kerry Ward

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Oscar Wilde would have loved this book and it is therefore no surprise that it has won a prestigious Australian book prize and found a local public audience. Kirsten McKenzie wields her pen with a wicked wit that makes the most of her scandalous stories of cross-dressing doctors, phony nobles, and defiled damsels whose tales were told at the beginning of the Victorian era of the British Empire. But the salacious gossip that oiled the wheels of conversation and newspaper circulation in the outposts of empire like Sydney and Cape Town, and occasionally made its way to the center of the empire's social universe, London, was more than just idle chatter. Forging family reputations was a serious business for the colonial bourgeoisie. Career advancement and advantageous marriages were concluded through access to exclusive elite colonial networks, members of which were paranoid about their social position as individuals and as a group. The insecurities of social status in the colonies made the creation and maintenance of personal prestige and honor a major preoccupation of these new elites. "While the tyranny of distance was by no means overcome, the imperial network was above all a network of information, what was gossip in Cape Town could soon become gossip in Sydney, Calcutta or London" (p. 7).

McKenzie explores the dynamics between sex, status, and politics through a series of colonial scandals that, at their heart, show how the colonial ruling class created, maintained, and jealously guarded its position over generations. It is only when these scandals were exposed to the gaze and gossip of the public sphere that they became of political relevance. There was more at stake than individual family reputations, namely the very reputation of the colony in the eyes of the imperial center, particularly when these matters came to the attention of the Colonial Office, Parliament, or British public opinion. Cape Town and Sydney were undergoing convulsive social changes during this period and their fates were very much in the hands of their imperial overlords. The Cape Colony was induced to enforce slave amelioration and emancipation that fundamentally altered the social structure of the colonial society. The Australian settlements were attempting to alter their reputation as penal

colonies and establish their credentials as respectable settler societies.

The first part of the book, "Patrolling the Boundaries," opens with the 1831-33 scandal that surrounded Jane Elizabeth Wylde, daughter of the Chief Justice of the Cape Colony, Sir John Wylde. A high-ranking career colonial official, John Wylde used successive appointments in the colonies in an attempt to secure his own professional, financial, and family position. Rumors of debt and marital estrangement dogged Wylde at the Cape, with good reason. The most damaging gossip, the pregnancy through incest of his eldest daughter and companion, Jane, exploded into a fully-fledged imperial scandal. The stain to reputation of these rumors would have been indelible and socially ruinous. The case reached the Colonial Office, which pressed for an official enquiry to protect the reputation of the imperial government. Wylde was able to deflect these accusations and protect his position while battling rivalries in local and imperial politics. Wylde eventually prevailed by asserting that malicious female gossip had been at the heart of matter, deftly using the masculinity of the colonial press to clear his name and simultaneously that of the colony in the court of imperial public opinion, and presenting male witnesses who attested in court to his version of events. Weathering another scandal resulting from his divorce, Wylde was able to retain his position until his retirement in 1855, two years after the Cape Colony received representative government.

McKenzie presents this case, and a range of others, to assert that colonial scandals which broke onto the imperial state threatened the tenuous claims of colonies to respectability, and therefore undermined their case for representative government. Cases like this resulted in the linking of private and public spheres in terms of colonial political and social recognition. Both at the Cape and in Australia during the mid-nineteenth century, issues of colonial respectability were inextricably tied to the body politic. Respectability was created and social boundaries enforced by both men and women. Exclusivity was created through the maintenance of social circles and keeping up appearances though consumption and clothing. Admittance to events at Government House, as the uppermost rung of the social ladder, was a matter of elite survival, not only for the individuals involved but for their future family prospects. The fact that symbols of status could be manipulated or impersonated by opportunists from within their ranks, or newly arrived from other parts of the empire, heightened both the insecurities and the determination of colonial bourgeoisies to protect their ranks from the taint of impropriety.

This helps to explain why so much tension existed around issues of colonial sexual morality, both at the Cape and in Australia. Stories of illicit affairs, broken engagements, seduced maidens, unwanted pregnancies, and fallen women were not only tantalizing gossip but could sully the reputation of the whole colony. In Australia these concerns over female sexuality coalesced around the issue of convict labor, particularly in regards to the perceived promiscuity of women convicts and their potential to corrupt men and pollute the colonial-born youth. The anti-transportation lobby used these perceptions to argue its cause and undermine the system of convict assignments in favor of free-wage labor and free settlers. Similar arguments were made by the slave abolition lobby with regard to slave women in the British Empire, including the Cape. "Concerns about the sanctity of the respectable home, about the role of women in civilized society, and about cultural contamination in the colonial sphere were all central to the arguments launched against unfree labor during this period" (p. 184). McKenzie explores these issues in part 2, "In the Courts," and part 3, "Transforming the Colonies."

Scandal and gossip begin with whispers and innuendo that are not necessarily recorded in accessible ways, but McKenzie brings an impressive array of sources to document her stories. Official

government correspondence and reports, court records, newspapers, church documents, private club records, private letters, personal diaries, family papers, and contemporary artistic representations all provide the substance for McKenzie's book. Her ability to construct clear and entertaining narrative stories while weaving her analysis of these colonial cause célèbres through these disparate sources is impressive. This book has appeal for a wide range of readers, including cultural studies, comparative colonialism, comparative slavery, and gender studies. ***Scandal in the Colonies*** offers insight into the way that empires and colonialism worked and how political struggles played themselves out in both local and imperial arenas.