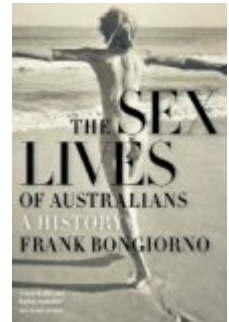


Frank Bongiorno. *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History*. Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012. 416 pp. RRP 32.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-86395-567-6.



Reviewed by Zora Simic

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Frank Bongiorno's *The Sex Lives of Australians* is one of the most important works of Australian history to be published in the last decade. Associate professor of history at the Australian National University Bongiorno, already a well-respected labor historian, is a relative newcomer to the field of sexuality history, though he has published previously on the impact of the contraceptive pill on Australian society. Like many of us, he has also come to research in the area via teaching, and it was through that experience that Bongiorno identified a gap in Australian scholarship: a survey history of sexuality in Australia, from white settlement (or "invasion," to use a term that also has sexual connotations, given the specific history of colonizing men expecting or demanding sexual access to Aboriginal women) to the present. In some respects, this gap is surprising. Australian historians have hardly ignored sexuality, and history of sexuality conferences have been a vibrant, if irregular, feature of the Australian history scene for at least two decades. Further, some of Australia's most distinguished

historians have turned their attention to sex, notably Stephen Garton, author of the benchmark historiographical study *Histories of Sexuality* (2004), feminist historians Judith Allen, Jill Julius Matthews, Gail Reekie, Joy Damousi, and Marilyn Lake (to select just five out of an impressive and constantly expanding field), and gay history pioneers Robert Aldrich and Clive Moore. Yet, given the typically massive scope of some of these projects—to take Raelene Francis's history of prostitution in Australia, *Selling Sex* (2007), as one example—Bongiorno's history is not so much overdue, as finally possible.

In addition to his own substantial original research, Bongiorno adeptly synthesizes (and where necessary critiques) most of the key scholarship on Australian sexuality over the last thirty years, including that of Lisa Featherstone, representative of the most recent generation of sexual historians in Australia, and herself the author of a recently published, wide-ranging history of sexuality in Australia, *Let's Talk About Sex* (2011). It is an exciting time to be teaching and researching sexu-

al history in Australia, and much of this work, including Bongiorno's, has relevance beyond the national framework. From his treatment of local responses to the Oscar Wilde conviction to the obvious British influence on censorship and on to the sexual revolution and gay liberation, the Australian examples are not so much derivative (and in the latter case clearly innovative) as freshly revealing of transnational phenomena. Our wider historical understanding of prostitution and its regulation; the treatment of venereal disease, particularly among the military; and the formation of gay subcultures all benefit here from Australian examples. Bongiorno also makes particularly good use of Havelock Ellis, who prior to his career as a doctor and pioneering sexologist worked as a teacher in rural Australia, "the loneliest, most isolated" experience of his life, yet for his "interior development, the most fateful, the most decisive, of all my years" (p. 58).

At the same time, Bongiorno brings a fresh perspective and rich detail to Australian history. Here, the by now familiar themes of the convict taint or legacy, the quest for national identity, perennial anxieties about race and population, and the impact of war (both on the frontier and off-shore) are significantly illuminated by placing sex and sexuality as central to the main story. In this task, Bongiorno has substantial official sources to draw on: the select committees of the colonial period, and the royal commissions of the post-federation era, who, whether meeting to assess the workings of the penal system, the conditions of the working class, or the falling birth rate, produced reams of contemporary opinion on sex and sexuality, not all of it "expert." And while these sources may have been used elsewhere, Bongiorno, attentive to the demands of a broad history, has taken evident care to ensure that he also updates areas of Australian history that have been relatively neglected when it comes to the history of sexuality, including post-World War II migration. The "New Australians," all migrants from Europe under the conditions of the long-

standing White Australia Policy, "were sometimes a source of sexual fascination and moral panic" (p. 212). Migrant women from southern Europe also tended to exhibit different sexual histories and habits than their Anglo-Australian contemporaries (p. 257), while Aboriginal women were often being coerced into using contraception at the same time as other women were demanding access to it, thereby suggesting the limits of an all-encompassing sexual revolution paradigm. Earlier waves of migration, namely of the Chinese to the gold fields of mid-nineteenth-century Victoria and to a lesser extent other colonies, are also brought into closer alignment with other patterns, via a discussion of sex. Bongiorno makes a convincing argument, for instance, that the growing emphasis on so-called Chinese sodomites during the 1830s may have been a method of displacing colonial embarrassment over the "alleged prevalence of sodomy among male convicts" (p. 30).

Given white Australia's origins as an experiment in British penal reform, contemporaneous with the emergence of new ideas about sexual difference and discernable shifts in sexual behavior and fertility in industrialized Britain, Australian sex was, writes Bongiorno, in key respects born "modern" (p. 3). Consequently, the staple themes that mark the emergence of modern Western sexuality are addressed, including the Victorian cult of (especially female) respectability, enduring and adaptable anti-masturbation discourses, sexual double standards, and ongoing official and unofficial concerns about both the quantity and quality of births. Also well-covered are modern preoccupations with eugenics, birth control, heterosexual desire, and policing sexual "abnormality" or "deviance," often with the aid of sexology. In each instance, however, these issues played out within a distinctly Australian context, where the first colony New South Wales was notable for its large, predominantly male, convict population, and an uneven ratio of white men to white women that in some parts of the country lingered into the twentieth century. Australia's "founding sexuali-

ties" reflected the peculiar demographics of a penal society, including conflicts between the colonists and Aboriginal men over Aboriginal women, a culture of gang or "pack rape," and colonial condemnations of interracial sex and the sexual habits of the lower classes, espoused by officials who were themselves sometimes in domestic and sexual arrangements that would have been out of bounds back in Britain. All of these patterns would endure in some form after the abolition of convict transportation in 1840 onwards.

The onset and features of sexual modernity have been thoroughly debated amongst historians of sexuality, particularly post-Foucault, and Bongiorno is aware of these debates without feeling the need to slavishly reproduce them. In the main, this is a history that shows rather than tells. The lead-up to, and immediate aftermath of, the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 is presented here as coinciding with the creation of sexuality as a marker of the self. Nascent and new nationhood was inevitably sexed as Australia was inaugurated as a White Man's Country where the declining birth rate was commonly interpreted by a chorus of pronatalists as not only selfish, but a potential racial problem. Meanwhile, feminists--buoyed from 1902 by the federal vote for women (early by international standards)--and others, including mostly middle-class reformers in social purity movements, sought to reform male sexuality as urban growth brought up close instances of aggressive male sexuality that in the case of the Mount Rennie gang rape case of the late 1880s were used to cast larger aspersions about the national character, and in particular young, urban men or "larrikans." These various projects--promoting the birthrate, protecting the racial and moral purity of the nation, domesticating men as husbands and fathers--were sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting (hence some mixed messages about contraception throughout much of the history covered here); and as shown by Bongiorno they were not necessarily represen-

tative of "the sex lives of Australians." Bongiorno is well aware of the potential pitfalls of allowing dominant discourses to swamp a history of sexuality. Thus he notes that sexual modernity was hardly uniform in its scope or effects, arriving later in rural Australia (p. 161); that the "modern girl" was clearly white and that the "meaning of singleness changed if you were Aboriginal" (p. 162); and that there was often a gap between the new sexual knowledge and what people actually knew about reproduction, for instance.

To produce a sweeping history such as this, a historian has to make decisions on how to organize the material and shape a narrative. Bongiorno employs a number of strategies, most of them successful. Generally, the history merges the thematic and the chronological, with Bongiorno revisiting themes such as contraception and prostitution across the two hundred-plus years covered here. This approach allows him to ruminate on historical change (he eschews a straightforward progress narrative), but in terms of readability the strongest chapters are those with a tight focus: the chapter on World War I is a stand-out. Another strategy is to foreground particular figures, such as the eccentric sex reformer William Chidley, who was institutionalized for his evangelical promotion of his theories, some of which were taken seriously by Ellis and Edward Carpenter (p. 150). Bongiorno draws a line of Antipodean sex theorizing from Chidley to Germaine Greer, who also saw "the living vagina as the basis for an active female (hetero) sexuality" (p. 239). The connection is a savvy one, but Bongiorno's dependence on Greer at the expense of other second-wave feminists is disappointing. It is hard to deny her significance of course, particularly in popular understandings of feminism and sexuality (curiously, women's magazines from the era such as *Cleo* are overlooked, though the groundbreaking *Forum* is not), but an opportunity was missed here to ponder some alternatives. Then again, these are also the minor criticisms of a specialist who is bound to be finicky about how

feminism figures in the overall narrative: the historian can only include so much, and Bongiorno's history is overflowing with striking examples and refreshing analysis. In his contemplation of the rise of oral sex in the 1960s, for instance, Bongiorno reminds us that "more frequent baths and showers produced cleaner genitals" (p. 235), offering one explanation.

Finally, to the question of audience. Bongiorno's history is not published by an academic press, though Black Inc. has a fine reputation in Australia for producing thought-provoking and accessible publications. *The Sex Lives of Australians* certainly meets this brief. The history has already generated significant public discussion in the Australian media, and hopefully it will be widely read. For those of us teaching the history of sexuality and/or Australian history, some chapters will be inevitably be more useful than others, but in general terms this should prove to be an invaluable resource. At times I wanted previous historians of sexuality in Australia to feature more prominently in the main text, but Bongiorno was usually generous in acknowledging other scholars and the endnotes are extensive. Boffins will appreciate the historian's deep reading: he has drawn on many important articles from now defunct journals. I look forward to teaching with *The Sex Lives of Australians*, and I have already allocated it a prominent position on my bookshelf.

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