

'The Cult of the Clitoris': Sexual Panics and the First World War

In June of 1918, a libel suit fought out in London's Central Criminal Court brought to the surface the bizarre rumour that sex-starved English women, deprived by the war of male companionship, were turning to lesbianism. The affair centred on Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*. Though it had been first put on in France in 1896 and later made into an opera by the German composer Richard Strauss, it had been banned in England by the Examiner of Plays, who regarded it as 'half Biblical, half pornographic'.¹ When news got out that the Canadian dancer Maud Allan was to appear in a private performance of *Salomé* in April of 1918 Captain Harold Spencer attacked her in the columns of a scurrilous tabloid called the *Vigilante* with an article sensationally entitled 'The Cult of the Clitoris'. In it Spencer made the astounding claim that Wilde's play was not only immoral but its current production part of a German plot to undermine British wartime resolve. Not surprisingly, Allan sued for libel.²

The three-day trial produced a string of ludicrous and amazing scenes. Noel Pemberton Billing, independent MP and publisher of the *Vigilante*, defended the truth of the cited article. Though he had a German wife he asserted in court that English society was riddled with perverts and fifth columnists forced by 'corruption and blackmail' to serve the Germans.³ The suborned included choir boys, cabinet ministers and dancing girls. A female bigamist was willing to testify that the government had ordered her to compromise Pemberton Billing by luring him to a male brothel. His star witness, Captain Spencer, claimed that he had seen in Albania a mysterious 'Black Book' in which the Germans had written both the names of the 47,000 English perverts whom they could employ as secret agents and the locations of the massage parlours, baths and public houses where they congregated. Sodomy, sadism and lesbianism were, he asserted, practised by German spies to bring the English people into 'bondage'.⁴ He

explained that he had entitled his article 'The Cult of the Clitoris' to warn the public of the 'circle of vicious women', including the 'hereditary degenerate' Maud Allan, that was attempting by various means, such as the putting on of immoral entertainments, to sap England's strength.

The 'Black Book' of course did not exist and Captain Spencer – a man who suggested that a sexually excited woman suffering from 'an enlarged and diseased clitoris' might try to have sex with an elephant – was quite mad. Nevertheless, the jury cleared Pemberton Billing and Spencer of the libel charge and the public cheered their victory.⁵ Maud Allan's counsel thought he could laugh away the absurd notion that enemy forces were seeking to pervert English society. Such was the persuasiveness of wartime sexual fears and ignorance that he was proved wrong.

Panics

A number of historians have asserted that the First World War, which in so many ways shattered the Victorian world, necessarily led to a reappraisal of traditional views of sex and gender.⁶ The Maud Allan trial, as peculiar as it was, serves as a forcible reminder that the war did not lead in any simple and direct fashion to a liberalizing of sexual mores. Across Europe millions of young men died; families were dislocated; religious beliefs declined. The war violently ushered in a world of science, technology and mechanization. But in both Berlin and London the fear that traditional sexual standards could not stand up to such an onslaught led the anxious to be all the more zealous in their defence of them. One result was the plethora of cautionary tales. The French and English not surprisingly produced a string of atrocity stories, attributing to the 'Hun' a penchant for the raping and mutilation of the defenceless. As the 'Black Book' furore indicated, however, the chief preoccupation of moralists on both sides of the lines was the sexuality of women and youths. Fear of shifting gender and generational relationships underpinned a surge of stories targeting adulterous wives, 'good time girls' and 'war babies'.

When conservatives bemoaned the decline of morality what primarily preoccupied them was the notion that women were taking advantage of the dislocations occasioned by the conflict to free themselves of old restraints. The respectable reluctantly accepted the fact that the demands of the wartime economy necessitated the recruitment of thousands of women to occupy themselves with what heretofore had been called 'men's work'.⁷ What the respectable opposed were the

apparent symptoms of sexual emancipation that followed. As women freed themselves of the restrictive clothing of the Edwardian period to take up their new tasks, the fear was that they would shed much of their moral decorum as well.

The newspapers reported that the outbreak of hostilities led to a releasing of sexual restraints. Why should young people refrain from sexual pleasures when there was no telling how long they might live? Women purportedly jumped into the arms of young men on the way to the front. Women's police patrols, established to provide better surveillance of the prostitutes who always trawled for soldiers, found themselves also dealing with 'highly painted teenagers', 'good time girls' and housewives supposedly seized by 'khaki fever'.⁸ British soldiers were as likely to contract venereal disease from an 'amateur' as from a professional.⁹ In the eyes of the respectable the line separating good and bad girls was increasingly blurred. Misogynists even accused nurses of seeking an erotic charge in caring for the wounded. Nursing – which according to Vera Brittain had a 'glamorous' nature – at the very least reversed gender roles inasmuch as strong women found themselves caring for weak men.

The war, according to official reports, placed family life under great stress. The jump in marriages in 1914–15 was hardly reassuring. Evidence soon appeared showing that hasty marriages often could not stand the strain of lengthy absences. Divorce rates soared at the end of the conflict. In Germany, for example, the number of divorces jumped from 15,000 a year for the period 1909–13 to 40,000 in 1923.¹⁰ The difficulties of re-establishing a relationship after a long separation underlay most break-ups, but moralists focused on the notion of the wife betraying her husband as he heroically risked his life at the front. Infidelity was so rife as to be almost a laughing matter. In central Europe the story was told of a movie manager who warned his audience that an armed trooper on leave was about to enter the theatre in search of his wife and her lover. Twenty-three couples immediately bolted for the exit.¹¹ It was bad enough that women might betray their husbands with the men unfit for service left at home. In England newspapers complained that women also consorted with well-paid American troops. In Germany the government was outraged to discover women fraternizing with prisoners of war. The nationalists encountered their worst nightmare, however, when the colonial powers brought black soldiers to Europe. Racists attributed to such recruits a natural taste for 'white meat' and lamented European women's morbid desire for such encounters and the cocaine and morphine with which they were associated.¹² France's stationing of Senegalese troops in the Rhineland following the Treaty of Versailles

was hysterically denounced by racists in England as well as in Germany as an incitement to rape.

Rising illegitimacy rates were pointed to by the anxious as evidence of the increasing numbers of faithless women. The German rate rose from 9.77 per cent in 1913 to 13.10 per cent in 1918.¹³ In England commentators also noted by 1915 a surge in the birth of bastards. *The Shield* reported that 'war babies' – by which it meant illegitimate children – who were usually delivered by young women had an infant mortality rate twice that of the average.¹⁴ If the illegitimacy rate were not higher it was because many women had recourse to abortion. In France the claim that many women were seeking to free themselves of a pregnancy which resulted from their being raped by Germans led even conservatives to defend abortion as appropriate for those whom they regarded as the 'war wounded'.¹⁵ Women who simply wished to terminate an undesired pregnancy were denounced by doctors and churchmen as contributing to 'race suicide'. This fanciful preoccupation with women's 'betrayal' of both their country and their sex finally and logically enough led to the construction of the notion of the 'lesbian spy'. In England it was out of such fantasies that Captain Spencer spun his story of the 'Black Book' and Maud Allan's lesbian cult. He was no doubt inspired in part by the fact that on 15 October 1917 the French government had executed Mata Hari, who had purportedly participated in sexual orgies as part of her espionage work for the Germans.¹⁶

It was not surprising that male commentators should have projected on to women their sexual fears, but as the war raged on disturbing evidence appeared that the men at the front were also falling prey to immoral urges. The war and the sacrifices that it would entail had been initially hailed by many as healthy antidotes to the materialism of the modern age. On both sides of the line nationalists presented the conflict as a test of true manliness and called on youth to demonstrate the manly virtues of courage, toughness and self-sacrifice.¹⁷ Those who had been worried by the blurring of gender lines believed that the war would return the sexes to their 'natural' roles. The virile male would fight; the woman would guard the hearth and home. Men, for a time free of the cloying interference of females, would find in the forces a chaste and virtuous male camaraderie. The army drilled them, cut their hair and put them into uniforms to bond them and make them look bigger and stronger. The popular press presented the nation's 'men' as potent and masculine warriors; the enemy as cruel and vacillating degenerates.¹⁸ Accordingly, the allies spoke of the kaiser's 'rape' of Belgium and a French professor of sexology could gravely inform his readers that research proved that the Germans had

a marked predilection for sadism.¹⁹ British propaganda presented the Germans as 'Huns' – half Asiatic brutes – given to slicing the breasts off helpless women.²⁰ Traditionally the English attributed the spread of vice to contact with continentals, especially the French. Hence the English references to French kisses, French letters and so on. But as France was a wartime ally, Anglo-Saxons now targeted the Germans as the dangerous sexual 'other'. The French for their part regarded most of their neighbours as more prone to homosexuality than themselves – referring, for example, to the *vice italien* and the *moeurs arabes*. They tended to regard the English public school, with its ritual beatings, as a particularly fertile breeding ground for sadism and masochism, but now had to show more discretion.²¹

As the war went on each side continued to insist on the moral superiority of its troops despite troubling evidence to the contrary. Under the constant barrage of artillery fire in the trenches of Flanders thousands of erstwhile brave soldiers broke down and behaved like 'hysterical women'. Shell shock, viewed as a manifestation of a dangerous loss of manliness, was initially treated with the utmost brutality.²² Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach proved successful in dealing with such cases. If the military finally accepted the diagnosis of 'war neurosis' and allowed for less punitive treatments of shell-shocked men, it was not a symptom of a softer attitude towards malingering or the embracing of a new view of true masculinity: the military accepted a psychological diagnosis primarily to individualize the problem and thereby prevent mass mutinies.²³

Other disquieting discoveries forced themselves to the attention of investigators. The modern war machine, in subjecting millions of conscripts to close scrutiny, turned up in every army unanticipated evidence of sexual deviancy. Traditionalists could understand that even 'normal' recruits would shock civilians with their filthy jokes and scatological humour.²⁴ Less easy to explain were reports that transvestites showed up at enlistment centres in dresses or that bigamists were discovered when more than one wife demanded a man's pension. Some men were made into sadists by the morbid demands of authority and even the army found that their addiction to cruelty bordered on the pathological.²⁵

Soldiers were discovered engaging in every imaginable form of sex from 'circle jerks' and bestiality to rape. The military tried to ignore evidence that the conscious and unconscious erotic relations which developed among masses of men separated from women led some, when drunk, to engage in 'pseudo-homosexual acts'.²⁶ It savagely persecuted the self-conscious homosexuals or 'urnings' who were discovered in U-boats, cavalry regiments and engineering divisions.²⁷

An American study insisted that homosexuals diminished army moral though some had in fact enlisted to prove their bravery.²⁸ A common ploy of propagandists was to attribute such sexual deviancy to the enemy. Since German writers led by Iwan Bloch and Krafft-Ebing had been among the first to discuss homosexuality, British commentators such as the anti-semitic Arnold White portrayed Germany as a haven for degenerates. Alfred Douglas, who had been both Oscar Wilde's lover and the translator of *Salomé* from French into English, turned violently against his past passions, poetically proclaiming: 'Two filthy fogs blot out the light: / The German and the Sodomite.'²⁹ The editor of the *Morning Post* heartily agreed:

These perversions of sexual passion have no home in the healthy mind of England. They have, like scum on water, a floating root in the international population which drifts between capital and capital. It is like a pestilence of which sporadic cases and even epidemics are sometimes brought to our shores; but it is abhorrent to the nature of this nation.³⁰

Prostitution, because it was viewed as the chief cause of the spread of venereal disease, posed in practical terms the armies' biggest sexual problem. The continental states had long regulated prostitutes and licensed brothels.³¹ In Paris, brothels continued to serve a purported million customers a year in the twentieth century. France only ended the 'neo-regulationism' of prostitution in 1946. England's attempt to employ its own Contagious Diseases Act for such purposes was dropped in 1886 after feminist and moral purity activists protested against the blatant sexism of a policy that subjected women but not men to forcible medical inspection. In the course of the war 400,000 cases of venereal disease were reported in the British army which led it to reinstitute a policing policy.³² Section 40d of the Defence of the Realm Act 1914 made it an offence for any woman with venereal disease to have 'sexual intercourse with any member of the armed forces or any of his majesty's allies'.³³ Similarly, the United States authorities, who were at first outraged by the French government's supplying brothels for its troops, rethought their position. Vice reformer Raymond B. Fosdick was hopeful that American boys could be continent and protected from venereal disease if provided with athletic distractions and if prostitutes – likened to mosquitoes carrying yellow fever – were eliminated. Thirty-two states ultimately passed compulsory medical inspection laws that resulted in over 18,000 women being incarcerated.³⁴ Once in France, however, the American military came to the conclusion that preventive methods had to be employed even

though the moralists might howl that this was tantamount to condoning vice. It was a simple fact that the New Zealand army with its 'dangle parades' and provision of condoms had proved the effectiveness of prophylaxis. When informed of such discussions, the Secretary of War's shocked response was 'For God's sake don't show this to the President or he'll stop the war.'³⁵

Continuities

With hindsight it can be recognized that the sexual fears engendered by the war were greatly exaggerated. Those who harped on about the dangers posed by flighty or seductive women were simply responding to the prospect of social disorder by the old misogynist tactic of attributing all their nation's failings to feminine interference. The truth was that in every country women's organizations threw themselves into the war effort. The League of German Women's Associations was for its part as nationalistic as Mrs Pankhurst's suffragists were in Britain. Women's war work impressed some contemporaries and shocked others, but it represented a continuation of economic and social changes that could be traced back decades earlier. Mills and factories had employed large feminine workforces since the early nineteenth century and indeed in France the war marked the zenith of women's labour participation. In Germany there was not so much a change in the numbers employed as in their visibility.

The notion that such changing social patterns threatened to undermine morality was an old charge. An anti-suffragist like Walter Heape had warned just prior to the war that the 'awakening of women' led some to seek to break the 'iron fetters of nature'.³⁶ Sexual mores did not change all that much during wartime. The talk of 'war babies' and declining fertility were both greatly exaggerated. Fertility rates had been declining in the United States and France for most of the nineteenth century, and in countries such as Britain and Germany where the drop was noticed after 1870, the pronatalists adopted the tactic of primarily blaming women for the fall.³⁷ 'The woman who flinches from childbirth', declared President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States, 'stands on a par with the soldier who drops his rifle and runs in battle.'³⁸

The pessimistic also lamented the fact that the war dashed many women's hopes of marrying and fulfilling their natural role of wife and mother. Many men, of course, did not return and the huge losses at the front skewed the demographic pyramid, producing millions of 'surplus women'. In Germany's case two million soldiers were killed,

leaving 600,000 widows, a million orphans and close to a million and a half so-called 'white widows' – the young women who had lost their prospective mates. France suffered a similar fate.³⁹ But the 'new woman' – by which was meant a college-educated or economically independent woman – was not a product of the war. 'New women' had been castigated by moralists since the 1890s. Those terrified by the spectre of lesbianism pointed out that some educated women did not marry and female couples formed what in the United States were called 'Boston marriages'. The reality was that an educated middle-class woman had to decide between having a profession and a husband. No doubt some women who opted for a profession and spinsterhood developed new modes of female interaction, some platonic, some sexual. In the nineteenth century women could, because of the separate sphere ideology, envisage living their entire lives with other women. With twentieth-century society increasingly pressuring the young to marry and pathologizing same-sex relationships, it could hardly be claimed that the war 'freed' the young woman's libido.⁴⁰

The first fantasy of commentators, frightened at the prospect of the war turning the world upside-down, was that the conflict would empower women and render men passive. Their second nightmare was that racial barriers would be breached. The fear that surfaced in the war that black men would rape white women was the most blatant example of male projection.⁴¹ In fact, in the southern United States – as in some European colonies – many white boys had their first sexual experience with black girls.⁴² Young white men were expected to be sexually active while white women had to remain chaste. This wartime preoccupation with race is best understood when located against the backdrop of the racial tensions occasioned by the first stirrings of decolonization and the arrival of a massive wave of African-American migrants in the northern states in the first decades of the twentieth century. The lynchings in the southern United States that took several thousand African-American lives were the most dramatic evidence of such racial fears. In 1909 a *New York Times* reporter noted that Europeans were only now recognizing the danger of allowing their daughters to consort with blacks. 'It has long been a common and repulsive spectacle in German cities to see white girls and women walking down the street arm in arm with American and African negroes, and appearing in their company at restaurants, cafés and theaters.'⁴³ Women and non-whites, it was believed, were restive.

The war also changed men, but a good deal less than the fear-mongers predicted. Soldiers paraded their coarseness and vulgarity but their letters and diaries revealed a good deal of prudery and a domestic longing for a return to their families.⁴⁴ Many men – such as

the Provençaux consigned to Breton regiments – did not find in the ranks the much ballyhooed solidarity and fraternity. The homoeroticism which purportedly lurked in the trenches was rarely encountered. Whatever male intimacy occurred was a carry-over of the harmless pleasures previously met with at home in public schools, the scouts and men's clubs. Heterosexuality was not seriously challenged in the trenches and the majority of men appear to have reverted to women as soon as they could.⁴⁵

Most of the stories of wartime debauchery similarly proved to be mythical. Civilians feared the return of millions of sex-crazed soldiers, but after the horrors of the trenches a cosy family life was what the troops found most tantalizing. Birth and marriage rates climbed dramatically after the war to make up for those postponed during the years of combat. In Germany, for example, there were 956,251 births in 1918 and 1,299,404 in 1919, though by 1923 the long-term trend in the decline of fertility had resumed.⁴⁶

Numbers of young men probably had their sexual innocence prolonged by the conflict which prevented them from marrying and kept them cooped up at the front. Yet given their living conditions some soldiers no doubt experienced some liberalization of their sexual mores while in uniform. Little romance was found in brothels but some soldiers had their first sexual experience with a prostitute. One young man calmly reported to his mates that it was 'not as good as I thought. It's a bit like pulling your thing, but you have someone to talk to.'⁴⁷ Most soldiers did not have casual sex if only because they feared venereal disease. The idea that 'innocent' women might be infected by men who consorted with prostitutes had been played up by moral purity types for some time. In 1913 Christabel Pankhurst had claimed in *The Great Scourge and How to End It* that 80 per cent of men were infected with venereal diseases, something that even other moralists thought a 'warped' view.⁴⁸ Despite the sensational figures that were bandied about during the war, the rates of venereal disease in many forces such as the British army and the German navy were actually lower than they had been in peacetime.

Social Hygiene

When *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen's play dealing with syphilis was produced in London in 1891, it was described in the press as: 'as foul and filthy a concoction as has ever been allowed to disgrace the boards of an English theatre'.⁴⁹ The war, in gathering together huge masses of young men, forced upon the public and military authorities the extensive

discussion of such heretofore tabooed subjects as the treatment of venereal disease, the policing of brothels and the distribution of prophylactics. Following the war and the 1917 revolution, the Soviet Union launched a series of radical sex reforms including the legalization of abortion.⁵⁰ Similar experiments were briefly carried out in Hungary. In New York's Greenwich Village the bohemians' defence of 'free love' was accordingly described by its critics as the 'Bolshevism of sex'.⁵¹ As indicated above, however, most of the sexual challenges which contemporaries believed had been produced by the war can be traced back much earlier and their subsequent progress followed a complex course. Nevertheless, most post-war commentators, hankering after a return to old certainties, found it all too easy to attribute every perceived decline in national health or social stability to the conflict's undermining of bourgeois morality.

Would women return to their domestic, maternal roles? Conservatives, attempting to shore up gender boundaries, bewailed the appearance of the independent 'new woman' and the androgynous flapper who adopted fashions that seemed to repudiate her womb and breasts. The assumption was that with looser clothes came looser morals. In France Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps* (1923) created a sensation in coldly narrating a woman's betrayal of her soldier husband.⁵² Veterans attacked the book just as in Germany they bitterly condemned the women who had 'stolen' their jobs.⁵³ In English courts male juries demonstrated their sympathy for veterans who had been thrown over by their spouses. In June 1920 Edwin Semmens, a demobilized soldier, shot his adulterous wife in the face, telling a friend later, 'I have shot my wife and spoiled her beauty.' Though two sympathetic medical experts argued that Semmens's malaria was to blame for sending him 'over the borderland', the judge instructed the jury that the question of intent was not at issue. Nevertheless, to his indignation and to Semmens's own bewilderment, the jury returned a not guilty verdict.⁵⁴ Even the avant-garde post-war writings of D. H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway reflected fears of selfish female sexuality. Such responses were understandable given that many equated sexual potency with courage. What fate, some wondered, awaited the thousands of men who in the war had been rendered impotent or suffered genital injuries.⁵⁵

If the war blurred gender lines, the authorities were upon its conclusion all the more insistent that women be relegated to their 'traditional' tasks.⁵⁶ French officials saw the need for healthy families and a high birth rate after the great losses of men and the disruption of families.⁵⁷ Conservatives everywhere sought to reconstruct a normality that never existed. Those who launched jeremiads against sexual

immorality were really talking in coded terms about what they perceived to be a breakdown in social order, deference and authority. Defeated Germany in particular looked to the post-war world for a restoration of order and discipline.⁵⁸ The Free Corps, by mutilating and torturing 'dirty' women suspected of supporting the left during the first chaotic years of the Weimar Republic, provided the most extreme example of the political right's equation of sexuality and subversion.⁵⁹

The war also raised the question as to how many men would prove themselves unable to face up to the brutal challenges of the modern world. Well before 1914 degeneration fears were rife. In Britain they came to the surface when the recruitment drives during the Boer war of 1899–1901 revealed that thousands of volunteers were physically unfit. Following the First World War many wondered if the thousands of cripples, amputees and shell-shocked that the conflict had produced would find mates.⁶⁰ Intellectually, the conflict, which had been entered into with much macho talk of 'playing the game', gave birth to a culture of resignation and introspection.⁶¹ The bloodletting was taken by many as a sign of the end of an age of reason. Those male cultural rebels of the pre-war period, such as Wilde, Proust and Gide, who had embraced hedonism and castigated the repressive morality of the Victorians, were hailed by the progressives of the 1920s as prophets. Yet for every writer who embraced modernism there were many more who trotted out old but reassuring jingoistic arguments.⁶² And if some sophisticated readers of Freud felt that repression was out of fashion and sexual experimentation in vogue they were far outnumbered by those who were alarmed by such ideas.⁶³

Would youths know their place? Europe had experienced a total war in which even children had been taught to hate their neighbours.⁶⁴ At the same time it had been a generational conflict in which the young had been sacrificed for the old. Nevertheless, the post-war press, filled with stories of children running wild, called for the more stringent disciplining of hooligans, hoodlums and 'problem girls'. The inspection and surveillance of the male body which the war legitimated as well as its military drills and exercises were carried over into the peacetime world through cadet corps, scouts and schools.⁶⁵ Pleasure-seeking, dance-crazed youths with too much money and time on their hands, predicted the anxious, would inevitably drift into sexual immorality. If gymnasiums and playing fields failed to steer juveniles away from such temptations more forceful measures would have to be adopted.

Would vice be controlled? The army's preoccupation with venereal disease and prostitution was a carry-over of previous peacetime

concerns. Feminists such as Maud Royden had argued that economic distress drove the young woman into prostitution, a point also made by George Bernard Shaw in *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1910): 'It's far better than any other employment open to her.'⁶⁶ Conservatives and moral purity activists, who launched the so-called 'white slave' panic, preferred to believe that innocents were shanghaied into the trade by either foreigners or criminals. The obvious intent of the reformers leading the attack against drink and prostitution was not simply to eradicate immorality, but to domesticate and better control workers and immigrants. Poor women, whose sexual standards did not match those of the bourgeoisie, risked being labelled prostitutes. And although three-quarters of the men prosecuted in the United States under the 1910 Mann Act were native born, the police targeted perceived foreigners, Jews and Italians as the most likely pimps. The act was also used to prevent black men consorting with white women. Jack Johnson, hated by racists for having replaced a white man as the heavy-weight boxing champion of the world, was tried and sentenced to a year in jail for purportedly transporting a woman across state lines for 'immoral' purposes.⁶⁷

The question posed by syphilis and gonorrhoea was how respectable society could combat such diseases without appearing to sanction the practices that were believed to produce them. 'It is better', argued one British commentator, 'that venereal diseases should be imperfectly combated than that, in an attempt to prevent them, men should be enticed into mortal sin which they would otherwise avoid.'⁶⁸ Progressive doctors responded that the well-being of the community depended on government-supported inspections and treatment. Accordingly, the campaigns against venereal disease in the Anglo-Saxon countries were marked in the first decades of the century by a swing away from moral purity rhetoric that centred on guilt and towards social hygiene programmes that stressed prevention. In the United States John D. Rockefeller established in 1911 the Bureau of Social Hygiene, while in England feminists joined with doctors in 1915 to create the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene. Such groups argued that venereal disease was a medical, not a moral problem. Accordingly, the Royal Commission on Venereal Disease, which reported in 1916 that something over 10 per cent of the male population was infected, called for government-supported clinics.⁶⁹ Yet relatively little was accomplished. The Medical Women's Federation still condemned treatment centres for making casual sex safe.⁷⁰ Some doctors continued to terrorize and lecture the public though others called for the sexual education of the young.⁷¹ The 'scientific' approach was particularly pushed by eugenicists who advanced the notion

that prostitutes were either feeble-minded or degenerate.⁷² The respectable press shied away from discussing 'sexual' issues, though any programme that presented 'racial' improvement as its goal was guaranteed serious consideration. Similarly, the most progressive social hygiene lectures to which troops were subjected tended to return to the old theme of the woman as temptress. In 1923, when a twenty-one-year-old Englishman was found guilty of strangling to death the nineteen-year-old woman who had given him venereal disease, the ex-servicemen's association succeeded in drawing up a petition with 50,000 signatures which won his reprieve.⁷³ The case was known as the 'Damaged Goods' trial, echoing the title of the film shown to troops warning them of the temptations of prostitutes.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In taking millions of men away from their families the First World War, conservatives warned, had seriously eroded male power. Prior to 1914 discussions of sexuality were already coloured by the alarming notion that conventional gender roles were under attack. The spectre of sadists, lesbians and sodomites that the Maud Allan trial conjured up would continue to haunt the respectable. In summing up the case, *The Times* asserted that it was a monstrous libel to claim that England harboured 47,000 perverts. At the same time the editor admitted that moral laxity was spreading.

But the tolerance of evil is a fertile breeding-ground of suspicion. No public man or woman can afford unnecessary contact with questionable companions. In the days before the war there was growing in London, beyond any sort of question, that passion for excitement and for the latest novelty which is always the familiar beginning of a corrupt society.⁷⁵

The editor thus implicitly acknowledged that the conflict, in crystallizing certain sexual fears, had simply speeded up long-term developments.

By starting an account of twentieth-century sexuality with an examination of the panics precipitated by the First World War and the responses made to them, one is provided with a vantage point from which to view the developments which both preceded and followed it. Contemporaries tended to attribute almost every disturbing moral change to the disruptions caused by the war. The mobilization of the civilian populations which took place in Europe no doubt weakened family structures and gender roles. The body lost much of its mystery

as millions of recruits were subjected to medical inspection and discipline. Sexuality was spoken of more openly than it had ever been in the past, related as it was to the health, productivity, racial purity and military strength of the nation.⁷⁶ Reproduction assumed a crucial importance with a host of new experts – led by eugenicists, feminists, doctors and birth controllers – calling for an unprecedented public surveillance of childbearing.

Some conservatives continued to find the very discussion of sexual matters unseemly. Sex reformers – more interested in efficiency than morality – broke the conspiracy of silence by replying that such issues as sex education, marital happiness, homosexuality and birth control were too important to ignore. Following the line set by those campaigning against venereal disease, they argued that replacing the older moral purity model with a modern hygienist model of social control would best assure both personal happiness and public order. This did not mean that the biomedical approach purged itself of references to ‘immorality’ or ‘promiscuity’ or dangerous ‘others’.⁷⁷ As will be seen in the following chapters, the sex reformers would produce their own cautionary tales.

The pursuit of sexual modernity would go furthest in the defeated powers – Germany and Russia – where the destruction of the older social hierarchies allowed greater scope for experimentation. In the West, the most original accounts of the sexual shifts produced by the war – the stories of the liberating effect of women’s war work produced by Vera Brittain and Radclyffe Hall and the tales of the homoeroticism experienced in the trenches by poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen – would only have an impact long after the guns were silenced. It would be an exaggeration to speak of some sudden liberalization of mores. The sexual panics occasioned by the First World War gave birth to many new and sophisticated means of repression. Yet inasmuch as the war focused unprecedented attention on sexuality it did mark the end of an era. Childhood sexuality, marital unhappiness, family limitation and the perversions had all been discussed before, but the war, in devouring millions of men, brought home to the state and the public the vital importance of reproduction. War, Clemenceau had declared, was too important to be left to the generals. A host of twentieth-century experts would add that sexuality was too important to leave to chance.