



‘Did You Buy It, or Was It a Gift?’: Australia’s Venereal Disease Crisis of World War I

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During World War I, Australia was swept by a moral panic about high rates of venereal diseases (VD), triggered in part by the large number of infected troops returning home from Egypt. Despite the fact that it was returning soldiers who had caused that increase, it was not men who were held responsible for the transmission of such diseases, but rather their female sexual partners. As such, the VD crisis of World War I followed a similar pattern to those that had occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While previously it was the ‘common prostitute’ who was blamed for the spread of VD, in the context of World War I, it was the young, working-class girl who engaged in sexual relations without the expectation of payment, known as the ‘amateur’, who bore much of the blame. In the public imagination, the ‘amateur’ could be found at Central Station, Sydney, seducing a young soldier in exchange for entertainment, frivolous gifts or a good time.

While the ‘amateur’ has not been the subject of great historiographical debate, various historians have attempted to explain the anxiety that coalesced around this figure during World War I. In the British context, Lucy Bland argues that ‘amateurs’ were the source of such anxiety because they were a challenge to the dichotomous understanding of women’s sexuality in the early twentieth century as either ‘prostitute’ or ‘healthy mother’.¹ This is reflected in the use of the phrase ‘amateur prostitution’, despite the fact that this activity was defined by the lack of monetary payment. Marina Larsson explains fears around the ‘amateur’ as owing to their role as a conduit for disease between the upper and lower classes. The discourse they incited was a space in which to discuss the transition of women’s sexuality at the juncture between *fin de siècle* notions of womanhood and nascent models of the “new woman”.² On the other hand, Judith Smart places great emphasis on the context of World War I as the first ‘total war’.³ While the defensive needs of the nation required and justified the conscription of young men’s bodies through enlistment in the army, the same applied to young women. Their unrestrained sexuality was seen to pose a threat to both the health of the soldiers and the future viability of the nation.

¹ Lucy Bland, “Guardians of the Race’ or ‘Vampire’s Upon the Nation’s Health’? Female Sexuality and its Regulation in Early Twentieth-Century Britain”, in *The Changing Experience of Women*, ed. Elizabeth Whitelegg (Oxford: M. Robertson, 1982).

² Marina Larsson, “An Iconography of Suffering: VD in Australia 1914-18”. M.A. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1995, 74.

³ Judith Smart, “Sex, the State and the ‘Scarlet Scourge’: Gender, Citizenship and Venereal Diseases Regulation in Australia During the Great War”, *Women’s History Review* 7, no. 1 (1998), pp. 5 – 36.

This essay will explore responses to the threat posed by ‘amateurs’ through the lens of ‘population ideology’, under which restrictions on women were justified in terms of the greater good of a stronger and healthier nation. From the 1870s to the 1950s, Western nations were consumed by concerns over the size of their population and the health of their inhabitants.⁴ This obsession is what Jill Julius Matthews calls ‘population ideology’, which dictated that ‘a large, healthy and ‘racially pure’ population was central to moral and economic progress’.⁵ ‘Population ideology’ was typically concerned with the restriction, regulation and supervision of health, mortality, procreation and life expectancy, transforming individual biological events, such as births, deaths and illnesses, into political issues.⁶ Having developed in western Europe in the eighteenth century, ‘population ideology’ could be seen across all Australian values and debates from the late nineteenth century, in the realms of politics, immigration, defence, economics, religion and science.⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century, various attempts were made to bring prostitution and the spread of VD under legislative control. In the 1860s and 1870s, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania introduced Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts).⁸ Based on British legislation, these Acts subjected women designated as ‘common prostitutes’ to mandatory examination, confinement and treatment for VD.⁹ The New South Wales legislature never introduced its own CD Act, despite attempts throughout the 1870s and 1880s to do so.¹⁰ However, in 1908, after enthusiastic lobbying by the New South Wales police force, the *Police Offences Amendment Act* was introduced that meant that prostitutes found soliciting could be punished by up to six months’ imprisonment.¹¹ In the same year, the *Prisoners’ Detention Bill* was tabled which provided for the continued detention beyond their original sentence of any prisoner with a venereal disease.¹² In its original form, the bill only provided for the imprisonment of women with a venereal disease, but was re-drafted to include both men and women after intense pressure from feminist organisations.¹³ The bill caused a large controversy, with the Member for Redfern, J. S. T. McGowen, stating during debate that ‘[t]he bill is to be read in conjunction with the *Police Offences Bill*. That means that every prostitute who is known to loiter or to solicit will be made a prisoner at once’.¹⁴ However, after an extensive propaganda campaign on the dangers of VD, the bill was passed with the backing of public opinion by the end of 1908.¹⁵ These laws constituted the legal context in which the VD crisis of World War I occurred.

⁴ Jill Julius Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 75.

⁵ Jill Julius Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 74.

⁶ *ibid.*, 75.

⁷ *ibid.*, 74-75.

⁸ Smart, “Sex, the state and the ‘scarlet scourge’”, 6.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Judith Allen, “The Making of a Prostitute Proletariat in Early Twentieth-Century New South Wales”, in *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, ed. Kay Daniels (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1984), 206.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 207-210.

¹² Judith Allen, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women Since 1980* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), 74-75.

¹³ Larsson, “An Iconography of Suffering”, 84.

¹⁴ Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 75.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

It was not until the early years of World War I that the issue of VD re-entered the public imagination prominently. From 1914, a moral panic regarding what was perceived as an epidemic of VD, namely syphilis and gonorrhoea, swept many Western nations, and Australia was no exception.¹⁶ Judith Allen argues that the hysteria in Sydney was triggered by two events: revelations regarding the level of VD amongst the first detachment of the Australian Imperial Forces returning home from Egypt as high as a third; and French and American naval ships refusing to allow their crews onshore in Sydney due to the prevalence of VD.¹⁷ The extent of this panic is revealed not only in the great number of articles printed in Sydney's newspapers regarding the issue, but also the publishing of sensationalist headlines such as 'The Red Plague: The Terrible Danger of Ignorance Regarding Venereal Diseases'¹⁸ and 'Gonorrhoea and Syphilis: Diseases Wrecking Humanity.'¹⁹ In 1915, the NSW Legislative Assembly ordered the creation of a Select Committee on the Prevalence of Venereal Diseases, which delivered its progress report on 11 November 1915. Before the committee, members of the medical profession and policemen were called upon to explain the rise in rates of VD and assess the efficacy of the 1908 legislation.²⁰ The committee's findings sparked widespread public debate over the most effective means of controlling VD. In mid-1916, the Commonwealth government offered £15,000 to state governments which introduced compulsory notification legislation following the Western Australian model enacted in 1915.²¹ It was not until December 1918 that NSW introduced its own version of the legislation, almost identical in substance to those enacted in the other states: all infected persons were legally obliged to undertake treatment and continue it until they were cured.²²

What differs between the World War I VD debates and earlier discourses is an emphasis on 'amateurs', rather than so-called 'professional' prostitutes. The CD legislation enacted in Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania applied explicitly to 'common prostitutes'. Similarly, the *Prisoners Detention Act 1908* was clearly intended in part for the treatment of women caught soliciting on the streets, and was therefore 'a CD Act in all but name'.²³ Both laws were grounded in the almost unanimously-believed distinction between 'respectable women' and 'common prostitutes'.²⁴ However, during the hearings before the Select Committee on the Prevalence of Venereal Diseases in 1915, witnesses testified that 'professional' prostitutes often engaged in preventative measures and early treatment methods to stem the spread of VD. Instead, much of the focus was shifted to 'amateurs'. 'Amateurs' were young women who were engaged in other forms of employment, but supplemented their income by providing sexual services, usually in exchange for gifts, social outings, or a good time.²⁵ Dr E. H. Molesworth defined 'amateurs' as:

¹⁶ Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Australian Worker*, 11 June 1914.

¹⁹ *Referee*, 24 October 1917.

²⁰ *Progress Report from the Select Committee on Prevalence of Venereal Diseases: together with the proceedings of the Committee, and minutes of evidence, and appendices*, New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Prevalence of Venereal Diseases, 1915.

²¹ Smart, "Sex, the state and the 'scarlet scourge'", 19.

²² *Venereal Diseases Act 1918* (NSW).

²³ Lisa Featherstone, *Let's Talk About Sex: Histories of Sexuality in Australia from Federation to the Pill* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 107.

²⁴ Smart, "Sex, the state and the 'scarlet scourge'", 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23; Larrison, "An Iconography of Suffering," 71-72.

women who, though earning enough to provide the necessities of life, still find themselves unable to afford what might be regarded as luxuries; but with which they are familiar by reason of their daily occupations in town. I refer, for example, to theatres, motor drives, smart dresses, furs and even the humble picture show. A woman of this class soon learns that all these things can be obtained, if she in turn is willing to provide other entertainment to the donor.²⁶

Thus, the figure of the ‘amateur’ entered the public imagination.

This distinction between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ prostitute informed much of the wartime concern with VD. Molesworth, when compiling statistics at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, would ask male patients ‘Did you buy it, or was it a gift?’, to which 60 per cent of them replied that it was a gift.²⁷ This distinction is also clear in the testimonies of the doctors and police before the Select Committee. Sir Herbert Maitland, a doctor and Lieutenant-Colonel in the Commonwealth Military Forces, stated that ‘[t]he disease that is being spread abroad, however, comes not from houses of ill-fame. It is coming from the clandestine immoral girl – from her who is outwardly respectable.’²⁸ He went on to state that ‘the greatest number of these [VD] patients blames the Central Railway Station. They confess that there had been no talk of payment.’²⁹ James Mitchell, Inspector-General of the NSW Police Force, testified, in response to the question of whether ‘there is any considerable amount of amateur prostitution in factories, restaurants and cafes’, that ‘there is a great deal of immorality and disease in connection with factories.’³⁰ Similarly, when asked whether there are ‘a large number of young women who carry on illicit intercourse, either as a means of supplementing their earnings in some other occupation, or for some other reason’, police inspector, Thomas Kelly, replied that he had ‘been told that some waitresses in cheap eating-houses are immoral women, who carry on this kind of thing.’³¹ He emphasised that these women ‘are paid sufficient wages to maintain them[selves].’³² These testimonies were disseminated into the press, where Central Station took on the role of the den of moral depravity and young girls who worked in factories and as waitresses as immoral carriers of disease.³³ Hence, the assumptions underpinning the previous legislation, namely the idea of the ‘common prostitute’ as sole disease-spreader, were no longer viable. When the *Venereal Diseases Act 1918* was introduced, it therefore applied universally in order to catch these ‘amateurs’.

Australia’s fixation with the figure of the ‘amateur’ should be understood through the lens of ‘population ideology’. In the context of a nation obsessed with the vitality of the race, it is not difficult to understand why the spread of VD created such a panic. If left untreated, syphilis and gonorrhoea can produce infertility, miscarriages, still births and birth defects, and

²⁶ *Truth*, 4 November 1916, quoted in Smart, “Sex, the state and the ‘scarlet scourge’”, 22.

²⁷ E.H Molesworth, ‘The Incidence of Venereal Disease and Method of Prevention’, *MJA* 2 (1916), quoted in Larsson, “An Iconography of Suffering,” 78.

²⁸ “They Wouldn’t Report It!”, *Australian Worker*, 7 September 1916.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *Progress Report from the Select Committee on Prevalence of Venereal Diseases*, 55.

³¹ *ibid.*, 95.

³² *ibid.*

³³ See “They Wouldn’t Report It!”, *Australian Worker*, 7 September 1916; “Venereal Diseases: Statement by Police”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1916; “Venereal Compound: Serious Statements”, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1915; “Venereal Diseases: Social Workers’ Evidence”, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 September 1916; “Immoral Girls: Women Patrols Advocated”, *Sun*, 5 September 1916.

indeed much of the Select Committee's report and subsequent media coverage was concerned with these issues.³⁴ During World War I, Australia was already experiencing what Marina Larsson describes as a 'potential eugenic crisis', precipitated by the loss of soldiers fighting in Europe and a declining birth rate.³⁵ In this context, measures against VD can be viewed as one of the various social reform programs aimed at advancing the nation, which also included slum clearances and medical examinations of school children.³⁶ However, this doesn't explain why 'amateurs' were blamed for this evil, while men were ascribed almost no responsibility.

Jill Julius Matthews argues that 'population ideology' was more than just a collection of ideas, but rather it 'formed the substratum of all social beliefs'.³⁷ It established a framework that every group in society, while potentially disagreeing in some ways, existed within and upheld.³⁸ 'Population ideology' thus defined and dictated the power relations and interactions between men and women. One of the key concerns of this era of Australian history was a desire to increase the size of the population.³⁹ Thus, the most important role that women played was that of 'mother', while the other roles of wife, companion, servant and worker fell to the wayside and monogamous, heterosexual marriage was the only acceptable expression of female sexuality.⁴⁰ On the other hand, a double standard existed in that it was believed that men had greater sexual needs which could not be restrained by monogamous marriage.⁴¹ Therefore, prostitution was a necessary evil, but prostitutes must be designated as such and separated from the so-called 'respectable women'.⁴² These ideas are reflected in the fact that prostitution was never made illegal at any point.⁴³ Only street soliciting was prohibited in 1908 and the intention of the *Police Offences Amendment Act*, discussed above, was more to reduce the visibility of prostitution, rather than to suppress it entirely.⁴⁴ The creation of a definable class of sex workers who men could frequent without the threat of disease was often the justification for the introduction of the various CD Acts.⁴⁵ This mainstream acceptance of prostitution as a necessary evil can also be seen in the testimonies before the Select Committee that 'professional prostitutes' engaged in methods to prevent the spread of VD.

The great danger of the 'amateur' lay in the fact that she was indiscernible from the general population, and therefore harder to police.⁴⁶ The *Sydney Morning Herald* report that, when questioned about the statements of Sir Herbert Maitland on congregations of 'immoral girls' at Central Station, James Mitchell responded that this was most likely the case, but 'it was impossible [...] for the police to do anything in the matter, as they could not discriminate between respectable young women who were on the station to meet sweethearts or brothers,

³⁴ See "The Red Plague: The Terrible Danger of Ignorance Regarding Venereal Diseases", *Australian Worker*, 11 June 1914; "Gonorrhoea and Syphilis: Diseases Wrecking Humanity", *Referee*, 24 October 1917.

³⁵ Larsson, "An Iconography of Suffering", 17.

³⁶ This was the argument advanced by Lisa Featherstone in *Let's Talk About Sex*, 94.

³⁷ Matthews, *Good and Mad Women*, 74.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 87, 111.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 127.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 73.

⁴⁵ Smart, "Sex, the state and the 'scarlet scourge'", 6.

⁴⁶ Larsson, "An Iconography of Suffering", 72; Featherstone, *Let's Talk About Sex*, 101; Smart, "Sex, the state and the 'scarlet scourge'", 22.

and those who were there for immoral purposes.’⁴⁷ By engaging in behaviour that carried a perceived high risk of contracting VD, the ‘amateur’ endangered her primary function as future mother and the health of her unborn children. In addition, she also posed a threat to the health of the soldiers she seduced, who were unable to recognise the amateur as a woman of ‘immoral character’. If the soldier was married, the disease could be passed on to his unsuspecting wife, impinging on her ability to bear children, a concern that was at the centre of the VD crisis. Therefore, measures needed to be implemented to control the ‘amateur’. There was also a recognition that the effective policing of ‘amateurs’ was almost impossible. Hence, much of the regulation occurred in the discourse that surrounded ‘amateurs’ and in the pages of the newspapers.⁴⁸

One perspective in the VD debate of the Great War that requires further analysis is that of feminist organisations. First-wave feminists were deeply opposed to the existence of the double standard that sanctioned men’s promiscuity.⁴⁹ However, these women were not seeking the right to be equally promiscuous, but a rather return to family values and chastity for both men and women.⁵⁰ When leading British women ‘invit[ed] all mothers and wives throughout the Empire to join in demanding the notification of venereal diseases’, many feminists in NSW did not answer the call.⁵¹ Several women’s organisations, including the Women’s Liberal League of NSW, were sceptical of the supposed gender neutrality of the compulsory notification legislation enacted in Western Australia, particularly in the context of existing legislation that enabled almost indefinite detention of women with VD until they were cured.⁵² These women were part of the reason why NSW was so late to introduce compulsory notification compared to the other states, and even after its introduction women’s organisations continued to fight for its removal.⁵³

This did not mean that feminist organisations were not equally caught up in the anxiety of the VD crisis. At a conference of various women’s organisations in August 1916, Miss Pallister spoke of the ‘deplorable state of public morals’, and Labor feminist Annie Golding denounced ‘the moral environment in local workshops and factories’.⁵⁴ Many of the women were particularly disturbed by the evidence given by Sir Herbert Maitland in regards to the activity occurring at Central Railway Station. Golding led a deputation of women’s organisations, including the Women’s Progressive Association, the Labor Women’s Council, the Women Workers’ Union and the Feminist Club, called on the Lord Mayor to instate female patrols at Central Station, streets, parks and ‘pleasure resorts’.⁵⁵ They considered women to be more effective in preventing that kind of wayward behaviour in both young men and women. These ideas were not confined to one side of the political spectrum, with the Women’s Reform League passing a motion at the same time that ‘in order to cope with the conditions stated by Sir Herbert Maitland to prevail at the Central Railway Station, the Government be asked to appoint experienced women as patrol officers’.⁵⁶ Therefore, while many women’s organisations were opposed to compulsory notification, this did not mean that they did not seek

⁴⁷ “Venereal Diseases: Statement by Police”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1916.

⁴⁸ Larsson, “An Iconography of Suffering,” 80.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ “Venereal Diseases: Compulsory Notification”, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1916.

⁵² Margaret Fitzherbert, *Liberal Women: Federation to 1949* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2004), 30.

⁵³ “Venereal Disease Act”, *Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 1920.

⁵⁴ “Venereal Disease”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1916.

⁵⁵ “Women Patrols”, *Australian Worker*, 5 October 1916.

⁵⁶ “Immoral Girls: Women Patrols Advocated”, *Sun*, 5 September 1916.

to regulate young women's bodies. While they were pursuing the end of the double standard of the gender order, they still existed within the framework of 'population ideology', and therefore were still threatened by the promiscuity of the 'amateurs'.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australian society was geared towards the creation of a larger and healthier population in order to achieve moral progress. The only acceptable expression of female sexuality in such a society was within monogamous, heterosexual marriage. However, a double standard which deemed men to be inherently more sexually insatiable allowed for the existence of a sex industry in which men could purchase extra or pre-marital sexual relations. Women who engaged in prostitution were thus accepted as a necessary evil but always existed as outsiders.

The threat of the 'amateur' thus lay in their lack of outwardly signifiers and ability to pass as a 'respectable young woman' while engaging in disreputable sexual behaviour. In doing so, the 'amateur' was viewed as a clandestine carrier of disease to soldiers, their wives and unborn children, damaging the health of the entire nation. Due to their insidious nature, initial attempts to regulate their behaviour took place in the media, rather than through legislative intervention. Meanwhile, feminist organisations petitioned for the use of female inspectors as the most effective means to quell such activity. Underpinning both these approaches was an understanding of 'amateurs' as a class of young women capable of being saved and returned to their rightful role of "future mother" of the nation.

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