

From Cleveland Street to Reading Gaol: An Analysis of Homosexual Sex Scandals during the Victorian Era

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INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality has been widely debated over the course of history. It has been confronted with a range of social attitudes, such as homophobia, prejudice, and violence. Besides its modern prevalence, socially and politically, homosexuality is all the more pertinent due to the ever-changing legislation regarding homosexual rights and liberties in the modern day. It has remained a prominent issue, as is evident from recent campaigns that have gained international attention, such as establishing the legality of gay marriage, enabling gay men to adopt children, and forming an active LGBTQ community are also key developments.

This research hopes to influence the evaluation, and as a result, our understanding, on the wider field of homosexuality within gender studies and the history of deviance, focusing on the Victorian era. Its main objective is to explore homosexuality through the lens of three prominent homosexual scandals: The Cleveland Street Scandal, The Dublin Castle Scandals, and The Trials of Oscar Wilde. Although these scandals have each been studied independently, they have not been examined comparatively, which is unique to this research.



CONCLUSION

All three scandals were ultimately brought into the public spotlight as a result of the significant prominent public figures involved. The reactions it caused were not so much a moral panic to homosexuality, but a shock chiefly instigated by the context within which homosexuality took place and how it emerged. This alludes to a timeless human trend whereby the upper echelons of society appear to come above the law and are permitted exclusive treatment over the ordinary working-class individual. Archives have shown that some prominent members of society, such as Lord Alfred Somerset, Oscar Wilde, and the soldiers involved in the Dublin Scandals received little or no punishment, whereas the ordinary working-class males involved in the scandals received much harsher penalties for their homosexual activities, often resulting in imprisonment with hard labour. This ultimately alludes to the inherent class bias not only in society but also within the judicial system. More importantly, the exclusivity that elite members of society received, ultimately superseded the authority of the law.

The Cleveland Street Scandal 1889

An underground homosexual network was discovered to be taking place at the General Post Office, where young messenger boys were recruited and found to be soliciting sexual favours at a brothel at 19 Cleveland Street in London. Here they tended to the sexual desires of elite men, such as Lord Arthur Somerset and Lord Euston; Prince Albert Victor was also rumoured to be involved. The elites implicated in the affair were relieved of any punishment while the messenger boys were imprisoned.

Dublin Castle Scandals 1884

Dublin Castle's administrators and its members of staff were discovered to be participating and soliciting in homosexual felonies alongside soldiers from the British Army. Public acknowledgement of military involvement in such an immoral crime thrust the scandal into the public spotlight. The men's punishment was highly dependent on their social ranking despite the moral failings committed. As a result, the soldiers were relieved of any punishment while the ordinary individuals involved were imprisoned.

METHOD

This research begins with a study of the history of homosexuality over the scope of four centuries, starting from the early modern period. Once the narrative behind all three scandals was unravelled, an extensive research was undertaken of the appropriate primary sources, which were extracted from The National Archives, The British Library, and the Public Records Office, which has recently been made accessible without restriction. The collection contains legal opinions, police reports, statements, newspapers, transcripts of legal proceedings, avowed information, and indictments. For this specific area of research, the most informative primary sources were trials and newspaper reports

Oscar Wilde Trials 1885

Oscar Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, was publically exposed. Queensberry persistently subjected Wilde to three infamous trials at the Old Bailey, which transformed his status as a celebrity to notoriety. After Wilde's trials, he was sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment with hard labour.