modern women on trial: sexual transgression in the age of the flapper

Lucy Bland, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013, 272pp.,
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Lucy Bland has a distinguished reputation for her feminist work on the political history of women's sexuality. This latest book maintains the same high standard of scholarship. Via scrupulous research into a rich range of evidence, including trial transcripts, newspaper reports and memoirs, it contributes a telling new dimension to the history of distressed post-Great War attitudes to gender and morality, as well as to feminist history. The word 'transgression' has seldom been so usefully used to expose the various ways some women's subjectivities and actions not only clashed with contemporary gendered mores, but illuminated hidden social anxieties.

Modern Women on Trial is about the British legal prosecutions of 'modern women/girls' between 1918 and 1924, and the press representation of their behaviour. These 'flappers' (a popular post-war term used interchangeably with 'bachelor girl' and 'modern woman' to describe 'a type' that had broken with Victorian values, and which was associated with youth, androgyny, instability and mobility) (pp. 3–4) were alleged to have committed crimes including murder, drug trafficking, sexual perversion, adultery and miscegenation. Bland shows that the women were positioned in a category accused variously of being surplus, promiscuous, sterile, sensation-seeking, addicted, lesbian, liars, prone to acting with sexual agency, disobedient, murderous and, above all, pleasure-seeking.

Bland argues that formal prosecutions by court and then informal trials by newspaper of these figures were an attempt to control and punish something that came to represent a frightening, uncertain future. It wasn't only the individual felon who was judged. It was the notion of 'immoral' modern Woman who pursued 'independence, consumption and sensation' (p. 6). Implicitly, this hedonistic new breed challenged not only masculinity, but expectations of order in a white, class-ridden patriarchal society still reeling from war. Bland persuades us that such figures were seen as the personification of a sense of instability pervading the land. Five main chapters deal with clusters of cases, with varying taxonomies of what the transgressive modern women/girl meant. Chapter 1, 'The Case of the "Cult of the Clitoris"', deals with dancer Maud Allan, who in 1918

initially accused a right-wing MP of libelling her as a lesbian pervert. The 'barefoot dancer' of Salome was then herself politically targeted as a German sympathiser and sadist, along with Margot Asquith, the wife of the former prime minister.

The second chapter focuses on race and miscegenation in 1919. Ada Ping You and May Roberts were ostensibly prosecuted for drug trafficking but also, in effect, for daring to ignore racial binaries and literally embrace the East by loving 'Chinamen' (p. 56). Edith Thompson in Chapter 3 and Marguerite Fahmy in Chapter 4 were accused of murdering their husbands. Thompson's sixty-two letters to her lover were used as evidence of inciting and conspiring to murder. Although she hadn't killed him, both she and her lover were hanged. However, Bland shows that orientalist attitudes meant Thompson's case was handled very differently to Fahmy's. An older French divorcee, in 1923 Fahmy shot her wealthy Egyptian husband but was vindicated because of his 'oriental beastliness'—sodomy. Chapter 5 focuses on Christabel Russell, who went through two divorce trials and two appeals between 1922 and 1924. The process accidentally exposed the extent of sexual ignorance in Britain; for example, that few people apparently knew that even partial penetration, leaving the hymen unbroken, could result in pregnancy.

Bland's conclusion compares the cases and the ways they were reported, successfully demonstrating that 'the figure of the flapper was a personification of the upheavals of the time. She "carried" a series of fears and anxieties about modernity and the instabilities of gender, class, race and national identity' (p. 218). The trials and the sensationalised reports, with all their projections, accidentally revealed hitherto hidden aspects of women's private lives, such as their ignorance of menstruation and their interest in thrill-seeking. Bland's skill is in coolly exposing what lay behind the furore, but without being tediously didactic in doing so.

It is rare to find a scholarly book that is so entertaining. The author is generous in understanding masculine anxiety, as well as witty, concise and clear. I was particularly impressed by the way Bland managed to marshal her story to keep making the point that these women were being so ferociously reigned in because they symbolised a frightening, unruly future.

This book is hard to fault. There were just two small difficulties for me. First, that the book seemed to promise more analysis on race and class than it actually delivers. Second, it might have been a good idea to weave in contextual information about the state of courtroom reporting at that time.

Overall, this is an exemplary work and a very useful, concise way of making women's history interesting to a wide range of readers, including non-feminists. It also adds an important cultural studies dimension to British political histories,

expands over-masculine histories of journalism, and helps further open up the wider subject of gendered race relations in the declining empire.

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