

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association
Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Religion, Science, and the Remaking of Illicit Sexuality

Joy Dixon

Volume 32, Number 2, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095579ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095579ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Dixon, J. (2022). Religion, Science, and the Remaking of Illicit Sexuality. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 32(2), 159–166. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095579ar>

Religion, Science, and the Remaking of Illicit Sexuality

JOY DIXON

Rachel Cleves's *Unspeakable* is framed from the beginning as a "history of the social world of sex between men and children before the 1950s." It is not a conventional biography but rather uses Norman Douglas's story to develop a larger history of sexuality. And so, though it is most obviously a history of a form of sexual behaviour that is, as Cleves puts it, "the third rail of contemporary culture," it is also a book that makes critical contributions to the cultural history of sexuality writ large, providing a model for the study of how sexual subjectivities are formed and understood in complicated relation to the cultural categories of a particular moment, often in unexpected and even disturbing ways.¹ Cleves offers, as she puts it, "a full retelling of Norman Douglas's life, highlighting the historical and interpretive questions that his life provokes, as a window onto the past."² Those historical and interpretive questions ramify and proliferate, making this an important intervention not just in the history of childhood, of children and sex work, or of sexual abuse and sexual crime, but also in fields where the contribution may be less immediately obvious (as is the case with my own research field, the intertwined histories of religion, science, and sexuality).

Cleves frames her argument via Gayle Rubin's idea of the "charmed circle" of sexuality. In Douglas's day, Cleves argues, that "charmed circle" was not just narrower than it is today, but its very narrowness dramatically reshaped how it functioned in relation to the making of "deviance":

[The "charmed circle"] was so narrow that those who were cast outside its limits shared common ground. Identity categories that are distant from each other today—like loose women, lesbians, and pederasts—were more proximate when they were all outside the charmed circle. Pederasty was less taboo before the 1950s, in effect, because so many other behaviors were disreputable as well. Pederasty was less distinct from other types of sexual nonconformity.³

Cleves returns to and expands on this theme midway through her text. There she makes the crucial point that as long as the "charmed

circle” contained only (for the most part) participants in married, heterosexual sex, that, in turn, created connections between sexual behaviours and identities that might otherwise seem entirely unrelated. According to Cleves, “When Douglas rose to fame, the rules governing sexual behavior lumped together a broad range of illicit sexual behaviors into one big grab bag of immorality. Pederasty may have been the worst of the worst, but it was still a part of the whole. The difference between pederasty and other sexual crimes like adultery and homosexuality was a matter of degree.”⁴ This was also a time when sexual inequality of all kinds was more “normal” than it is today, when sex was almost inevitably structured by inequalities of “class, gender, age, ethnicity, race, or some combination of all of the former.” The late nineteenth-century articulation of “a new model of same-sex love structured by ideals of equality and reciprocity” was part of a political strategy aimed at acceptance via assimilation;⁵ it also marked a profound shift in the way that sexual aberrance was mapped and understood. In that context, Cleves quotes John Addington Symonds’s late nineteenth-century lament that “we cannot be Greeks now”⁶ but also argues that Douglas himself played a key role in carrying those classical and supposedly “pagan” sexual practices forward into the twentieth century: “As a writer, Douglas didn’t just draw on the classical pederastic tradition; he also innovated the tradition. His books were foundational for a new twentieth-century pederastic subculture that thrived until the sea change of the 1960s.”⁷

Here I want to take the opportunity to draw out some of the implications of this aspect of Cleves’s argument, emphasizing the ways in which her account of Douglas’s sexual practices and persona reveal a new dimension of this particular moment in the history of sexuality, in which a particular kind of sexual self became imaginable. That sexual self was formed in complex dialogue with the changing context via dynamic engagements with an orthodox Christianity that condemned sexual sin, a sexological science that diagnosed deviance and disease, and a classically inflected version of “paganism” that (re)authorized sexual libertinism for modern audiences. My goal is to bring to the surface the cultural history of ideas around religion, science, and sexuality that enabled Douglas and those around him to make sense of himself and his desires, that made possible a sense of sexual self that is, as Cleves’s title emphasizes, “unspeakable” in the context of contemporary attitudes to adult-child sex.

Cleves tells us that Douglas lost what religious faith he ever had in the wake of his father's untimely death, after which Douglas "came to consider religion a pernicious absurdity."⁸ Throughout his career as a writer, Douglas "delighted in satirizing the absurdities of Christianity and other faiths," often drawing on sexological and scientific accounts to puncture Christian claims.⁹ His most successful novel, *South Wind*, tells the story of an Anglican bishop whose moral certainties are definitively upended by his visit to a thinly fictionalized version of Douglas's own Capri.¹⁰ In the deliberately blasphemous collection of limericks that Douglas published in 1928, we find him characterizing the Virgin Mary as a "whore" and Christ as a "fairy," as well as (most memorably) rhyming "Jesus" with "contagious diseases."¹¹ The theme ran through much of his work. As Cleves summarizes it, he despised Christianity's disdain for the appetites of [the] human body, "that exquisite engine of delights." According to Douglas, the Christian dogma of "the antagonism of flesh and spirit" was "the most pernicious piece of crooked thinking which has ever oozed out of our poor deluded brain."¹² Foundational to Douglas's defense of pederasty was his rejection of sex as an evil. Pederasty was not bad for children, according to Douglas, because sex was a positive good for all human beings.¹³ Cleves notes that "Douglas's rejection of Christianity ran as an undercurrent through his early books and grew fiercer as he aged."¹⁴ In *How about Europe?* — his response to Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) — he emphasized that it was Christianity rather than Hinduism that promoted an indecent sexuality, and Cleves notes that he argued not only that Christianity had much to learn from Hinduism but also that he recommended "the Kama Sutra as a counter-irritant."¹⁵ The critique of Christianity was "central to Douglas's philosophy" and often a key factor in his appeal to readers.¹⁶ It was also key to his defense of pederasty: Douglas "thought that the modern aversion to pederasty stemmed from a false and pernicious Christian belief that sex was sinful. Christianity's negative attitudes to the pleasures of the flesh underlay moralizing attitudes to sex with young people."¹⁷ I would emphasize (and this is a point that Cleves could have developed in more detail) that it is Protestantism that is the real target of his concern here: Roman Catholics, he argued, had, with their saints and angels, cobbled together a reasonable facsimile of pagan polytheism, but Protestants retained "a single tyrant-god."¹⁸ It was the Calvinist perversion that was puritanism, along with Lutheranism's "repressed or misdirected sexual impulses," that had led to

a world in which, as Douglas put it, “We have too much sex on the brain, and too little of it elsewhere.”¹⁹

The critique of Christianity in general and of Protestantism in particular provided an enabling context for Douglas’s defense of his pederastic ideals, but it is important to note that this was not therefore a straightforwardly secularizing process, in which science came to displace religion as the structuring context of sexual subjectivity. While Douglas made ample use of the resources of both Darwinian evolutionary biology and the sexual sciences, he was no more likely to find a sense of his own sexual self there than he was in Christianity. Douglas was, nonetheless, well-versed in the scientific literature on sexuality. Cleves cites, for example, the seventh pamphlet in his Capri series (published in 1907) that dealt with the life of Suor Serafina di Dio, a seventeenth-century Carmelite mystic whose religious ecstasies Douglas characterized as “misguided sexual yearnings [sublimated] into a sub-carnal passion for the Son of God,”²⁰ quoting from the sexologist Havelock Ellis to support his claim. And in *Some Limericks*, a line about “an old man of the Cape/ who buggared [*sic*] a Barbary ape”²¹ footnoted the sexologist Xavier Mayne on simian sexual behaviour. These tactics were not unique to Douglas, but where writers like Aleister Crowley wielded scatological humour to sacro-sexual ends, Douglas appears to have had other (though perhaps equally serious) ends. Cleves is certainly right to emphasize that he had no desire to emulate sexology’s style or endorse its substance.

Late in his life, Douglas’s son Archie blamed what he characterized as his father’s sexual obsession with children on his senile dementia; Cleves explains that “Archie’s explanation fit into emerging diagnostic categories that were refashioning pederasty into pedophilia, a mental illness,” a claim introduced by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* and reaffirmed by the child psychologist William Healy.²² This is almost certainly a conclusion that Douglas himself would have resisted. He was firmly committed to Darwinian evolutionary theory but a harsh critic of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection (which he thought gave far too great a role to female sexual choice). In place of sexual selection, he turned to the role of the external environment to explain evolutionary change,²³ a theory he developed in two essays in *Natural Science* published in the fall of 1895, though Cleves also notes that he combined his “scientific” with “sexual adventuring,” combining “lizard hunting with prowling for sex.”²⁴ Freud he dismissed as (in Cleves’s words) “just another variety of mumbo-jumbo,

no more meaningful than theology.”²⁵ By the early 1920s, he claimed to be “tired of the subject,” and Cleves notes that “he rarely used sexological terms like ‘homosexual’ or ‘invert.’ He favored ‘sodomite’ or ‘sod’ for short,” just as he preferred “old-fashioned” pornographic texts like John Cleland’s 1748 *Fanny Hill* or the works of the Marquis de Sade.²⁶

With the publication of his *Birds and Beasts of the Greek Anthology* in 1927, we can see Douglas’s shift away from the idiom of the natural and sexual sciences, which he clearly found unsatisfactory, and towards the classical tradition, which provided a more congenial context for the articulation of his identity as a “modern pagan.”²⁷ *Birds and Beasts* was, in Cleves’s words, “suffused with Douglas’s appreciation for the pederastic culture of ancient Greece.”²⁸ Cleves summarizes Douglas as follows: “The ancient Greeks . . . had understood the necessity for communion with nature. They also understood how pedagogy and eros intertwined in the relationship between teacher and student”;²⁹ Douglas saw himself as the survivor of an ancient pagan age. Mr. Keith, the central character in his novel *South Wind*, stood “for paganism and nudity and laughter.” “Oozing paganism at every pore,” this self-proclaimed follower of Epicurus rejected all of Christian morality, even denying that he had “any objection, on principle, to incest,”³⁰ defending individual sexual freedom above all else. This was also the world celebrated in Douglas’s favourite of his own novels, *In the Beginning*, which was, Cleves tells us, “set before the rise of monotheism, when [according to Douglas] ‘the thing called Sin had not yet been invented.’”³¹ Cleves finds many examples of the ways in which Douglas’s admiration of classical pederasty was intimately bound up with his critique of organized religion. Many of Douglas’s friends linked him, for example, with the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata, who was “infamous for scoffing at religion and the supernatural.”³²

There were, however, important limits to Douglas’s supposed paganism. Rebecca West, Cleves notes, “pointed out that Douglas only believed in material reality. He had no patience for gods or abstract moral laws. He regarded all religion as ‘Mumbo-Jumbo.’”³³ In her memoir, *The Heart to Artemis*, the novelist and poet Bryher wrote of Douglas, “Nothing that I can write will make you feel the forces of his love for the visible world.”³⁴ Epicureanism, with its celebration of the body and of pleasure (and of the avoidance of pain) as intrinsic goods, captures some of his ethical and moral stance. Douglas described himself as an “Epicurean animal,” arguing that “pleasure is the end; liberty

the means.”³⁵ “After the war,” Cleves tells us, “Douglas took the position that a person’s actions should be guided by self-interest . . . In his view, a person had no responsibility except to himself [as he advised his son Archie]: ‘Take care of your belly, and your morals will take care of themselves.’”³⁶ In this way, Douglas played a key role in the redeployment of a particular version of Epicureanism and the classical tradition in what Cleves calls “the social world of interwar pederasty.”³⁷

What I want to emphasize here is Cleves’s demonstration of the extent to which Douglas’s pan-sexual libertinism disrupts easy stories of the emergence of sexual modernity. Cleves forces us to confront a messy and confusing world in which the various ways in which sexuality was mapped look very different than they come to appear even a generation or two later; here the classical past was utilized as a resource in a distinctively twentieth-century sexual project. Douglas, Cleves reminds us, “never identified as homosexual. As a category, adult men likely held the least sexual appeal to Douglas, coming after boys, girls, and adult women.”³⁸ Viva King (the literary hostess, and wife of William King, the Deputy Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum) claimed that Douglas “was not, as most people think, a homosexual but rather a pan-sexual, if there is such a word.”³⁹ Cleves’s exploration of Douglas’s attempt to preserve an older model of age-differentiated sex in a world where “a new more egalitarian model of relations between adults of roughly equal age” had made pederasty “unspeakable” takes us into difficult and challenging terrain.⁴⁰ Cleves’s *Unspeakable* confronts this messiness and confusion directly, refusing the supposed naturalness of “unspeakability” in favour of an opportunity to open up the historical categories that we use to think about sexuality and to reveal their complexities and instabilities.

JOY DIXON is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia.

JOY DIXON est professeure agrégée au département d’histoire de l’Université de la Colombie-Britannique.

Endnotes

- 1 Rachel Hope Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1–2.
- 2 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 12.
- 3 Cleves, 13.
- 4 Cleves, 182.
- 5 Cleves, 34.
- 6 Cleves, 34.
- 7 Cleves, 176.
- 8 Cleves, 19.
- 9 Cleves, 83.
- 10 Cleves, 127.
- 11 Norman Douglas, *Some Limericks: Collected for the Use of Students & Ensplendour'd with Introduction, Geographical Index, and with Notes Explanatory and Critical* (privately printed, 1928); cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 175.
- 12 Norman Douglas, *Siren Land and Fountains in the Sand* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), 152; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 192.
- 13 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 192.
- 14 Cleves, 192.
- 15 Norman Douglas, *How about Europe? Some Footnotes on East and West* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), 46–48, 105; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 192.
- 16 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 193.
- 17 Cleves, 217.
- 18 Douglas, *How about Europe?* 119–20.
- 19 Douglas, *How about Europe?* 194, 201.
- 20 Douglas, *Siren Land*, 116, 29; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 83.
- 21 Douglas, *Some Limericks*; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 175.
- 22 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 224.
- 23 Cleves, 39.
- 24 Cleves, 43.
- 25 Cleves, 85.
- 26 Cleves, 168.
- 27 Cleves, 76.
- 28 Cleves, 169.
- 29 Cleves, 108.
- 30 Norman Douglas, *South Wind* (New York: Modern Library, 1925), 198, 64, 322, 268, 247; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 128.
- 31 Norman Douglas, *In the Beginning* (New York: John Day Company, 1928), 10–12; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 170.
- 32 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 82–83.

- 33 Rebecca West, *D. H. Lawrence* (London: Martin Secker, 1930), 20; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 192.
- 34 Bryher, *The Heart to Artemis: A Writer's Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1963), 227–38; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 263.
- 35 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 188.
- 36 Norman Douglas to Archie Douglas, January 24 and March 14, 1922, box 21, folder 347, Norman Douglas Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; cited in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 193.
- 37 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 196.
- 38 Cleves, 237.
- 39 Viva King, *The Weeping and the Laughter* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1976), 198; cited in Cleves, 237.
- 40 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 218.